

Historic bell discovered at Neshobe school

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As late as the 1950s, the little one-room school in Brandon's Arnold District had a working bell and an operational outhouse. The outhouse is long gone but the bell still exists, now perched in a cupola atop the art building at the Neshobe Elementary School in Forest Dale.

When the Arnold District schoolhouse was built in 1804, Brandon was a tiny town in the wilds of Vermont and the school served the children of the farmers who lived on the northwestern outskirts of the village. In fact, to accommodate the farming cycle, the school was in session for only three months each year, allowing the children to work alongside their parents during the other nine months.

A school bell wasn't just ceremonial; it would echo across the district and let the kids know it was time to make their way to school for their lessons.

In the 1800s, schooling was very much a neighborhood affair in Brandon. By 1850, there were 13 "school districts," each of which served 20 or so families. The Brandon Town Office still has the handwritten enrollment records from the earliest days of the village's school system. In 1828, for example, the Arnold District school, the "first district," had a total of 43 "scholars" coming from 21 households.

These figures were recorded with a quill pen by the Town Clerk, Barzillai Davenport, in the beautiful cursive of the era. It was in this period that little Stephen A. Douglas lived on his uncle Edward Fisk's farm in the Arnold District and attended the schoolhouse there. In fact, the 1828 enrollment record lists three students in Edward Fisk's household and, as Fisk himself was childless, it's likely that one of those students was Stephen Douglas.

It wouldn't be long before Douglas left Vermont to seek his fortune out West, like many youths of his time, eventually becoming a U.S. Senator from Illinois and running for president as the Democratic candidate against Republican Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

At some point in the 1800s, a handsome bronze bell was installed in the Arnold District schoolhouse. The bell was cast by the Meneely Foundry of West Troy, New York, one of the premier bell foundries of its day. Meneely produced bells for schools, churches, and town halls all over the country. You might not think that a little schoolhouse in Brandon, Vermont had anything in common with the historic Trinity Church in Manhattan, but you'd be wrong: they both had Meneely bells.

Many Meneely bells bear the dates of their manufacture, but the Arnold District bell does not. However, the foundry was established by Andrew Meneely in 1826, setting a cap on the earliest possible timeframe for the bell's casting. It's unlikely that the Arnold District bell is that old, though, since such a bell would have been quite an extravagance for a rural school that didn't even operate all year. And the earliest bells had wooden yokes while the Arnold District bell is supported by cast iron, as was the standard in the Victorian era.

It's more likely, then, that the bell dates to the mid-to-late 1800s, when Brandon had become a prosperous, bustling town that could afford such luxuries, perhaps replacing a smaller, simpler bell.



