Northumberland High School

1883 - 1998

# MEMORIES HISTORY PICTORIAL OF AREA SCHOOLS

# NORTHUMBERLAND PENNSYLVANIA



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255 Market Street - Sunbury, Pennsylvania 17801

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF NORTHUMBERLAND SCHOOLS

## THE EARLY YEARS

"School!" What word in the English language brings more terror and delight in the heart of a child than this one? Who does not remember the fear of leaving home for the first time to venture out in the world alone? We've all asked ourselves, "Can I do the work?" or "Will I measure up? or "Will the teacher like me?". Yet despite these questions, deep in our hearts was also the joy of getting out and observing the world on our own, of making new friends, learning new lessons, becoming "grown up."

Parents look at school differently. They see education for their children as a way to help them succeed in the world, to earn more money, to have an easier life. It is not surprising, then, that soon after Captain John Lowden and Captain William Patterson laid out the town of Northumberland in 1772, folks began to think about having a school for their children. According to the "Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for 1877," written by John F. Wolfinger of Milton, we learn the following. The first school house in Northumberland was built about 1798. It was located at the corner of what is now Wheatley Avenue and Park Avenue--to the rear of the Northumberland National Bank. The one story building measured 30' by 30'. Among the families who sent their children to the "Wheatley School" were the Cowdens, Forsyths, Fricks, Hepburns, Priestleys, Shannons and Wheatleys. The name of the first teacher has been lost, but it is known that in 1814 George Bowdry taught there, to be followed by William Leathers and James Aiken. This log building was later replaced by a brick school house which was still standing in the accounts of 1929.

In 1801-02, Thomas Whittaker is noted to have taught at the "Union School," built on Lot 59 on the east side of King Street near Third Street. This school was established by James Hepburn, James Davidson, and William Cooke, trustees of the Union School.

In 1802 another school house was built in the southeastern part of town on Northway Street, now Priestley Avenue (no more specific location given). This too was a one story log structure measuring 24' by 30'. The first teacher was a Mr. Wiley; his successors were Rev. William Christy, George Bowdry, a Mr. Train, James Forest, Edward Chapman, Rev. W. R.

Smith, and John Bear. The families who sent their children here were named Albright, Boyd, Campbell, Chapman, Chappell, Crutchley, deGrouchy, Gaskins, Jackson, Lee, Leighhou, Lloyd, McClintock, Morris, Newberry, Norbury, Waples, Weimer, Wilson, and Zeitler.

In 1803 "The Northumberland Academy" was established through the efforts of Dr. Joseph Priestley, famous English chemist and philosopher, who emigrated to Northumberland in 1794. The ornamental two-story building was located on the corner of West Way and Second Street in the western part of town. (West Way is currently known as Penn Street and is located between Duke Street and the railroad tracks. The Academy would have been located where the Keystone Forge now stands.) Records shows that \$4000 had been spent on the building and that Dr. Joseph Priestley had offered to donate his library of "not less than 2000 volumes" to the Academy. Through the efforts of Jesse Moore, a representative to the State Legislature from Northumberland County, a \$2000 state appropriation was secured for the school in 1804. The first principal of the Academy was Dr. William Christy, a Unitarian clergyman from Winchester, Virginia. (He would have been a most fitting choice for Dr. Priestley since Priestley was the founder of Unitarianism.) He was succeeded by Rev. Isaac Grier, his son Robert C. Grier (who later became a lawyer and a judge on the U. S. Supreme Court), Rev. Robert F. N. Smith, and Elijah D. Phimb. Those students who attended Priestley's Academy include Charles G. Donnel, George A. Frick, William Montgomery, George A. Snyder (son of Pennsylvania Governor Simon Snyder), William B. Sprague, James Thompson, and Abraham S. Wilson--all of whom became famous men in later life.

