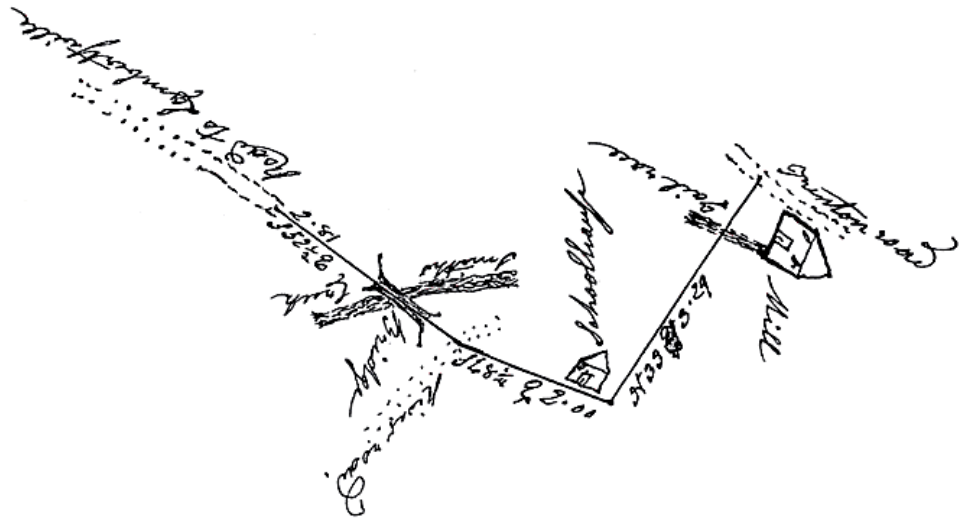


Pleasant Valley's First School: ca1820 – 1889

by Larry Kidder

Pleasant Valley has a long history of agricultural settlement extending back to the early 1700s. The scattered farm families were somewhat independent, but socialized with each other and relied on one another for many things. There was cooperation among these people in completing farm work, exchanging skills, tools, and oxen and horses for power, and in the establishment of needed facilities, such as mills and blacksmith shops. But, just what the early settlers of Pleasant Valley in the 1700s did to educate their children is not known. Education in New Jersey in the colonial period and the beginning of the 19th century was a somewhat haphazard combination of private and parochial schools instead of the free, compulsory public schools that were common in New England from an early date. After independence, and especially beginning in the early 19th century, Americans began to dream of an educational system that would bring the diverse population of the nation together and produce “Americans.” This new type of person would be imbued with the key beliefs embodied in the Constitution and the ideas of the Founding Fathers. It was recognized that only well educated citizens could participate effectively in the new democratic form of government. To achieve this dream would require a free public education system led by teachers who were highly qualified. The 19th century, therefore, saw continuing efforts in New Jersey to establish a public school system that would benefit all citizens by providing a high quality curriculum taught by well qualified teachers in suitable and well equipped school buildings. It would be a long, slow struggle and the story of education in Pleasant Valley reflects, and exemplifies, this century long effort.

The earliest evidence of a schoolhouse in Pleasant Valley is found on an 1826 map associated with a Hunterdon County road return. This schoolhouse was in a central location in Pleasant Valley and served a rural school district extending out from it about two to three miles in all directions. The district was



The 1826 road return map showing the Phillips Mill Schoolhouse just down Pleasant Valley Road from the mill and near the intersection with the Road to Lambertville, today's Valley Road.

undoubtedly created before 1826, perhaps around 1817 when the New Jersey legislature made an early effort to establish some funding for local districts. By 1826, though, no appropriations to schools had yet been made. In 1820 a law had authorized townships to raise money for schools, but only on a limited basis. So, the people of the Valley probably built this little rural schoolhouse and organized its district in Pleasant Valley about 1820. Its students came only from those families who wanted their children to attend and who could afford the tuition. The local farmers built the schoolhouse, purchased curriculum materials, and hired the teachers. Therefore, the school was only as good as its supporters in the Valley could afford to make it.

