

The New Schoolhouse 1889

by Larry Kidder

In early May 1889 the people of Pleasant Valley voted to build a new school house for their District No. 1 in Hopewell Township. There had been a centrally located schoolhouse in the Valley since at least the 1820s but by 1889 the old schoolhouse was in poor condition and in need of replacement. In the 1880s small rural school districts such as Pleasant Valley were directly controlled by the residents of the district. The people elected a board of three trustees to oversee everything about the school and its operation. When the question of a new schoolhouse was raised, the people came together to decide the kind of building they wanted and could afford. Since not all families in the valley enrolled their children in the school, and only a fraction of the children who were enrolled attended on a regular basis, there were undoubtedly some residents who even argued against building a new school. Another consideration, though, was that the building also served all the families, even those without children, as a community center and especially as a place to hear preaching by ministers from Titusville or Lambertville and for meetings of the popular Union Sunday School held in the Valley each year.

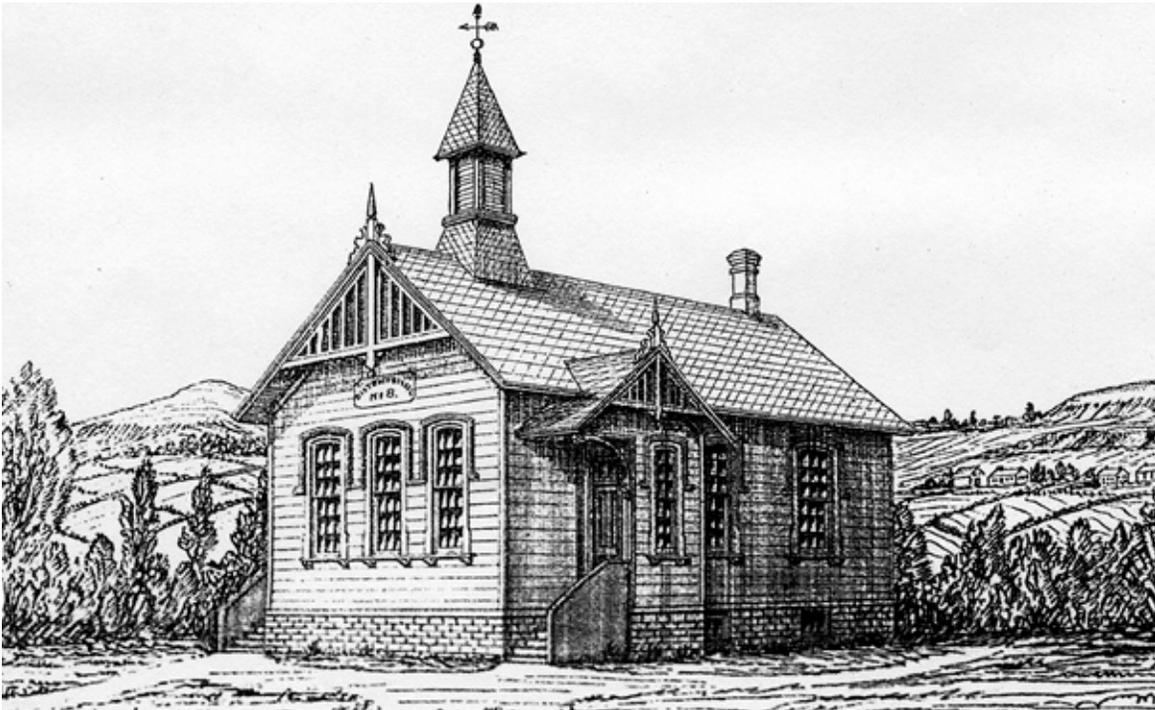
Not surprisingly, a major issue was the expense involved and the tax that would be imposed. Pleasant Valley resident Rachel Williamson commented in her May 9 local news column in the Hopewell Herald that the vote on the new schoolhouse culminated several days of "hard electioneering by some of the opposing party" and she revealed her own feelings with the comment that, "if they had represented the prospective tax correctly it would not have appeared quite so enormous to some of the big property owners." Altogether the Valley residents voted to raise \$1000 for the school through the sale of bonds. The trustees of the school were authorized to issue bonds in the amount of \$1000 as of September 1, 1890 and agreed to pay the bond holders over five years, 1890 through 1894, at 5% interest. This took an act of faith on the part of the Pleasant Valley farmers that crops and prices would be good for the next five years. Selling bonds was the typical method of paying for a new school, but the farmers' debt in this enterprise was neither remote nor impersonal and the agreement to pay school bonds was looked upon as a personal debt. Although typically bonds for schools were sold to some of the more well to do people of the community, specifically who the Pleasant Valley bonds were sold to isn't known. Rachel Williamson, closed her report on the new schoolhouse meeting with the comment, "The enterprise in the district in voting for a new school house is certainly commendable in consideration of the comfort and convenience of the children and youth who attend the school in this district, also the teacher's comfort. Also in consideration of having a suitable place for holding Sabbath school and meetings during the summer months."