In 1819 Samuel Kirkham, author of "Kirkham's English Grammar," taught school for one or two quarters in the Northumberland Town Hall, located in the second story of the Northumberland Market House. (At this time King Street was known as Market Street and the King Street Park was Market Square.) The building was situated in the center of the square, immediately in front of the Priestley residence that is currently the Priestley-Forsyth Memorial Library. John Wolfinger, the writer of this account of early Northumberland schools, attended Kirkham's school. Kirkham boarded with John's father, Henry Wolfinger, who kept a tavern (known as the "Cross Keys Tavern") in the brick building that now houses our town library.

In 1834, five years after Northumberland was incorporated as a borough in 1829, the public school system was adopted. The first election of school directors under the Free School Law of 1834 was held on March 20, 1835. Elected to serve were John B. Boyd, John Frick, Levi Hobart, Joseph R. Priestley, and John Wheatley. In 1836, Henry Gossler and John Shriner were elected, followed in 1837 by William Forsyth and James Hilborn. For some years thereafter, school was conducted in small buildings in different parts of the borough.

### THE MIDDLE YEARS

As you can see from the early accounts, school buildings were small and scattered throughout the town. While many people were for educating their children, others saw education as a necessary evil. They did not see the need to spend a lot of money for it--any site and any kind of building was good enough for a school house. With this prevailing attitude, it is not surprising that many people in 1870 were shocked at the idea of building a consolidated school. To add insult to injury, the planners had located the building in the center of the quarter block, leaving so much ground "go to waste as a playground." The new "substantial and commodious building" was situated on Second Street between King Street (then known as Market Street) and Orange Street, a two-story structure measuring 100' by 64'. There were 6 "apartments" on the first floor and 3 main rooms with 2 recitation rooms on the second floor. The forward-looking school board of 1870 included D. M. Brautigam, J. C. Chesney, William H. Leighou, Charles H. Renninger, J. O. Tracy, and John H. Vincent, Sr. The completed building was opened in January, 1872. The cost, including furnishings and grounds, was estimated at about \$27,000. (The building was razed in 1959.)

In 1871 the schools were graded and with the opening of the new building consolidated into one location. Prior to this time, Northumberland had 3 one and a half story buildings. In 1872 Northumberland High School was organized. By 1875 the school system enrolled about 630 pupils.

In 1874, a visiting school director from Lancaster gave the following description of how well the new school was run:

"The system of teaching instituted by Mr. Lenker, the principal, comprehends the co-education of the sexes, to the extent that two boys and two girls occupy alternate seats, and the choice of seats is

given according to merit, as determined at the end of every month. The most meritorious are awarded front seats and are always sure of having a good companion. The plan works so well that there is very little changing. The prevalence of discipline is everywhere manifested. This will be best illustrated by the fact that the outhouses are as clean as the class rooms, and not a pencil or any other mark has been made on the wall in two years. It is so unusual to see a clean, undefaced out-house connected with a public school, that we deem this worthy of mention."

This same visiting school director from Lancaster also noted that by 1874 there was only one private school in Northumberland. The school was sponsored by Amos E. Kapp and was located on the second floor of the building at the corner of Queen and Front Streets.

Prior to 1882, the children of Point Township were attending one of six schools, strategically placed in different locations throughout the township. The schools did not have individual names at this point but were known simply by number. Each school had a director who was solely responsible for the needs of his school. The school building the children attended consisted of one room heated by a large pot-bellied stove in the center. The stove was surrounded by double seats and desks. The teacher's desk was in the back: in front of it were the recitation seats. The teacher did all the necessary janitorial work for his school and was responsible for teaching all students from first through eighth grades. The children walked to school or rode a horse.

Number One School was situated long the Northumberland-Milton highway between the road, the railroad, and the canal. A high board fence protected the children at play from the dangers of the railroad. However, students were known to climb over this fence to go down to the canals to call to the mule drivers as they urged on the mules pulling the canal boats. (You can still see the school building today as a private home on Lahr's Road, second house of your left, behind Stuck Brothers Appliances.)

