



NORWICH  
Historical Society  
and Community Center

# HISTORIC DRIVING TOUR — NORWICH SCHOOLS — *A Companion to the Norwich Historic Audio Tours*

## Podcast Tour Transcript

### INTRODUCTION

**M:** Welcome to our Norwich Schooling Podcast Tour.

**M:** I'm Milt Frye and **W:** I'm Wendy Thompson

**M:** I was the Principal at Marion Cross School from 1973 until 1996.

**W:** And I was a teacher at Marion Cross School for thirty years.

**M:** We'll start and end our tour here at the Norwich Historical Society, directly across the street from Marion Cross School. There are seven stops along the way. As you listen, we'll give directions to each stop.

**W:** When you hear this sound.... [Bell rings] pause the podcast until you reach the next stop on your tour. You can also follow the podcast on the accompanying map.

Vermont was the first state to authorize public education in its constitution. Education was a priority for Norwich's early residents, many of whom were friends with Eleazer Wheelock, founder of Dartmouth College. Before Vermont was **even** a state, Norwich had built its first school, and divided the town into districts. By 1836 there were 18 school districts in Norwich with over 700 students, ages 4 – 17, being taught in one-room schoolhouses all over town.

Settlement patterns were more spread out than today --as areas in town were settled, districts were added. The districts were often named after the neighborhood hamlet, or for large families in the district such as the Cossinghams, the Braggs, and the Sproats.

**M:** District boundaries were set so no child had to walk more than 2 miles to school, although district lines had to conform to geography. Even in the 1970's, children were required to walk up to 2 miles to catch the bus to school. Each district was responsible for raising money to build schools, hiring teachers, and maintaining standards. In 1892 the "district" system was

abolished by Vermont law, and the town system put in place. ....

**W:** Though any child in Norwich could **then** attend the village school, in 1935 there were still **8** one-room schoolhouses in operation in Norwich. But by 1938, just 3 years later, this had been reduced to only five, and the consolidation trend would continue until 1951, when the last one-room school closed.

**W: Our first stop** is just across Main Street to the right, the brick house at 248 Main Street set back from the road. Pause the podcast until you have safely reached this next stop.

## **STOP 1: BRICK SCHOOLHOUSE**

**M:** This brick building was once the **District #1 schoolhouse**. The builder's instructions for this schoolhouse required that it be, "built of good brick, well laid in good lime mortar, 45 feet by 26 feet with two rooms." It was completed in 1845 at a cost of \$705 –not an insignificant amount of money for the time-- ( approximately 22,000 dollars in today's money) It served the children who lived in the southern end of the village. The School Superintendent described the seats as "mostly perched upon two inclined planes; uncomfortable and inconvenient."

**W:** At one time there was a shed attached to the left side of the schoolhouse with a trap door in the ceiling. The boys would sometimes climb up through the trap door and creep across to the attic above the school room. The teacher--a Miss Lydia Thompson--was greatly frightened on several occasions when noises came from overhead and, as she believed in ghosts, it is reported that she once fainted dead-away.

**M:** This brick schoolhouse was used until 1888, when village students were moved to the empty "Old North Barracks" of Norwich University. The barracks were located where the oldest portion of Marion Cross School now stands. At lunchtime the children would climb the rickety stairs to the tower where the bell was, and there they would eat their lunch.

**W:** In the Old North Barracks building there was a stove in each school room; it was the task of the students to keep the fire going. The wood was the size and length of railroad ties. One day the fire had gone out and so at lunch, the teacher asked two boys to build a fire, while she went to supervise the other students They piled up several large logs and very soon a roaring fire was going, so hot that the chimney that went the length of the whole room was red hot.

**M:** The teacher came in and was greatly disturbed. She ordered the two boys who were to have been in charge to sit on either side of the stove all afternoon. The two boys began to get red and one of the boys had some little rubber buttons down the side of his pants that began to melt, much to the amusement of the children.

