

School Days, School Days

September marks the beginning of the new school year but it wasn't always so. Brighton was an agricultural town for most of the nineteenth century so the school year for farm children didn't begin until November after the harvest was over. For the same reason the school year ended in March so children could help with the planting.

From its earliest days, education was important to the people of Brighton. In June of 1814, just three months after the first town meeting, Brighton's three commissioners met to establish five school districts in the new town. Because Brighton was very much larger in those days (20,090 acres in 1814, 6500 acres in 2017) many children had a long way to go to school. District #1 was on the east side of town and its schoolhouse faced Clover Street at Elmwood Avenue. District #2 was in Brighton Centre, later to become Brighton Village. District #3 was all of what became the town of Irondequoit in 1839. Districts #4 and #5 stretched to the Genesee River and included what is now the city of Rochester on the east side of the River.

In the one-room school houses, often built of Brighton brick, children from five to fifteen learned arithmetic, geography, reading, writing, and spelling. Teaching the different grade levels often fell to young men and women just out of school themselves. When a pupil reached the highest grade available, his school days were over and he went to join his father on the farm or he was hired by a neighboring farmer. After eighth grade girls usually stayed at home until they were old enough to marry. A grammar school education was considered sufficient for the time and could be considered the equivalent of a high school education of today.

If a young man or woman of Brighton wanted to attend high school his or her options were limited by family circumstances. Brighton did not offer schooling beyond eighth grade until 1928 nor was high school available in nearby towns. If he was lucky and he wasn't needed to supplement family income, he might have gone to high school in the city of Rochester. Rochester Central High School opened in 1857. In 1874 the Rochester Free Academy opened on Fitzhugh Street. East and West High Schools opened in 1903 and 1905 respectively.

With no school buses, the problem of getting to high school in the city fell on the student. Public transportation existed on Monroe and East Avenues but one would have a long walk to access it from some of the more remote parts of Brighton. One would also need the fare. If one's family could spare a horse and wagon, a young man could drive into the city and leave the rig at a livery stable while at class. Girls fortunate enough to attend high school might board with a relative during the week, returning home for the weekend. They might have been expected to provide child care or domestic work in exchange for room and board.

The opening of Brighton High School in 1928 followed the development of the town's first residential neighborhoods, Home Acres, Rose Lawn, Bel-Air, and Meadowbrook and marked the beginning of the town's reputation for quality education.

Mary Jo Lanphear
Town of Brighton Historian
9 August 2017