Regardless of any lingering concerns among the Valley residents about the propriety of building a new school, work needed to begin quickly if the new building was going to be ready for students in the fall. So, the board now had to deal with a myriad of details. First, a location had to be determined so at the same meeting at which the new schoolhouse was approved the people decided to locate it on a one-acre corner of the Gervas Ely farm not far from the old schoolhouse and centrally located. The acre also contained the family graveyard of the John Phillips family that had owned the land in the late 18th and early 19th century. Then, a design for the building had to be selected and someone had to be contracted to excavate the foundation and haul in stone and building materials, including lumber, shingles, nails, flooring, windows, and paint. A builder had to be selected since this was not going to be a simple vernacular building the local farmers could put up. Bidders would need to be solicited and the lowest bidder determined and contracted.

On June 6 Rachel Williamson reported that the "plot of ground has been surveyed on which to build the new schoolhouse," but it wasn't until July 22 that the Ely's signed the deed conveying "one acre more or less" to the Trustees of School District No. 1 for \$125.00. The goal was to have the new schoolhouse ready for the September 1889 opening of the school year, so there was only about a month left in which to build it. During the summer, preaching by the Titusville clergymen continued in the old school house on Sunday afternoons. Then, on August 8 Rachel Williamson reported that, "Mr. Donaldson, of Titusville, preached his last sermon in the old school house last Sunday. As the old house is to be torn down he could not leave any appointment for the future, other than that when the new school house is completed he would come and preach." The old school wasn't torn down in August, though. As with many construction projects, the scheduled completion date came and went. On September 10, as the school year began, we find that "Mr. Donaldson preached last Sunday in the old school house, as the trustees have decided not to tear it town until the new one is completed." That summer the Valley residents not only got to watch the construction of their school but also the construction of the nearby iron bridge over Moore's Creek on Hunter Road that gave better access to the Charles Miller farm (today's Howell Living History Farm) and other farms. Unfortunately, due to missing issues of the Hopewell Herald we don't know just when the new school was completed and the old one torn down. It would be safe to say it was sometime in the fall of 1889 and that the school year began in the old school house and finished in the new.

The new schoolhouse said quite a bit about the Pleasant Valley community and its interest in education. In his book *The Old Country School*, historian Wayne Fuller comments on district schools like Pleasant Valley and the local control they enjoyed before they became part of larger entities, such as townships. He describes these schools as being, "Built with the participation of all the people, it had cost the farmers their time and money and sometimes friendships, but it had also forced them to consider the problem of education and measure its worth in ways not possible for succeeding generations of Americans." The new school was planned and built at a time when the architecture of school buildings was undergoing much discussion. The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of great debate about education in general and the need to provide better teachers, curriculum, and school buildings for students. While for many decades local schools had remained small, cramped, and uncomfortable and were of simple, vernacular designs that local farmers could construct, by the late 19th century older schools were being replaced by schools based on plans in published plan books drawn by architects to reflect modern ideas of education and modified based on local ideas or budgets. The design of the Pleasant Valley School built in 1889 reveals a lot about discussions among the farmers that must have taken place but that have been lost if ever recorded.

In general, the new designs for small school houses were influenced by both house and church design. Schools were generally considered to be an extension of the home – not large or intimidating, and homelike in structure and feel – wainscoting up to window sills, plastered walls above, clothes closets with hooks – all very similar to homes and a place where the children would be in familiar, comfortable surroundings with their siblings and friends. Schools were also a community center and designs were influenced by that other community center, the church. Pleasant Valley did not have any churches and the new schoolhouse was going to accommodate religious services and activities for several denominations. The design chosen by the people of the Valley drew on several elements of church design and the small, ancient graveyard of the Phillips family adjacent to it must have added to the impression.



