

■ *A snapshot in time...*

SCHALMONT'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

In the last 50 years, Schalmont Central School District has experienced many changes at the elementary level.

In 1955, 13 small school districts voted to create Rotterdam-Princetown Central School District No. 1, Towns of Rotterdam, Princetown, Florida, and Guilderland – later shortened to “Schalmont.” Five existing school buildings became a part of the new, consolidated district:

- Pine Grove (originally Rotterdam District No. 1),
- Schonowe (originally Rotterdam District No. 3),
- Henry Ellers (originally Rotterdam District No. 4),
- Woestina (originally Rotterdam District No. 5), and
- Jefferson (originally Rotterdam District No. 11).

Each one had value as an instructional facility, but over the years, several aged out of usefulness. Meanwhile, others were added to or renovated so as to better serve district students.

Mariaville Elementary joined Schalmont in 1959, but it has already had the spotlight, so now we focus on the history of the rest of our elementary schools.

Still with Us...

Jefferson Elementary

Uniforms and squad cars aren't normally associated with crayons, scissors and glue – except in Rotterdam, that is. That's because what once was known as Jefferson School now serves as the Rotterdam Police Department building.

Education on Princetown Road

began with the opening of this eight-room, red brick school for the 1921-22 school year. The property it sat on was purchased for \$900 from Margaret and Myndert Turnbull on Sept. 26, 1918.

At first, only four rooms were completed, but the second floor was



A kindergarten class at Jefferson Elementary in 1952

eventually added with voter approval in 1927. This old Jefferson school held grades one through eight until 1943, when kindergarten was added.

By 1948, the school was so overcrowded that students in seventh and eighth grade were sent to Van Corlaer School in Bellevue.

By 1950, every available space, including the basement and the auditorium stage, had been converted into classrooms, and several classes were combined to try to deal with the problem.

In 1949, the Jefferson School Board proposed an eight-room addition to the building to alleviate the tight squeeze felt by its 232 students. Upon learning

that the cost of such a project would be about the same as constructing a new building, they later proposed a new \$442,000, 10-room school instead.

Construction of new Jefferson began in 1951 on 25 acres located diagonally across from the old school. This land

previously was owned by Edward Siegel, and used as circus grounds.

The building was shaped like the letter M, and had eight classrooms with movable desks and chairs, large windows, individual wardrobes, and bulletin and chalk boards – the latest styles in education

at the time. A combined auditorium and gym, which is still a part of Jefferson today, served as a community center for the school district. It also served as a cafeteria with the unfolding of four 20'-long tables and benches that tucked into the wall.

In 1955, the Jefferson School Board voiced their full support for centralization with what eventually became known as the Schalmont Central School District. Their reasoning was that it would cost taxpayers much more to continue operating independently. The district would soon no longer qualify for emergency state aid, Draper High School was closing its doors to students from Jefferson, and the cost

to send Jefferson graduates to other high schools would be twice as much.

Since it joined this district, Jefferson has undergone significant structural and aesthetic changes. Over the years, several renovations were made to the facility, but major modifications occurred in 1956, 1974 and most recently in 2003 thanks to voters' support of Bond 2000. The facility now looks more like a top-heavy, elongated Z, and serves approximately 650 students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Woestina Elementary

In 1890, a wooden school with a single floor and two rooms opened on the corner of Main and Bradt streets in Rotterdam Junction. This predecessor to Woestina is still around today, though the original structure was raised to add a new first floor in 1902. But the building that most people associate with Schalmont is the brick Woestina High School, which opened in 1923 for



children in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Located near where Woestina stands today, this older building was the only high school in any of the 13 districts consolidated in 1955. After consolidation, kindergarten at Woestina was closed, and those students were sent to Henry Ellers.

This didn't open up much space for the high school, though, because its 12 graduates in 1956 represented a very small portion of the over 2,000 children under 18 years old in the newly consolidated district. With the opening of Schalmont Junior-

Senior High School in 1957, Woestina eventually was able to close its high school and focus on elementary education.

