



# Back To School IN 1842

By Doug Humes

*The opening of the school doors every September to welcome the children back to class is for the 21st-century citizen a simple matter of fact. Every child is entitled to 12 years of “free” public schooling, and we build schools, equip them, staff them and operate them with public tax dollars. But it took about 150 years from the initial founding of Pennsylvania for this idea to take root.*

William Penn and the Quakers who first settled Pennsylvania valued education and established schools for Quaker children. Later, non-Quaker children whose parents were willing to pay for education were allowed to enroll. However, the children of the poor were left out of this scheme. After the American Revolution, the Pennsylvania constitution began to address this issue,

providing: “The legislature shall, as soon as conveniently may be, provide, by law, for the establishment of schools throughout the State, in such manner that the poor may be taught gratis.”

A few Newtown residents decided they could not wait for the state to act, and in 1794, Joseph Hood, deeded land to Edward



Hunter, John Hunter, and Richard Fawkes for yearly rent of one penny – if demanded – in trust for the subscribers for a schoolhouse; for 35 years commencing April 1, 1795 through March 31, 1830. The Hood family owned farms that take up what is now the shopping center to the south of West Chester Pike, and the Dunwoody Village property. A log cabin school was built on the property – though we do not know its location. A variety of other schools were built in Newtown as well; as there were no school buses, it would be a long walk for young children living a distance from one centrally located school. But school attendance was not required, and many of the schools were still by subscription, meaning only the families who paid would get the education for their children.

The legislature finally began to make good on the promise of the Constitution and enacted the Public School Law of 1834, which provided for compulsory public education. And slowly, the counties and township fell into line. In Newtown, Isaiah Fawkes, who owned the farm next to the Hoods and Dunwoody's, deeded half an acre of land for school purposes, and a modern eight-sided one room stone schoolhouse was built at the site in 1842. And that schoolhouse, remains at the same site today – the Hood Octagonal School.

Why was it built with eight sides? As far as I can determine, it was simply the architectural fashion of the day. In the mid-19th century, building octagonal structures was the latest design craze – houses, barns, public buildings, and schools. One source suggested the following reasons:

“Octagon houses minimized surface area to volume, which meant lower costs for building materials and

heating. There would be fewer dark corners and more space. ... The superior physical shape of the house was supposed to translate into superior health for the people who lived inside. There was better sunlight and better air.”



THE OCTAGONAL SCHOOL HOUSE, NEAR NEWTOWN SQUARE

1919 Farris Octagonal School

Whatever the reasons, this octagonal school building served the children in that section of Newtown Township for the next 26 years. After 1868, the octagonal school saw service principally as a storage shed, and a quaint reminder of the past for those who traveled by on West Chester Pike. In 1917, John Faris, in his book “Old Roads Out of Philadelphia”, said: “Beyond Broomall, opposite the grounds of the Pennsylvania Hospital, is one of the most curious buildings in the neighborhood of Philadelphia, the old Octagon School. This is the sole survivor in the neighborhood of several structures for school purposes who builders made use of similar design.”

Miraculously, in the post-war 20th-century when the country was swept up in all things “modern”, the old octagonal building survived. A local school teacher who first taught in a one room schoolhouse, John MacCauley, took an interest in the old schoolhouse and convinced the Dunwoody Home to restore it to its original appearance in the mid-1960's, to be used for 19th-century education instruction. Alice and Myrtle Grim, two long time Newtown teachers, donated items to help outfit it for school use; and students and staff at the Marple Newtown High School made the rough benches and slate boards and donated them. McCauley, Isobel Snyder, and a whole line of volunteer teachers since then have conducted classes for elementary school classes at the site in the manner of mid-19th-century schooling.

Newtown Township embraced the building and included it on the township's logo. The Marple Newtown School District did the







same. In 1983, Bob and Dody Freeman built a scale model of the school for the 1983 Philadelphia Flower Show. The curious visitor today can find that model in the Dunwoody lobby, built into a wall near the mailboxes. In 2005, Dunwoody Village took a giant step towards giving more legal protection to the old building, by adding it to the National Register of Historic Places, the fifth site in Newtown to gain that designation.

This old building continues to grace our community and teach our children because people in the community cared enough to make noise, raise money, and donate their time and talent to its preservation. A succession of Dunwoody residents and administrators have been careful stewards of the building and its history. So now, as in every classroom, comes the test: Have we as a community learned anything from these efforts?

Join our Society, and be part of the correct answer!

*Doug Humes is a board member of the Newtown Square Historical Society. Visit our website at [www.historicnewtownsquare.org](http://www.historicnewtownsquare.org) for more information on membership and local history.*