On the 1826 map the schoolhouse is clearly shown located between the gristmill of William Phillips and the intersection of the road to Lambertville and the River Road, today's Valley Road and Pleasant Valley Road. It is wedged between the road and Smith's (now Moore's) Creek. Its proximity to the prosperous and well known grist mill led the people to call it the Phillips's Mill School.



Detail from the 1849 Otley and Keilly Map of Hopewell Township showing the location of the Phillips's Mill Schoolhouse wedged between the road and Moore's Creek at the intersection of Pleasant Valley and Valley Roads.

The 1849 Otley and Keilly Map of Hopewell Township provides another picture of its location. A visit to the site today would astound the observer, who would have a hard time believing that a building could have been located there, because the area between the rise of Kuser Mountain and the channel of Moore's Creek is only slightly wider than the road. Even when one considers that the paved road today is at least twice as wide as the original dirt road, there is still very little space. By oral tradition passed down in the Valley the schoolhouse actually extended into the road. Taking the evidence of the maps and this oral tradition, it appears that this school was like many others and closely fits the harsh description of rural schools appearing in a number of accounts in the

19th century. A vivid example is the 1856 description given by John B. Thompson of the recently organized New Jersey State Teachers Association. He says, "Indeed the country schoolhouse of the first half of this century would now be considered a disgrace in a civilized community. Usually it was perched upon the side of the public road resting equally on it and the land of the adjacent owner, who quietly ignored the trespass. Claiming thus only a permissive existence and having no right to occupy space on earth, it seemed to feel its own insignificance."

The land this schoolhouse "trespassed" on in 1826 was owned by Henry Phillips, whose farm was today's Howell Farm. He was one of four brothers who owned large farms in the central part of Pleasant Valley; the third generation of the Phillips family in the Valley. Not surprisingly, there is no evidence of a deed to a local school committee so it is probable that Henry Phillips welcomed the "trespass", perhaps to have close proximity to the school for his own children. In the 1830 census he has six school age children in his household, the oldest of whom would have been five years old, the beginning school age, about 1817. Or, perhaps he tolerated the "trespass" because it contributed to the cross-roads community center located around it. The men of the Phillips family were primarily farmers, but in the first generations there were millers and blacksmiths in the family. The location of a blacksmith shop in the years before 1830 is not known, but it is likely the shop was near the Phillips gristmill that was only a few yards from the schoolhouse. By about 1830 a blacksmith shop

was located where it appears on the 1849 and subsequent maps in the 19th century, no more than 50 yards north of the schoolhouse. Having the schoolhouse that also served as the community center near the blacksmith shop and gristmill certainly didn't hurt, and perhaps helped, these businesses, and giving the name Phillips's Mill District to the school didn't hurt either. One wonders how influential the Phillips family was in determining the creation of the early school and giving it the name of their mill.

The earliest family whose children are known to have attended this school in its early years was the Wrick family who lived on Goat Hill in West Amwell Township. According to family tradition, Mary Wrick, born May 20, 1825, and her seven older siblings attended the "little red school house" in Pleasant Valley. They accompanied each other on the two to three mile walk to and from the school each day across farm fields and along dirt roads. Mary was the youngest and started school about 1830 or 1831, just a few years after the 1826 map, while her siblings attended earlier, perhaps even from the first year of the school's existence. Classmates undoubtedly included the Phillips children who were about the same ages. Enrollment of the Wrick children is an indication that the original school district, and Pleasant Valley itself, included families from both Hopewell and West Amwell Townships, both part of Hunterdon County when the school district was first formed. The statement that the schoolhouse was painted red, as stated by the person recounting the family story, is open to question and may have been simply an assumption based on folk lore. Painting schoolhouses, even with relatively inexpensive red paint, cost more than most school trustees could afford, so most were left unpainted until after about 1870 when cheaper paints became available. This of course increased their rate of deterioration. White was the most common color for those schoolhouses that did receive paint.