Its student body may have changed, but the building looked much the same until both its demolition and the construction of a new elementary school were approved by voters in 2000. One of the oldest buildings in the district, Woestina had seen little renovation work over the previous 70 years, was in violation of federal mandates under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and was poorly suited for helping students meet new, higher academic standards. Though most of the old school was torn down, the new school retained its combined gym and cafeteria addition from 1956.



Woestina School in 1902 (left) and Woestina Elementary in 1989 (above)

Today, students at Woestina find bright hallways, comfortable classrooms, up-to-date technology and library resources, and safe, fun places to play. The new building was constructed to handle 150 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, so Woestina also has room for growth in its student population.

Now a Part of Our History

Henry Ellers Elementary

The first school to be closed after the creation of Schalmont was Henry J. Ellers School. In 1955, it had 50 students in eight grades, two classrooms, two teachers, no lunchroom, and no kindergarten. It also

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Please help us celebrate our Golden Anniversary by joining us for...

- Schalmont Central School District's **50th Anniversary Rededication Ceremony on Tuesday, April 24**, at 7 p.m. in the high school's new gym,
- The induction of the first Schalmont High School Alumni Wall of Distinction honorees at the rededication,
- Mariaville Elementary School's **80th Anniversary Celebration on Wednesday, April 25**, at 7 p.m.,
- Time capsule dedications and special "open house" activities at all schools throughout the week,
- Tours of the district,
- And much more!

For more details, please visit www.schalmont.org and be sure to check your mailboxes.

The information and images in this article were gathered in large part thanks to town historians Irma Mastrean, Princetown, and Richard Whalen, Rotterdam; former Jefferson teacher Janet Smith Legere; former Jefferson secretary Norma Gardiner; former Pine Grove teacher Margaret Spring; former business administrator Steve Perillo; and Ross and Kathy Stagnitti, who served this district as a principal and a teacher, respectively, for many years.

Elementary Schools

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had the unique quality of being one of the three school districts whose boards voiced opposition to consolidation of the 13 districts.

After voters approved the consolidation, Henry Ellers' student body was changed to kindergarten through seventh grade. It also began to accept kindergarten students who would have formerly attended Woestina. Students' commute time was minimally impacted because the two schools were only a couple miles apart, with Henry Ellers located on Route 5S in lower Rotterdam Junction. The buildings also at times shared a principal, teachers and a school nurse.

In 1970, Henry Ellers became the home for Schalmont's Head Start program, which was funded by a federal grant. The program was designed to help children with special needs, and 16 students from across the district were



The picture above shows Henry Ellers under construction. At right is the building as it looks today.

enrolled by 1973. Head Start teachers worked with parent volunteers and agencies like Eleanor Roosevelt Developmental Services, Social Services and the Visiting Nurses Association to help participating students reach their full

potential.

Throughout the 1970s, the district took a close look at its elementary education programs and facilities. This included the creation in 1976 of a volunteer, district-wide citizens' committee to study the problems of declining, escalating and fluctuating enrollment.

By that time, changes in student population had led to Henry Ellers housing only kindergarten through first grade. Schools across the state were experiencing a similar decline in enrollment due to societal forces like families having fewer children and employers reducing their workforce.

Henry Ellers was closed in 1977 because of declining enrollment and



increasing costs for operating the small school. Students were transferred to nearby Woestina, and the old building was eventually sold in the early 1980s. After changing hands several times, the building now houses several Capital Region BOCES classes.

Pine Grove Elementary

In 1923, the destruction by fire of their 46-year-old, wooden, one-room schoolhouse led the Pine Grove community to erect a wooden, two-classroom building on Giffords Church



The old, wooden 1925 Pine Grove School (right) is shown during the construction of a new brick addition (left) in the 1950s.

