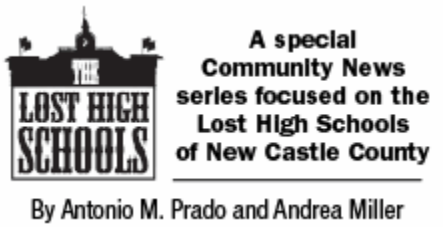

SOURCE: http://communitypub.com/losthighschools/lhs_index.htm

Since 1969, seven high schools in northern New Castle County, once centers of their communities, have closed – one, a victim of geography, changing technology and timing (Brown in 1969); one in 1971, because of consolidation (Gunning Bedford, formerly Delaware City High School), three in 1978 from the immediate fallout of a controversial and sweeping district court busing order aimed at racial balancing (P.S. duPont, Conrad and De La Warr); and two that closed in the 1990s as the county tried to deal with lingering effects of racial balancing (Claymont and Wilmington).

Through the voices of former students, school system leaders and court documents, the Community News has published a five-part series examining the "Lost High Schools" of northern New Castle County—what the closings intended to accomplish, the effect they had on the students and communities they served, and how each of the school districts affected by the court order are doing today.

The 40-year legacy of Evans vs. Buchanan: A struggle over education, race, power

By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: November 16, 2006

There was a time when there were even more rivalries in high school football, with Thanksgiving Day games that were the center of attention amid an even greater abundance of school colors.

It was an era of bobby socks, greasers and drive-in movies when the P.S. duPont High School Dynamiters battled the cross-town Wilmington High School Red Devils for bragging rights in the city, while in New Castle, the De La Warr High School Lions challenged arch-rival William Penn High School.

It was also an era when institutionalized segregation was being challenged in neighborhoods and in the nation's high court, often framed as battles over equal access to public education.

In Delaware, the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court Brown vs. Board of Education decision, a conglomeration of lawsuits that included two New Castle County schools, was only the first step in a fierce, decades-long battle to implement integration plans that were just and feasible.

For a quarter century after Brown vs. Board, northern Delaware's schools, students and communities lived through tension and upheaval as they moved from the segregation of the 1950s to integration in the 1960s, to legal battles contending that schools had re-segregated in the 1970s.

The year 1978 was pivotal, as the State Board of Education exhausted its last appeal and the courts ordered a sweeping re-integration plan. What came to be known as "the busing order" was unprecedented, and changed the face of public education in northern Delaware with racial quotas, sweeping pupil reassignments, school closings and reconfigurations, and bus rides up to an hour each way.

Widespread loss of confidence in the public schools and resistance to busing in the 1980s gave rise to a reversal of the busing order and sparked the charter school movement in the 1990s, and finally led to a legislative reaffirmation of neighborhood schools in 2000.

Amid the battle of ideals for achieving social justice, were students caught in the middle of legal wrangling, who just wanted to live out their high school careers as normal children. But for some of them who endured closures and reassignments, gone were the traditions of proud neighborhood schools, their homecomings, their theater productions, sports and proms.

With the stroke of a pen, a slice of Americana in Northern New Castle County began to disappear with the conversion of De La Warr, Conrad, and P.S. duPont High schools into junior high and elementary schools.

People who lived through the era agree the effort to right the wrongs of past discrimination turned education in northern Delaware on its head. But none felt the disruption as keenly as the classes of 1979, who suddenly found themselves classmates with former rivals their final year of high school.

“We had Conrad rings, but ended up with Wilmington High diplomas,” said Jim Kelley, who was moved to Wilmington his senior year.

How and why did it happen? What were its effects, both intended and unintended on northern Delaware’s school children and their communities?

Legislation that segregated

In 1956, just two years after Brown vs. Board, black students in downstate Clayton filed suit against their school district for refusing to admit them.

As a result, the U.S. District Court ordered the Delaware State Board of Education to submit and implement a statewide desegregation plan. The case, called Evans vs. Buchanan, referred to the last name of the first plaintiff (Evans), and Buchanan, the last name of the president of the State Board of Education.

By 1967, the Board of Education had dismantled the last of the black school districts, and the federal Office of Civil Rights commended Delaware as the first Southern or border state to formally end its dual school system. Although Wilmington’s Howard High School remained virtually all black, students from other area high schools recalled peaceful integration and friendships built across racial lines.

However, the story didn’t end there.

The next year, after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.– there were riots in Wilmington's streets, 21 buildings were burned to the ground, 40 people were injured, 154 arrests and Delaware's entire National Guard of 2,800 mobilized to patrol Wilmington for nine months – the State Legislature enacted "The Educational Advancement Act of 1968."

The Act, which restructured the state's 49 districts into 26 in 1969, also laid the groundwork for re-opening Evans vs. Buchanan in 1971. That year, plaintiffs argued that the Act had effectively re-segregated Northern New Castle County schools when it disallowed Wilmington (which had shifted from 73 percent white in 1954 to 79 percent black by 1971) from consolidating with the suburban districts, which were 90 percent white.

Wilmington was the only district in the state excluded from the reorganization and was also expressly prohibited from expanding its boundaries to include more white areas.

Some felt such provisions were aimed at keeping the increasingly black city children out of the suburbs. Among those were five black Wilmington families – encouraged by Marilyn Harwick, a white mother who withdrew her children from city schools as blacks became a majority and performance declined – who filed suit, according to University of Delaware history professor Dr. Raymond Wolters, who wrote "The Burden of Brown: Thirty Years of School Desegregation."

Others in Wilmington saw no problem with the Act, as most cities have school districts contiguous with their borders, not only large ones like Philadelphia and New York City, but also towns like Smyrna, De., Elkton, Md., and Avon Grove, Pa.

Still others thought interfering with the Act would damage the black community's newly gained political power, since by 1971 the seven-member Wilmington Board of Education had gained a black majority for the first time, Wolters said in an interview with the Community News.

"For the first time, blacks had their own school board and many blacks felt they should build up the schools," Wolters said. Two black board members, Hermania Garrett and Robert Mitchell, wanted nothing to do with the lawsuit.
However, the other two black board members, Lloyd Casson and Roy Wagstaff – also initially apprehensive about the suit – ultimately voted with the three white board members, led by Janet Greenwell, to pursue integration through metropolitan dispersion.

Jea Street, today a New Castle County councilman, was just getting his start as a community activist at the time as the first executive director of the Parent Education Resource Center, an office created by the Wilmington Home School Community Council to help transition through the impending desegregation.

Street, a 1970 Wilmington High graduate, said he was one of the few black leaders at the time who openly opposed metropolitan dispersion from the start. Bebe Coker and William "Hicks" Anderson were the others.

"At that time, there were several schools of thought among Wilmington families and leaders. However, the vast majority supported desegregation," Street said. "Why? The elders in the community, my mother included, recalled how under the segregated system, separate but equal wasn't – how they would get the used books after the white schools were done with them. Those feelings never go away."

A look of sadness comes over Coker's face when she thinks about how it all turned out.

"We penalized the schools when we should have gone after the housing laws," Coker said, referring to realtors' practice –propagated by state and federal guidebooks – of steering clients to neighborhoods according to race.

A question of scope

In a July 12, 1974 decision in the case of Evans vs. Buchanan, a three-judge panel comprised of Circuit Judge John J. Gibbons, District Judge Caleb M. Wright Jr. and District Judge Caleb R. Layton ordered the State Board of Education to submit plans to desegregate Northern New Castle County's schools, according to court records.

The three-judge panel wrestled over whether the remedy must be countywide or could be resolved within Wilmington's district. Gibbons and Wright held it must incorporate areas beyond Wilmington. Layton dissented, saying the court's findings had had no basis for an inter-district remedy.

But the story didn't end with that judgment, either.

People understood the court's opinion would likely lead to district consolidation and busing, and there was widespread opposition that delayed implementation of the plan four more years.

For example, the General Assembly was ordered by the court to enact legislation to end segregation but it failed to do so. The suburban public showed their opposition with demonstrations, there was white flight from the city and enrollment in private schools increased.

Some suburbanites formed the Positive Action Committee Inc. (PAC). The group, supporting Layton's minority opinion, argued that since suburban districts admitted students regardless of race and had done nothing to keep blacks out of their districts; they should not be included in the remedy to Wilmington's problem, said founder and President James Venema. PAC grew to a dues paying membership of 12,500.

"It had become a case where judges were writing law instead of interpreting law," Venema said. "We had integration. The whole concept here was racial balancing."

With the support of groups like PAC, the defendant Delaware State Board of Education and intervening defendant school districts filed more than 10 appeals.

However, not every suburban district agreed with PAC.

DeLaWarr, a district south of Wilmington that had shifted from a white majority in the 1960s to a black majority by the time of the suit, argued that unless the whole county was included most school districts named in the suit would never be integrated.

Judges Gibbons and Wright supported the DeLaWarr plan, which would lead to one, countywide school district. Layton dissented in part again; saying while inter-district busing was necessary, consolidating 11 districts with 80,000 students into one was too drastic.

Layton also said the court erred in adopting racial quotas, which a higher court later upheld.

The remedy

In June, 1976, the District Court's three-judge panel was dissolved and Judge Murray Schwartz was appointed to handle the remedy phase of the case.

During this phase, the defendants continued to appeal and seek stays and the General Assembly failed to enact legislation. However, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear their appeal, and their options were eventually exhausted. Schwartz's order to consolidate 11 school districts into one stood.

Throughout the process, Schwartz emphasized that the court did not have the expertise or inclination to micromanage school systems, and called on the State Legislature and the State Board of Education to come up with solutions.

However, he still had to deal the problem of quotas, which the Third Circuit Court of Appeals had ruled unconstitutional. Without quotas, how could you measure whether integration had been successful? With them, you were breaking the law. His solution was to redefine pupil reassignment in terms of how many years a student would be bused out of their neighborhood.

People opposed to busing, like Venema, said Schwartz got away with quotas without calling them quotas.

Schwartz also created a temporary board, the New Castle County Planning Board of Education, to work out the details to implement the solution. The group was empowered to reassign students and to convert and close schools to achieve the desired racial mix. The first solution the planning board devised included converting or closing several schools—including all of the city's traditional high schools.

The problem with the solution was that it was a one-way plan. Only Wilmington students would be bused out of their home districts into to the suburbs, a solution that would essentially place the burden of fixing the problem on its victims, according to court documents.

