Early Schools of Ottawa
Taken from “High School Opinion”, January, 1898

“The History of the First School Taught in Ottawa”
By its teacher, Mrs. Mary Ward-Smith

The first term of Ottawa’s public school was taught in the winter of 1864-65. Mr. John Walruff, president of the board of education, employed Miss Mary Ward as teacher, at a salary of fifty dollars a month; not an exorbitant sum, when recalls the fact that in those days of cheap money, calico was forth-five cents a yard, and it took a week’s wages to buy a pair of shoes or a silk umbrella.

The only large building in Ottawa at that time was one which had been moved from Minneola—eight miles distant—and during territorial days had there served as a legislative hall. When brought to Ottawa, it was placed on the present site of the People’s National Bank [ed. note: northeast corner of Second and Main]. The lower floor was divided into several rooms, the largest of which was occupied by the only store in town, owned by Deacon Holt. The other rooms served as county offices and the home of C. C. Hutchinson, the Indian agent. The main part of the upper floor was in one room, and was known as “The Town Hall.” This was used as a court room, and for general public meetings. On Sunday, it was used for religious services, and for that purpose, was furnished with long benches.

This was the only available room suitable for school purposes. To transform this church, courthouse, and hall into a real schoolroom, a few necessary additions were made; a blackboard six or eight feet long, and four desks or tables were added. The new desks were arranged in the body of the room, with a bench on each side, to accommodate all who were considered old enough to use ink in writing. This well-intended arrangement had one serious drawback, for when seated, half the pupils were necessarily with their backs toward the teacher. The remaining benches were arranged around the room and were occupied by the younger pupils. Ottawa at that time had less than fifty houses, located mainly on the west side of town, at some distance from the school house. The streets, which were well defined on the town plat, were on the ground only indicated by stakes, and during muddy weather, were almost impassable.

On the opening day of school, to the great surprise of everyone, one hundred and twenty pupils were enrolled, ranging in ages from five years to years exceeding those of the “school-ma’am.” The mixture of human life in this assemblage was indeed remarkable. Some were refugees from the south, being wanderers until the war was over. A few were genuine Yankees, while others represented many states of the Union, now centered in this new town, to become the future men and women of Kansas. Many of the pupils brought books which they had used in former schools, with a written request that they might be permitted to use them, for this one term at least. Requests which, considering the price of school books and the financial condition of the families, could not be ignored. The result of all this was a multitude of classes. For instance, there were four kinds of Third Readers with Geographies and Arithmetics as varied. The copy books, made of foolscap paper, all had copies “set” by the teacher. The necessity of an assistant was soon apparent, and Miss Lottie Myers, one of the pupils, now Mrs. A. Supernaw, was chosen to fill the position.

If any of our present teachers ever have struggled to bring order out of such chaos, they can to some extent realize the labor of those first three months of the public school.

Some of the names of the pupils recalled today, are: Jennie Whetstone, now Mrs. W. T. Pickerell, and her sister, now Mrs. J. F. Maxey; Belle Heck, now Mrs. C. Harris of Emporia; Katie Cobb, now Mrs. F. Reid of Coffeyville; Levi Holt, now a prominent minister in the Baptist church; Del. Valentine, now one of the brightest newspaper editors in Kansas; T. H. Sears, superintendent of a division of the Santa Fe R. R.; J. J. Whetstone, merchant of Pomona; “Johnnie” Dietrich, one of the smallest boys in school, now superintendent of schools at Colorado Springs, Colo.; Roger Hood, Warren Myers, and many others, the memory of whom the flight of years can never efface; neither destroy the recollection of pleasant days we spent together in our first public school of Ottawa.

[Editor’s Note: A slightly edited version of the above history was printed in the 1925 edition of “The Ottawa Record.”]

“School District No. 30, Franklin County”

The beginnings of Ottawa were in the spring of 1864. Just before that time the Indian title had been extinguished and the territory opened to settlement. Already there were important villages and neighborhoods in Franklin county: Centropolis and Minneola, on the north; Peoria, Mt. Vernon and Lane, on the east and southeast, whilst toward the south were Ohio City and vicinage. The irrepressible “town company” was promptly on hand to stake out the future city and be ready to welcome the oncoming hosts from near and from far.

From the first the new arrivals took great interest in educational matters, and in fact, many of them were drawn hither by the prospect of the coming University.

