

MEMORIES OF AN HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBER OF THE 1964
RESTORATION OF THE 1794 WEST SCHOOL



Written by:

Paul J. Arseneault

March 20, 1997

These reminiscences are dedicated to all of the citizens of Burlington who came forward to help with the restoration of the West School. It was you who made it possible.

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Early in 1964, there appeared in the newspaper a most interesting letter-to-the-editor written by Charlie P. Casassa. In this letter, Charlie explained why the town should save the one-room West School from being torn down. That night, I called Charlie, and we both agreed to meet the following day to look at the schoolhouse.

Charlie and I walked from his house to the school, which was only five houses down the street. As we viewed the outside of the building, I found it to be in tough shape. Many years earlier, it had been converted to an auto-repair garage with two large garage doors. Some of the clapboard siding was now missing or split and in need of replacement. The siding that was still good needed to be renailed, scraped, primed and painted. Broken windowpanes needed to be replaced, and the chimney had to be recemented and pointed. Next, we checked the four-foot crawl space under the school. Four of the 2" by 12" floor joists were broken and split down the middle, and would need to be jacked up and repaired. I could foresee that a great deal of work would have to be done to preserve this relic of our past.

When Charlie and I went inside, I took my first look at the two blackboards on the wall. I got goosebumps. Burlington's first schoolhouse had been built during the first years of our country--during the presidency of George Washington. In 1794, when the first teacher opened the front door of the newly-built West School to the first class of pupils, George Washington was in his second presidential term. I knew at once that I wanted to have a hand in restoring the West School, so that future generations could experience there what I felt. I shook Charlie's hand, and asked him what he wanted me to do?

Charlie said that three things would have to be done before the restoration work could be started: first, he had to talk to the owner, Allen Gray, about buying the property; second, a town historical society needed to be formed; and third, the historical society would have to secure a bank loan. By the time all of these were accomplished, I was ready and eager to put my hands and tools to work.

I devoted time after work, Saturdays and my two vacation weeks to the restoration, enjoying every minute of it. Charlie and I began by stripping off the old cedar-wood shingles from the roof. It wasn't long before other volunteers stepped

forward to offer their help. There was John Curtis, who flashed and pointed the chimney, and made a copper chandelier. Commander Leslie James and other members of the American Legion Post #273 painted the exterior. Stedman Rice, member of the Board of Library Trustees, and others painted the interior. Frank Kirby and the boy scouts of Troop 518 cleaned out the basement crawl space. Kenneth Canning did interior replastering. The Garden Club cleared the land of brush, and then put in lawn and shubbery. The Lions Club refaced the front of the building. In place of the two garage doors, they reconstructed the front face of the schoolhouse to its original look. Charlie Casassa used his farm tractor to move a big granite slab from his backyard to where it now stands as the step before the front door. Everyday, Marge, the wife of Charlie Casassa, faithfully served us coffee, soft drinks, doughnuts and ice-cream. This was appreciated by all. So was the music. Walter and Mildred Sheehan brought an old wind-up Victrola phonograph, and played patriotic songs to inspire the volunteers.

On the ground in front of the school, we set a two-foot high replica of the West School along with four seven-inch high "bank" replicas of the school. I had built these to promote the restoration project and to raise funds. Even back then, the corner of Bedford Street and Francis Wyman Road (now called Charlie P. Casassa Square) was busy with traffic. Drivers would stop their cars to drop money into our little West School "banks." With us hammering and sawing, painting and plastering and landscaping to the strains of patriotic music, people would tell us how impressed they were to see our efforts to preserve this part of our American history--the one-room schoolhouse--all through old-fashioned volunteerism and fund-raising.

We decided to inform the school children of our project by giving each child a piece of Burlington's history. I spent a week sawing the discarded old cedar roof-shingles into small pieces. We then soaked these small pieces in gym finish in order to preserve them. After the members of the Historical Society had stamped "West School" on them, we went to the schools, where we gave away around 8,000 of these historic mementos. We also placed two small "bank" replicas of the West School in each school, so that the children could raise money. We were pleased with the amount of money raised.

After the reshingling of the roof was done, we turned to repairing the floor. When we entered the basement crawl space, we were surprised to encounter a four-foot long black snake. It didn't take us long to get out of there. We were cautious in reentering the crawl space the next day, but we never did see the snake again. Thereafter, we were careful to check the area before starting work on the floor joists each day.

To lift up the floor, we used a house jack that had been in my family for over fifty years. We nailed 2" by 12" boards along side the four split 2" by 12" floor joists and put in place posts for support. These posts came from the old St. Margaret's Church that used to stand on the corner of Winn Street and Center Street. When we finished the floor, I mistakenly left the house jack there. In 1986, while I was looking for this house

jack, I remembered where I had left it in 1964. Sure enough, there I found it, twenty-two years later, still in the basement of the West School.

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The Historical Society placed a request in the local newspapers asking if anyone in possession of six pairs of old wooden window shutters would like to donate them to the West School restoration. I soon received a telephone call from Mrs. Madeline Bustead of Wilmington Road. Mrs. Bustead said there were some shutters stored between the ceiling rafters in her garage. The next day, she let me check their condition. Happily, they were exactly what we needed--six pairs of 16" by 60" shutters in great condition. All I had to do was to scrape, paint and install them on the school.