Planning Board member Wendell Howell opposed it and came up with another alternative, which came to be known as the "9-3 Plan." It called for city students to be bused for nine years of their 12-year education into the suburbs and suburban students to be bused into the city for three. The plan also preserved, for the time being, Wilmington and Howard High schools.

However, it did not spare De La Warr High School in New Castle, which had a black majority by then, predominantly white Henry C. Conrad High School near Newport, and P.S. duPont High School in Wilmington, which had recently turned predominantly black.

The 1977 plan, called the "Plan for Desegregation of Eleven Districts in New Castle County," aimed to bring unity to the region.

"No existing district will continue in name or function," it stated. "Former identities and alliances will diminish in time. In three years, the student identity problems will be eliminated."

Although the Planning Board of Education intended for its solution to help end racial tensions, residual effects would be seen for years to come across the county. White flight eventually led to the closing of Wilmington High, and ironically, Claymont High, the first public school in the state to integrate – two years before Brown vs. Board.

Wolters said New Castle County education fell victim to the philosophy advocated by Johns Hopkins sociologist James Coleman, who in his 1966 "Equality of Educational Opportunity" report said that blacks would benefit if they were in majority white, middle class classrooms. Coleman recanted his report in 1975 when busing accelerated white flight, according to Johns Hopkins Magazine.

Wilmington High School graduate Donald P. Patton, now principal of Kirk Middle School in Newark, said it was a racist assumption to believe that the Wilmington School District could not survive or thrive if given the chance.

"I don't get this notion that black students can't learn at all black schools. That is old, limited thinking," Patton said. "Any time you can keep students in their own neighborhood they are better off, and that includes city students. I know teachers are committed to working with students in

after school activities, but kids can't stay. They ride buses home and their parents aren't around to chauffeur them."

But Howell said it was not about eliminating a predominantly black system.

"You don't just go to school with white kids to learn better. If you are a black school district in a black, bourgeois town where you can get the resources you need for quality of education, you won't aspire to change the school district at all," he said. "I said that in court."

Remembering 'happy days'
at De La Warr High School
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: November 16, 2006

Every time Ken Boulden steps into his red 1964 Corvair convertible, it's a drive down memory lane.

Photo from De La Warr yearbook
Students gather outside De La Warr High School in 1965.

The hotrod is the car he took to his De La Warr High School senior prom, refurbished to its original state in painstaking detail and stocked with memorabilia from the era: an original drive-in speaker from the Ellis Drive-In Theater in Wilmington, fuzzy dice, yearbook, varsity letter, and a banner from his senior class trip to the 1964 World Fair in New York City.

Boulden, of Middletown, reassembled this tribute to his "real life 'Happy Days'" era six years ago by tracking down the original parts dispersed throughout the country using the car's serial number and the National Society of Corvair Owners Registry.

It was well worth it, he said.

"Time goes by, the years flee, but every time I drive it, it's a way to bring back those good days," said Boulden, a 1965 graduate who is the New Castle County Clerk of Peace.

Holding onto artifacts of the past are important for De La Warr alumni like Boulden because their high school closed in 1978, following a sweeping desegregation order that immediately closed it, two other area high schools and many other middle and elementary schools.

De La Warr High School opened in 1960, and when it did, it immediately sparked a rivalry with William Penn High School, because both schools were in New Castle, said Bill Coleman, a 1965 De La Warr graduate.

"We were the new school competing with a longtime high school," he said, "so it was a natural, friendly rivalry that transcended any sport."

De La Warr's Lions exploded onto the sports scene that first year when its baseball team won the Blue Hen Conference championship, led by Terry Arnold, Jim Maxwell and Donald Lloyd. They continued to dominate with five straight Blue Hen baseball championships, with Coleman on four of those teams. In this era, before official state championships, the Blue Hen title was the highest achievement a team could win, he said.

The rivalry made for a close-knit community, but it was more than that.

Photo by Andrea Miller
Ken Boulden, New Castle County Clerk of the Peace, polishes his 1964 Corvair, the same car he drove to his senior prom.

"We had no busing at the time. Everyone walked. That created a unique feeling because going to and from school was a social event," said three-time class president Coleman. Walking together created character, camaraderie and an atmosphere where the upperclassmen didn't look down on underclassmen. "It was a group of one because we were all from the same community."

That sense of unity pervaded even across racial lines, alumni said. That is one reason why so many were outraged that a desegregation order closed the school.

The DeLaWarr School District was about 40 percent black in the 1960s, and had become about 55 percent minority when it was made party to Evans vs. Buchanan, a lawsuit that resulted in a 1978 court order mandating that Northern New Castle County schools integrate through pupil reassignment, busing and school closures.

"We all said why are they even messing with this thing? We had a greater balance than any of the other school districts," Coleman said. "They should have never touched De La Warr."

Many alumni didn't find out about De La Warr's closing until years later.

After Linda Jean Thompson Worley graduated from De La Warr in 1965, she married a military man and moved around a lot. When she returned to Delaware to live with her parents while her husband served overseas in the late 1970s, she was in for a surprise. The school her daughter was assigned to, McCullough Elementary was once De La Warr.

"I was shocked," she said, because her alma mater was gone, and puzzled because the school, with its huge hallways and gyms, and classrooms equipped for home economics and business now house elementary children.

Photo by Antonio M. Prado
De La Warr High School graduates Carolyn (Pierron) Stanley and Bill Coleman, both members of the class of 1965; reminisce about their high school days. De La Warr ceased to be a high school in 1978 because of the federal desegregation order that affected local education. Today, the building is used for McCullough Elementary School.

When Coleman found out his alma mater closed, it became his mission to find De La Warr memorabilia. Like Boulden's classic hotrod, Coleman wanted some physical evidence of history. Finding any of it – trophies, mascots, and signage –proved to be extremely difficult.

"When the doors were closing and the school had to be emptied, everything that had the name De La Warr went into dumpsters," said Vickie L. Jones Snyder, of New Castle, a 1968 graduate. "There was no sense of archival or historical value placed on anything. It was necessary to clear out the building, and clear it they did."

At the time, the school consolidation policy emphasized diminishing students' identification with their old school in service to integration into the new school they were assigned to. But far from diminishing, for some alumni, like Carolyn (Pierron) Stanley, trashing history actually increased her identification with it.

Stanley, of Middletown, graduated in 1965. She, like many other graduates, didn't learn about the closing until later, but when she did, it somehow made her feel even closer to former classmates.

For others, the loss led to longing that remains today.

"To those of us who have fond memories of school, it will always be the high school on the hill near I-95," Anna Lewis, class of 1966, said. Even so, she often wishes she could go to just one more De La Warr Lions football game.

Some alumni said that longing has led to greater identification with and involvement in their children's schools. Even after the closing of De La Warr, for some, the rivalry continued. Lewis said, "Thank God my son didn't go to William Penn. He went to Hodgson."

Others said nothing can replace the loss.

"I envy my friends that are William Penn graduates," Coleman said. "They relate to the undergraduate populace that is now William Penn. They have that in common. We don't have that."

Susan Goldner, who was called Gladys Hamm at De La Warr high school, graduated in 1965.

"It still makes me sad when I go back for a reunion," she said. "The building is still there and I'm not sure if that makes it worse or better."

The name

The high school "on the hill" was named after Englishman Lord De La Warr, (Thomas West), who was the first governor of Virginia. According to state of Delaware history, early explorer Samuel

Argall was blown off course and ended up in a bay that he named after his governor and fellow Englishman.

For many, a sad day when P.S. duPont became an elementary school
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
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A Georgian school building stands majestically in a scenic residential neighborhood in Wilmington's Ninth Ward, its white columns and stone steps a contrast against red brick.

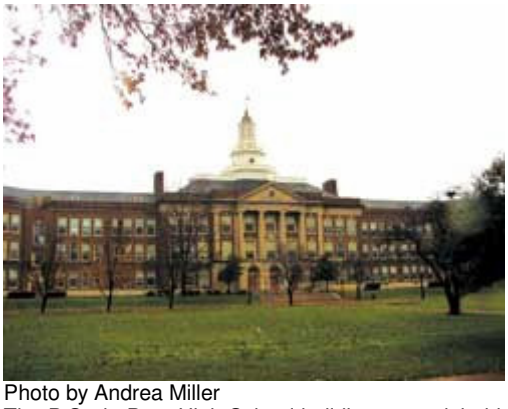

Photo by Andrea Miller
The P.S. du Pont High School building, remodeled in the late 1990s, serves as an elementary middle in the Brandywine School District.

So stunning is the classic design and craftsmanship, artists have painted the 1935 building and photographed it for greeting cards.

At one point the city's largest high school with more than 1,500 students, P.S. duPont High was changed into an elementary school sometime after a 1978 U.S. District Court desegregation order closed schools across the county and mandated busing to redistribute the city's predominantly black student population.

Alumni who remember the grand hallways, three-stories of classrooms and massive gymnasiums of P.S. still have a difficult time envisioning it as a place for 9 to 12-year olds.

"Look at the place. It has high school written all over it," said Bill Lawrence, of Greenville, a 1955 graduate.

From high academic standards, to close friendships, to sports and great teachers, good things happened at P.S., graduates said, and they hated to see it end. But despite the good, the years preceding its closing were fraught with racial tensions, and in Delaware places like P.S. fell victim to attempts to remedy the problem.

In 1968, the school's homecoming queen was black, but a Catholic boy wouldn't dare date a Jewish girl, for fear of what the families would do, said alumnus John Flaherty. It was a school where black and white athletes played side by side, but Jewish teens had their fraternities and the greasers had theirs.

It was a school where riots happened in the cafeteria, the National Guard patrolled the parking lot and citywide curfews followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Amid that undercurrent of racial tension, in 1971, several Wilmington families filed suit against the Delaware State Board of Education. They argued that Delaware had

Photo by Antonio M. Prado
P.S. duPont High School graduates Daniel Young, with his yearbook, and (from left) State Rep. Dennis Williams, Oscar Potter and Wilmington City Councilman Charles Potter meet at Fox Point Diner in Wilmington regularly. Young and Charles Potter are members of the class of 1973, and Oscar Potter and Williams graduated in 1971.

Re-segregated when Wilmington, which had become more than 90 percent black, was left out of a statewide school district reorganization in 1968. The court sided with the plaintiffs and ordered the legislature and state school board to find a solution that would re-integrate the schools.