**W: Our next stop** is the Beaver Meadow School, located on Chapel Hill Road. Head down Main Street into town and turn left onto Beaver Meadow Road. Travel 5 miles, turn right onto Chapel Hill Road and you'll see the school just down a bit on the right. Pull up into the schoolhouse yard.

## **STOP 2: BEAVER MEADOW ROAD**

**M:** Beaver Meadow, District #3 encompassed a relatively large area that ran west to Sharon. At one time this hamlet had a population almost as large as Norwich and included a post office, a general store, a sawmill, and a blacksmith shop. The **original** schoolhouse, which was built in 1791, stood across the road from where the current schoolhouse now stands. It **burned** in 1921.

There were large farm families in the district, and as many as 60 scholars attended the Beaver Meadow School for the winter term when their labor on the farm was not needed. The School Superintendent's reports provide a **window into the world** of Norwich's schoolhouses.

In 1887 one superintendent reported that the windows and doors were broken, and that the seats were the "old-style board seat, with a cold, frosty wall to support the back, and the desks were awkward in form, and often so marred by the knife of mechanically inclined boys as to be nearly useless." There was no insulation in **these** buildings.

**W:** Teachers were often young (sometimes younger than their students) and were sometimes challenged by older students. In 1887 Edward Whitcomb, soon after having finished his (own) schooling at Beaver Meadow, came back to teach the winter term. It was his first term of school teaching. The Superintendent was pleased with how well he did, despite having just completed school and having to teach students who were older than he.

**M:** After the original schoolhouse burned in the summer of 1921, this fine new building was constructed, There were 15 pupils with Stella Sears as teacher, and for 16 years she taught

grades 1-8 here at Beaver Meadow. Some grades were combined, especially in geography, history, and science. Miss Sears was known for placing special emphasis on reading and arithmetic.

By 1935 **running water** was installed (before that, the older students retrieved water from a neighboring house), and, in 1940 a new addition added a small kitchen, flush toilets, and a large stage alcove, but there was no electricity.

**W:** School days lasted until four o'clock, but in the winter, in order for children who walked a long distance to get home before dark, Miss Sears recalled that they shifted the lunch schedule so school could close at 3:30. One of her youngest students walked 2 1/2 miles each way. Many students travelled over the **rolled roads** on skis to get to school in the winter, and then took down the pasture fence and skied at noontime! Quite often there were visitors in the afternoon. With no television to watch, or way of going shopping, the school offered a fine place for community members to gather. Miss Sears recalled special days with poems that students recited for parents **and** that they worked very hard preparing a Christmas program each year. It was always held at the Beaver Meadow Chapel, with nearly a hundred in attendance.

**M:** Decreasing enrollment, with more students shifting toward the village school, and fewer teachers during World War II, made maintaining schools with fewer pupils difficult. Beaver Meadow School closed in 1946 and consolidated with the Village School. Stella Sears moved with her students to the Village School and taught there until 1971!

In 1952 the Norwich School Board sold the schoolhouse to the Beaver Meadow Union Chapel Association for \$5 to use as a community center. In the early 1970s, neighbors began to repair and to once again make the schoolhouse a gathering place for the community. And today, the Beaver Meadow School House Association cares for and coordinates the use of the schoolhouse for holiday celebrations, parties, and other community events. The Town/School Board still owns the land and the right to the spring which used to supply water for the school.

**W: Our next stop** is at the Root Schoolhouse on Union Village road. (District #6) Head back to Main Street and turn left. In 3 miles, immediately after Pattrill Hill Road, you'll see the white schoolhouse sitting a little above the road on the left.

### STOP 3: ROOT SCHOOLHOUSE

This schoolhouse, known as “Root Schoolhouse,” was built in 1937 to **replace** one that had burned the year before. There had been several schools in this district since it was formed in 1791. Just after the Civil War, the school superintendent reported that this district’s schoolhouse was the worst **ever** seen--”a dismal shell of a house on a public road.” But the 1867, just a few years later, his report indicates progress--”now a good school-house, well furnished... both summer and winter terms were equally successful.”