Number Two School, the Stone School House, was located along Ridge Road where today it intersects with Stone School Road. (Today the building has been converted to a modern house and the stone work is no longer evident.) Number Three School was the school that eventually became known as the Spruce Hollow School. It was located on Spruce Hollow Road near Roush Road. Number Four School was situated near the County Bridge.

(Today this school is part of a private home, the first house on the left, located on Ridge Road as you turn left from Route 11 North.) Number Five School was located on the Danville Road. (Today you can see the school as it was made part of a modern house located directly across from the former Dorsey Trailer building.) In prior days it was known to be located "below Chulasky," a small village located near the Point Drive-In, which was a stop on the local railroad line. Number Six School was better known as the Kapp Heights Schools. It can still be seen today at the corner of 14th and Queen Streets where it is now a private residence.

In 1883 "Northumberland High School" had its first graduating class. It consisted of three girls: Edith Hawley, Sallie Renninger, and Nellie Voris. The diplomas presented to these graduates were special works of art created by Mr. Will Lesher. There was no graduating class in 1884, but in 1885 the class of five had one boy graduate: Harry Steele, father of Attorney J. Donald Steele. The class of 1890 had the youngest graduate in the history of the school: Robert McCay, an alumnus at 13!

Perhaps the best known today of these early classes is the group of boys who played football against the Sunbury team in 1893--and won! The Northumberland team was coached by Principal Myron Geddes and six of the famous eleven graduated from our school: Augustus Jacoby--Center (1893), Cameron Dunham--Right Tackle (1894), John H. Vincent--Left End (1894), George S. Graham--Right Halfback (1894), John Martin--Left Halfback (1895), and Houston Taggart--Fullback (1895).

In 1895 Northumberland High School held its first Alumni Banquet at the Van Kirk House restaurant, located on the corner of Front and Queen Streets. The NHS Alumni Association is the third oldest in the state, organized after New Castle and Shamokin.

The school building on Second Street served the town of Northumberland well for about thirty years. By 1900, however, new industry brought in new families with children and more space was needed for classrooms. Rather than build an addition to the school, an old office building owned by Dr. Joseph Priestley (the Dr. Priestley's great grandson) was purchased and moved to the school property. (The office had sat on what is now the vacant lot next to the Priestley-Forsyth Memorial Library.) This building was not appropriate for school use and was quickly dubbed "the chicken coop." (Eventually the building was

given over to use by Boy Scout troops, but it was not razed until the 1950's.)

As we approach the 21st Century, let us look back at what our school system was like at the beginning of the 20th Century. From the reports from 1903-1904 we find that there were 14 teachers (whose combined salaries were \$4595): 3 High School, 10 Undergrade (all were unmarried ladies), and 1 substitute; 611 pupils: 292 males, 319 females; a library containing 692 volumes; 10 classrooms; and an annual budget of \$7,040.49. School sessions were from 9 AM to Noon and 1:15 PM to 4 PM. The school day began with the reading of the scriptures and prayer.

By 1912, with the coming of workers needed to run the Pennsylvania Railroad Classification Yards and their families, one school building was no longer enough. Plans were made to build another school. A site was chosen at Sixth and King Streets on land presented to the School Board by Charles Steele, who was developing that section of town at the time. On that site, a two-story structure was built and named the Charles Steele School. The School Board responsible for the construction of the Steele School consisted of W. C. Burns, Isaac Cornwell, George G. Seasholtz, Dr. Charles W. Rice, and Harry C. Hawley. The building cost \$23,000 and housed grades 1-6. It accommodated 345 pupils in 8 rooms. An additional room used for the Directors was later converted into a classroom. (The Steele School was used until 1978 when the School District sold it to the Borough of Northumberland for \$1. The building remained vacant until it was razed in 1996.)