The public, the state and the board of education resisted, but in 1978, a court order went into effect that closed or converted several schools, including those at P.S.

Former students, both black and white, recall the closing with mixed feelings.

Alumnus Daniel Young, who loved the fierce rivalry with the cross-town Wilmington High School Red Devils, couldn't understand why the order had to happen, because no one really thought about their school's shift from 95 percent white in 1957 to 95 percent black by his graduating year, 1973.

"We had problems like any other high school," said Young, of Wilmington. "But at our high school, black kids, white kids or Jewish kids never worried about race. You know what we worried about? Beating Wilmington High, beating De La Warr, beating Howard or beating Sallies."

Some alumni from earlier generations couldn't understand either.

"When we went to school, we all knew that it wasn't right that the black kids who lived a few blocks from us had to go to Howard High School," said John W. "Jack" Hudson, a 1950 graduate who was a P.S. student during the dual-school system era. "So, they changed it. I'm just not sure that was the right move."

Another 1973 graduate, Wilmington City Councilman Charles Potter, said one of the problems with today's integrated system is that cultures clash inside the schools, often at the expense of minorities.

P.S. duPont cheerleaders (left to right) S. Jacob T. Wells, S. Jenkins, S. Moss, D. Sigmund, M. Lee and J. Slovin cheer for the 1969 "Pierrean" yearbook.

“When our young people go to schools outside of the city, they can do something that’s (acceptable) within our culture and other people feel it’s taboo or out of line,” he said. “Then, they put names on them that never leave and they end up in alternative schools when all they needed was a strong, male figure to help straighten them out.”

At first, P.S. class of 1965 alumnus Arthur Goldman, of Brandywine Hundred, was delighted that the schools would be more equal.

“Then, after several years, it was apparent that busing was not achieving what it set out to accomplish. Children were spending up to three hours of the school day riding buses, and they seemed to segregate themselves at any school they were sent to,” he said.

What especially saddened some P.S. students was the way the closing was handled.

According to the New Castle County Planning Board of Education, its Pupil Assignment Committee was charged with deciding which schools to close or convert and where students would be assigned. With regard to the consolidation of 11 school districts into one, the committee said, “Former identities and alliances will diminish in time.”

While that didn’t bother some alumni, like Joseph Pennington (P.S. class of 1954), who said life goes on, others saw it differently.

“They threw out the big Dynamiter (mascot),” Young said. “It was in the trash, all broken and everything. That actually broke my heart. We used to touch the thing when we came out for football games. Everybody would touch it.

“The court order destroyed the cross-town rivalry. It destroyed the fact that the city of Wilmington had high schools,” he said. “When they were gone, they were gone. And when they left, you know what left with them? A sense of belonging, a sense of pride.”

Young remembers his teacher Wodeman Schock filling in for his father at a sports awards banquet. He remembers Willy Miranda, his Spanish teacher, and the two ended up working together at Brandywine High School. Young was the best man at Miranda’s wedding.

P.S. was a neighborhood school and many alumni share a strong conviction that neighborhood schools are the best way to instill a sense of community.

Beverly (Sutton) Potter, a 1960 P.S. duPont grad, said she understood the shift in population made it necessary to put her alma mater into service as an elementary school. However, she said, “The changes brought about by taking children out of their neighborhoods has had more problems than advantages in my opinion.”

Others agree.

Jeffery Lewis, of Greenville, a P.S. alumnus from the class of 1967, played baseball and football and was the yearbook literary editor.

“I think it was wrong to force racial quotas and it was a mistake to close P.S. There are still families and high school-aged kids living in the neighborhood that could benefit from the sense of community,” he said. “Educationally, P.S. prepared me for college and life. Socially, there were many kids from all walks of life and I had many friends, some with whom I am still close.” Today, Lewis is the first vice president and a financial advisor for Merrill Lynch.

While the court order was well intentioned, it really affected the concept of neighborhood schools, said Dr. Nick Manolakos, of Limestone Hills, a 1969 P.S. graduate. Today he is an administrator

in the Red Clay Consolidated School District and state representative elect from the 20th House District.

Manolakos said he has worked to establish a strong sense of community in his schools, because "20 or 30 years later, we're finding that personalized schools is one of the keys."

Some alumni still hope that eventually, P.S. will come back as a high school, though the Brandywine School District has no current plans to do so.

"I'm still hopeful one day they'll bring it back. We have a very strong community in the Ninth Ward," Charles Potter said. "It would be even stronger when we are able to educate all of our children – black, white, Hispanic – in a unified way."

State Rep. Dennis Williams, P.S. class of 1971, is skeptical about having city high schools because people are more mobile now. He also worries about how Wilmington would be able to support the local portion of expenses, a concern shared by Mayor James M. Baker. (The state usually pays for 70 percent of educational operations and 60 percent of major construction projects. Local taxes and federal money funds the rest of operating costs, and referenda authorize the Delaware Department of the Treasury to sell 20-year bonds that pay for the 40 percent local share of major construction projects.)

Even so, Williams, of Wilmington, said P.S., where he played baseball and football, was his second home, and thinks it would be good for the city to have community schools again. Because those types of schools weren't around when his children went to school, they graduated from St. Mark's High School in suburban Wilmington.

"You want to know why? Because I had no faith in the public schools."

Potter would have sent his sons to P.S. but they attend Archmere Academy in Claymont.

"It's a loss of community and being able to gather at a place where you know a lot of the alumni and people," he said. "It's a proven fact that back then our graduation rate (in the black community) was at least 75 to 80 percent. Now we're down to 30 percent or something. Something is drastically wrong that needs to be fixed."

Remembering Claymont High
State's first white public school to admit black students closed in 1990 because of racial imbalance

By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: November 23, 2006

Sometimes a single moment can capture the sense of an era.

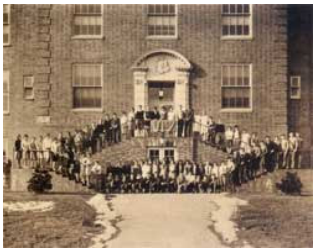

Photo courtesy Larry Grace,
Friends of the Claymont Stone School

Students from the first graduating class of Claymont High School, 1929, stand with classmates on the steps of the original Green Street school. The seniors are standing at the top of the steps.

Dan Harkins remembers such a defining moment that illustrated how ahead of its time Claymont had been in becoming the first high school in Delaware to integrate. It was two years before the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Brown vs. Board of Education.

It happened one night when his football team, the Claymont High School Indians, was returning home from a win in Maryland. Three buses of cheerleaders, athletes, marching band members, twirlers and color guard rolled into a hamburger restaurant on Rt. 40 in Maryland to celebrate.

“Everything went out on the grill. They thought it was bonanza night, and they were going to make a fortune,” Harkins said of the restaurant staff. “And we were all excited, ready to celebrate the victory.”

When the students began to settle in, restaurant staff informed them that the black players would have to eat their burgers on the bus, said Harkins, class of 1965.

Coach Bill Holstein told everyone to get back onto the buses.

As one, they left to celebrate together at a Rt. 13 restaurant in Delaware that didn’t discriminate.

“We all knew what was going on. We didn’t even question it,” said Harkins, of Claymont. “It was the right thing to do, and it showed what the 1952 moral choice meant.”

Alumni from that era and the decades that followed have been vocal about owning Claymont High’s peaceful integration as part of their heritage, part of their community’s identity, and, as one of two northern Delaware schools named in the landmark Brown vs. Board court order that ended segregation nationwide.

That is why so many of them were saddened, even infuriated when the Brandywine School District Board of Education closed the school mainly because of “racial imbalance” in 1990.

As alumni look back, some say that decision was another defining moment for Claymont, the one they blame for the once vibrant town’s decline.

Others say Claymont’s problems were larger than that, and the closing was only one in a series of events that changed the face of their community. These men and women look to new solutions to revitalize their hometown.

From integration to quotas to closing

Bernice “Sandy” (Byrd) Couch was one of the first 11 black students to integrate into Claymont in 1952, and the only one in her seventh grade class. The 1958 alumna said nobody gave her a hard time, and she had no sense of the history-making magnitude of her attendance there.

“I went to class. I had to study just like everybody else,” Couch said. “I was never treated any differently.”

In the decades that followed, the rest of northern Delaware struggled with the implications of Brown vs. Board, which had declared “separate but equal” schools unconstitutional.

Curtis Maxwell competed on the 1988-89 track team.

Delaware became the first state to formally end its dual school system in 1967. However, within four years, the State Board of Education was under fire for segregation. It was sued by Wilmington students, who successfully argued that a 1968 statewide school district reorganization had effectively re-segregated northern Delaware’s schools when it separated Wilmington’s predominantly black school system from the suburbs’ predominantly white ones.

The decision in that case led to Northern New Castle County school closings, far-reaching pupil reassignment and mandatory busing to achieve racially balanced schools, beginning in 1978.

In 1990, the ripple effect of the order reached Claymont.

Despite its place in history as a frontrunner in peaceful integration, the Brandywine Board of Education closed it due to declining enrollment and a racial imbalance. Its population, which had the highest percentage of black students among Brandywine’s schools, was redistributed throughout the district’s other three high schools (Brandywine, Concord and Mount Pleasant), according to Dr. Raymond Wolters, a history professor at the University of Delaware.

“It was certainly a victim of busing because enrollment did drop after busing,” said House of Representatives Majority Leader Wayne A. Smith (R-Clair Manor). “The closing of Claymont High

School was one of the greatest tragedies ever in this state. In Claymont, my constituents still feel like they were robbed."

Ironically, it was the busing order that created Claymont's overrepresentation of blacks. The high school had been racially diverse for decades, but became "racially identifiable" as Wilmington students, predominantly black, were bused to Claymont.

"I find the fact that we lost Claymont High School to the desegregation of New Castle County extremely ironic given its place in history," said alumna Jean (Morrison) Lee, class of 1976.

Mixed emotions over closing

Virginia (Tryon) Smilack, a 1965 alumna, called the closing the death of Claymont. She is the daughter of Dr. Sager Tryon, a Claymont Special School District Board of Education member during the integration era.

Claymont High graduated students from 1929, when Violet Hayes was one of 11 graduates (left), to 1976, when Alexander Clement was one of 234 graduates, and Amy Balock who graduated in 1989 with 104 classmates, the second to the last year to attend Claymont High School.

"It did not help Wilmington schools and it destroyed not only the school district but the town itself," she said, because it was a community based on its schools.

