

DUSTY ROADS®



by Dean Karau

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Kewanee and Wethersfield's First Free High School

In 1858, the Two School Districts Shared a Jointly-operated Secondary School

Soon after the founding of the Wethersfield Colony in 1837, the settlers built a small hewn-log meeting house on the northeast corner of Tenney and Church Streets. In 1839, the Colony opened the first school with a single teacher in the meeting house. Early teachers included Miss Stewart, Miss Dorr, Mr. Keeler, and C. C. Blish.



Sketch of first Wethersfield meeting house

The seats were slabs four to eight feet long, with legs made of wooden pins driven into augur holes, and no backs to the seats. Younger students sat on the seats holding books in their laps, swinging their feet which could not yet reach the floor. Older students had seats facing the walls, with a wide board jutting out from

the wall to be used as a writing surface. The students would gather the school books from the seats each Friday afternoon to make way for the Sunday services.

In addition to teaching basic literacy and arithmetic skills, the school sought to instill a common political, social, and moral philosophy representing that which the colonists brought with them from their homes in the East.

In 1850, after the Wethersfield Congregational Church built a new edifice, the school trustees moved the log school to the other side of Tenney Street and a block north on land acquired for a school campus.

Soon after the founding of Berrien in the spring of 1854 (renamed Kewanee a year later), the new village turned its attention to schools.

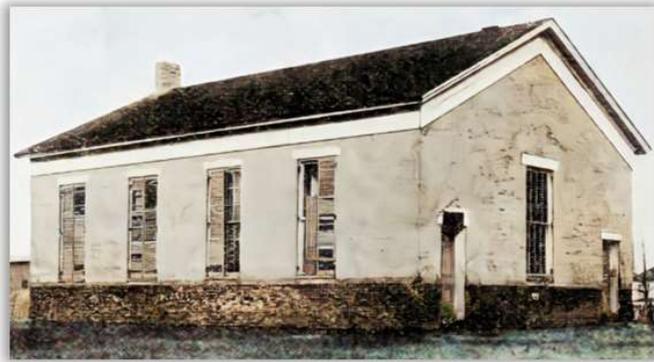
A private school was located in Dwight Needham's house on west side of Tremont Street between Second and Third Streets.

George A. Morse, who with Silas Willard had opened the first store in the village, donated a building north of the railroad tracks on Main Street for a school. (After a few years, the building was moved across the tracks closer to the village center.)

Nelson Lay, Howard Sullivan, and Henry G. Little

put up a one story building on the north side of Second Street between Main and Tremont Streets. The building was used as a school, and also was used for religious services and Sunday school.

In 1856, after the Wethersfield Baptist Church stopped construction of a building on the west side of Tenney Street between McClure and Church Streets. The Wethersfield school trustees acquired the building for use as a school, later known as the South Brick School.



The South Brick School

Other small, rural schools also had opened around the countryside.

This was the state of learning in Kewanee and Wethersfield in 1856. But the education landscape was about to change.

In January 1856, citizens of Wethersfield and Kewanee formed an association to create a seminary for higher education which was unavailable from the existing schools. The association held a second meeting in February, and together they raised over \$5,000. The association then appointed a committee to draft a constitution and bylaws.

The association wanted to build its school near the line separating the school districts, which was a quarter of a mile north of the Wethersfield township line. James Elliott donated two and a half acres of land on the west side of South Chestnut Street (the street would be extended from the original village).

In May, the association began construction of a two story, 40 ft. x 60 ft. building with a cupola housing a bell. They completed construction by the

end of the year. (It was located on today's 600 block of Chestnut Street.)

In early 1857, the association hosted an examination and exhibition of the new school, and those attending expressed "*the highest gratification*" of the seminary. It was furnished with Ross school desks and was "*fitted up in the best and most modern style.*"



Ross style student desk and chairs

The school was officially called the Union Seminary, but eventually became known simply as the "Old Academy." It began its first term in April 1857. Tuition ran \$4.00 per quarter for common school studies and \$5.00 per quarter for advanced branches and languages, with extra charges for music, drawing, and painting. The school promised the availability of nearby boarding.