In another ten years the School District was running out of space again. In 1922 Northumberland's first high school building was established when an annex on Orange Street was constructed on to the building on Second Street. The cost of the structure and the equipment was \$65,000. The School Board members in 1922 were W. C. Burns, Isaac Cornwell, George G. Seasholtz, Harry C. Hawley, and Dr. C. W. Rice. The building contractor for this building and the Steele School was Albert Boyer.

Consolidation and expansion were also taking place in the township schools at this time. By 1924, a second room was added to the Spruce Hollow school building. As a result School Number Four and School Number Five were closed, and the students were bussed to Spruce Hollow.

In 1926 the Joseph Priestley School was built in Kapp Heights on what is now 16th Street. At this time the Number One School, the Number Two School, and the Kapp Heights School were closed and the students were bussed to the Priestley School. Each of the two remaining Township schools had two or three teachers, depending on the number of students. Pupils in Point Township completed school through the 8th grade in their respective schools and then attended Northumberland High School. In 1925 there were 36 such students; by 1934 there were 71. Their tuition was paid by Point Township.

The construction of the High School building on Orange Street, however, did not solve the problem of overcrowding. The school system from 1926-1934 had a high enrollment of 1191 students and a low of 1119. At this time, there was no kindergarten. Congestion made it necessary to have grades 5 and 6 attend the Steele School. Grade 11 was assigned to rooms 4, 5, and 6 on the first floor of the Second Street Building. Grades 1 and 2 went part-time. A temporary annex was placed in back of the "Chicken Coop," called the "Pasteboard School" by the children. The Pasteboard School contained 2 rooms: one for the 3rd grade and one for a combined 3rd and 4th grade. This building housed 75 pupils. The auditorium-gymnasium of the Second Street High School was also used for classroom space. One teacher taught a class of 65 students there. For several years, the Unitarian Church on nearby Front Street was used for classrooms.

By 1935, these overcrowded conditions and substandard class sites were forcing the construction of additional space. On March 3, 1935 the School Board commissioned a Project Analysis for the Northumberland Borough School District to be made by the firm of Davis and Rice, Sunbury architects. The results were threefold: (1) recommendations were made to raze the Second Street School, along with the Chicken Coop and the Pasteboard School, since they were no longer considered safe or satisfactory structures in which to instruct children--cost \$4700; (2) consideration was then given to building a three-room addition to the Orange Street building on the space vacated by the Second Street School, of course leaving no lawn or playground area--cost \$19,948; (3) evaluations were presented on constructing a new building on a site located on Hanover and Fourth Streets--cost \$213,237. The advantages of this site were its central location, easy accessibility, lack of traffic hazards, adequate play space and room for expansion, and the beauty of its setting.

The site of the new school building was to be on a vacant lot between Hanover and Prince streets owned by Senator Steele. (It is said that this would have been the site on which the capitol of Pennsylvania would be located had Harrisburg not edged out Northumberland by one vote.) The new school would face on to Hanover Street on a lot with street frontage of approximately 750' and a depth of 500'--a plot a block and a half in size. The new building would face Hanover Street at the intersection of Fourth Street. A side entrance would be provided where Ropewalk Alley would extend between Hanover and Prince Streets. The lot at the rear of the building would provide ample space for an athletic field. While this site was desirable for a new school building, it was also prime real estate for residential development. The owner, Charles Steele, gave his account of the transactions: The School Board optioned the property defined above in August, 1935. At that time, the property was owned by two parties. Steele owned the greater part of the land and had optioned the other part for \$4000. The price he was asking for the two parcels combined was \$8500. However, the School Board was unable to get government approval for the appropriation for the new building prior to the expiration of the option on November 1, 1935. The option was renewed on November 1, 1935, and the School Board did not object to the asking price of \$8500. As noted earlier, Senator Steele donated the land for the Steele School building back in 1921, land which he claimed would have netted him \$3500 had he sold the lots for homes. He said the real estate value of this Hanover Street plot was \$20,000, and he expected the School Board to pay him a fair price for the land. Apparently the School Board later balked at paying \$8500 for the land because it is noted in newspaper accounts that Attorney Samuel Gubin, special counsel for the School Board, was instructed to begin condemnation proceedings, petitioning the court to appoint a board of appraisers to determine the price to be paid for the site.

