

The Medina Free Academy 1850 SCHOOL BELL

By Craig Lacy

The Medina Free Academy was incorporated by an Amended Act of the New York State Legislature on April 10, 1850, for the purpose of offering a free secondary education to the children of Medina. Prior to this time, secondary education in Orleans County was available only to those who could afford a private tutor or the tuition charged at one of the academies then located in Yates, Millville, Gaines, Albion and Holley.

come the norm for school systems throughout New York State, thus dealing a deathblow to the private academies.

Construction on the Medina sandstone academy was begun in 1850 on Catherine Street at the end of Cross Street, now Pearl. The land had been donated by congressman Silas M. Burroughs and was, at that time, considered near the western limits of the village. Opening in 1851, the school consisted of six rooms, six teachers and about 148 students. In 1882, an enlargement of the original structure doubled the size of the school, allowing for the employment of 19 teachers and vastly improving the conditions inside of the school.

Due to increasing enrollment, a separate high school building was constructed in 1896 on the corner of Ann and South Academy streets, again of Medina sandstone. This allowed the academy to then be used exclusively for primary education. In 1921, it was determined that Medina needed a larger, more modern high school. As a result, the beautiful old academy building was razed with the new school being built on the same spot.

A devastating fire on February 11, 1967, destroyed the 1896 high school building, which was then being used for school administrative offices. During the demolition by Albion contractor Carl Petronio Sr., the original academy school bell was discovered to have been stored in the basement and was subsequently moved to storage at his facilities in Albion. It wasn't until 2017

that the existence of the bell was rediscovered, and it was through the generosity of Carl Petroni Jr., that the artifact was acquired by the Medina Historical Society and returned to Medina.

The approximately 800-lb. bronze bell was cast by the Adam Goode Brass and Bell Foundry of Buffalo in 1850, which was then located on Ohio Street near Washington. It was then likely transported to Medina down the Erie Canal. Through the efforts of the Medina Historical Society, the bell has been restored and, in 2019—after 169 years—was loaned to the Medina Central School District. Today, it is proudly displayed in the high school lobby.



The 1850 Medina Academy bell, cast by the Adam Goode Brass and Bell Foundry of Buffalo, prior to restoration. Author's photograph, 2017

At the time of incorporation, there were only two other localities in the State of New York offering free secondary education. One was located in New York City and the other in the City of Lockport. Medina was the first village in Orleans County to adopt this form of education for its community and thus is the longest continuously operating school system in the county. The passing of the Union School Act of 1853 allowed for voters to create a Board of Education and an academic department supported by taxpayer dollars. Soon, this system of free secondary education adopted by Lockport and Medina would be-



This ca. 1906 postcard image shows the enlarged Medina Academy with the separate 1896 high school building in the left background. *Private collection*



The 1896 high school building following the February 1967 fire. *Medina Historical Society*



The restored 1850 Medina Academy bell on display in the Medina High School lobby. *Author's photograph, 2019*

Craig Lacy is a lifelong resident of Medina, an active member of the Medina Historical Society, currently serving as its treasurer, and is a past recipient of the Orleans Heritage Hero Award.



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