Union Seminary – "Old Academy"

UNION SEMINARY.

THE next Quarter of this Institution, will commence on the first Monday in April, 1857, and continue eleven weeks. It will still be under the direction of REV. L. F. WALDO, its Principal, aided by thorough and competent Assistants.

Instruction will be given in the Common School branches, and in all the departments of study usually taught in our best Academies and High Schools.

LECTURES will be given upon the different departments of study, by the Principal and others.

TERMS:

Common School Studies, per quarter,	\$1.00
Higher Branches and Languages, "	5.00
Music, Drawing and Painting, extra.	

TUITION INVARIABLY IN ADVANCE.

Board can be procured in the vicinity of the Seminary on reasonable terms.

C. C. BLISS, Sec'y.

Kewanee, March 27, 1857 —3w

March 28, 1857, Kewanee Advertiser

Only the second floor of the building was used for the school. The first floor was given over to use for lectures, lyceums, and a public hall. Newspaper publisher Horace Greeley, of "go West young man, go West" fame, spoke there, among others.

The first principal was Rev. Mr. Waldo, and he was assisted by Miss Atwood. The academic year was divided into three terms:

First Year

- 1st term: arithmetic, grammar and physiology.
- 2nd term: arithmetic, grammar and physiology.
- 3rd term: arithmetic, grammar and algebra.

Second Year

- 1st term: algebra, physical geography, Latin.
- 2nd term: Geometry, physical geography, Latin.
- 3rd term: Geometry, rhetoric, Latin grammar.

Third Year

- 1st term: Geometry, philosophy, Cicero.
- 2nd term: Algebra, philosophy, Cicero
- 3rd term: Algebra, chemistry, Virgil.

Fourth Year

- 1st term: Moral science, chemistry, Virgil.
- 2nd term: Elements of criticism, chemistry, Virgil.
- 3rd term: Astronomy, mental philosophy, Horace.

In the beginning, the school was quite a distance from where most Kewaneeans lived, that is, nearer to what is now downtown. The streets were in a constant muddy state in the winter months and there were no wooden sidewalks extending to it. So a large wagon was pressed into service to transport most of the Kewanee students to and from the school.

But the private seminary was short-lived.

In 1855, the Illinois legislature had mandated a free public school system. In early 1858, the seminary stockholders offered to give the Kewanee and Wethersfield school districts the building and the grounds for the purpose of a free union high school, provided the districts assumed the stockholders' debt of between \$2,000 and \$2,500. Both districts voted to accept the proposition. Kewanee and Wethersfield, operating together, were in the business of providing a 40-week per year, free public high school education to the students in their districts. (Students outside of the districts still paid tuition.)

Unfortunately, discord developed between the two villages. According to the July 21, 1870, Kewanee Advertiser,

"[f]or a considerable time past there has been a growing dissatisfaction on the part of a portion of the people of Wethersfield with the partnership in the schools and at the last election in Wethersfield for school directors, some of the candidates were supported on the ground that they were in favor of the secession of Wethersfield from the present school union, and it has been thought best by [Kewanee] school directors to submit the matter of purchase to a vote of the people of [the Kewanee] school district"

In August of 1870 at the Kewanee school district election, voters agreed to purchase Wethersfield's interest in the high school. The sale included the

The School Election.