Drawing of schoolhouse design from the 1874 Annual Report of the New Jersey State Superintendent of Schools.

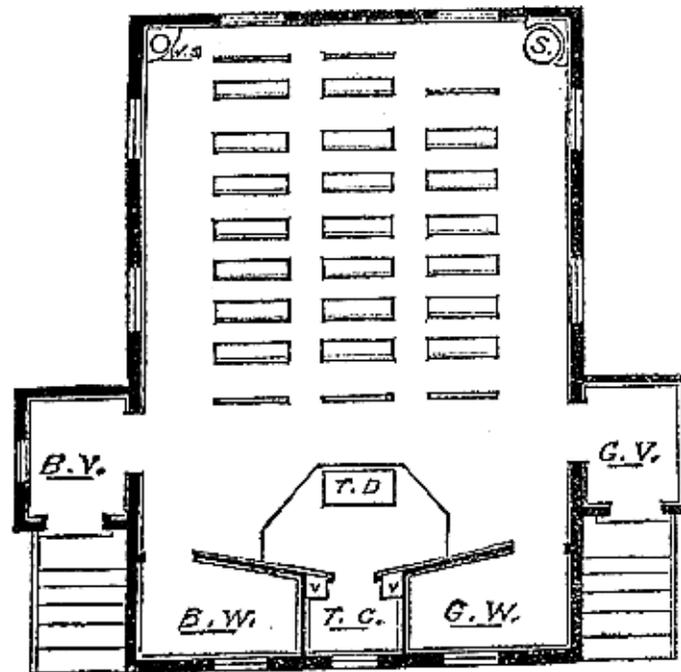
The design chosen by Pleasant Valley appears to have its origins in a plan included in the 1874 Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Schools. It was design number seven in a series of plans drawn by architect Albert N. Dabb of Elizabeth, New Jersey for this volume. Detailed sets of building plans could be obtained from the architect. This plan included two entrances through gabled vestibules, windows on the front of the building, and a bell tower – all reminiscent of churches. Modifications to the original plan included locating the bell tower on the roof of the west vestibule instead of the main roof, modifying the window placements, and cutting back on elaborate trim. The state superintendent had recommended belfries for both ventilation and housing a bell. The bell would provide a common signal to insure punctuality, since he noted that clocks in country neighborhoods varied a lot. The vestibules were also recommended by the superintendent as they prevented drafts, rain, and snow from entering the building.

The design was typical of school designs in the 19th century plan books incorporating new ideas of educational reformers, such as placement of desks and windows, while giving schools some architectural style aside from austere

vernacular. The completed school can best be described as Folk Victorian in style. It is a scaled back version of Queen Anne style with its symmetrical cube design, patterned wood shingles in the front gable, a pattern in the slate roof shingles, overhanging eaves, the pyramid shaped roof, and vertical windows. The original design in the 1874 annual report was estimated to cost \$1500 to \$1600 to build. The cost of the actual building, achieved primarily by reducing the amount of trim, was more like \$900. It was more than a simple vernacular school and exemplified the desire of the people to express pride in their community but, as practical farmers, without the unnecessary gingerbread trim.



This photo of Pleasant Valley 1889 schoolhouse shows the modifications such as moving the bell tower, modifying the window plan, and much less decorative trim.



FLOOR PLAN A—40 pupils,
22x30,

The floor plan of the 1874 one room school design is classic in its dimensions and fits exactly the dimensions of the Pleasant Valley schoolhouse. In the days before sound amplification experience had determined that 30 feet by 40 feet was about the maximum size a room could be in order for everyone to hear. Common sizes for school rooms in the 19th century were more like 20 by 30 feet, about the size of the Pleasant Valley School, and were rated to accommodate 30 to 40 students comfortably. Schools at this time generally had a teacher's platform eight or ten inches high in the front

of the room. This gave the teacher a sense of authority and he or she could look down on the farm boys who might cause trouble. The platform also provided a stage for plays, recitations, and spell-downs. It also gave a platform for the preacher on Sunday afternoon or weekday evening meetings. The walls were painted white or cream above the wainscoting that extended up about four and half feet from the floor to just beneath the windows. Some of the walls had blackboards. The student desks were put in rows in the middle of the room rather than around the edges as had been done previously. In the early years, boys and girls were probably assigned to different sides of the room, corresponding to the boys and girls entrances, although this was abandoned later in the school's history. Whether or not the student desks were originally fastened permanently in place isn't known, although we know it was not fastened down in later years so that it could be moved aside for community events.