According to the architects' presentation to the School Board, the new school would be a two-story brick structure with nine classrooms, plus space for home economics, music, chemistry, a library, a work shop, and a gymnasium--all new additions to the curriculum at this time. The actual measurements give the building the size of a fourteen room school building.

Needless to say, in the midst of the Depression, the School Board needed the support of the citizens of Northumberland before undertaking to spend such a large amount of money. A special election was set for October 1, 1935, so the people of Northumberland could decide whether or not they wanted to have a new school. In 1935 the Borough's assessed value of taxable properties was \$1,052,600 and its indebtedness was \$26,480.89. If they voted "Yes" to a new school, the townspeople were agreeing to add another \$47,000 to the Borough's indebtedness. The final cost of the new building was deemed to be \$104,000 and a debt ceiling was set at \$109,000. Application was made to the Federal Government's Public Works Administration (WPA) to fund 45% of the cost with the Borough paying the other 55%. The government was sponsoring building projects such as these during the Depression in order to get people back to work. On September 25, 1936, the WPA agreed to pay the Borough \$49,090 with the stipulation that the work begin by December 1, 1936, reach its peak by March 1, 1937, and be completed by November 15, 1937. This offer was accepted by the School Board on October 2, 1936. The WPA estimated that this building project would provide approximately a year of useful employment for at least 55 men, most of whom would be from Northumberland. (It was estimated that at that time there were approximately 275 relief cases in the Borough and that there were 292 unemployed men who could be put to work.)

Bids were sought for the new high school building, and on November 19, 1936, the bids were opened. The School Board meeting to open these bids was attended by Dr. C. W. Rice, president; George G. Seasholtz, secretary (non-member); Mrs. Hanford Shuman, F. Merrion Gross, and C. R. Derk. E. R. Bastress Company of Mount Carmel, the lowest of 8 bidders, was awarded the general contract with a bid of \$68,812. John F. Moleski was the low bidder for both the heating contract--\$12,721, and the plumbing contract--\$5,212. The contract for the electrical work went to A. Rockefeller Company of Mount Carmel--\$3,230. The total amount for all contracts awarded was \$89,975, well within the budget set. Taking the WPA grant into account, the actual cost to the town was about 11 cents per cubic foot, about half the average cost of school construction in this area at that time. Construction on the new school began on December 1, 1936.

The corner stone of the new high school was laid on April 27, 1937. Principal figures attending the ceremony included the official speaker, Dr. Lee L. Driver, State Department of Public Instruction; Professor Charles E.

Hilbish, County Superintendent of Schools; Professor John B. Boyer, Assistant County Superintendent of Schools; Dr. C. W. Rice, School Board President; School Board members Mrs. Hanford Shuman, F. Merrion Gross, and Charles R. Derk; Miss Claire Scholvin, Supervising Principal; Professor Boise L. Bristor, High School Principal; Charles W. Rhoads, Attendance Officer; Paul Rice, Davis and Rice Architects; and W. C. Ellsworth, WPA Engineer. School was dismissed at 1:15 on this day and the school children marched up to Fourth and Hanover Streets. The Calhoun Boys Band played "America" and the opening prayer was given by Reverend Walter B. Knight of the First Baptist Church. After remarks by the esteemed citizens listed above, the corner stone was cemented in place while the band played "The Star-Spangled Banner." The ceremony closed with the benediction given by Reverend Russell J. Crouse of St. John's Lutheran Church.