An Act to Establish Common Schools was passed in 1829, essentially repealed in 1830, and then reenacted in 1838. It established the rudiments of a statewide school system based on funding from a combination of tuition, township appropriations, and state appropriations, mostly for poorer districts. Under this system, each school district elected three men as a board of trustees to support the local school and hire the teachers. At some point after this act, if it hadn't been done earlier, the Phillips's Mill District was probably formally chartered by Hopewell Township. The first trustees of the Phillips's Mill District must have created a handwritten document similar to one for a nearby district found in a folder of miscellaneous early deeds and records at the Hopewell Board of Education and dated April 23, 1851. This document certified the adoption of the district name and boundaries, stating it was incorporated in accordance with the provisions of "the supplement to the act entitled 'an act to establish public schools'."

In 1844 a new state constitution was adopted that provided for state funding for public schools and beginning in 1846 township superintendents were required to submit annual reports to the state superintendent in order to qualify for state aid, aid that could only be used for teacher salaries, not for building or repairing schoolhouses. The 1844 constitution was an indication that the people of New Jersey were beginning to accept the concept of free public schools established through legislative acts. That year the first free public school in New Jersey was established in Nottingham in Mercer County, supported by a tax on dogs.

Annual published reports of the state superintendent of school begin in 1846 and provide information about the Hopewell school districts as a group, although not about individual districts in the township until 1870. The picture painted of New Jersey schools by the state superintendent

in 1846 indicated a pretty poor situation in spite of the interest of at least some people in providing a quality educational experience for New Jersey children. It was apparent as mid-century approached that many people were still not sold on the necessity for properly organized and maintained schools. This is about the time of the 1849 map that shows the school in Pleasant Valley as one of those frequently mentioned schoolhouses jammed into a small space by the roadside. The superintendent called for a state law to regulate standards of quality for such school buildings. He said the need for the law was obvious:

from the dilapidated appearance of a portion of our district school houses. Let any one travel over the state and he will see the truth of this; he will recognize at a glance, every "Place" where a school is taught - not by its adaptedness to the purpose, but by a want of it. Let him examine many of these buildings - they would be invaluable to any painter in search of the "Picturesque." The clap-boards hang loose, fluttering to every breeze; the places where panes of glass once were, are supplied by old hats, or pasted over by pages of the copy book; the door hangs loose upon its hinges, and the floor has given way. The water from the road, or a neighboring one, has found its way under the house, and oozes in through the missing planks, perhaps a good remedy for the "dryness" of hard study, but a better cause of disease. The roof, perchance, is fallen in, and lets in the rain, and would be a serious objection, did it not also serve to let out the smoke, which is emitted at fitful intervals from the old broken stove. The seats are, in some cases, made of the "slabs" from the neighboring saw mill, with four poles inserted for legs, (and it is not always that the bark side is turned downward), and having no backs, give an early lesson of the necessity of supporting oneself. The desks are in many cases made of two boards grooved together and placed in the form of an inclined plane, against the wall, too high for most of the children who "aspire" to write. The position of the house is also deserving of notice, generally upon the highway, in a hollow, and, if possible, like the body of a suicide, where "four roads do meet."

How closely this colorful word picture described the school in Pleasant Valley is not known, but the last sentence is an unfortunately close description. The annual report two years later in 1848 says much the same and uses phrases such as, "places where scholars are congregated, called by courtesy, 'school houses'", "More dilapidated than the out-buildings of a respectable farmer", and, "In fact, a 'merciful man,' being merciful to his beast, would not winter his horse in places appropriated at present for district school houses." And, finally, that one can recognize a school house "if it is located at the junction of two or more roads, in a low, wet spot, with no fence around it, and no appurtenances attached." All of these statements were counterpoint to the comments by the superintendent that school districts should avail themselves of publications with plans for more suitable and up to date schoolhouses, such as Henry Barnard's *School House Architecture*, and use them as a guide when planning new school buildings.