Others see it differently. John DeCostanza, who has run Joe and Tony's Automotive Service with his brother since the 1970s, said he doesn't think Claymont has done any worse than elsewhere.

"We are subject to the same cyclical patters as everywhere," he said. It has been a good place to have a shop, because people tend to be close knit and community oriented.

"I always thought this was a great place to do business," he said. "People around here highly identify with Claymont and patronize local businesses."

However, alumna Paula (Wyatt) Rineer (Class of 1965) said she felt her town allegiance dwindle without a high school to rally around. She wanted her children to have the same educational experiences she had. Since it could not happen in Claymont, she moved to Cecil County, Md., where schools are the center of the community. She said many of her classmates picked up and left for the same reason.

However, others say losing the high school was only one of a number of things during the years that damaged Claymont's sense of community.

Brett Saddler, president of the Claymont Renaissance Development Corporation, a group founded to revitalize the community, said he can think of a lot of things that led to its decline.

Interstate 95 cut the town off from the rest of Brandywine Hundred in the 1960s. Then there was the decline of local industry and loss of jobs, the destruction of culturally-significant historic structures through bad land use decisions and overdevelopment of low-income housing and construction of a second highway, I-495, that ripped through the community again, he said.

Don Forrest, a 1965 Claymont graduate who lives in San Francisco, said he can't fully fault the school district. Fixing huge problems like discrimination is complicated, and no one can foresee mistakes made trying to fix them.

"At the time, the best solutions we could think of to break the color barriers included racial quotas. Did it help? Some, I think. Did it have to be done that way? We'll never know," Forrest said. "Did it achieve what it intended to achieve? Not as well as we had hoped. In my case, at least, going to school with kids of differing races saved me from fear of the unknown, and all the reactionary stuff that leads to."

Barbara J. Pawelski, a 1962 graduate, agreed.

"Choices are sometimes made that don't particularly make sense, but it was long ago," and good things have come of it, she said. A community center, with a variety of social services and community groups, is now housed in the old high school on Green Street. The newer high school building is now Claymont Elementary School.

Thomas Edwin Wroe, class of 1962, was less understanding. He called Claymont High's closing, which he links to the 1978 busing order, one of the most frightening things he's ever seen as a public administrator, and a decision made in fright and ignorance that cost the children time and county dollars.

Busing brought city students and negative effects, some alumni said. Most were blacks from the city, but the problem wasn't their skin color, it was their and their families' understandable lack of buy-in to Claymont.

However, others felt that having regular contact with city students was good for them. Tina Grossman, Dawn Henry, Bev Guinto, Gretchen Boyd, Martha Frizzell and Anna Whitlock, all 1984 graduates, still get together once a month for dinner.

"We had a great rapport with the kids in the city," Grossman said. They became so close that her black girlfriends stuck up for her when she was in trouble.

Cheryl Leek and Larry Hookey were
Mr. and Miss Claymont High School in the 1975-76 school year.

"I remember someone bothering me in school and one of my friends said, 'Don't you mess with my sister.'"

Rebirth

Many who still live in Claymont are concerned about revitalizing the area. A few think bringing a neighborhood high school back to its old location would help, but most don't think that's the right or only answer.

"It's great to have a historical landmark," said Dr. James "Gil" Ryan, class of 1965. "But a child of any color who gets an inferior education has a big disadvantage. All our public schools should be good schools. Unless it's a special (charter) school, there is no reason for a new Claymont High."

Others disagree, saying neighborhood schools are what make communities like Claymont thrive. Whether Claymont High was to return or not, its alumni still have their memories and their alma maters indelible place in history.

"At our 40th reunion, there were a whole bunch of folks who still felt very much connected to one another and to Claymont High School," Forrest said. "What made our class special was still there, and we each carry a part of it with us on into the future."

Wilmington High School Red Devils celebrate school, mourn its loss
The city's last traditional high school closed in 1999
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: November 30, 2006|

Although there were more than a dozen secondary schools in Northern New Castle County in the 1960s, if you said you went to "High School," everyone knew where you meant, said Don Marshall, a 1964 Wilmington High School graduate.


The 1996 Wilmington High School football team takes the field.

For a long time, the school "was absolutely reflective of the city itself," said 1986 graduate Wiley Blevins Jr., the author of "Dear Old High: The Story of Wilmington High School."

Established in 1872, Wilmington High moved from Delaware Avenue to a new building at DuPont Road and Lancaster Avenue in 1960.

Virginia (Mitchell) Ciarlo, of Brandywine Hundred, a 1955 graduate, said there "was a time when school was the place to be."

"We respected our classmates and our teachers," she said. "Everyone supported our teams and was there at the games – especially the big Thanksgiving Game between P.S. (duPont High School) and ourselves."

Joe Hamill, a 1965 graduate from Middletown, felt the same way.

“Maybe we were naïve, but I felt there was this camaraderie,” he said.

Indeed, “High School” athletes were readily recognized in the neighborhoods.

Photo by Antonio M. Prado
Dr. Pete Grandell, who graduated from Wilmington High in 1938, married fellow graduate Kit, class of 1944. Grandell returned to the high school to serve as a teacher and guidance counselor for 50 years.

“You walked down the street and police would stop and talk to you about a picture in the paper about the last game,” said Bear resident Art Madric, a 1966 graduate, who played football and ran track for Wilmington.

For alumni like Madric, Hamill, Blevins and Ciarlo, it is hard to imagine that their alma mater ceased to exist in 1999. But the effects of a busing order aimed at achieving racial balances between city and suburban schools in 1978 would prove to be Wilmington High’s undoing as students formerly assigned to the school were bused out to the suburbs while suburban students resisted assignment to Wilmington High.

Perhaps no one has felt the loss as much as Elsmere resident Dr. Pete Grandell, who graduated from Wilmington in 1938 and returned in 1948 to teach Spanish and serve as a guidance counselor for a half-century. To Grandell, Wilmington High was like family.

For instance, it was the night before Grandell’s prom and the guidance counselor, Miss Connelly, asked him who his date was. He explained that he wasn’t going because he couldn’t get a tuxedo at Sisifo’s for $2.

“So, she took me after school, got me a tuxedo, got me flowers for the date, got me the date, OK?” he said. “And the next day she came to my house, picked me up and took me to the girl’s house and the prom. Now, that’s sharing and caring.”

First Lady Hillary Rodham, who visited Wilmington High School during the 1996-97 school year, makes a $20 deposit with senior Penny Scholes at The Financial Trust of Wilmington in the school.

Such behavior was a matter of loyalty, said Jim Emory, of Newark, another 1965 graduate, whose mother and daughter also went to Wilmington.

“I think we were a more social group than we are today. I can’t ever remember a problem in school,” he said.

Paula (Gilbert) Manolakos and Lorraine Haggerty, 1967 graduates, agreed.

“We didn’t care who we went to school with,” Haggerty said. “It didn’t matter what color you were.”

In 1964, the 1,069-student high school was 77 percent white and 22 percent black, according to the Delaware Department of Public Instruction. By 1973, the school grew to 1,967 and was 24 percent white and 71 percent black.

Alumni recalled some racial conflicts during early desegregation as blacks and Hispanics came to the school. But by the 1960s things had stabilized, Grandell said.

Wilmington High had become predominantly black by the early 1970s because of white flight from city schools. However, school spirit remained, alumni recalled.

The Red Devils football team, led by players Ben Williams and Warren Avery and coach Alex Sansosti, won the first official state football championship in 1971. Later that same school year, the basketball team beat Dover to win the 1972 state championship led by players Nate Evans and Floyd Evans and coach Tim Autry. Bill Berry and Sidney Roy, coached by Greg McNeill, beat Howard for the basketball title in 1974, and in 1978 – with busing looming –Myron Jones and coach Gene Thompson led Wilmington to another basketball title.

That year, a U.S. District Court order consolidated Wilmington and 10 suburban school districts into one super-district to achieve racial balances in schools through metropolitan dispersion and busing. The order led to a pupil reassignment plan that eliminated Wilmington’s arch-rival, P.S. duPont and two other area high schools that year, and, many felt, caused Wilmington High’s own closure two decades later.

Dennis Brady, Jim Kelley, Donna Mensinger and Jeff Nichols were all Conrad High students who found themselves at Wilmington High their senior year in 1978-79, when Conrad closed.

Students from the Drama Club perform the Nativity scene in 1963.

Brady said there was a lot of rage among former Conradians for what they felt was the closure of a fabulous school for nothing.

“None of us crossed the line,” he said. “We had to have co-presidents. Everything had to do with color. In my mind, it never accomplished anything. In the end, it was sad to see that happen.”

Despite consolidation, Wilmington saw some good years in the 1980s, like when Tony Tucker led Wilmington to a victory over Salesianum School in the 1983 boys' basketball state championship. Erik Edwards and Wesley Reynolds led the Red Devils to a win over Sussex Central High School in 1988 for Wilmington's record fifth basketball state championship, an achievement that has never been equaled.

However, enrollment continued to dwindle in the early 1990s as parents opted to send their children to suburban public schools or move them into private ones if they could afford it. Meanwhile, students from neighborhoods formerly assigned to Wilmington High before the busing order – all those south of the Brandywine River – were bused to Newark, Christiana, Glasgow, Alexis I. duPont, Dickinson and McKean high schools.

People were scared of Wilmington High but it did not deserve its reputation, said Chris Jones, a 1993 graduate, who loved his time at "High School."

"It definitely prepared me for life in the real world," Jones said. "I wasn't ever subjected to just one racial or ethnic group. I was always around different people – black, white, Spanish – everybody."

The Red Clay Consolidated School District tried to bolster enrollment with programs like Phoenix for gifted students and the banking program, but declining enrollment continued.

In 1996, the Red Clay Board of Education granted the first charter in the state to the Charter School of Wilmington, and by 1999 Charter and the magnet Cab Calloway School of the Arts replaced Wilmington High. With that, the last traditional high school in the city ceased to exist.

Graduates Tim Carter (1995), Chad Kendall (1996) and teacher Debbie Buccio said Charter made sure to keep its students separate from Wilmington High during the transition years.

"(Charter President) Ron Russo wanted it very separate," Carter said. "And at Cab Calloway, you didn't go to their hallway and vice versa."

Kendall said he does not identify with the schools that replaced Wilmington High in any way.

