

School House Destroyed
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1875-1919 – Montague’s original Central School Building which housed all grade levels 1-12.

Building and Contents Total Loss - Valued at \$20,000 - With Insurance of Only \$9,500.
Schools Now Held in Churches.

This was a headline summary of an article that greeted readers of The Montague Observer on Thursday, November 13, 1919.

Fire destroyed Montague’s central school building last Friday night, November 7, together with its contents of valuable records, books, maps, splendidly equipped laboratory and library, furniture, etc. Everything was devoured by the flames, and not even a scrap of paper was saved, so rapidly did the fire spread throughout the interior of the building.

It was fully three-quarters of an hour after the fire was discovered on the second floor of the building in Miss Johnson’s room, before the firemen got a stream of water on the fire. This was no fault of the fire department, however, as they responded promptly after the alarm had finally been sounded. The delays were caused by some difficulty in getting a message through the telephone

office. The other delay was in getting a water pressure, owing to a defective suction pipe at the power house. Contrary to rumors that are being circulated Engineer Cote was at the power house and had the pumps working a few minutes after the alarm was given.

The origin of the fire is a mystery although some think it started from the furnace stack and that the fire had been smoldering all afternoon before it finally broke out at nine o'clock in the evening. Some of the teachers recall having detected the odor of heated varnish during the latter part of the day, but as fumes of gas often escaped from the furnace it was laid to that and nothing more was thought of it. Supt. Chase was in the building about seven o'clock on the night of the fire but saw nothing wrong. Fred Noordhof was probably the first one to see the fire from his home. He first saw a light in the window which went out and was succeeded by a brighter one. In another moment flames burst out in the room which convinced him the building was on fire and he then gave the alarm.

All that now remains of our imposing school building is the grim brick walls, and the brick chimney in the center, a skeleton of the structure that has stood for 44 years, and in whose halls of learning hundreds of our youth have been fitted for life's battles. It is indeed a sad sight, especially to those who look back to their childhood days spent in this institution, many of whom are yet living in this community.

The total loss is difficult to estimate but it is safe to say that the building and its valuable contents could not be replaced today for \$25,000. The total insurance carried was \$9,500.

The building that burned last Friday night was built in 1874-75 at a cost of \$16,000. It was a three-story structure built of white brick and was exceptionally well constructed, as is evidenced by the fact that its walls still stand after being completely gutted.

We find by the records of the school district that on April 18, 1874, a special meeting of this school district was held and voted to build a new school house with a seating capacity of 300 pupils, the building to be completed by the following September. The new school house was not occupied, however, until June 1, 1875. The building committee was composed of George E. Dowling, Ophir R. Goodno and DeWitt C. Bowen.

The first superintendent in the new building was Prof. Henry B. Strong. In 1881 there was an enrollment of 363 pupils in the school with an average attendance of 230. The enrollment at the time of the fire was 240.

The present school board, owing to the loss of the school building, were confronted with a serious problem as to how to maintain our schools, and solved it by soliciting the aid of the various local churches who came to the rescue of the schools promptly and generously, especially that of the Presbyterian society who have given over their church entirely to the schools. Their sacrifice is very great and was made only because the emergency was very great.

Monday morning the schools all assembled at the Presbyterian church where details were worked out for taking care of the various departments with the result that the High School and grammar grades are to occupy the auditorium of the Presbyterian church, the 5th and 6th grades the church parlors, the primary grades the League rooms of the Methodist Episcopal church and the 3rd and 4th

grades the Lutheran school room on the north hill. The Presbyterian church has been divested of its carpet and the pews will be replaced by regular school desks as soon as they can be procured.

The loss of the old school building is a staggering blow to the district, not only financially, but from an educational standpoint, as the schools will be handicapped by the lack of equipment and conveniences for many months. Everything will be done to make things work as smoothly as possible and with the cooperation of patrons and scholars everything will come out all right in the end.

One thing is certain and that is we must now have a new school building and as quickly as possible. A district meeting will probably be called soon to authorize the issuance of bonds. It is barely possible to have the new building ready for occupancy by next fall. This is an ideal time to establish a township unit system whereby all the districts in the township unite into one district. This would give the district schools a fine building and equipment, also greatly superior advantages for their children's education which cannot be offset by any money consideration. The Observer would like to see a move started in this direction.

Prior to the devastating fire, the teachers for the year included: Supt. Vernon E. Chase, Miss Edith Campbell and Miss Blanch Sumner, High school assistants; Mrs. Ruzena Pillman, 7th and 8th grades; Mrs. Florence Ferguson, 5th and 6th; Miss Ethel Johnson, 3rd and 4th; Mrs. V. E. (Maude) Chase, 1st and 2nd. There was no mention of a Primary or Kindergarten grade.

In January 1920 some chairs were donated to the High School rooms from the Red Cross, but more are still needed. Anyone having chairs not in use would be gladly received by the school.

In March 1920, new school desks were being installed in the Presbyterian church, much to the appreciation of the students.

With the loss of Montague's entire school system, it provided an opportunity for the people of Montague Township to reorganize into a single school district and to consolidate its four schools – Maple Grove, Mears, Redding & Trading Post. There being no high school building and only the four rural schools of the old one room type, the township had little to lose and everything to gain. A vote was taken in April 1920 and passed with 232 Yes votes to 71 Nos. Thus, was created the Montague Township Rural Agricultural School.

By the end of November 1920, Batterson & Ellsworth, architects of Kalamazoo, had submitted their final plans for the new proposed consolidated school building. The building is two stories high, made of brick with white stone trimmings, and is fireproof in all stairways and corridors. It is steam heated and well ventilated and is provided with the required number of grade, class, assembly and recitation rooms to advance the health, comfort and interest of its occupants.

School started in the new building on Tuesday, September 6, 1921. There were 20 students in Kindergarten with still more to follow, 32 in the 1st and 2nd grades, 28 in 3rd and 4th grades, 32 in 5th and 6th grades and in the Grammer room 54, and 77 in the High room. Over the years, as school enrollment increased, the Nellie B. Chisholm (NBC) middle school and a new high school were built.

In June 1985, the 1921 school building became Oehrli Elementary School, named after Raymond Robert “Jack” Oehrli. He came to the Montague School system in 1929, at the age of 25 when the school system had 285 students and 8 teachers. When he retired as Superintendent in July 1965 after 36 years, there were over 1,000 students and 55 teachers. Oehrli died in a Muskegon hospital in May 1986.

According to published information for the 2023-2024 school year, Montague Area Public Schools has 1,353 students in grades PK, K-12, and 86 teachers.