**W:** Yet by 1874 the report states “there can never be a quiet, progressive school in this house, until the present desks are used for kindling wood, and more suitable ones put in their place.”

**M:** This 1937 schoolhouse, that we see today, was a vast improvement! At the time, it was considered the only rural schoolhouse in Norwich to be in excellent condition, earning a “superior” rating from the state. One of the mandatory criteria for a superior rating was having natural light coming in only from the left side of the pupils. With no electricity, natural light was of utmost importance, as the only other source of light would be kerosene lamps attached to the walls. Other mandatory criteria included: adequate heating with a jacketed stove, sanitary outhouses or toilets, and at least 16 linear feet of blackboards.

**W:** Inside this building is one schoolroom with a large bank of windows on the east wall and a slate blackboard across the front. There is a recessed stage alcove and a small kitchen area at the front, which was most likely the original cloak

room where students hung their jackets and stored their boots. There are two original toilet rooms at the rear with metal train **station-style** toilets. The wooden seats are spring loaded to activate the flushing mechanism. A large jacketed stove sat in the basement. To regulate the heat, the damper could be opened and closed from upstairs, by turning a lever attached to a chain, which ran down through a hole in the floor.

**M:** By 1940 the addition of new desks and seats meant that the school qualified as **superior**. Former Root Schoolhouse students recall that the school day was from 9:00 - 4:00. Students walked to school, although sometimes in winter a father might bring his children to school by sleigh. One student recalled having a toboggan that they all piled onto; if they missed the turn they ended up in the brook. There was a 15-minute recess in the morning and then an hour for lunch. When hot lunches were offered, the teacher would have to leave the classroom, to go into the kitchen, and pull together lunch. Often lunch was a simple soup, casserole, or pot of baked beans that just needed to be heated. There was no refrigerator, of course.

**W:** One student recalled that his classmates would often bring little jars of milk to school and they would put them in the brook to keep them cool. Some students went home for lunch. Despite the new building's quality, the Root Schoolhouse was closed after just 8 years in 1945, when enrollment had dwindled to only four pupils. The district school was an anchor for neighborhoods at a time when neighborhood relations were of central importance for the sharing of work and celebrations.

A 1952 agreement between the Norwich School Board and the Root District Game Club, a small organization of families surrounding the schoolhouse, transformed the building into a community center, carrying on this deep tradition of neighborliness. Today the Root Schoolhouse and the Beaver Meadow Schoolhouses are listed on the National Register for Historic Places because they retain so much of their original architectural details.

**M: Our next stop** is at the Union Village Schoolhouse (in District #8)

Continue down Union Village road onto Route 132. In 1/2 a mile, bear right onto Academy Road. The schoolhouse is on the left, right next to the church.

#### **STOP 4: UNION VILLAGE SCHOOL**

The Union Village school was truly a union school, once sitting on the town and county lines and financed **jointly** by Thetford and Union Village residents. It was one of the smaller rural schools, averaging fewer than 15 students. It is said that the students from each town sat on **opposite** sides of the room. Like the other district schools, students attended 8- to 12-week terms, with more attending in the winter than the summer when help was needed on the farm.

**W:** Summer school was said to be easier to teach as the younger students attended while the older students worked. Farm chores had another impact on schools: there was no time for homework, so all work was completed at school!

After the Civil War, a shortage of qualified teachers brought about the establishment of state "normal schools," –schools to train teachers—in Randolph, Castleton, and Johnson. Many of the new teacher recruits were female. Norwich's 1865 Superintendent's Report noted that all the schools except for one had been taught by females, commenting: "Such an almost exclusive employment of female teacher has probably never been known in the town before." The women earned 60% of what male teachers earned.

**M:** Individual school districts hired and fired teachers and arranged for boarding with district families. Female teachers were not allowed to be married or to be seen out with men.; it was thought that female teachers were more capable of delivering a moral education.

