

Fort Klock School from destruction to restoration, one person's memories

By Willis Barshied, Jr.

In the summer of 1954 when members of the Tryon County Muzzle Loaders first began to clear the brush and debris from the Fort Klock property, old Fort Klock School stood silent, shuttered, and overgrown. The building had been last used for classes in the mid 1930s. Alex Don, owner of Fort Klock, had stopped the central school system from selling the building on the strength of the statement his grandfather, Amos Klock, made that the property under the school was to revert to the Klock family if it was not used for school purposes. No deed was found by lawyer, William Crangle, Jr., who represented Alex. After that Alex felt he owned the property. He allowed Lew MacWethey to use the building as a book store for a period of time. Thus we come to a sunny Sunday and a sad day for the old school.



Fort Klock School on fire

On August 8, 1954, Alex Don came to the Fort to oversee a few Muzzle Loaders members as we tore down a building that was deteriorated beyond repair. The building stood about where the small parking lot is now located just toward the river from the Dutch barn. The debris was being burned when the fire

spread to the overgrown east field. When it was suggested to call the fire department, Alex said it was good to burn the field. The fire was coming close to the school when the call was put in to the St. Johnsville Fire Department. Soon a small building used as a coal shed was ablaze. A chain was brought in an effort to pull the shed back onto already burnt over land. Several of us tried to beat out the flames. It became impossible when weeds and brush that had grown up through panels of stacked page wire fence ignited. For a time, we thought the school might escape destruction since it had a metal roof and a high cement foundation. The St. Johnsville Fire Department arrived at about this time. Alex Don and I pulled the hose to the south side of the building. When the water pressure was on, Alex started to spray the back of the school to prevent its catching fire. One of the firemen took the hose from Alex and turned it onto the burning coal shed. The hose was taken away from him the second time. We said, "The firemen are in charge at a fire," so we both walked away. Shortly, the school was also burning. About this time, The St. Johnsville Fire Department was summoned on a house fire. The Fort Plain Fire Department came under mutual aid. They put the fire out. The lean-to addition that had been built on the school to house chemical toilets when the outside toilets were no longer used was almost completely destroyed. The inside of the school suffered considerable damage. Some wainscot was badly charred, lath and plaster were destroyed, and some roof boards were burned through. It was a sad day, for now the burned shell was a constant reminder of the destruction of a landmark. It seemed that it was the end of the old school. Our organization thought the building automatically became part of the Fort property that we had leased from Alex Don. Then came a surprise. On a very cold, snowy night, I received a call from Harold Greene of St. Johnsville, wanting me to come to his house right away. He had picked up the mail and opened a letter that really upset him. It was from an Amsterdam attorney who represented an insurance company who had a fire policy in the name of St. Johnsville School on the old building. They deemed the Fort Klock School a complete loss. The amount of the policy was \$500. The company expected to collect the \$500 from our organization since it was our members who started the fire that destroyed the building. Since I was the President, it became my job to find \$500 or solve the problem in some other way. When I contacted Attorney William Crangle, he advised that we should collect what money we could to offer the insurance company in settlement. Our membership was less than twenty and our treasury was near zero. We finally came up with \$50. I delivered the money to Attorney Crangle in hope he could help us. Sometime later, he returned the \$50 to me with word that the insurance company had released us from the liability since we were an "eleemosynary" organization. The school district received the \$500 and it was distributed pro-rata to the tax payers of the old rural district. Thus, the original district had received the full value of their school building that had been closed nearly 20 years earlier. The title to the land under the Fort Klock School remains in question to the present day. The plot of land east of the small lot that the school sits on was purchased by Fort Klock School District when the education department passed a regulation requiring rural school districts to have a specific land area for students.

With a badly deteriorated Fort to try to save with a small number of members and very limited funds, there was no way that a burned out school could soon be dealt with. When other more pressing jobs were under control, attention could be turned to the school. In 1959, I asked Frank Don, Alex's brother, to contact St. Johnsville Central School Board to see how to gain control of the remains of the building. Frank and I attended a school board meeting. The board agreed to transfer the building to the Tryon

County Muzzle Loaders for one dollar. The bill of sale is dated September 22, 1959. Five years had passed since the fire. Now an effort began to save the old school. It was very evident that one of the little red school houses should be saved. This school was unique since it stood so near to Fort Klock.

After an article in the local newspaper was published, some donations came to help buy building materials. It was decided to restore the school without the later lean-to addition on the east end of the original building. Now it was time for members to volunteer to donate their time to do the job. Fortunately, there were several of us who had attended a country school. We had a loyalty to the project. Among these volunteers was George Moyer, who had been a trustee of Fort Klock School and his wife was once a teacher there. Paul Hudson, Howard Herroth, Jay Nellis, Ron Hudson, Dan Nellis, Jr., Herbert Mueller, and Richard Mueller were active workers. As work progressed, a man unknown to us would sit in his red pickup truck and watch. The man was Joe Flint who had a very serious heart problem. Joe soon did what he could to help us. He had attended a country school at Salt Springville. It was Joe who gave the teachers desk now in the school. It had come from his boyhood school.

By spring 1960, much of the work on the Fort Klock School had been finished. The first recorded visitors came on May 28, 1960. The school furnishings were still not complete. Since the period of usage of this school bridged many years, the furnishings it housed would have considerably changed. It was decided that two rows of seats would be used. Those toward the road would be all wood like those used earliest and the remainder would be later cast iron ended seats. Since the furnishing of the building was left to me, I began a search for representative examples that were used in local schools whenever possible. The two early wooden seats toward the back were given by John Edwards and had been in the Bolster Hill School in Fulton County several miles to the north. More of these could not be found locally. Dr. Albert Cory, then New York State Historian, stopped one day and told me of some available at Smith's Close Museum at Monroe, New York. Three were obtained. They were picked up and delivered by a truck driver from New York City who delivered ink to the printing department of Beech Nut where my father was foreman. The iron ended seats came from two schools at Stone Arabia. The wooden blackboards behind the teacher's desk were once used at Round Top School at Seebers Lane in the town of Canajoharie where my grandfather, grandmother, and all of their children once went to school. The slate blackboards toward the road came from the old Stone Arabia School which later was the Grange Hall and is presently a home. The box stove was purchased from Foster's Antiques for \$5.00, it being one of the few items purchased. The picture of George Washington was from District 10 at Marshville where I attended, as had also my mother and grandfather. The cases of books were given by Susan Ellithorpe of Palatine Bridge. The other furnishings were added through the years, their history now mostly lost. One exception would be the hand bell which I restored after finding the bell on the burned over ground on the day of the fire in 1954. One could only wonder how it became lost. Possibly a long ago student did not want it to bring recess to an end. The old school was now complete. What use were we to make of it?



Fort Klock School after restoration

Mrs. Betty Bradbury, a St. Johnsville teacher, was also a history enthusiast. She began bringing her class to have a day of school the old way shortly after. I will long remember Russell Getman starting a fire in the old stove on a cool morning for Mrs. Bradbury's class. Russell and Nellie Getman were our caretaker interpreters when we first opened Fort Klock to the public for summer visitation in 1962.

Through these many years, local school teachers have also brought their classes to Fort Klock School. It still echoes the voices of scholars from the past, but they are now mingled with the present voices of visitors, the Fort Klock Young Pioneers and our teacher, member Anita Smith. May the old Fort Klock School stand for many years to come.

Skip Barshied

Stone Arabia, April 2004