The first Hopewell superintendent's report was included in the 1849 annual report of the state superintendent. Hopewell superintendent John H. Phillips, a doctor from Hopewell borough, reported that there was not much improvement in the condition of the schools in the nine whole districts and eight partial districts shared with adjoining townships. He attributed the lack of progress to lack of interest in education on the part of the majority of people. He argued that this attitude would not be changed simply through legislation, but that those people interested in education needed to get out and talk about it in business and social settings to persuade the mass of people to

support schools in their locality. In these comments, Phillips demonstrated that the efforts to reform education in Hopewell were like other reform movements in the country – temperance, abolition, prison, etc. – where the debate between the need for moral suasion versus legislation was a part of life throughout the United States. Earlier in the 19th century the emphasis was on moral persuasion and as the century progressed it turned more to legislative solutions. In Pleasant Valley it is probable that many people were among those that Dr. Phillips found wanting in their determination to improve their school, through either moral persuasion or legislation.

The township reports for the late 1840s and 1850s show there were about 16 districts in Hopewell and they were generally open for nine months of the year. Only averages for the districts are given so we can't be sure what the Phillips' Mill District did. Although there were consistent calls for free schools, the Hopewell schools were financed by a combination of tuition, on average about \$2.00 early in the decade and \$2.50 later, and township taxes. For Hopewell as a whole, only about half to two thirds of the children of school age were taught at all and many who attended school did not attend all year. Schoolhouses during these decades were consistently described as inadequate.

In addition to a suitable schoolhouse, the quality of a school depended to a great extent upon the quality of its teacher. People interested in improving education during the 19th century were especially interested in raising the quality of teachers. The proper people needed to be attracted to teaching and had to be adequately prepared to teach. In the 1820s the licensing of teachers was a local affair and it varied greatly from district to district. In 1846 the first published reports of the state superintendent bemoaned the shortage of well qualified teachers, while he took the districts to task for the poor quality of their schoolhouses. The superintendent spoke of the local examination system, recognizing that it would not be uniform from district to district, and then discussed what made a qualified teacher.

When we speak of qualified teachers, we allude not only to the mental, but moral qualifications. To entitle a man to enter upon the responsible office of a teacher, he should not only be possessed of the requisite literary qualifications, but possess an irreproachable moral character. Too much attention has hitherto been bestowed upon the former, to the almost entire disregard of the latter. This should not be so. The men to whose care we commit our children in the tender age of childhood, when both head and heart receive their first and perhaps lasting impressions, should themselves be pure – should not only point out the path of duty, but walk therein themselves – should serve as guides, counselors and friends. It is a mistaken notion that instruction is only communicated by words. Every act of a teacher is a lesson. The angry voice, the threatening brow, the impatient temper, the lewd look, or the lascivious manner of a teacher, do not indeed speak, but they make an impression which time may not easily efface. The very breath of the drunkard teaches. How necessary then to select “properly qualified teachers” for our schools.

In the early discussions of teachers there is an assumption that most will be men. But women were recognized when he stated:

We have also in our schools some well informed female teachers; and I would suggest to the trustees the propriety of employing them, when practicable, for many of the small schools; they will be found as well qualified, in point of intelligence, and frequently excelling in a capacity to impart instruction and to govern a school.

It is nice that female teachers were well regarded, although the rates of pay, small for both men and women, were less for women than for men until well into the 20th century. The predominance of male teachers continued through the 1840s, 50s, and 60s when male teachers in Hopewell Township outnumbered females in most years, sometimes by as much 12 to one as in 1853 and 1856.