"I haven't been back at all and I really have no desire to," he said. "I mean, they took away our high school, and I can't honestly say that I would have been associated with it for life, for every event. But in years to come I would like to be able to bring my kids back and show them some of that tradition."

Red Clay Board President Irwin J. Becnel Jr. said Red Clay's troubles with Wilmington High came directly as a result of the 1978 order.

Photo by Andrea Miller
Jeanne (Kassees) Kimerer shows off memorabilia from Wilmington High. She graduated in 1966.

“Whenever you operate a school system under the guidance of any judge, you lose education,” said Becnel, who ran for the school board because he resented forced busing.

“We fought the wars of the 1980s,” he said. “That’s why choice is so important to me, especially for high schools, because they were always the inflammatory issue in the 80s. Once we got out from under the desegregation order and were able to implement choice then the high school thing just absolutely settled down.”

Except for Wilmington High.

Former Red Clay Board President William E. Manning said he was embarrassed the district had a school nobody wanted to attend. People did things like rent an apartment in Greenville so their children could attend A.I. duPont instead of Wilmington.

"We had big fights on the board about which children from the suburbs were going to be assigned to Wilmington High," he said. "It was demeaning to Wilmington. But the best thing you could do was say, 'You don't have to go there if you don't want.' It automatically changes the way people look at it.’"

Becnel says Wilmington High has not gone away. He prefers to view it as a campus that has “two special, high-performing, highly regarded programs.”

But Grandell said the phasing out of Wilmington High left Wilmington as perhaps the only major city in the U.S. that doesn’t have a traditional school.

About 50,000 men and women fulfilled the school motto, “Enter to Learn: Go forth to serve,” he said. Among the graduates are Grandell’s wife Kit Grandell (class of 1944) and their son, Pete Grandell Jr., who was the quarterback of the football team.

Hamill said the Charter School could have retained some of the identity of Wilmington High, such as keeping the Red Devils mascot and the school colors of cherry and white. Under Russo, Charter replaced the school colors with blue and white and implemented “The Force” as its mascot.

“Why not keep the identity?” Hamill asked. “I didn’t think Wilmington High School was going to disappear. And a lot of pride went with it.”

But, Ciarlo said, “nothing stays the same.”

“I guess that's called progress,” said Ciarlo, whose grandson graduated from Charter.

Carter, who met his wife Carol at Wilmington, said one of the most vivid memories he has of his alma mater was participating in Wilmington’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.
“Wilmington High always brought on Santa Claus. That was the tradition in the Wilmington parade,” he said.
Buccio added that the 1998 parade was the saddest.

But, despite Wilmington High’s demise that school year, alumni still hold onto their Red Devil spirit.

Jeanne (Kassees) Kimerer, a 1966 graduate, returned to Wilmington High when her stepdaughter, Brandy (Boyer) Pusey, graduated.

"It was so emotional for me,” Kimerer said. “I said, ‘This is my high school. This is where I graduated. I felt like I was home. All I can say is that it’s not right that the school does not exist anymore,” she said. “It’s just not right.”

Janie (Pierce) Hurlock, a 1966 graduate, said Wilmington High should be brought back.

"So many Delaware natives attended and graduated from Wilmington," she said. "They are doctors, lawyers, and builders and for Wilmington High to no longer carry the name is a very sad thing."

THE SLOW ROAD BACK
Federal oversight lifted after 17 years
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
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After 17 years of federal oversight of Northern New Castle County public schools following a U.S. District Court desegregation order, the State Board of Education successfully argued for the court to end its supervision in 1995.

Yet, the problems the order had created would take years and more legislation to change.

"The vestiges of past discrimination have been eliminated to the extent practicable," wrote U.S. District Court Judge Sue Robinson in the '95 ruling.

The U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed Robinson's opinion, despite its view that racism remained a serious problem.

"It is beyond dispute that racism and bigotry continue to tear at the fragile social fabric of our national and local communities," wrote Circuit Judge Ruggero Aldisert for the Third Circuit. "In light of this sobering truth, it is all the more important that we write the final chapter in this long period of supervision, and release our provisional grip" on the school boards to enable them to combat the problem.

After years of fighting a desegregation order that had collapsed 11 districts into a single super-district, closed schools and put into motion an unprecedented and widely resisted busing plan, the victory seemed a hollow one for many who fought for it because it lacked a follow-up plan.

Neighborhood schools advocate William D'Onofrio was president of the Positive Action Committee, a group that had long fought busing.

It was hollow, D'Onofrio said, because despite a $1 billion price tag, busing never achieved its goals.

"I don't think there was much racial integration," he said, and "during the many years of this grand experiment, the achievement gap between black and white students widened." According to 2006 Delaware Student Testing Program results, white students were more than twice as likely than their black counterparts to meet math standards in all of Brandywine, Christina, and Red Clay's traditional high schools. In reading, the gap was consistently in double digits, ranging from 25 percent to 47 percent.

It was also hollow because the reversal had little immediate impact on most city and suburban school children, as feeder patterns remained largely the same, busing continued and the last remaining traditional high school in the city, Wilmington High, couldn't fix its perennial problem of declining enrollment and closed in 1999.

"Through a combination of habit, fear and ideology, school districts remained unwilling to adjust their race-based assignment plans after the federal order was dissolved," said House of Representatives Majority Leader Wayne A. Smith (R-Clair Manor).

In 2000, he led the charge for a new mandate, which came to be known as the Neighborhood Schools Act.

The Neighborhood Schools Act required that students be assigned to the schools closest to their homes, without regard to any factor other than distance and natural, neighborhood boundaries. It also required schools to revise grade configurations to limit the number of times students would have to change schools.

The four school districts in Northern New Castle County had to get approval for their plans from the Delaware State Board of Education. Today's school districts were created when, still under federal oversight in 1981, the state divided the super-district into Brandywine, Christina, Colonial and Red Clay.

Each came into compliance with the new mandate differently.

Brandywine

Ironically, Brandywine, the only school district in Smith's representative district, used a loophole in the law to comply without changing anything.

The loophole, an 11th hour amendment to the act Smith accepted to avoid stalling in the Democratic-majority Senate, said that school districts could assign students to schools based on factors other than distance and natural boundaries if those factors alone would create a substantial hardship on a school, district, student or student's family, so long as the additional factors considered did not include race.

Brandywine Board of Education member Nancy Doorey and former Superintendent Dr. Bruce Harter used the provision to successfully argue before the state board in February, 2002 that sending students to the closest schools would create a hardship, violate fairness and equitability, and conflict with the will of the Brandywine community, based on an October, 2001 poll.

The poll showed Brandywine residents, by more than a two to one majority, backed existing attendance zones and school configurations that continue to move children after third, sixth and eighth grades.

The State Board of Education's March 2002 ruling, which keeps the busing status quo, remains in effect today.

"Given that I was the father of the act, the irony is that Brandywine was the one who utterly failed to implement provisions of the act," Smith said. "But they also had the most ideologically committed board to forced busing."

Colonial

Brandywine's commitment to busing not withstanding, the other three districts have tried to move toward neighborhood schools.

In August, 2001, Colonial was the first to submit a neighborhood school plan that complied with the act, according to state board records.

The district, under Superintendent Dr. George Meney and manager of transportation Monroe Gerhart, realigned elementary school configurations and demonstrated Colonial also assigned students to its three middle schools using natural, neighborhood boundaries. Colonial has only one high school, William Penn, which makes the question of school assignment moot at the high school level.

The state board declared in March, 2002 that Colonial complied with the law.

Christina

The state board acknowledged that the Christina School District faced a formidable challenge trying to comply with the new mandate, because it has two separate geographic areas – Newark and part of Wilmington – as one of the biggest leftovers of federally mandated desegregation.

However, the state board noted Delaware code allows geographic boundaries to be changed through addition or subtraction. In theory, Christina could be expanded to include the area between Wilmington and Newark, or its Wilmington area could be reassigned to another existing district or to a newly created district.

Former Christina Superintendent Dr. Nicholas Fischer first submitted a plan in November, 2001, a plan that failed because it kept old grade configurations.

In May, 2002, Christina used the hardship clause to fight for the status quo, saying geographic assignments would result in overcrowded suburban schools and under used city schools. City schools would be made up mostly of poor students, which the state board viewed as a hardship. However, public comment from Christina residents “were overwhelmingly critical” of maintaining the status quo, stressing the disruption caused by students switching schools so often and long bus rides. In addition, they said, schools receive the same amount of funding based on enrollment, regardless of socioeconomic background.

The state board rejected Christina’s plan in March, 2003.

An alternate plan proposed changing grade configurations, which would require renovations and new construction. The state board said, contrary to Christina’s plan, the Neighborhood Schools Act did not require new construction in order to realign schools. Moreover, the plan would still require busing many suburban middle school students to Wilmington for grades sixth through eight.

The board rejected this plan as well.

Christina has since reconfigured some of its elementary schools without renovating. But it still believes it must renovate some schools and open new ones in order to complete the reconfiguration. But, residents voted down a $211 million referendum during the 2005-06 school year, blocking construction plans. What’s more, the district also had to climb out of a $12 million operating deficit.

Lastly, legislative action to change Christina’s boundaries to make the district contiguous or to give its Wilmington portion to another district is not forthcoming.

Christina has submitted no plans to the state board since 2003.

Red Clay

Red Clay’s initial approach to neighborhood schools was to argue that promoting choice fulfilled the new mandate because it allowed parents to voice their preferences about neighborhood schools through their actions.

Board President William Manning, Superintendent Dr. Robert Andrzejewski and consultant Dr. Gail Ames submitted a plan in November, 2001 that relied solely on choice to comply with the Act.

The state board rejected Red Clay's logic, noting that its Wilmington students could not use that strategy to stay close to home because Wilmington High School no longer exists. It was replaced by the choice-centered Cab Calloway School of the Arts and the Charter School of Wilmington.

The state board noted that Red Clay had largely moved to required grade configurations. However, a second plan submitted in 2003 was also rejected for the same reason as 2001's plan.

In 2005, Red Clay's kindergarten through fifth grade configuration for most of its elementary schools and attendance zones satisfied the state board. In addition, citing a change in the state's choice law in July, 2004, the state board declared that Red Clay did not have to submit a neighborhood schools plan for grades six through 12 because it enrolled 40 percent or more of its students through choice for these grades. Therefore, Red Clay is in full compliance with the neighborhoods schools law.