Road. This building was completed in 1925, and renovations in 1952 and 1954 led to a brick addition with extra classrooms and an auditorium.

Graduates of the small school who were interested in continuing their studies went on to schools like Draper or Oneida Junior and Mont Pleasant High. When these schools decided to stop accepting non-resident students, the board of Pine Grove was happy to support the creation of a new Rotterdam-Princetown consolidated school district.

After consolidation, Pine Grove continued to serve students in kindergarten through sixth grade. It also continued to see an increase in enrollment, forcing the school to convert a portion of the basement into a classroom and a former multi-purpose room into three, thin-walled classrooms.

Luckily, bond votes authorizing the construction of a Schalmont Junior-Senior High School also included money for renovations to some of the elementary schools. Pine Grove received a new school wing with four classrooms, a cafeteria and a library. Two more classrooms were added with the state-mandated demolition of the old, wooden portion of the school.

In 1963, adjustments were made so that Pine Grove housed only kinder-



Pine Grove in the 1960s

garten through third grade, and older students were transferred to Jefferson. This was also the time period when all Schalmont buildings, except for Woesztina and Henry Ellers, became part of a centralized telephone system that allowed for conference calling.

There were other changes at Pine Grove over the years, but in the 1980s, Schalmont began again to review the condition of its older elementary schools and to take a close look at the district's expanding enrollment. By that time, only kindergartners and first-graders still remained at Pine Grove, and older students went to Jefferson.

The review of elementary schools went on for several years as the Schalmont Board of Education tried to find a proposal that both addressed the needs of students and gained the support of district residents. After voter approval of Bond 2000, Pine Grove was closed

in 2003, and the grades formerly housed there were moved to the newly expanded Jefferson. This fall, Pine Grove was sold to the then-current occupant, Schonowe Pre-

school.

Note: Some historical sources mention that a one-room schoolhouse built in the late 1800s on Florida Road in the Princetown North/Pattersonville area was known as "Pine Grove." Officially, it was Princetown District No. 6 School. In the 1920s, it was rebuilt as a private residence, and was not a part of Schalmont.



The 1908 Schonowe School (left) and the 1949 Schonowe Elementary School (right)

Schonowe Elementary

Schonowe was the second of the schools originally included in the consolidation to be closed. It began, much like the others, as a one-room schoolhouse in the 1800s. In 1908, a brick, two-classroom school was constructed farther south on Schermerhorn Road in front of where the modern school presently stands.

In 1948, construction began on a new \$420,000 school that could accommodate about 200 students. It had a kindergarten, library, health office, principal's office, kitchen, stage, gymnasium, auditorium, storage rooms, six classrooms, and teachers' rooms.

Upon graduation, students could

attend Draper School or the secondary schools in Schenectady to continue their education. Yet when these schools decided to stop accepting non-resident students, Schonowe was not sure at first that consolidation would be the best answer to their problem. Some residents seemed to fear that the district's educational standards would be lowered by the change. Eventually, their fears were allayed, and the district voted to join Schalmont in 1955.

Schonowe continued to offer grades kindergarten through sixth. It even hosted adult education courses, including western-style square dancing in 1967. Over the years, the school often shared a principal with Pine Grove. One such principal was Ross Stagnitti,

who was there when Schonowe replaced its old, wooden flagpole with a metal one in 1976, and when it closed as an elementary school in 1980.

Over the years, Schalmont has leased the building to various companies and organizations. One of the first was a computer/educational service bureau that provided computer training for district students and staff in addition to a cash stipend. The old school also housed Schonowe Preschool for many years, but that program relocated to Pine Grove in 2003.

Schonowe now houses Capital Region BOCES classes and the Community Transition Program, a joint Schalmont/Mohonasen GED program.



Find out what Schalmont students are up to at www.schalmont.org, and be sure to register for Schalmont's **School News Notifier** to receive the latest news on the district, schools and emergency closings or delays!