On January 2, 1938, following the Christmas recess, the Freshman Sophomore, Junior, and Seniors classes moved into the new Northumberland High School. This was the only Freshman class to attend school in the high school building. (The school building at Second and Orange Streets now became the Junior High School, attended by students in grades seven, eight, and nine.) The high school was dedicated on January 27, 1938, and was named the "Dr. C. W. Rice Building," in honor of the man who had worked so diligently for its construction.

The desire to establish an athletic field behind the high school was made possible by another grant from the WPA. On September 17, 1938, the "F. Merrion Gross Memorial Stadium" was dedicated to the memory of this devoted School Board member (class of 1910) who had died several weeks prior. The merchants of downtown Northumberland closed their stores at 1 PM so folks could get there for the 2 PM ceremonies. Three bands, totaling 175 students, were featured: the 65 member Shamokin High School Band; the Northumberland High School Girls' Band, led by Miss Elizabeth Bostian and Professor T. Holland Paist; and the Calhoun Boys' Band, led by Harold Bollinger. Although no speeches were made prior to the Norry-Shamokin football game, Postmaster Charles Gubin dedicated the F. Merrion Gross Memorial Stadium over WKOK. Attendance at the opening game was estimated to be between 3500 and 4000 people. The bleachers on both sides of the field were designed to seat 2000, but 2600 people paid admission to attend the game. The Northumberland Pineknotters had 12 cheerleaders, dressed in maroon and white, to cheer the team on. Norry beat Shamokin 7-6.

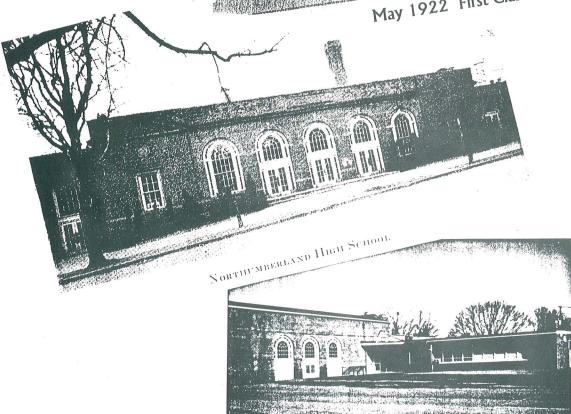
Many important games were played in the new F. Merrion Gross Memorial Stadium, but probably no game is more remembered than the football game at Sunbury in 1956 when Norry beat Sunbury 20-6. This victory occurred last in 1893.

By the time Norry beat Sunbury, both the Junior High and the High School buildings were bulging at the seams. The Point Township schools had merged with the Borough schools in April, 1950. At this time, the name was changed to "Priestley Joint High School." However, this name change was obviously not popular with the local residents since by 1953, the name was changed back to "Northumberland High School." By 1957, there were 558 pupils to be housed in grades 7 through 12. Once again, the school district was running out of room. Luckily, the planners for the C. W. Rice building had anticipated this growth and had selected a site where there was room to expand.

The proposed building program called for the construction of an addition at the north end of the High School on a lot formerly used as a playground. Early in 1958, the School Board hired the architectural firm of Buchart Associates of Lancaster to design the new addition. The School Board members were Willard W. Deets, president; George A. Burgard, Mrs. Edith Epler, Mrs. Ruth Hockenbrock, William F. Hollenbach, Lewis Hummel, Gordon S. Krum, John E. McCreary, Dr. William B. Simington, and James C. Snyder, members; Russell S. Machmer, solicitor; Mrs. M. Elizabeth Reeder, secretary. By June of 1958 the preliminary sketches of the proposed addition were approved. The building would contain 6 general classrooms, specific rooms for homemaking, arts and crafts, music, industrial arts, and physical education. In addition there would be administrative and health suites, faculty and conference rooms, and a guidance office. The total dimensions of the addition would measure 33,760 square feet. In April, 1959, authorization was given by the School Board to float a bond issue of \$950,000. The lowest bid for general contractor for the new project, \$750,054, was submitted by Bogar Construction Company of Selinsgrove. The new addition was occupied in the fall of 1960. By this time, in the former senior high school the shop area had been converted to an agricultural classroom, the old gym had been made into a cafeteria able to feed 190 students at a sitting, and the former home economics room was renovated into a library with a conference room. The new addition was formally dedicated on November 19, 1960.