Events moved apace. On July 7th the county commissioners on petition of I. S. Kallock and others organized Franklin township, which was made to consist of all of Ottawa and Chippewa Reservations. August 1st the voters of the county once more and finally determined upon the location of a permanent county seat, and Ottawa became and was duly proclaimed such August 8th, 1864.

In November of the same year, Jacob Sumstine, then County Superintendent of Public Instruction “formed District No. 30 of Franklin county” assigning as limits of the same “all that part of Franklin county known as Franklin township.” The territory thus indicated was immense, including the greater part of what now constitutes the townships of Ottawa, Harrison and Lincoln together with all the region westward to the county line. By way of parenthesis it may here be remarked that pioneers on the Marais des Cygnes bottoms south of Pomona and east of Quenemo actually contributed their quota in taxes toward the support of the early schools of Ottawa and the building of the Walnut street school house.

The first school meeting was held by appointment of the County Superintendent on November 23rd, in the county treasurer’s office. Of that meeting A. S. Lathrop was made Chairman, H. F. Sheldon Secretary. The school board elected were Joseph Wilkin, Director; G. W. Beeman, Treasurer and John Walruff, Clerk. Somewhat later the School Board through the clerk contracted with Miss Mary Ward to teach the common school of the district for a term of four months for the sum of fifty dollars a month, commencing January 4th, 1865. The school was taught on the second floor of a large frame building situated at the north-east corner of Main and Second streets. This historical and migratory building still survives in part, at least, on the home lot of S. F. Beeler, in the western suburbs of the city.

The opening days of the school brought together an unexpected number of pupils, so that before the close of the first month, Miss Lottie Myers was employed as assistant for the remainder of the term. The roll of that school, if extant, would be interesting reading today, in view of the thirty-three years between.

During the summer and fall there was no school supported from the public funds, but several private enterprises.

The next term of the common schools began January 2d, 1866, with Mrs. Ruth S. Mayhew and Miss Fannie Thomas as teachers. A summer term was taught by Miss F. M. Ricksecker and Miss Jennie White; also a separate school for colored children, by Mrs. Ann V. Scott at which the attendance averaged seven.

Ottawa was incorporated as a town June 18, 1866. Meanwhile the busy little burg had been planning and working for better school accommodations, and there was in process of construction a two-story brick building, 30 x 50 feet, on Walnut between Third and Fourth streets. This building was finished and equipped early in October at a cost of about six thousand dollars. It was formally dedicated October 9, Prof. P. Fales of Ottawa University delivering the dedicatory address. The school opened the next day, with a house full of pupils. J. N. Holloway, Principal, and Miss Ricksecker, assistant, were on second floor; Miss Hemenway and Miss Mary Kelsey on first floor. After three months Mr. Holloway was succeeded by G. V. Ricksecker as principal, and Miss Kelsey in the primary department by Jennie S. White. A third term followed, April 22, with Misses Ricksecker and White in the higher grade, and Misses Mary F. Ward and Clara Emerson in the primary grades. A separate school for the colored children was sustained by the board for a period of nine months and taught by Mrs. F. E. Coy. A special provision of her contract for the summer term was that she “should furnish a suitable room to teach said school.” The annual school census in August counted 479 of school age in the district. In the fall of 1867 the teachers were Miss Ricksecker, supervisor and teacher, Miss Ella Ward, Mrs. F. E. Coy, Miss Clara Emerson. Miss Sallie Johnson taught the colored children, in a small building belonging to the Methodist Protestant church and situated on the west side of Locust between First and Second streets. Rev. H. P. Satchwell of the M.E. church served as principal for the winter term, having under him in the brick, Miss Ricksecker, Miss Ward and Miss Laura Sayre.

Ottawa having become a city of the second class Nov. 23, 1867, at the charter election held on the first Monday of April 1868, a school board of two members from each ward was elected and the schools thenceforward passed under the new order of things. This board organized by electing P. L. Earnest president, Wm. Sears vice-president and P. Fales Clerk. Permission was given to Misses Luce and Ricksecker to use the brick schoolhouse for select schools three months rent free. September following the board of education arranged for the purchase of the Cumberland Presbyterian church on Main street near Fifth, for the sum of $2,500 in bonds at par. The schools opened for a term of six months on Oct. 1, 1868. C. S. McArthur, of Bowdoin College, had been elected principal, at a salary of $100 a month, Miss Sallie Johnson his assistant. In the primary grade were Laura Sayre and Susie P. Norris; in the colored school, Cynthia Hiller; in the Cumberland church, known from that time as the White Schoolhouse, Mr. Van Slyck.

