

THE "BIRTH" of HARWINTON and the "LIFE" of FIRST DISTRICT SCHOOL

In the 1680s the Colony of Connecticut was worried that its charter might be taken away by the British government and that the *Western Lands* (now most of Litchfield County) might be lost, thus the entire northwest corner of Connecticut was given to the Hartford and Windsor Plantations for safekeeping. When the threat had finally passed, Connecticut's General Assembly asked to have the land back, but Hartford and Windsor refused! They reasoned that the land had been given to them. The matter was arbitrated to settlement in 1726: Hartford and Windsor kept the eastern section of the contested tract while the western portion was returned to the Colony. In addition to Harwinton, the eastern section of the plantation was carved into what would be the towns of Torrington, Hartland, Barkhamsted, Colebrook, Winchester, and New Hartford.

By agreement Hartford became sole owner of *East Harwinton* and Windsor the owner of *West Harwinton*. The boundary was a straight North and South ten rod (165') wide *highway* running through the middle of the town from border to border which would become known as North and South Roads. Tracts of land were parceled out to proprietors (qualified property owners of 1720 /or their heirs) from co-owners Hartford and Windsor. The land was divided in proportion to their grand list holdings during the drawings. Young settlers were attracted by the area's inexpensive farmland with its vast timber and water power. There was an economic need to leave the century old Connecticut Valley towns of large families and diminishing farm sizes.

In 1732, the two halves of Harwinton were joined back together in anticipation of eventually being declared a *township* by a vote of the Colonial Assembly. In October 1737 approval for "*sd plantation to be a town Incorporated and Known by the name of Harwinton*" was given by the colonial legislative body. The petition stated that with 161 residents there were needs. Approval was granted for "*a tax of two pence per acre be levied for support of ye Gospell Minister and Building a Meeting House*". Harwinton consisted of twenty-five to thirty widely scattered houses.

The first Harwinton Town Meeting was held at the private residence of Jacob Benton on the east side of Locust Road (presently Camp's Farm) on December 20, 1737. Daniel Messenger was named moderator and Benton was named Town Clerk. A brander of horses and fence viewers were appointed. Swine were given the liberty to run at large, a sign post to be used to post legal notices and notices of public meetings was to be erected on the "*senter line*", a "*Meeting House for Divine worship*" was to be built on the "*senter line*" (Harwinton Congregational Church location), and the salary for a minister were among the decisions. (See Raymond G. Bentley's History of Harwinton (p 18-20) for a detailed list of the meeting decisions.)

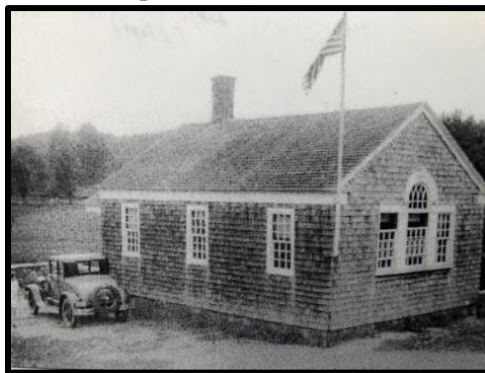
During a 1741 town meeting it was voted that a tax would be levied to maintain a school which would be open for some part of the year. (At first schools were held in homes. Later one-room schools were built- students of all ages were under the guidance of one teacher.) In 1748 funds were appropriated to hire schoolmasters (male) and school dames (females). These teachers were required to sustain good moral character; write legibly; and be able to read and spell correctly. Teachers were usually between 16 and 20 years of age and often boarded with a family in town. Most teachers had only a district school education themselves.



In 1840 one-room First District (Center) School was built on the town green.

In 1874 Harwinton had 12 school districts. Although school was not mandatory, children usually started school at the age of four, learning the alphabet and then moving on to reading. At about seven years of age students began to study geography, followed by penmanship at age nine, and arithmetic and more difficult reading between the ages of ten and twelve. Older students worked on history and grammar. The school day usually was from 9-12, followed by a break for lunch, and classes again from 1 to 4. Students walked to school most days, and often went home for lunch. Bible readings and prayers, as well as penmanship were important parts of the school day. Each family decided whether or not a child would attend school on a given day. Sometimes chores at home (especially during planting and harvest times) required students to stay at home to help.

Raymond Bentley describes the 1924 schools in History of Harwinton, “With a few exceptions, there was little difference in those buildings and the ones in use one hundred years ago.” Center School was one of the exceptions! In 1924 Center School was one of two schools in Harwinton to have furnace heat- the other schools were heated with wood stoves. When wood was delivered, it was split by the older boys (5-6 cords of wood a year) and students helped carry wood to the basement. An older student called “the fireman” arrived by 7 a.m. to get the fire going so the room would be warm by 9 o’clock. One of the students was paid twenty-five cents per week to put wood on the fire if it got chilly and to take out the ashes. Only one school, Center School, had running water. Newman Hungerford installed the water as a memorial to his wife, Helen Wilson, who had taught at the school before their marriage. The water was gravity fed from the top of Center Hill. All of the schools had outside toilets.



In this 1930 photo Center School was located along the banks of Lead Mine Brook at the bottom of Center Hill (South side of Route 4). It replaced the first school building that was originally located on the town green. William McConway (the Pittsburg industrialist who had the beautifully constructed walls on South Road built around his “vacation house” properties) is said to have rebuilt Center School in exchange for Central Academy. John F. Peckham described this school in the one-room school students’

Book of Memories: “Center School as we see it today has been restored to its original classic simplicity, but in 1930 it boasted some alterations that the pupils thought special. These included a large arched window on the wall, shingles on the exterior, and a furnace in the cellar which had a register in the floor through which hot air was circulated to provide warmth, unlike most of the other schools which were heated by pot-belly stoves.” In 1932 Center School became the first school to have electricity installed. . . while the students watched! The town did not fund the enhancement- students raised the \$100 needed through performing plays. Students were very proud of the globe light that was hung in the middle of the ceiling! In addition, students used the funds they raised to purchase a small radio. On weekends and during vacations, students had the opportunity to bring the radio home to listen to Amos and Andy, Fibber McGee and Molly, and the news.

As the years passed, residents began to enjoy greater conveniences and comforts in their homes, thus it was thought that schools should have better conditions, also. With improvements in roads and transportation, the 1941 directive to the school board was to replace the one-room schools with a central consolidated school. In 1945 residents voted to purchase land at the intersection of Scoville Hill and Litchfield Roads. After the land was purchased it was found through seepage tests that there might be problems with waste disposal. After several town meetings and lively discussions about location, it was voted to sell the Scoville Hill property and buy the property on Litchfield Road where the elementary school is now located. An eight-room school was opened in September 1948 -all of the one-room schools in Harwinton were consolidated into this one location, Harwinton Consolidated School. All of the one-room schools except Center School were disposed of by the town (sold for houses and a community center, torn down). The fate of Center School was unknown until HHS came to the rescue!



In 1972 the building that once housed First District School students was moved to its current location on Regional School District 10 property (115 Litchfield Road) and restored to its original 1840 design.

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