The elevation of the teaching profession continued to be a concern in the 1850s. A teachers' association was formed in 1853 and the following year eight teachers' institutes were held. Each institute lasted for several days and the teachers who attended heard lectures on educational topics and approved school procedures. In general, the period leading up to and through the Civil War saw an increase in the number of women teachers, but slow growth in the number of free schools and other school reforms. In cities and towns interest in providing a graded system, where there was a separate teacher for each grade, producing better qualified teachers, constructing better buildings, encouraging better attendance, and providing better, more consistent text books was slowly growing and bringing at least some change to those districts. The rural districts like Phillips's Mill did not experience these changes and met resistance when even considering them. The school did benefit in 1859, though, when the state arranged to distribute to all schools a copy of *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* and a copy of *Lippincott's Pronouncing Gazetteer*. This was not meant to diminish the role of the local trustees in determining curriculum and textbooks. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was more and more pressure to improve the rural districts and eventually to abolish them and combine them into the township districts.

In 1860 the statistical data for Hopewell looks pretty much the same as during the previous decade, but the report of the state superintendent is especially critical. While finding many schools "in a wretched condition" and some "totally unfit for educational purposes", he even castigates those districts with suitable schools because too often their good qualities had been achieved through the misuse of state funds "intended exclusively for the payment of teachers." He noted that in districts where the money was used properly, "the miserable pittance annually required to keep the school house from decay cannot always be raised." He did note that some progress was made to the accommodations inside the schoolhouses, with seats and desks installed in many schools where the old "uncomfortable benches and forms so well calculated to make the school room a prison and study a punishment" had been abandoned. However, providing proper ventilation was another matter and he noted about half of the district schools had "no protection whatever ... against the pestilential atmosphere of a crowded room." After commenting that the need for ventilation to maintain health was well understood and ways to provide it were widely known, he found it incongruous that buildings dedicated to knowledge should not be examples themselves of the use of up to date knowledge. Most schools relied simply on doors and windows for ventilation so that "the luckless children who sit by the open door or window, with a December's blast upon their unprotected heads, go home with a cold, and are fortunate if they escape with only the loss of a quarter's schooling." But, the superintendent saved his strongest condemnation for schoolhouse privies.

But the most remarkable tendency to barbarism observable among us is in the construction, or rather non-construction, of school house privies. While it is the duty of every parent, before sending his children into the highway, to cover them with suitable clothing, the obligation upon him to use every other means in his power to guard them against the vice and immodesty is equally binding; but if any reliance may be placed upon the information which I have been able to collect in regard to the surroundings of district school houses, there is great reason to fear that some

communities are in imminent danger of lapsing into positive heathenism. That the 513 school houses in the State of New Jersey have no suitable privies attached to them for both sexes, is a fact calculated to startle any one whose knowledge of human nature extends beyond the nursery walls. Positively 513 pig pens, whose inmates of either sex run grunting into the woods, the bushes and the fence corners, learning to expose their nakedness without shame, and to practice all manner of indecency without a blush. I should be an unfaithful public servant were I to neglect this opportunity to call attention to so scandalous an evil, for while legislation may not be able to suppress it, just indignation, with the finger of scorn pointed at those who tolerate it, may.

The lack of adequate playgrounds was also noted and regretted. Again, the image was painted of the rural schoolhouse perched on the side of the road with barely enough space for the schoolhouse itself, like the Phillips's Mill district.

We can get some clues about the Phillips's Mill schoolhouse from special statistics reported in 1866. In that year there were 13 districts containing eight frame, one brick, and four stone schoolhouses. Only seven of the 13 schoolhouses were considered well ventilated and only four were reported to have sufficient school grounds. Five of the schoolhouses, over a third, were considered unfit for use.

During the 1860s, in part due to the Civil War, the numbers of male and female teachers began to even out and in some years there were more females than males. As the century moved on the number of female teachers became consistently greater than males. The first year we have information about a Phillips's Mill District teacher is 1870, when the teacher was a female who earned \$32.00 per month in salary. She may well be the Emily McNeal, age 22, living on the T.Q. Phillips farm in Pleasant Valley in August 1870 who gave her occupation as teacher in the US Census. The teachers at Pleasant Valley were all female until 1875 when records show two teachers, one male and one female. Since the school was only averaging 19 or so students each day this must mean that each taught for part of the year. This situation continued in 1876 and 1877 and we know that employing a teacher for less than a full year was not uncommon at this time.