If the Pleasant Valley School followed the 1874 plan, in the front of the room were the teacher's closet and separate cloak rooms for the boys and girls. Each cloakroom had hooks, pegs, or nails placed about three to four feet from the floor and probably a shelf above for the students' lunches. Lunches were brought in tin pails or lard pails and sometimes froze solid in the winter sitting on this shelf in the unheated cloakroom. A lower shelf in the cloakroom may have held a wash basin, where the water might freeze in winter also, and a cake of soap and towel. Somewhere near the front of the room, in a somewhat warmer spot, a water bucket was kept with a common dipper to provide drinking water. On a table or bookcase in the front of the room there was undoubtedly a clock in a wooden case.

Windows were a hot topic in discussions about school design. Expert opinion was that light should come over the students' left shoulder and not come from more than one direction. The Pleasant Valley School followed some rules and broke others with regard to windows. One rule was that students should not face windows. The bank of windows on the front, south side, of the school is unusual. If the floor plan was anything like the 1874 prototype these windows gave light to closets rather than the school room and walls of the two wardrobes had blackboards. The windows in the peak of the gable offered southern light to the interior classroom far above the heads of the students. The bank of windows on the east wall gave light that would be over the left shoulder of students as recommended by the experts. We know from written descriptions and from evidence in one early photograph that there was at least one window on the north wall. While it appears that the west wall originally had no windows, one was added not too many years after construction towards the back of the building. The more typical pattern was to have several windows on each of the two longer sides of the building, in this case east and west, so the Pleasant Valley School is a bit unusual having windows on only one side. The usual pattern was for three separate vertical windows but Pleasant Valley connected these windows with additional upper windows in the spaces between them. These high windows provided additional light to the building which relied solely on natural light. Typically, school windows were designed to lower from the top as well as bottom to provide ventilation in warm weather. The state superintendent recommended windows have shades and early photographs appear to show them at Pleasant Valley.



This photo of the Pleasant Valley Schoolhouse shows the east wall windows consisting of three vertical windows with upper windows in between making almost a complete wall of windows. This is quite different from the usual simple three vertical windows. In the 1874 plan there were only two vertical windows.

In winter, heat was provided by an iron stove probably located in the middle of the room with its cast iron legs sitting on a heat reflecting metal pad and with a pipe extending up and then making a right angle leading it to the chimney. The further away from the stove the colder the room was since there was no insulation in the walls and heat rose to the high ceiling. With doors and windows kept closed there was little introduction of new air and oxygen into the room. In hot weather only opening doors and windows provided air circulation and any cooling a cross breeze could offer.

The new building incorporated mass produced materials and equipment that became available in the 1870s and included such things as tongue and groove flooring, wainscoting, embossed metal ceilings, cast-iron desks, cabinets, shelving and slate blackboards. Trenton had a school furniture company that may have provided the student and teacher desks and perhaps other items. The outside of the building was painted, but not red. The idea that one-room schools were painted red has been shown to be mostly myth. Most schools were painted white, but in the Victorian era styles such as Queen Anne often used earth tones or forest colors such as tan or yellow. Early photos of the Pleasant Valley School show it to have a light brown, tan, or cream color with dark brown or green trim that would fit this pattern.

The new school house served the families of Pleasant Valley for about 45 years until 1936. During those years it stood as a symbol of the community and a focal point of community activities. It was enlarged to a two-room school in 1917-18 and was closed in 1936 at the height of the Great Depression, as a money saving move and as part of the program to have all students attend larger schools where each grade could have its own classroom and teacher. The school was purchased in 1938 by a former student, Franklyn Wooden, who converted it into his family home. During this conversion he dismantled the original 1889 portion of the school and used the wood and windows in buildings he constructed on the former schoolyard to house the chickens from which he made his livelihood. Today the one-acre plot containing the converted schoolhouse and chicken farm buildings is owned by Mercer County and administered by Howell Living History Farm.

Sources:

Annual Reports of the State Board of Education and of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of New Jersey for the school years ending June 1874, 1890, and 1891. (1874 pages 23+, 44-45; 1890 pages 50-51; 1891 page 48)

Fuller, Wayne E. *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. (Chapter 4 on the schoolhouse with the quote coming from page 73)

Mercer County Deeds, Book 168, page 219.

Pleasant Valley column in the *Hopewell Herald*, May 9, 1889.