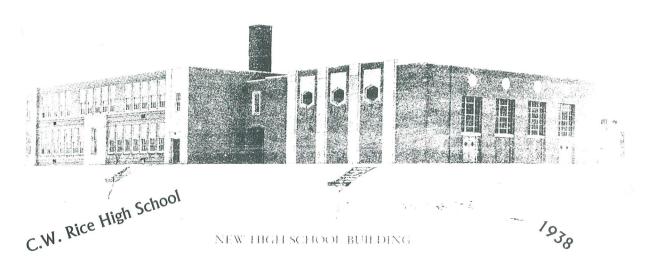
During the next few years, the unthinkable was actually being discussed: Northumberland High School would merge with its long-time rival, Sunbury High School, to form what would become the Shikellamy School District. In 1965 the merger actually took place, with the Class of 1965 being the last class to graduate from Northumberland High School. Between the organization of the high school in 1872 and the merger in 1965, 82 classes, with a total of 3,512 students, have graduated from Northumberland High School.

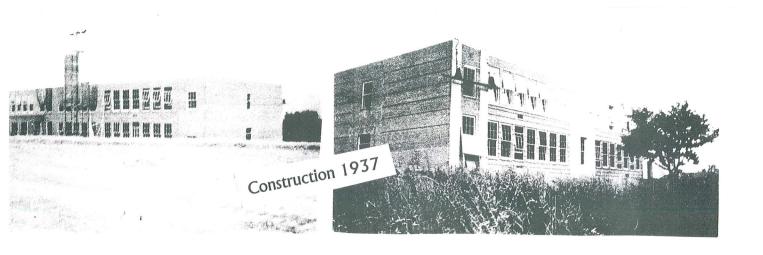


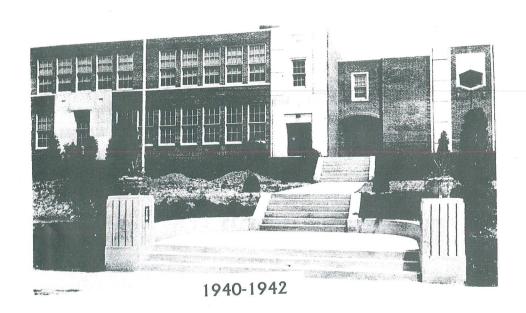


Second Street School as an Elementary School view of New Wing late 1950's



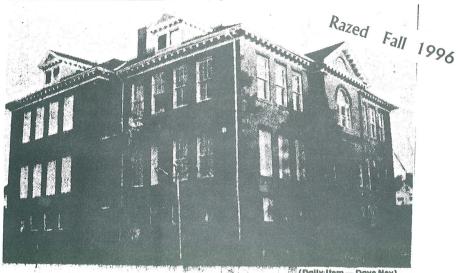








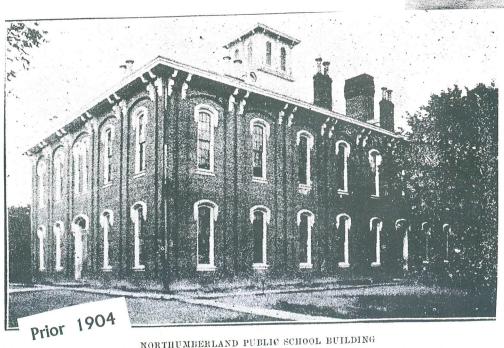




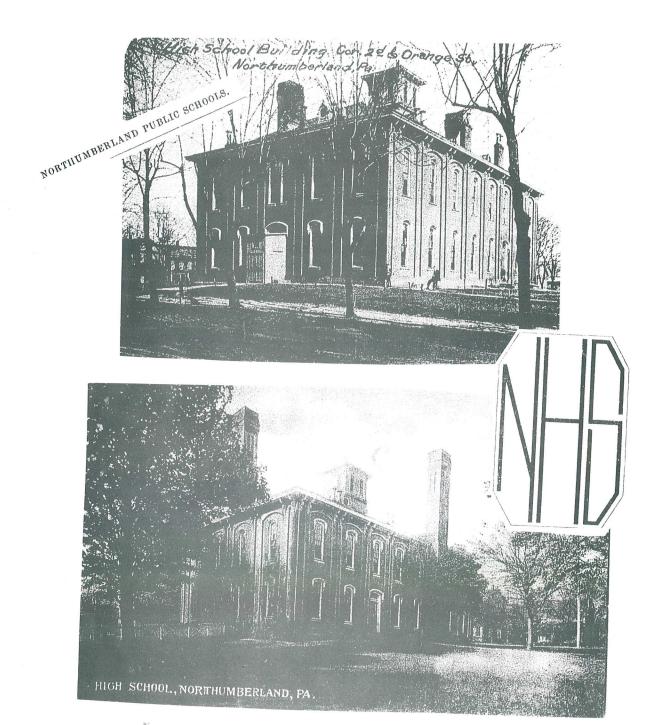
The Charles Steele School at Sixth and Orange streets in Northumberland is considered an eyesore by Northumberland Councilman

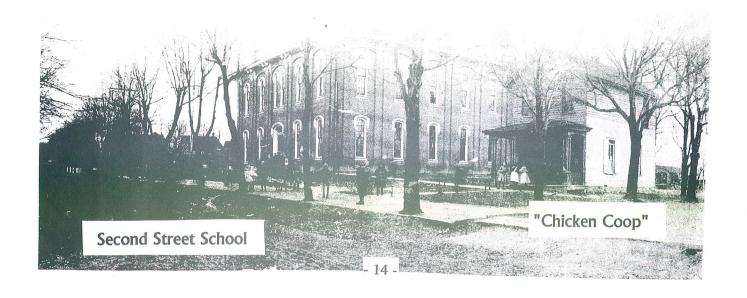
The borough bought the building for \$1 in 1978.