In 1867 a state-wide census of school age children was made and reported by township and district in the state superintendent's annual report. This census tells us that the name Phillips's Mill was being used for the district in Pleasant Valley and reports there were 64 children of school age, ages five to 18, in the district. It isn't until 1870 that the annual reports begin to give specific information for local districts, and in this year we first find the name of the district given as Pleasant Valley, replacing Phillips's Mill since the mill had evidently closed down some years earlier and was no longer a landmark. About this time school district boundaries were revised and clarified. Fifty-four districts were designated in Mercer County, with the Hopewell schools given numbers 1 through 14 and the Pleasant Valley district designated District No. 1. This activity was associated with an 1867 act by the legislature to "Establish a System of Public Instruction" that repealed all previous acts and established a new system. A major part of this plan provided for the appointing of county superintendents to work with the various district committees and township superintendents. That year the state superintendent noted in his report that there was more interest on the part of teachers to improve teaching methods, teacher salaries were increased, there was more uniformity of textbooks,



Detail from 1860 map of Hopewell showing the location of the Phillips Mill schoolhouse in the same wedged location as in 1849. The blacksmith shop is still in operation but the gristmill may have closed down by this time.

there were more free schools, and a number of old schoolhouses were torn down and new ones built. Before 1867 there had been various combinations of district, town, and county examination and certification systems in effect, but in that year the State Board of Education finally established a state-wide system that would serve until 1911.

In 1870 the schoolhouse was only in fair condition and valued at \$300. So, it was probably one of those schoolhouses that three years earlier was a frame building, not well ventilated, having insufficient grounds, and, if not unfit for use, perhaps close to it. The total cost for running the school was \$199.38 and this money came from state appropriations (\$20.84), the Hopewell Township tax (\$102.00), and tuition (\$76.54). It was not yet a free school and of the 63 eligible children only 56 enrolled, leaving seven who attended no days of school. Four students attended less than four months, nine attended between four and six months, 30 attended seven or eight months, and only 13 students attended the full year. While the average daily attendance in the old building was given as 46, this is undoubtedly a typographical error and it was more likely 16. This would be in line with reports for the next two decades when the average daily attendance fluctuated from 12 in 1871 to 19 or 20 in the mid-1870s to mid-80s. The next highest reported average attendance was 28 in 1883.



Detail from 1875 map of Hopewell showing the location of the Pleasant Valley district schoolhouse about the time it was repaired or replaced. The blacksmith shop is still in operation but the gristmill no longer appears on the map.

By 1872 the schoolhouse was listed in poor condition, one of just six given that designation in the county. The 1872 annual report indicated that these six dilapidated schools were all scheduled for repair or replacement. Two years later, in 1874, the report indicated that there was just one schoolhouse still in poor condition, although it had been repaired at district expense, but with little effect and “the money was little better than thrown away.” We don’t know if this was the Pleasant Valley School, but by 1875 the schoolhouse had been significantly repaired or replaced and the value of the school rose to \$900. However, it was only listed as being in “good” condition, not “very good” as one would expect of a new schoolhouse, so perhaps it was just repaired. In his 1874 annual report the state superintendent supplied a series of approved designs for schoolhouses. One of these plans would one day be adapted for a new schoolhouse in Pleasant Valley, but not at this time.

The estimated capacity of the schoolhouse in 1872 was 40 students, the first year this statistic is given in the reports, and the schoolhouse was rated as in poor condition. In 1877, after the school had been improved to \$900 in value, the capacity was given as 50 students. For the next six years the capacity was variously 48 to 50. In 1884 the capacity was reduced to 45 and it fell further to 40 students during its years of decline to 1889. Whether these estimates relate to the condition of the building or to changes in what was considered an adequate amount of individual space per student is unclear. It is interesting that when a new schoolhouse was finally built in 1889-90 it was rated at only 40 students although it was undoubtedly larger than the old schoolhouse. It would appear that it was space expectations that changed rather than just the deterioration of the old building.