Local control, neighborhood high schools not for Wilmington

By the 1990s, the U.S. Supreme Court had said busing was intended only as a temporary remedy.

But, there will continue to be quite a bit of busing for Wilmington students until high school and junior high education is provided for those who can't attend Charter or Cab Calloway, according to critics.

In attempting to comply with the Neighborhood Schools Act, Wilmington City Council passed an ordinance in 2001 calling for the return of the Wilmington School District.

Mayor James Baker vetoed the measure the day it passed.

"The idea that a Wilmington School District would give Wilmington residents more power over school governance is a pipe dream," Baker wrote in a letter to the council. "Those days are gone and will not be coming back."

Baker recently said he is not against neighborhood schools. The main issue is money.

"In Wilmington, everybody wants to have a school district back but Wilmington can't afford it," he said. "There's no way you can do it unless you get 100 percent state funding or get one of the districts to merge with Wilmington. I don't think they will."

Baker doubts that will happen because the tax revenue from Wilmington's big businesses is incentive for the four districts to keep things as they are.

It is also hard to resurrect a city school district because despite a strong corporate tax base, it still can't afford its own district without a strong residential tax base. That base has dwindled as many middle and upper class neighborhoods have declined since the 1960s.

The city school district would have worked at one time if Wilmington's boundaries could have naturally expanded, he said. But the city was hurt by the Educational Advancement Act, which precluded Wilmington from consolidating with suburban districts. Furthermore, the city itself was excluded by state law from annexing wealthier adjacent areas, preventing natural growth.

Smith agrees that there are tremendous financial issues involved in trying to restore the city school district. However, he has urged Baker to reconsider his stance, saying its residents deserve their own schools.

“Having its own school district would complete the urban renaissance Wilmington is trying to undergo,” he said. “Municipally based school districts are the norm in America, not the exception.”

Conrad High School to return next year
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: December 7, 2006

Henry C. Conrad High School will return by the 2007-08 school year, mixing a focus on biotechnology and allied health career programs with a traditional program

Photo by Antonio M. Prado
A statue of the Conrad Indian, representing the school's mascot, was displayed at a 2005 press conference announcing the re-opening of the school.

The last Conrad students to graduate from the high school in Woodcrest, near Newport, are members of the class of 1978, the year a federal court order for desegregation led to the closure of several schools to reassign students.

The Red Clay Consolidated School District has partnered with Delaware Technical & Community College, Christiana Care Health System, the Delaware Biotechnology Institute (a unit of the University of Delaware) and the DuPont Company to create the new school.

Although some Conrad alumni say their alma mater can never truly return, the overwhelming majority of them are excited about its resurrection as a high school.

“Can you imagine in a few years being able to see a Conrad football team?” said Joan Enslen, a 1975 graduate who lives in Granogue near Centreville.

The school would include grades six through 12, following the same, successful model implemented at Red Clay’s Cab Calloway School of the Arts, said Red Clay Superintendent Dr. Robert J. Andrzejewski.

Andrzejewski grew up in Woodcrest, and served as Conrad Middle's principal from 1991 to 1993. Although he graduated from Salesianum School, he remembers Conrad High as a fine school with strong community spirit.

"We're hoping that by bringing back the school, that spirit will come with it as well," he said.

Conrad High is designed for various types of students, who will eventually enter the workforce as blue collar or white collar workers.

"Our focus as a school district is really to try to find a way for our students to enter the workforce, whether it's before college or after college," Andrzejewski said. "And we're hoping that, with the help of our partners, this program will open doors to opportunities for students as well as be a source of pride for this community."

Students who graduate from the new Conrad would enter the workforce immediately, pursue a two-year degree at Delaware Tech or pursue a four-year degree at the University of Delaware or another college, he said.

Some community members are concerned that the students in Conrad Middle School's current attendance zone, primarily a blue collar area, will not seek secondary education at the newly revamped school.

But district officials counter that they have done several things to make the Conrad community aware of the changes under way and, what's more, Andrzejewski has repeatedly said the Conrad attendance zone will have preference when it comes to determining enrollment.

In June, the Red Clay Board of Education approved a plan to disperse Conrad Middle students who choose not to attend the new program to the district's other middle schools. At that meeting, school board President Irwin J. Becnel Jr. said the new Conrad program "is destined to be one of the premiere high schools in the state."

The attendance zones were criticized because they did not adhere to the spirit of the Neighborhood Schools Act. But Andrzejewski said that many Conrad families have already been using the choice program to send their children to other middle schools, and the new attendance zones reflect those patterns. Conrad has a capacity of more than 1,000, but it only had 652 students in 2005. In the 2006 Delaware Student Testing Program scores, it consistently ranked last or next to last among Red Clay's middle schools.

Charles M. Cavanaugh, on the Red Clay board since its inception in 1981, said that if anything, the new program at Conrad will stop the loss of students it has experienced.

"It's time we gave them a choice back in," he said.

1965 graduate Connie Nichols Marro, of Rehoboth Beach, would love to see Conrad become a high school again. But, she would rather see high schools return as neighborhood schools.

But alumni like Carmine Balascio, a 1975 graduate, said choice or charter programs are the way to go in today's open market. Balascio has not been impressed with the quality of Delaware's regular public schools.

"If things are the same when our daughter is old enough for high school, we would consider Wilmington Charter School," he said. But otherwise they will probably look only at private schools. "I support reopening Conrad as a medical tech school with enthusiasm. That sounds like a school my wife and I might consider sending our daughter to."

But Conrad High School sweethearts Rich and Terry Henderson (1964 and 1967, respectively) have reservations about having a sixth through 12th grade format.

“I have a problem when you have young children mixing with older children like that because I have a granddaughter and I notice that when she is around older children, she tends to pick up things that she doesn’t really understand,” Rich Henderson said.

But 1976 alumna Ellyn Stanek Hutton, of Greenville, thinks “it would be great to utilize this building to serve the needs of the community.”

“As a nurse, I especially realize the need for a larger nursing pool to staff our hospitals, skilled nursing facilities and home care agencies,” she said.

Barbara (Green) Webb, a 1975 graduate of Newport, is not sure as a parent if she would like sixth graders intermingling with high school children. But, she loves the concept for the new school.

Tinker Simpers, a 1973 Conrad graduate, said she has no faith in the overall management of the public schools with the exception of charter schools. But Simpers does not support a combined middle-high school for Conrad, thinking it would be a social disaster.

Lois Jeanne (Harvey) Baillargeon, of Rehoboth Beach, a 1960 graduate, disagreed.

“I think it would be a better use of the school,” she said, “and add a new spark to the area around Conrad.”

Graduates remember good times at Conrad High
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: December 7, 2006

Henry C. Conrad High School in Woodcrest brought a lot of excitement to its community before it was turned into a junior high in 1978 as part of a federal desegregation order.

The Conrad basketball team in 1937-38 included (all left to right) back row - Richard Burke, Ray McKendrick, Clifford Jedlicka, Bill Bowman, Tommy Stewart; front row - Coach Frank Loucks, Steve Burke and Manager Harry Baines.

One of the traditions that always excited neighbors was when the renowned Conrad Redskins band would march through the neighborhood, with the drum major or majorette donned in an Indian headdress as part of their grey and scarlet uniform. The band would play one of its two trademark songs, “Love and Honor to Old Conrad.”

Or it played “Cherokee,” a song that moves graduates like Faith Carter (1965), of Wilmington.

“When we hear the Alumni Band perform ‘Cherokee’ at any local function, it takes us back to our days at the school,” she said.

The Redskins band and mascot were high school traditions that no child should be deprived of, said Betty M. Shockley, a 1950 graduate.

“I loved the school and the super teachers there,” she said. “They cared about their students and there was lots of support from the community too.”

The 1937-1938 Conrad High School cheerleaders (all left to right) back row - John Brick, Olive Comegys, advisor Edna Lynch, Charles Brown; front row - Clara Hirsch, Mary Dentinoo, Robert Walter, Bettie Dearie and Catherine Tomlinson.

Lois Jeanne (Harvey) Baillargeon, of Rehoboth Beach, a 1960 graduate, was captain of the band’s twirlers her senior year.

“Next to family, (Conrad) was the most important thing in your life,” she said.

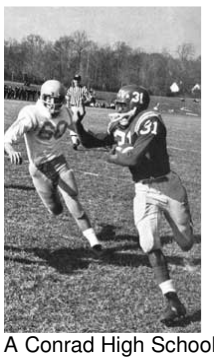
High school sweethearts Shirley (Covert) Gardner and Philip H. Gardner, Newark residents who both graduated in 1952, called it “‘an Esprit de Corps’ that doesn’t exist in most schools.”

Pat Sanders, of Pike Creek, (1969) remembers that spirit.

“To say you were a Conradian had very special meaning to those who said it or heard it,” she said.

Conrad alumnus Laird Logue, class of 1952, made school friendships that have lasted more than 50 years.

“The spirit and friendship from athletic teams continues to this day,” he said. “Our 12th grade starting basketball team was composed of Dallas Green, Bill Bowen and Harvey Halfen, all of whom I see on a regular basis.”



A Conrad High School football player, right, wearing the school colors of grey and scarlet, tries to elude a defender during the 1966 season.

Conrad sweethearts Rich Henderson (1964) and Terry Henderson (1967), of Pike Creek, still get together with a group of friends from Conrad and former arch-rival Dickinson High for trips together.

“I still get chills when I go past that school,” Terry Henderson said. “It’s the school and the memories. It’s a beautiful building and it’s in excellent shape.”

But in 1978, things changed.

Jim Kelley was about to be a senior at Conrad for the 1978-79 school year when his school was converted into a junior high. The conversion was part of Judge Murray Schwartz’s mandate to begin busing suburban students into the city for three years of their schooling and city students into the suburbs for nine years.

“I loved attending Conrad High,” Jim Kelley said. “But once we were all bused to Wilmington High School, the spirit was gone.

“I never went back to any of Wilmington High's football, basketball, or baseball games but may do so when Conrad becomes a high school again,” he said.

Walter C. Wilson (1957), of Wilmington, was also sad to see his alma mater disappear. His daughter, Leigh Ann Wilson, was president of the senior class, the last year Conrad High existed.

“We wanted our (other) children to attend and graduate from Conrad High, but they went on to other schools,” he said.

Carolyn (Kress) Grant, of Newport, is a 1961 Conrad High School graduate. She too wanted her children to experience the same community-based high school education she had.