The following rules for teachers were typical in the late 19th century:

1. Teachers each day will fill lamps, clean chimneys.
2. Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes, or two evenings a week if they go to church regularly.
3. Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.
4. Every teacher should lay aside from each pay a goodly sum of his earnings for his benefit during his declining years so that he will not become a burden on society.
5. Any teacher who smokes, uses liquor in any form, frequents pool or public halls, or gets shaved in a barber shop will give good reason to suspect his worth, intention, integrity, and honesty.

**M:** Sometimes teachers were moved from one district to another to help with discipline. One year Bethenia Matthews moved to the Turnpike school, which was having some trouble with the large boys 15-16 and 17 years old. She took this position with the understanding: discipline first. About the middle of the forenoon, the big boys were known to get up, open the windows, and jump out to the ground and run around the schoolhouse singing and shouting and then clamber back in again the same way. Well, on her first day Bethenia took her nice little riding whip with her. They started their parade, she stood right there by the window, and as the first and largest boy went through the window, she used her whip. After two or three they didn't want to go anymore, but she made every one go through, and also come back that way. She never had any more trouble!

The Superintendent's Report for 1874 listed 4 qualities for a really good school:

- First, a good and properly furnished house;
- second, a good teacher;
- third studious children who are well-governed at home;
- Fourth a **union of feeling** in the school district."

In 1950, the purchase of a used school bus by the Town of Norwich allowed Union Village students to be transported to the Village School (and that year the Union Village School was closed.) Until this time, the economics of transporting students to the village school was not

practical.

**W: Our next stop** is at the Pompanoosuc Schoolhouse.

Go back and turn left onto Route 132. Travel east for 2.8 miles and pull over to the side of the road just before you reach Route 5. You'll see the former red schoolhouse, now a private residence, across the road behind a fence. Pompanoosuc, district No. 7 served families in the northeastern corner of Norwich.

## **STOP 5: POMPANOOSUC SCHOOL**

Pompanoosuc was a relatively independent sub-community with several mills, a chair factory, and its own railroad station and Post Office. This school was built around 1850. In 1921, the school was moved to its present location and enlarged. The schoolhouse was flooded both in the fall of 1927 and spring of 1936, **the years of the two Great Floods in Vermont.**

**M:** Superintendent reports reveal the typical ups and downs of a school district and the state of the classrooms and buildings. In 1865 the superintendent reported this "schoolhouse to be one of the best. The order within the school, especially during the summer, was **good**, with an almost entire absence of **whispering**." Conversely, in 1904 the school was reported to be in a "state of dilapidation" with supplies so low that each child "was obliged to find their own or go without," and the dictionary was "so far out of date as to be useless."

But by 1907, only three years later, the schoolhouse was reported once again to be "in as good condition as any in the state, our books are all modern, we have maps, globes, and dictionaries of the very best."

**W:** Donald Bond recalled that in 1938 there were 6 students in his class with 25-30 students in the school, and that one year, the teacher, Ruth Damon, lived with his family. Students fondly recalled holidays at Pompanoosuc School. They swapped names for Christmas gifts. The older boys would cut a Christmas tree and Santa Claus would pay a visit. On Memorial Day they picked bouquets of lilacs, walked 1/2 mile down to the bridge over the Pompanoosuc, and dropped the bouquets in the river to remember the soldiers.

One teacher was named Emma McDonald. On the first day of school she had all the children stand and sing "Old McDonald had a Farm" just to get it over with. She was a fun, but strict teacher. Like the other Norwich teachers, she used a ruler on the hands for punishment, **and**



kept a dunce stool in the corner, complete with a dunce cap!

**M:** In 1945 the town investigated the future needs of Norwich schools. They noted the lack of space in the **village** school and deteriorated physical condition of the District schools. Attendance at the District schools had been falling and the highest projected enrollment for 1946 was only 13, here at Pompanoosuc. The two District schools with the highest projected enrollment, Pompanoosuc and New Boston, were also the two in the very worst physical condition. At the same time, the recently closed Root Schoolhouse, was in excellent condition.