Also in 1872, when the school was in really bad condition, the State began to encourage the creation and expansion of school libraries by offering \$20 to district schools who raised matching funds. It wasn’t until 1880, several years after the schoolhouse was improved, that the Pleasant Valley district raised \$20 for its library and applied for these State matching funds. The reported statistics indicate this was the first application for funds and there is no indication of any previously purchased

books, previously raised funds, any books already in the library, or any books checked out during the year. So, this looks like the beginning of the school library. There is no evidence of further fund raising for the library until 1888-89, the last year of this schoolhouse's existence, when Miss Hodge held an entertainment to raise money to improve the library.

In the year of our country's centennial, 1876, the Pleasant Valley school was rated as in "good" condition, not "very good," and it still only provided a traditional education for that time period. In other districts, and at the county and state level, thinking and action were taking place that looked to the future when schools would be better able to provide the foundation for more students to attend high school or college and have greater opportunities as a result. These ideas would eventually filter down to Pleasant Valley and begin to change the nature of education there and ultimately lead to the abandonment of the little rural school.

Between 1878 and 1882 the school had a male teacher each year and in 1880 he may well have been Robert Calwell, age 26, who was living with the Charles L. Hunt family at today's Birum house, only about a hundred yards from the schoolhouse, and gave his occupation as teacher to the census taker in August 1880. During the years between 1883 and 1889 only female teachers taught at the school, the last of whom was Miss Hodge. Throughout the 19th century to 1889 the salary for teachers in Hopewell and the Pleasant Valley district was virtually unchanging, varying only from about \$25 to \$35 per month for nine or ten months and most years the range was \$29 to \$34. A man tended to make a few dollars more each month than a woman with the same experience.

In 1884 the value of the schoolhouse in Pleasant Valley had declined to \$500 and in 1887 to \$400. For some reason, perhaps a different evaluator's perspective, in 1888 it was back to \$500. Through all these years of modest decline it was rated as being in good condition. But, suddenly in 1889 it was down to \$150 in value and just marginal in condition. Why this sudden change occurred in 1888-1889 is unknown. Was it because for several years the reports had been overly optimistic, or did something happen to the schoolhouse? Whatever happened, it was clear that the building needed to be replaced. The last teacher for this schoolhouse in 1888-1889 was Miss Hodge whose story is told separately. During her year of teaching the school trustees agreed to build a new schoolhouse just a few yards to the east, but this time on an acre of land that could accommodate the new building now set back from the road, two privies, and a large schoolyard, in addition to a good sized shed to shelter the horses that brought Valley people to the schoolhouse for community events. The struggle to get the vastly improved new schoolhouse approved, located, and built is a separate story also.

By 1888-1889 the old schoolhouse had served the people of Pleasant Valley for about 70 years. Whatever its good or bad qualities, they were the product of decisions made by the residents of the Valley themselves through their elected neighbors serving on the district school board. Some changes had come about through state legislation, such as doing away with tuition and setting standards for teacher certification, but who the teacher was each year, what condition the schoolhouse was in, and what the basic curriculum was were all determined by the district. Likewise, the decision to abandon the schoolhouse and build a new one was the decision of the people of the district who agreed to tax themselves to pay for it. The change in the name of the school district from Phillips's Mill to Pleasant Valley showed a change from the people identifying with a community business landmark to identifying with a geographic region containing the families that made up the community of Pleasant Valley. There seems to be a growing community identity and the new schoolhouse was destined to play a major role in the development of that identity over the next fifty years. This would be true even

though the people were destined to lose local control of their school in 1894 when all rural school districts came under the control of their townships.

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