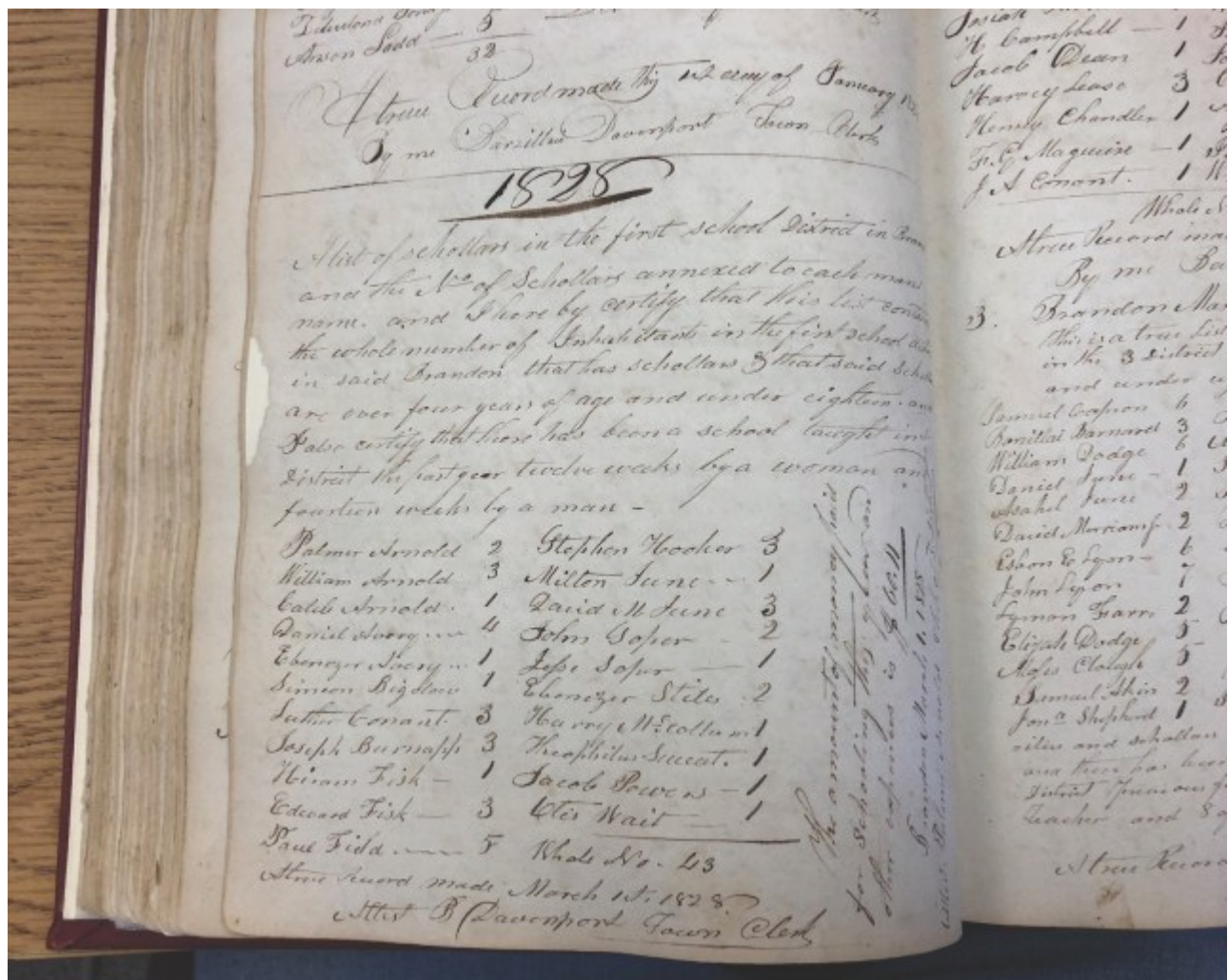
The Arnold District schoolhouse in the 1800s

The Arnold District school was closed in the 1950s, when Brandon's elementary-age students were consolidated in the "graded school" that used to stand on the hill across from the old Brandon High School on Seminary Street. The graded school burned down in 1959 and a few years later the Neshobe Elementary School was built in Forest Dale.

In the meantime, the Arnold District schoolhouse was used for community events and 4-H meetings. It was eventually sold into private hands and turned into a residence. Some years later, the building was moved from its original position to a spot farther away from the main road. The bell was removed from the belfry and installed in a cupola on what is now the Neshobe School's art building, which was designed to look like an antique schoolhouse.

Over the years, the bell that once echoed across the farms of the Arnold District fell mute, invisible and forgotten in its little wooden tower. Most people in Brandon, even at the Neshobe School itself, were completely unaware of its existence.

The Otter Valley Unified Union Board (OVUUB) has recently begun deliberating plans for the bell, whether to leave it in place or to move it to another spot. If moved, it would be displayed somewhere more central in town, perhaps at the Town Hall, to make it more accessible to the public. If left in place, windows would be cut into the cupola and the bell would be incorporated into school life, perhaps to open and close the school day as it once did in the Arnold District.



List of School

District One residents

There has even been talk of establishing a new tradition in which graduating sixth graders get to ring the bell themselves on their last day as Neshobe students. OVUUB member Bill Mathis says the school board will take up the matter at its next meeting on May 4, and welcomes input from the community. Anyone who would like to weigh in on plans for the bell can reach Mr. Mathis at wmathis@sover.net. He said he would be happy to convey the community's suggestions to the OVUUB.

The bell is a precious link to Brandon's history, connecting us to life here in the 1800s. Brandon has long cherished its historic architecture and its old traditions, such as the white-frosted flower girls on Memorial Day. We should similarly cherish this bell and consider creating new traditions for it. But whatever the final decision on the bell's placement and use, we're fortunate to still have it.