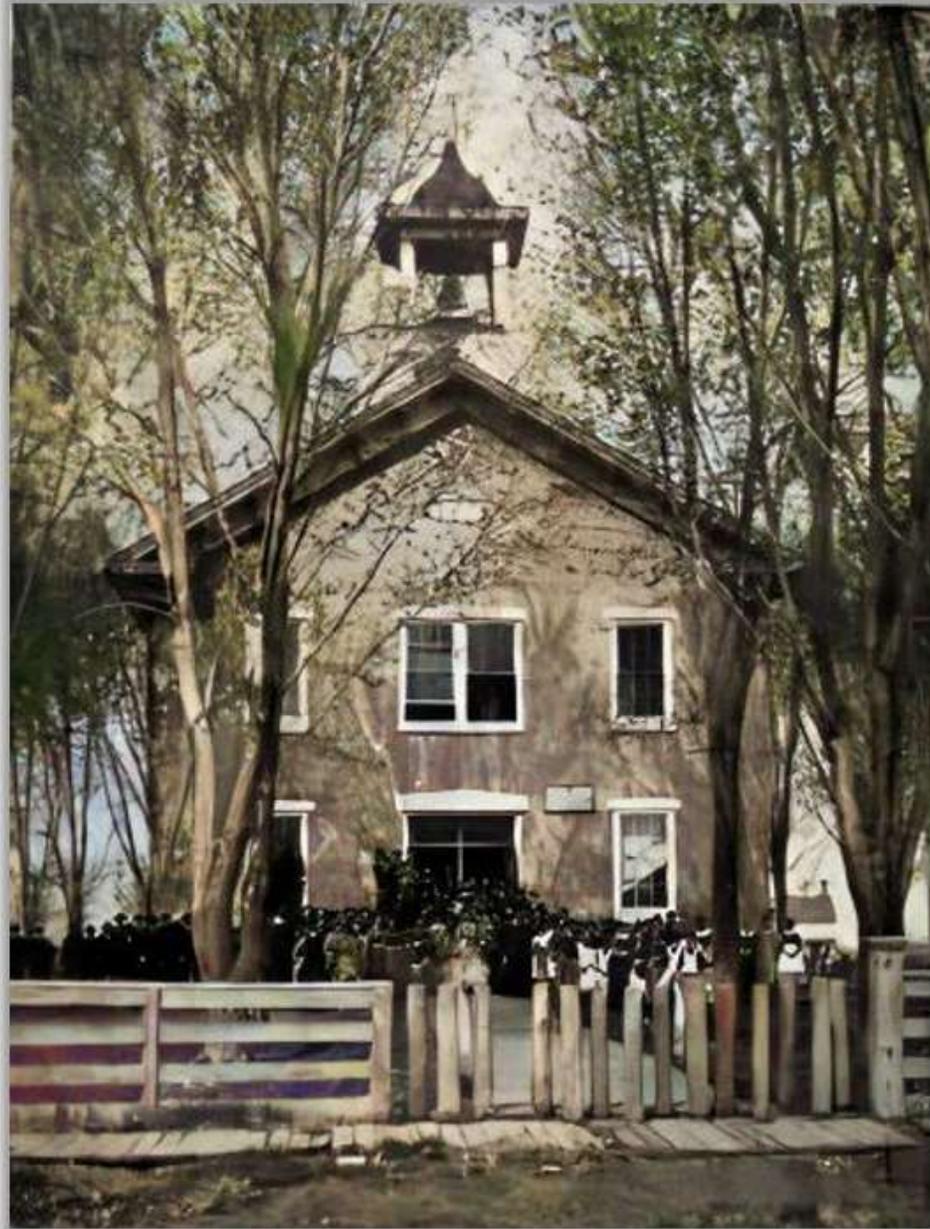
The result of the election last Saturday to ascertain the wishes of the voters of the district relative to the purchase of Wethersfield's interest in the High School property, was in favor of the purchase. In addition to the purchase of the High School building, furniture, &c., this district acquires a large increase to its territory. The southern boundary of the district heretofore has been a quarter of a mile north of the Wethersfield township line, it will in the future extend to the Wethersfield line, giving Kewanee a strip of territory a quarter of a mile wide and a mile in length, the school tax upon which will now fall to Kewanee, instead of Wethersfield, this will amount to several hundred dollars annually. There is another matter to be considered in this connection—the purchase will save the district the expense of building another primary school house, which was much needed, and which would have been an absolute necessity in another year. The purchase will cost the district \$1,800, the building of a primary school house would have cost much more. The vote at the election, was as usual at school elections a very tight one—there being some 50 odd in favor of the purchase, and but 12 against. Had there been a full vote polled, the majority would have been in about the same proportion.

August 4, 1870, Kewanee Advertiser

building, the furnishings, and the quarter mile strip north of the Wethersfield Township line.

The villages' spirit of educational cooperation was no more. But each village soon developed its own

highly respected educational systems, which continue to serve the respective communities well to this day.



Union Seminary – the “Old Academy” in later years