Short-term solutions included:

1. Require that all students living *near* a District school to attend that school;
2. Use the Root schoolhouse for one or two grades from the village school;
3. Transport all Lewiston pupils to the Turnpike or Root schools;
4. Transport 7th and 8th grades from village school to Hanover Junior High;
5. *Move* the closed Root schoolhouse to Lewiston or the Village;
6. Provide another school room in Tracy Hall on the stage.

Their conclusion was to **construct** a four-room addition to the Village School building, which was completed in 1952.

**W:** In 1951 this Pompanoosuc school was the last district school to close. Former Pompanoosuc and Beaver Meadow students recalled how overwhelming it was to move to the village school after having been so enmeshed in a small, one-room school. The village school seemed huge. Fortunately, friends and teachers made the move together.

**W: Our final stop** is back in front of Marion Cross School. Head south on Route 5 and onto Main Street and the center of Norwich. Turn left onto Main Street and find a spot to stop in front of the Norwich Historical Society where you can see the school.

## **STOP 6: MARION CROSS SCHOOL**

In 1819, Norwich University was built on this site. After the South Barracks burned in 1866, Norwich University moved to Northfield, VT The following year, 1867, the University sold its remaining North Barracks to the Norwich Classical and English Boarding School, which became Norwich Academy. The Academy offered college preparatory, teacher training, and

business education courses for young men and women. In 1888 the town took over the academy building.

**W:** The building burned in 1897 and was replaced with a new Village School. This is the brick building currently standing.

**M:** Students were divided into three levels; common, intermediate, and grammar, and then in 1920 the school changed to a system of grade levels. The building was heated by a woodstove that the students kept burning. It wasn't until 1925 that indoor plumbing was installed; a central heating system was installed in 1942. The Norwich Women's Club initiated a hot lunch program for students across the street in the Tracy Hall kitchen in 1945. Marion Cross came to Norwich in 1932 to teach the seventh and eighth grades. At that time there were four rooms in the 1898 brick building, and each teacher taught two grades. The older children were upstairs in two rooms opening onto a hallway with a piano.

**W:** Each morning, the classes had assemblies conducted from the hallway, the students seated in their respective classrooms. The flag salute, the Lord's Prayer, and a Bible reading made up the assembly. In 1948, as the district schools continued to close and the Village School grew, the grades were split up. The five lower grades housed in the school and the three upper grades across the street in Tracy Hall. The 6th grade had 28 students and they were all in a "classroom" on the **stage** of Tracy Hall.

**M:** Mrs. Cross was the Principal and Teacher during those years, and it was challenging with classes spread throughout two buildings. In 1951, four new rooms were added to the old school, and all the classes were back in one building again. Consolidation was complete and the Village School became the elementary school for all Norwich students. In response to the continuing postwar growth of Norwich population, another six-room addition and remodeling was authorized by the voters in 1960. In 1963, after ten years of planning, President John F. Kennedy signed the Dresden interstate school district into law. The first interstate school district in the country and the final piece of legislation that President Kennedy signed. From that point on, Hanover Highschool and Middleschool have been the designated middle and high school for Norwich students.

**W:** Marion Cross retired in 1973 after 44 years as Principal. That year, citizens voted to make the school her namesake, The Marion W. Cross School. Marion Cross was succeeded by Milton Frye, sitting right here, who in 1988 oversaw the construction of the final school addition. The nature area behind the school was named in honor of his 23 years at the school.

Like the schoolhouses of the past, Marion Cross School sits at the center of its community. Children play at recess on the village green, join with the community for celebrations, and go out into the world prepared for a lifetime of learning.

**M:** Today if asked, “what does it require to have a really good school?” we might answer just as the Superintendent did in 1874.

- First, a good and properly furnished house;
- Second, a good teacher;
- Third, studious children who are well-governed at home;
- Fourth, a **union of feeling** in the school district.”

**W:** The seeds to Norwich’s education system were planted in the schoolhouses that now sit quietly in the corners of Norwich.

**W:** We hope you enjoyed your tour. You can find photographs and more stories of Norwich’s schools at the historical society website as well as links to more podcast driving tours and walking tours.