Susan (Wade) Green of Woodcrest, a 1973 graduate, didn’t understand the implications of the desegregation order until it was too late.

“It was like trying to stop a train moving at the speed of light,” said Green, who met her husband, Earl, at Conrad. “It seemed that only local communities could see that the order and the state’s plans were going to run the train right off the tracks. It was very frustrating.

Photo by Antonio M. Prado
High school sweethearts Rich and Terry Henderson look through Terry’s 1966-67 Conradian yearbook. Rich graduated from Conrad in 1964 and Terry graduated in 1967. They later married.

“Why couldn’t the judges and those we voted into office see the same looming disaster as the rest of us?” she said.

“I can sum it up in three words:- abuse of power. In retrospect, I always say this decision was the beginning of the end of Delaware schools.”
Green would have sent her children to the Conrad that she loved, but not the Conrad it had become.

The change also angered Newark resident Don Quashne, a 1975 graduate.

“Do I agree with a federal judge whose kids are in private school saying we needed to close down Conrad?” he said, referring to Schwartz. “No, I didn't agree with him and I still don't. We had white, black, Hispanic and Asian students at Conrad.”

Baillargeon also stressed the diversity already at Conrad while she was there.

“For example, Mike Brown, who was African American, was an officer of our class,” Baillargeon said. “My friend Carol MacDonald, myself, along with Patrician Harmon and Karen Gardener, both African Americans, had a singing group together for two years.”

Eleanor Badders Steele, of Bear, a 1965 Conrad graduate, felt like a part of her personal history changed forever.

“I know they tear down schools to build other buildings, but for the building to remain and be changed to a middle school affected my pride in my alma mater,” she said.

Jeffrey Irwin, of Lewes, a 1965 Conrad grad, said he supported the desegregation order, and taking the high school away did not bother him. But he opposed busing.

“It is a Band-aid, and an expensive one at that,” he said. “It serves no purpose other than to align the beans. The education system needs to be overhauled completely.”

Jane (Crowe) Gaudioso, of Chadds Ford, Pa. a 1965 Conrad High School graduate, agreed.

“To me busing has been a huge waste of time and resources,” Gaudioso said. “After school activities are a logistic nightmare for parents. Everyone ends up exhausted. The cost of busing should have gone into education and school improvements.”

New school opens in St. George's, a move that saddens Brown alumni
City school produced a generation of craftsmen, artisans, beauticians
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: December 14, 2006

Don Ridgeway was finally coming home to Wilmington after five years of roving the country as a music producer.

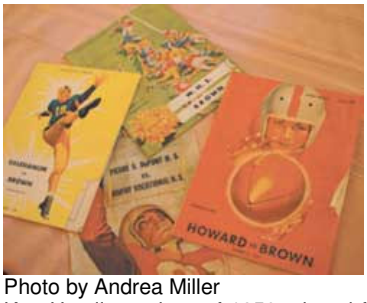


Photo by Andrea Miller
Ken Hamilton, class of 1950, played football for the Brown Bears, and he kept souvenir programs for the games Brown played against the other members of “The Big Five” in Wilmington – Howard, Pierre S. duPont, Salesianum and Wilmington high schools.

It was 1972, and on the 31-year-old's mind was walking the halls of his high school to reminisce and reconnect with the teachers who had shaped his education and character as a young man.

When he arrived at the corner of 14th and Market streets in Wilmington, Ridgeway was stunned to find that the H. Fletcher Brown Vocational High school was gone.

"All I found was an empty lot," said Ridgeway, a 1960 graduate.

Today, a park with a statue, pagoda and memorial plaque commemorating the school and its benefactor is the sole reminder of a place that meant so much to its graduates.

Brown Vocational served greater Wilmington for 31 years, producing a generation of craftsmen, artisans and beauticians that helped make New Castle County what it is today. Once one of Wilmington's "Big Five" sports schools (that included Howard, P.S. duPont, Wilmington and Salesianum), Brown Vocational closed in 1969 to make way for the larger, technologically up-to-date suburban Delcastle Technical High School, which opened in the Fall of 1970.

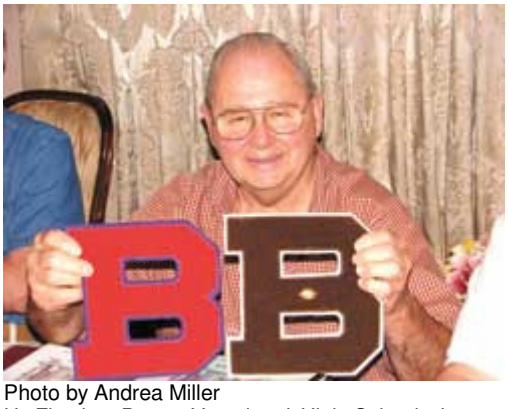


Photo by Andrea Miller
H. Fletcher Brown Vocational High School alumnus Joe Stevens, class of 1952, shows off the varsity letters he won playing football for the Brown Bears. The school colors were red and blue until 1951, when they were changed to brown and white in honor of the school's namesake/beneficiary and the longtime principal, William E. White.

Ridgeway learned that a few of his former teachers had transferred to Delcastle, and he took a bus out to Newport Road to see them. But it just wasn't the same, he said. Without a place to return, the rich school history he longed to connect with had evaporated.

The building itself, once situated on the banks of the Brandywine River within walking distance of affluent neighborhoods and working class neighborhoods, was built thanks to a $600,000 gift from philanthropist H. Fletcher Brown, and students felt privileged to call it theirs.

"It was a wonderful, wonderful building with the finest equipment for its day, built with vision for location and beauty," said Frank Pantano, a 1953 graduate, who lives in Greenville. "I remember just loving to walk to school."

Above the ornate doorway and wide staircases leading to the 14th Street entrance, was a plaque that read, "A person who works with his hands is a laborer. A person who works with his hands and mind is a craftsman. And a person who works with their hands, mind and heart is an artisan and a Brown Vocational graduate."

That attitude was ingrained in every aspect of Brown Vocational, said Clarence Woodlyn, who lives in Brandywine Hundred.

"It was instilled into your head that when you walked out of this facility you're capable of getting a good job, making a good living, being above the average living style at that time," Woodlyn said.

“You would be able to afford a home. You’d be able to afford a family. You could go as far as you wanted to if you put yourself to it. That’s what you got at Brown.”

Photo by Andrea Miller
The Brown Alumni Association, which coordinates many reunions, meets once a month. Members include, from left to right, Marie Paul, Louise Gilberto, Ben Giliberto, Beryl Hamilton, Ken Hamilton, Joe Stevens, John DalGesso, Claire Stevens and Frank Pantano.

Because Brown was a vocational rather than neighborhood school, it drew students from all over the area. Elsmere resident John DalGesso, class of 1953,grew up in Little Italy. He would walk to school with his buddies from the Lincoln Street area. Others came from a distance, like Joe Stevens, class of 1952, who rode a commercial bus to the school with his brother from their home near the old Brandywine Race Track, or walked if they didn’t have money.

“You seemed to know every guy in the city,” said West Chester, Pa. resident Ken Hamilton, class of 1950, who played football for Brown with Stevens.

“You’ve got to remember that back then the schools were not only a part of the neighborhood,” Woodlyn said. “They were the neighborhood.”

Pantano, editor of the school newspaper, always had “an ear to the ground” and saw everything. What he remembers well are teachers still worthy of tribute more than 50 years later.

“These teachers were dedicated,” Pantano said. “I mean, they were right in your foxhole all day. They wanted you to take off like a rocket. They were regular guys, trades people who decided to take on education, who could convey what the real world was all about.”

Hamilton said one teacher’s tough but true words steered his life course.

“I thought I wanted to be a carpenter. But my shop teacher said, ‘Son, you’ll never make a carpenter.’ But he saw I could draw,” he said. The following year, Hamilton went into commercial art and had the opportunity to improve his skills under a man who had worked with the likes of Walt Disney.

So great was the student body’s admiration for their school’s leadership, they changed the school colors from blue and red to brown and white in 1951 in honor of Brown, and the longtime principal, William E. White.

Many said the education at Brown Vocational set it apart from the vocational education that came before it.

“Many a day, instead of classroom work, we would go outside, especially the commercial art people, and our job was to visualize the park,” Woodlyn said. “The idea was to take that park into your mind. Look into the future and see what it would be like 20 years from now.”

Woodlyn, a 1970 graduate, attended Brown Vocational for 10th and 11th grades, but had to go to elsewhere for his senior year, because Brown closed. There was no other vocational school, since Delcastle would not open for another year, so he went to Howard High School.

It “felt like a lame duck” year, he said.

DalGesso said that feeling of being cut off is shared by others who did graduate from Brown. He summed it up this way, “A place like Salesianum can have a class of 1995 reunion but Brown Vocational can’t. Our high school life stopped at a certain point and we have no history after that.”

When the school was slated for destruction, no one even bothered to take the quarter-million dollar mural by renown artist Frank Schoonover off the wall, Hamilton said. Nor was there any effort made to save, archive or display any Brown memorabilia at Delcastle. Alumni are still trying to get space to display the football programs, banners, school letters and other memorabilia from their private collections.

“They just wanted to wash it off the books,” Hamilton said.

Pantano agreed.

“I have a great sadness, that the name and example of H. Fletcher Brown was not carried on,” he said.

Added Ridgeway, “You have ownership and pride in a school. But there is nothing left. It’s a big void.”

However, many alumni said they carry the Brown spirit within them.

“Brown Vocational is still very much alive, more vibrant than other existing schools in this area,” Pantano said. The continuing camaraderie is evident in the perennial alumni dances, dinners, lunches and reunions that have drawn as many as 240 on special occasions, such as a recent 50 year reunion.

As the opening pages of a class of 1953 reunion commemorative book states: “the spirit remains strong among the alumni. It was a special school where boys and girls from throughout the county came together and formed a bond.”

New school opens in St. George's, a move that saddens Brown alumni
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: December 14, 2006

Answering increased demand for vocational education and the latest technology, the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District added a fourth high school to its offerings this Fall.

St. Georges Technical High School, a $45 million facility located near Rt. 1 south of the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal, opened with 270 freshmen.

There is a lot of excitement among the students about being St. George's first class, said St. Georges Principal Terri Villa.