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There is one desk in the West School today that was present in the original classroom. That desk is a double-seater with an inkwell in the desktop. It is held in place by legs that fit into matching screwholes in the desk itself and in the floor. We got some of the other desks from the Union School attic when the Union School was turned over to the Board of Selectmen by the School Committee. The rest of the desks were donated by individuals.

Over the years since the restoration was completed, three questions have been frequently asked about the West School by visiting school children: (1) Where is the drinking fountain?; (2) Where is the bathroom?; (3) What is this hole in the desk for? (The inkwell.)

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My brother Ralph created a painting of the West School using a photograph given to the Historical Society by Mrs. Elizabeth Lowther, the society's first president. This painting shows a teacher and her students posing in front of the school. It has hung inside the school since 1965.

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We were surprised when a donation of money arrived from California. Someone who had lived in Burlington once somehow had learned of our efforts to save the West School, and wanted to help.

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While I was in the attic of the West School shoring up the ceiling and putting the tie-jack bracing below the roof, I spotted a piece of tree-bark covered by a quarter of an inch of dust. I took it home with me, washed it off, and rubbed linseed oil on it. To my surprise, this cleaned-up piece of bark revealed the profile of an American Indian with

eyes, nose and war-paint. On the bottom was a square hole of the type that was made with a cutnail--a nail in use many years ago. This bark profile of an American Indian can now be seen mounted on a wall in the Burlington Town Museum.

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Part of our fund-raising took place at the IGA, the grocery store that first occupied the building on Cambridge Street where Building 19 1/2 is now. We set up a glass display case there in which we placed some items representative of Burlington's history. Among other things, there was a piece of the iron gate from the old Burial Grounds, some burnt brick from the historic Sewall House, and some Indian arrow heads from the area of the present-day Chestnut Hill Cemetery. To raise money, we raffled off a beautiful seascape painted by Gwen Burgess. Louis Skelton, who was the Historical Society's treasurer, and I put together a contest that had people guess the number of beans in a beanpot. The twelve-year old girl who won was only 38 beans off in her guess from the actual count--her guess was 3089; the actual count was 3127. She received a winning trophy, membership in the Historical Society, and a couple of other prizes. We also set up my two-foot high West School replica along with two of the seven-inch high "bank" replicas. Through the raffle, the contest and the donations placed in the little "banks", we raised over \$300.00 towards the West School mortgage.

There was a humorous part to our fund-raising at the IGA. The manager of the IGA was a fine gentleman named Irving. He generously let us put our display in a perfect place in the center of the store. Since we wanted to make as much money as possible, we kept the display up for about three weeks. After two weeks, however, we found that the display had been moved a little towards the exit door. The next day, we found that it had been moved a little farther, and the following day, a little farther still, all in the same direction--towards the door. We all loved Irving, but we knew he was trying to tell us something without actually saying it to us. At the Historical Society meeting, we had a big laugh wondering how close our display would be to the door tomorrow. We knew it was our last day when we found it moved right up to exit door. We thanked Irving for helping us to raise money.

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During my twenty-three years of working for the Town of Burlington, I was able to continue to assist in the preservation of the West School. As the Town Hall custodian, I was in charge of the maintenance of seven town buildings, including the West School. Over the years, I did such things at the school as replace windows and doorlocks, and also visited the school at least once a week to check on its general condition.

My wife Mary and I moved to Burlington over 40 years ago. Of the contributions that we have been able to make to Burlington, the highlight for me will always be our part in the restoration of the one-room West School. May it stand in Burlington always!

OBITUARY

Paul Arseneault, 76

Taps will be played and the flags of the Allied Veterans Council unfurled on Friday at funeral services for Paul Arseneault who died Thursday at the Lahey Hitchcock Clinic following a three-year battle with cancer. He was 76.

A well known figure in town, Mr. Arseneault retired several years ago from his job as head of maintenance at Town Hall. Active in numerous organizations, Mr. Arseneault, is probably best known for his love of Burlington and patriotism. Along with the late Charles Cassassa, he founded the Historical Commission; made many of the ornaments that brighten the Town Common during the holiday season; served as chairman of the Tree Lighting Committee for two years; helped build numerous floats for the Fourth of July parade; and was an active member of St. Margaret's Church and local veterans organizations.



Paul Arseneault

Born in White River Junction, Vt. on Feb. 20, 1930, Mr. Arseneault was the son of the late Joseph and Louise Arseneault.

Mr. Arseneault was a veteran of the Korean Conflict and received a number of medals including the Purple Heart. Until his death, he was the last living veteran in Burlington for whom

a memorial had been named. Paul Arseneault Square is located at the telephone building at Bedford and Center streets.

Mr. Arseneault is survived by his wife Mary Louise (Carberry) Arseneault; his sons, Michael and Frederick Arseneault, both of Burlington and Denis Arseneault of Metheun; and his daughter Elaine Suleski of Peabody.

In addition, he is survived by his brothers Norman Arseneault of Plymouth and Ralph Arseneault of Winter Park, Fl; and his sister Sylvia Impemba of Burling-

ton; and four grandchildren, Candace and Ryan Arseneault and William and Jennifer Suleski.

A Mass of Christian Burial will be celebraterd at 10 a.m. on Friday at St. Margaret's Church.

Visiting hours will be 2-4 and 7-9 p.m. on Thursday at the Edward V. Sullivan Funeral Home, 43 Winn St., Burlington.

Interment will be in Chestnut Hill Cemetery.

Memorial donations may be made to the St. Margaret's Church Building Fund, 111 Winn St., Burlington, MA 01803.