NORTHUMBERLAND PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDING









KNELLING LEFT TO RIGHT: CHARLES WEAVER, WOODY CARL, BOB SEES, DON LIDDINGTON, ROBERT HORTON, MONROE MYERS, JOHN ORWIG, HARRY EARP, WM. RATUSNOCK, JOE MAROTTO, BILL LEITZEL, TIP MORDAN, JOHN LEWIS, BOB RORKE, JOHN GULICK, RED SHILO, GUY OWENS, HARRY TROXELL, BOB TATE, GEORGE DONACHY, JOHN DEBARR.



BACK ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT): ELIZABETH BOSTIAN, LEAH TRAVERS, SHIRLEY RUCH, HANNAH SPLAIN, GRACE GEISE, STELLA DODGE, MARY HUBBEL, EVELYLN HASSINGER, MARGARET SEES, FANNIE LANDBACK, BETTY SMITH, ELEANOR MELLOTT, UNIDENTIFIED, MARY ALYCE YEAGER, KATHRYN BRECHT, DORIS STAMM, GLADYS YOUNG, HELEN BUTLER, IONA KEYSER, FRANCES HOFFMAN, LORRINE FRY, SHIRLEY BEURY, ANNA PETRULLO, MABEL GROSS, ELIZABETH SHILO, ANNA KISTNER, MARARET HUMMEL, LOIS WALKER, FRANCES ROUSH, EVELYN HUNT, BERTHA GEISE, ESTHER HAAS, JANE MALONE, MARGARET STEFFEN, EVELYN CRITZER, EVELYN BOLLINGER, JANE NEUER, T. HOLLAND PAIST, JR. (DIR.)