

HINSDALE ACADEMY



On January 24, 1848, six years after the Western Railroad was completed through Hinsdale, a newly created group of concerned citizens met at Merriman's Hall on Hinsdale's Main Street, calling themselves the Hinsdale Academy Association.

They met to plan formation of a new academy in the town, to consider construction of a building to house it, and to ascertain a site for the proposed building.

J. M. Tuttle called the meeting to order. William Hinsdale was appointed chairman and Charles J. Kittredge chosen as secretary. He recorded the Association's concern:

"In view of the increasing population and the interest we feel in education of [the] rising population, we strongly desire to place within their reach [more] advantages of a higher education than can be offered in our public schools."

To finance the new educational venture, Ezra B. Tracy proposed that the members form a stock company with shares to cost ten dollars per share. Dr. Benjamin Kittredge and Henry Putnam became the committee on subscriptions.

On June 3, 1848 the sum of \$ 370.00 was subscribed and \$ 400.00 dollars were borrowed from the town.

Through the action of another committee, Henry Putnam, Charles F. Kittredge and Henry Merriman, the new academy was incorporated by the state legislature on April 21, 1848.

A site for the new academy was chosen on land bought from the Kittredge family, a knoll near the emerging new center of the town, immediately west of the place where the Congregational Church was to be moved nine years later in 1857. After much active discussion of materials whether wood or stone and architectural design, the Association chose wood with marble steps and a classical Greek temple design, reflecting the Greek neo-classical spirit of the era. The design also echoed the style of buildings in Pittsfield's then active Maplewood Academy, the building committee having borrowed the Maplewood Academy plans as a guide.

Architects of the time provided a detailed description to guide the builders. The Hinsdale Academy was to have a hexastyle (six-column) south facade with an entablature, the horizontal forms above the fluted columns. The entablature includes the three main horizontal parts, the architrave, frieze and cornice, resting on the columns. Above those three entablature sections is the pediment, the low triangular space with a small window. In more elaborate buildings, like the Parthenon in Athens, the pediment is decorated with sculpture figures.

The fluted columns themselves display the Ionic Order, one of the five classical architectural orders. At their capitals or tops are pairs of spiral volutes, which identify the Ionic Order. The column bases have two toruses, doughnut-edged discs resting on a plinth, the square-edged base slab.

Henry Merriman, one of the Academy planners, in addition to Merriman's Hall on Main St above the rooms that housed generations of Hinsdale pharmacies, built the first textile mills on the nearby Housatonic cascades. In the mid-1800's his name also identified Merriman's Corners, as the junction of Longview Avenue with Curtis Street/Robinson Road was once called. When originally built, the real estate for the Academy was valued at \$15,000.00 and the personal property, excluding books and apparatus, at \$5,000.00

Building construction proceeded through late 1848, and on October 3 that year a bell was hung in the belfry. Cast by the Bell Foundry in West Troy, NY, it weighed 209 pounds at a cost of 32 cents per pound....\$66.88, and with the wheel and frame the assembly totaled \$81.61. The completed Academy was dedicated January 11, 1849, one year after the Association first met, with William B. Sprague, D.D., minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Albany, NY, as the main speaker.

The faculty of the new Academy included Isaac N. Lincoln, A.B. as Principal; Samuel W. Lincoln, Assistant Principal; Miss Mary E. Lincoln, preceptress, and Miss Elvira L. Richards, music teacher. Later principals included Charles E. Bissell of E. Windsor, CT; Rev. Chauncey Goodrich, D.D., Dr. Benjamin F. Kittredge and Henry Putnam, a prominent farmer, all Hinsdale men.

The students could choose between two programs, Latin which stressed classical studies, and English, a general program. Eventually numbering some 159 pupils, the student body included "90 Gentlemen and 64 Ladies", making the Academy among the earliest to include both men and women. Tuition was four dollars for the winter term. From successive classes, eighteen men continued their studies and graduated from Williams College.

Academy continued as an educational institution for close to a generation, from 1849 to 1867, both before and after the Civil War.

Widespread educational changes following the Civil War saw the emergence of the public high school, and the Hinsdale Academy, facing bankruptcy, sold its facilities by public auction to the town of Hinsdale in 1857. The property was deeded to the town by William Ambrose Taylor in May 1857 for \$4,000. Over the next three or four decades, until the early 1900's, Hinsdale High School occupied the site, educating two generations of Hinsdale young people. The local high school, for financial reasons like its predecessor, was at last closed, and students then attended either Dalton or Pittsfield High Schools. The building, entering its third phase, became the Hinsdale Town Hall.

Town meetings were held in the large upstairs room, with town offices in other rooms. The Hinsdale Boy Scouts, Troop 21, formed by S. R. Swift about

1914, one of the earliest troops in the nation, occupied a lower room. In 1954 the Town Offices and meetings were moved, and the building was used only by the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts for some years, succumbing to gradual decline. On April 23, 1963 the town voted to permit the Lions Club, led by Charles DeAngelus, to restore the building to use as the Hinsdale Youth Center and now the Hinsdale Community Center. Extended hours of labor for the restoration were volunteered by townspeople and out-of-towners, including summer campers from Camp Taconic, with donations from civic, business and industrial groups and many individuals.

Standing in classic style on its elm-bordered knoll, the building, restored, maintained and usefully occupied testifies to the foresight of the men who gathered in 1848 as the Hinsdale Academy Association, and to the civic spirit of generations of its guardians.

(Drafted from notes assembled by the late Mrs. Marion A. Ransford, and the late Mrs. Thelma Suitor and expanded with additional information by L. F. Swift. 6/1/02)

(Peter White 2016)