During the summer of 1869 the need of more school room becoming manifest, the board rented for a year the United Presbyterian church, corner of Cedar and Sixth, where A. M. Blair’s house now stands. Nine months of school were planned for, and the time of opening set for Sept. 19, with Wm. Wheeler principal. The other teachers were Sallie Johnson, Miss Norris, Robert Detwiler, J. C. Watson, with Mary [I.?] Churchill for the colored school. Mr. Wheeler came to Ottawa in the prime of manhood with twenty years of successful teaching behind him. Before the end of the year his influence was plainly observable in improved classification, better school room work, and greater unity of purpose. Meanwhile the growing town was ever requiring enlarged school accommodations. The board rented and furnished with home-manufactured seats and desks, one room on east Second street, near Hickory, and another on west Second street, near the alley east from Walnut, in readiness for the fall term, which was to open on the 8th of September, 1870. The teachers employed were, besides Principal Wheeler, Miss Johnson, Miss Gray, W. W. Manning, J. C. Watson, the in the White schoolhouse; Miss Hills on east Second, Miss Ruth Adrain on west Second. Miss Johnson resigned at Christmas vacation and Miss Lucy Manley was appointed to her place. Miss Hills also resigned and Mr. Manning was transferred to her place and Mrs. Wheeler appointed to fill the vacancy. In April 1871, the city voted on a bond proposition for $30,000 to purchase lots and build a schoo9lhouse. The proposition was badly defeated in every ward. In May the brick schoolhouse was condemned as unsafe and the schools transferred to the upper story of the Whetstone block, corner Main and First, for the remainder of the term, with interruption of work for one day only. The school population in August, 1871, was 967. The fall term opened Sept. 12. Teachers seven; in grammar grade, Wm. Wheeler and Ella Gray; intermediate, Miss Nervia Scott, Miss E. A. Parkinson, all in the Whetstone block; primary, W. W. Manning and Mrs. Wheeler, in the basement of M. E. church; J. C. Watson, in White schoolhouse.

Whilst the schools are thus moving on smoothly and successfully, the board of education and the public have not forgotten the defeated bond proposition. They have discussed graded and ungraded schools, one or three, costs and locations, indefinitely, in groups, through the press and in public debate. At length the board submitted for vote Feb. 19, 1872, two propositions: First, the issue of bonds in the sum of $30,000 for purchasing a site or sites, and building thereon a schoolhouse or schoolhouses. This proposition carried on a full vote by a majority of 119. Second, Shall the board build one central school house, or three to be l0ocated one east of Main street, one west of Main street, and one north of the river? In a considerably reduced vote “For a central schoolhouse” had 166 majority. The bonds were issued and sold at 93. The site, finally secured without cost, was on the west half of the city park. The contract price of the building was a trifle less than $26,000. Work commenced promptly but the building was not ready for occupancy till the following spring. Meanwhile the schools kept on their course till the end of the school year in June, 1872. They reopened Sept. 23 with a single change in the corps of teachers and no change in the rooms occupied.

At last, on the 7th day of April, 1873, they were all gathered into the new building, properly graded and officered; some 500 children, with principal and ten teachers in ten rooms as follows: No. 10—Miss S. E. Mason, High school; No. 9—Miss E. M. Gray; No. 8—Mr. W. W. Manning; No. 7—Miss E. A. Parkinson; No. 6—Miss L. Churchill; No. 5—Mrs. Wheeler; No. 4—Miss R. Topping; No. 3—Mr. C. Esterly, colored children; No. 2—Miss M. Emerson; No. 1—Mrs. Fales; 1st Primary with 77 on the roll. Mr. Wheeler reported an actual attendance of 430 that first day.

With some blunders and omissions, doubtless, school district No. 30 is thus merged into Central School building.

“History of Washington School”
By Miss Mary C. Kittredge

The history of Washington school has been quite uneventful. The old “Central,” as it is still called by former students, has been the goal of hundreds of our pupils every year, as all above sixth grade until two years ago were compelled to come here. Year by year the number in the High School has increased and the efficiency of work in grades thereby improved.

