

OUR SCHOOL'S HISTORY

Frances Willard School - from a one room schoolhouse to a modern educational institution

Willard School traces its roots to the 1860s to the old "West Side School" of District No. 8. It was a district that was later named District No. 63. On the other side of the village was the "East Side School" of District No. 64 located at the corner of Main and Mill Streets. Students from that school would later attend the new Clinton School, and a successor to the old school has since become the home of a church.

Other schools in the area included the Kipp School of District No. 62 located on McLean Boulevard a block north of Kane Street. Many would know it as Hopp's School because of the many generations of the Hopp family that attended there.

There was also the Tefft School of District No. 47 also known as the Kenyon School. Located on Kenyon Road near Route 25, a successor building, which is now a church, stands on the site. All of the original schools were one room, wooden frame buildings.

The original "West Side School" was located near the main entrance to the current Willard School. Outside was located a wooden sidewalk and an outdoor privy.

By 1908, the school served 72 families and 279 children. Records also show that about that time a long outside stairway was removed and the school lowered.

From 1908 to 1914 the "West Side" school teacher was paid \$50 per month. She was also docked for any sick days taken off.

About 1914, a new \$7000 brick structure was erected to replace the original wooden school. The new two-room school also included a large auditorium on the second floor.

The basement housed a manual training room and the furnace. Part of it was also used as a classroom. The old school was sold at auction and later moved to 12 South Walnut Street where it has now been remodeled into a home.

In the early 1920s, the new "West Side School" got a different name – "Frances Willard School." The name was suggested in a contest in which the double winners were paid \$2.50 each. Willard, who was the founder of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union had been a prominent American temperance crusader and women's suffrage leader and had once spoken in Elgin.

In the late 1890s when a new school was being built in Elgin, Frances Willard was suggested as the school name. School officials settled on the name Abby C. Wing School in honor of a

prominent Elgin educator who had recently died in a fire. That school was later converted into the Burnham Schoolhouse Apartments.

In the years ahead, the second floor of Willard School was used for various community functions including plays done by the nearby Methodist church. It would also serve as the home for Boy Scout Troop No. 21.

Into the early 1930s, the school remained small by most standards. The pupil count for one year showed 32 students in Miss Livingston's primary grades class and 23 in Ms. Burkman's upper grades class.

Following World War II, Kane County had 93 districts. About one-third of them operated one-teacher buildings. To provide cost savings and increase efficiency, the state of Illinois required the small districts to combine enrollments or be annexed to a contiguous district.

In compliance with this legislation, Willard School was annexed into School District U-46 in 1948. It was a time that many other neighboring districts did so as well.

With the village's growth, the old Willard School was replaced by another in 1954. An addition was added in 1957. In more recent times, air conditioning, updates to the technology, and additional classroom space have been added to the school.

From its humble beginnings as a small one-room wooden schoolhouse, Willard School had now grown into a modern up-to-date structure built to serve the area's children for many years to come.

Source: "South Elgin: 150 Years of Heritage 1835-1985," by Ralph Tredup. "Elgin Daily News" and "Elgin Courier" on file at the Gail Borden Library.

Written by Jerry Turnquist, September 2014.