"No one raised their head back in the days when it was called Delcastle. But loss of history is loss of community."
Ken Hamilton, 1950 Brown Vocational graduate

However, some Wilmington-area residents have watched the planning and construction of St. Georges with mixed emotions. These residents, tradesmen and women themselves, realize the need for vocational schools to provide the latest technology and training equipment. Yet they are sad at how the progress has seemed to forget their past.

More than 50 years ago, these men and women were students at the then-proud H. Fletcher Brown Vocational High School in downtown Wilmington. Brown Vocational served Greater Wilmington for 31 years, beginning in 1938 – its first students transferring from the Wilmington Trade School and other high school vocational departments. By 1969, aging technology and lack of space to meet the growing need for vocational education closed the school.

With history behind them, Brown alumni asked the New Castle County Vocational Technical School Board's appointed Naming Committee that the new high school be named after Brown. The committee was impressed with the alumni's presentation. However, it recommended the name St. Georges after its geographic location, St. Georges Hundred. The board members present at a February 2002 meeting unanimously adopted the recommendation. Board Vice President and Brown Vocational alumnus Joseph Hagee was absent, and he did not return calls to discuss the alumni's proposal.

Brown alumni said they felt the school district missed an opportunity to honor a man who gave so much to vocational education.

"This man was a wonderful, giving human being. He had a love that was imbedded in the plaster, brick and stone," said 1953 Brown graduate Frank Pantano. He and other alumni said they felt naming the new school Brown would help revive that message in today's educational system.

Vo-Tech Board of Education President John Lynch said there is no doubt Brown Vocational produced fine men and women for the workforce, but the two schools have little else in common: they are separated by 30 miles and 37 years. One was in the city, the other is in the country.

They also differ in educational focus. Brown's students studied cosmetology, commercial art, secretarial skills, construction and auto-shop.

Today, St. George's students can enroll in one of three academies: Information Technology, Health Services and Science, as well as the traditional Construction and Mechanical department. The offerings today reflect a changing trade workforce, training young men and women for retail, web design, nursing and physical therapy support services, the restaurant industry and teaching in early childhood education centers.

"We're living in a different age and you try to find something people relate to," Lynch said. "The name (St. Georges) fits this school in this location at this time."

The Brown alumni suggestion was among more than 150 that the naming committee considered, including ones that would have honored other men and women who were important to Delaware education, said County Vo-Tech District spokeswoman and Naming Committee Chairwoman Kathy Demarest.

Each suggestion had value, said Vo-Tech District Superintendent Dr. Steven Godowsky, who was the assistant superintendent when St. Georges was approved. In the end, the committee

chose a name consistent with its criteria, which were: a name that would describe the school's location, had historic credibility, relevance in the future and support from the community.

Clarence Woodlyn, who attended Brown Vocational the last two years before it closed, said it does not matter to him that the board didn't name it Brown, because it would not recapture what was lost.

However, older alumni continue to feel strongly about it, despite the gulf in distance, time and technology, because they felt it was the second time their tradition had been overlooked. The first time, they said, happened in 1969, when Brown was closed to make way for a new vocational school near Marshallton. It was named Delcastle, an amalgamation of Delaware and New Castle, and opened in the Fall of 1970.

"At that time, I thought it was good because it was a new school and we knew the direction and teaching was going to be a bit different. I personally did not feel it was going to hurt us," said 1952 Brown Vocational graduate Joe Stevens.

More recently, several Brown alumni, like 1950 graduate Ken Hamilton, have begun to see it differently.

"No one raised their head back in the days when it was called Delcastle," Hamilton said. "But loss of history is loss of community."

These alumni say they want to be a part of a school tradition again, but without their namesake attached, it is difficult to do so. With the Brown name, they would feel some relationship to the place, said alumni John DalGessso, who graduated from Brown in 1953. "Right now, I have no roots or sense of feeling for it in the least way."

Delaware City, Gunning Bedford disappear in merger with William Penn
By Antonio M. Prado and Andrea Miller
Staff Reporters
Published: December 14, 2006

People easily recognize the growth Delaware has seen through the years, but less apparent has been its school consolidation as districts have combined for efficiency, particularly in more rural parts of the state.

Gunning Bedford, Jr. Senior High School football coach John Gosney gives a pep talk to his Panthers football team during the 1967 season.

One notable example is that of Delaware City's students, who were rolled into Gunning Bedford, Jr. Senior High in 1960, then moved into William Penn High School about a decade after that.

Mary Louise Deakyne was in the last graduating class of Delaware City High School, 1960. The underclassmen she knew were all moved to the new Gunning Bedford High on Middle Cox Neck Road, just outside the city, where they would graduate.

Gunning Bedford was built on farmland and named after one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, a man who helped write the U.S. Constitution.

But the 1970-71 school year would be its last year as a high school, said Bruce Haase, Delaware Public Archives manager of public services. For the 1971-72 school year, Gunning Bedford was listed as a middle school in the state Educational Directory, he said. That year, students formerly assigned to Gunning Bedford High were moved to William Penn High School.

The transformation came three years after the Delaware General Assembly passed the Educational Advancement Act of 1968 that consolidated the state's 49 school districts into 26. The move was intended, in part, to create districts with populations large enough to support a high school.

It was not the first time Gunning Bedford faced consolidation, said 1969 graduate Dorothy (Bendler) Gibala, who lives in Detroit. There had also been a movement to consolidate with Middletown sometime before that, she said.

"The students and school district fought that one, and it did not happen," she said. "I am sure there were other reasons, but at least we did not get connected with one of the big rival schools at that time."

However, the later Gunning Bedford merger still meant consolidation with a rival.

That didn't bother Walt "Sonny" Wisowaty, a 1963 graduate who was born and raised in Delaware City and "will probably die here too." When it comes to high school, Wisowaty, who played football and baseball, said he feels no particular sense of loss. "Just a plain ol' school for me. Could not care less!"

However, it still disappoints Bill "Reiny" Reinhart.

"Now Gunning Bedford students go to William Penn. That was our enemy," said Reinhart, a 1963 graduate who spent one quarter of ninth grade at Delaware City before being moved over to the new school.

Students in the Gunning Bedford High School
Future Teachers of America give a presentation during the 1964-65 school year.

“It just makes you feel like there is a missing part of your life when they take your high school,” said Reinhart, who lives in Tennessee with his wife and family. “It’s the same thing that happened with the Navy boot camp I went to in San Diego. It no longer exists.”

Reinhart remembers playing drums in the band and participating in Spring concerts. That experience would help him when he played drums in the Navy, with whom he served a tour of duty in Vietnam.

Other experiences remain vivid memories as well, from a crush on the home economics teacher, Mrs. Ryan (“the older she got the better looking she got”), to the ex-Marine principal Mr. Sterling Brinkman, for whom being disciplined “was like being brought before Hades,” he said.

“We had good teachers. In those days, we paid attention. I remembered that in science class, two girls were sitting in the back talking and Mr. (David) Snow threw an eraser and got both of them. That was allowed back then. You had the usual fistfights between students, but most kids were good.”

Like other high schools, Gunning Bedford sent athletes and other students to the annual Delaware Foundation for Retarded Children’s Blue-Gold All-Star Football Game from 1963 to 1971, with the exception of a few years. They were Charles Armstrong and Norman Neal in 1963, Geraldine Cross in 1965, Sara Sartin and Paul Spitzer in 1966, Pamela Bendler-Gray and David Nichols in 1968, Jo-Anne Miller and Harry Portlock in 1969 and Debbie Hudson in 1971.

John Lewis (class of 1969) said his son went to the current Gunning Bedford Middle School.

“It was nice being back at the school for open house and running into a couple of former classmates who had become teachers at Gunning Bedford,” he said. “I think Colonial School District will one day need another high school and it would be nice to see Gunning Bedford reopened as a senior high school. … Go Panthers!”

Gunning Bedford Jr.

According to Delaware Public Archives, Gunning Bedford Jr. lived from 1747-1812, was a member of the Continental Congress and of the Annapolis Convention. He was appointed the first District Judge of Delaware by President George Washington.

Biography of H. Fletcher Brown
Compiled by staff reporter Andrea Miller from information on University of Delaware website and from the H. Fletcher Brown Vocational High School’s 50th Class reunion Year Book - 1953/2003.
Published: December 14, 2006

Harry Fletcher Brown (1867-1944) was a Harvard University-trained chemist who became a DuPont vice president after he spearheaded the development of a stable, smokeless explosive powder for Great Britain.

That accomplishment is credited by some as vital to the Allied Forces victory in World War I, and “would forever secure him a place in the history of the chemical industry,” according to a condensed biography of Brown based on John Perkins and Robeson Bailey’s 1960 “Harry Fletcher Brown, an Essay in Appreciation.”

Despite this noteworthy accomplishment, Brown is remembered locally for his community service and philanthropy following his retirement from DuPont in 1930.

From his career at DuPont, Brown amassed enough money to become one of Delaware's great benefactors of education and social services in the first half of the 20th century, the biography said.


H. Fletcher Brown

At his death, Brown left $4.5 million in 11 bequests, all benefiting public institutions. He gave gifts to the University of Delaware for a chemistry building, a dormitory, and an endowed chemistry professorship. He underwrote building a new wing for the Delaware Art Museum, and gave money to the YMCA and YWCA for a community building initially used by the black community during the segregation era. He also provided funds for the Delaware Hospital and School of Nursing in Wilmington.

When it was learned that Brown had donated $600,000 for a new vocational school that opened in 1938 in Wilmington, the state of Delaware voted to name the school in his honor.

"The man had a love that was incredible, and it was imbedded in the plaster, brick and stone," said 1953 H. Fletcher Brown Vocational High School graduate Frank Pantano.

Brown's community service roles included: board member for the Wilmington Institute Free Library, director for the Historical Society of Delaware, director for Children's Bureau of Delaware, the chairman of the advisory committee of the YWCA, trustee and chairman of the finance committee of the Delaware Hospital, and a life membership of the National Education Association. In addition, Brown was a president and member of the Delaware State Board of Education.

Brown was born on July 10, 1867, in Natick, Mass. to William H. and Maria F. (Osgood) Brown. On October 26, 1897 Brown married Florence Matilda Hammett (d. 1952) of Newport, R.I. The couple had no children. He died February 28, 1944.

Compiled by staff reporter Andrea Miller from information on University of Delaware website and from the H. Fletcher Brown Vocational High School's 50th Class reunion Year Book--1953/2003.