The office of the city superintendent of schools has always been located in the Washington building—making it more truly the “central” building of our school system. The superintendent, much of the time, has also been principal of the High School, and even when not principal has frequently taught classes. Naturally the care of classes or of the High School and grades has interfered somewhat with the care of the schools in general. The present system ought to give the best satisfaction. While Prof. Smith was superintendent, the seventh grade was put in charge of a gentleman teacher, who also looked after the grades below, but this was changed with Prof. Smith left.

Last fall Miss Muth, the teacher of the eighth grade, was made principal of the grades, and the High School principal was free to devote himself to his one great work. This seemed an action almost premonitory, when a little later the building was condemned and the grades sent to Field building and the High School located by itself in rented rooms.

There might be chapters written of the life stories enacted under the roof of “Central”—romances, comedies, tragedies, or the noble work in character building, known only when the great book shall be opened the last day. This is ended. We are now awaiting something, we hope a new building, perhaps for the High School by itself, and repairs for Washington to make it serviceable for the grades.

The following is a list of superintendents and teachers who have been employed in the building:

SUPERINTENDENTS

W. W. Wheeler, Calvin Esterly, P. S. Halleck, G. I. Harvey, A. S. Olin, Frank P. Smith, Wm. M. Sinclair

TEACHERS—1873-1897
W. W. Wheeler, Miss Sarah E. Mason, Miss Ella M. Gray, W. W. Manning, Miss E. A. Parkinson, Miss Bettie Churchill, Mrs. P. Fales, Miss Mary Carroll, Miss Sadie Rodgers, Mrs. F. J. Decker, Miss Clara Johnson, Miss Margaret Mitchell, Miss May Hamilton, Miss Mary Kuhn, W. S. Jenks, Miss E. S. Scott, Miss Margaret Powell, Miss Grace Woodmas, Miss Emma Elder, Miss
Carrie L. Brooks, B. B. Wade (col), Miss Alice Norton, Miss Julia Walsh, Miss Lizzie Reed, Miss Mary Murdock, Mr. P. Fales, Miss Elsie Wickard, Miss Laura Welsh, Miss Nora Gott, Miss A. Barnett, Miss Lou Wright, Miss Nellie Sawyer, Miss Carrie Brown, Miss Nannie B. Hunter, Mrs. C. C. Adams, Miss M. E. Cowgill, Miss Delphine Hanna, Mrs. Amanda Pusey, Miss Fannie Long, Miss Jessie Acker, Miss Augusta Pierce, Miss Kate West, Miss Nora Johnson, Miss Blanch Renecke, John Deitrich, Miss Emma J. Short, Miss Annie M. Parker, James Wallis, Miss Lina Wickard, Miss Laura Wickard, Miss Will McCracken, Miss Genevra Bates, W. G. Martin, Miss Frances Fraser, Miss Ellen Sheldon, Frank Prentis, Miss Jennie Gott, Miss Clara Gard, W. S. Whirlow, Miss Laura Ewing, Miss Mary Redmond, Miss Estelle Bailey, Arvin S. Olin, F. P. Smith, Miss Annie R. Barker, Miss May Churchill, Miss Olive D. Arnold, Miss Nellie Wharton, J. R. Wylie, Miss Norma Pepper, Miss Ella Keith, Miss Fanny McFadden, Mrs. Nellie Gordon, Miss Jennie Cook, Miss Mattie Mallory, Miss Haidee Ewing, Miss Mattie Fowler, Miss Jennie M. Brooks, W. N. Kelsey, Miss Kittie Boltwood, A. D. Wilcox, Miss Rose Brock, Miss Clara Stillwell, Miss Mame Chenoweth, Miss Cora Ellis, Miss Jennie O. Muth, Miss Clara Van Sickle, Miss Harriet Mallory, Miss Flora Hedges, Miss Jessie M. Craig, Mrs. L. N. Hart, Miss Bessie Boltwood, Miss Ellinor Davidson, Miss Lulu Tutcher, Miss Kate Walgamot, Walter H. Olin, Miss Mary Berry, Miss Mary Kittredge, Miss Ada V. Carr, Miss M. G. Grant, Miss Gertie Manley, Miss Ada Burney.

 --101