

THE HISTORY OF  
ONEIDA SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 3

Otherwise Known As

THE SOUTH ONEIDA SCHOOL

Or

THE STRANGE SCHOOL

By

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April 1979

Cover Design by BARRY FREED

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## F O R E W O R D

Some months ago the author was surprised to receive a letter from Frances Strange Catey stating that she had two early record books of our country school, and that she wanted me to take them and write a history since 1979 would be the centennial year for the brick schoolhouse. Right away my interest was piqued. This project has been very congenial and interesting to me. I have enjoyed the task, and I am grateful to Frances for initiating the project and making it possible.

About the same time the members of the school board were noting that 1979 would be the centennial of our schoolhouse. They were immediately interested in the history project, and wanted the history completed for the celebration of the centennial. The present school board is composed of EvaBelle Deer, President; Douglas Brunger, Secretary; and Richard Catey, Treasurer.

I am especially indebted to Douglas and Debra Brunger, EvaBelle Deer and Karen Burman for their interest and help. Many other people have given their help to the author. Hilah Haueter Perry who taught here from 1935 to 1939, has been most generous in writing letters, and in sharing memories in a personal interview. Her fine history of the Canada Settlement School gave helpful information on our school. Also I thank Herbert Calhoun and Alice Brunger Bouknight for reminiscences which I have included. Nellie Burman Ireland wrote me a most helpful letter; likewise Mary McMullen LaBatt. Mertie Frost and Helen Strange Rueckert wrote letters of encouragement. I have enjoyed visits with reminiscences of school days, with Frances and Wilford Catey, Carl Cook, Lila Edwards and Mrs. Ervin Burman. Time was lacking for further visits which would have been helpful. I would note further that we are indebted to the writings of Daniel Strange for virtually all our knowledge of the first log school.

This has proven to be a large project, and I have lacked the time to do all the background research that I would liked to have done. I have endeavored to be accurate, but it is all to likely that some errors of fact or judgment have crept into the narrative. I trust that I may be forgiven for omissions or errors. Many more names and details could have been included. We hope this is a representative history, and that it will prove interesting and instructive to many who have been interested in our South Oneida School, or who received their elementary education in our brick school now celebrating its centennial.

Ronald Alvord Brunger  
April 26, 1979

## THE HISTORY OF ONEIDA SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 3

Otherwise Known as The South Oneida School

or The Strange School

### I. THE PIONEER LOG SCHOOL

On Oct. 6, 1836, John and George Strange, Peter Kent, and their guide Mr. Groger of Eagle, were exploring the land in south Oneida Township and "met up" with six men from Canada on the east border of section 34. That winter Solomon Russell and family became the first settlers in Oneida Township. In February Samuel Preston cut a road 10 miles through the forest from the southwest, and built a shanty on his land, a little over a half mile west of our school corner, on the south side. The shanty had no floor, door, or window; blankets were hung over the openings and the next morning a large wolf was just outside. Six men from Canada came on the last day of February, built a shanty and slept in it the first night. Two of men returned to Canada in April to bring back oxen to draw the logs of the trees they had cut down. In June 1837 Truman W. Nichols arrived from Canada with the wives and families.<sup>1</sup> Their area was at once appropriately known as the Canada Settlement.

Sometime in 1837, Peter Huckens arrived and built a cabin in the southeast corner of Section 27. In June 1838, John Strange returned to settle permanently. On his first Sunday he attended a religious service at the Huckens' home; although "barefooted and clad only with homespun shirt and pants", he was "respectably dressed" for that frontier occasion and was cordially welcomed.<sup>2</sup>

The first school district on Oneida was organized in the Canada Settlement, and a log school house was built in 1838 or 1839, on the northwest corner of what is now called Strange Highway and South Hartel Road (M-100)<sup>3</sup>. Soon after school opened with a 3½ months' term, taught by Miss Abigail Billings. In 1838 Miss Emma Orinda Sprague, possessed of a "zealous missionary spirit and feeling that she might be useful in helping to found a Christian community in the then wilds of Michigan," came from New York to make her home with her sister, Mrs. Rebecca Preston.<sup>4</sup> She taught the second term at the

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Strange, Pioneer History of Eaton County, Michigan, 1833-1866 (Published by the Eaton County Pioneer and Historical Society, 1923), pp. 116f

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Strange, "An Address to John Strange and Other Pioneers.." in Pioneer History of Eaton County.

<sup>3</sup> Hilah Perry, The Canada Settlement, page 6.

<sup>4</sup> Obituary of Emma Orinda Sprague in the Grand Ledge Independent, March 1905.

Canada Settlement, evidently in the summer of 1839. In pioneer days, incoming settlers were often housed in the schoolhouse while they built their first shanty, if there was no school at the time. But Emma Sprague had to put up with a family who were living at the schoolhouse while she taught. They were most cooperative. They hid their dishes in a box and went to the woods before schooltime. "The husband cut trees and the wife piled the brush until noon. The teacher and pupils sat in the shade of the forest to eat their lunch, while the wife prepared and ate lunch with her husband. Dishes were put away without washing and school again 'took up'."<sup>1</sup>

In the northwest corner of Oneida, four Johnson brothers settled early and the settlement was known as the Johnson settlement. Their name was given to their school, which became District No. 2.<sup>2</sup>

In 1839 the settlers here in South Oneida were organizing a school district, and planning to build a log schoolhouse. The leaders in the move were "Samuel Preston, Peter Kent, Solomon Russel, and John Strange bachelor."<sup>3</sup> In the spring of 1840 they built their log school, nearly a half mile north of our present brick school, on the hill to the east of the present road. Rebecca Preston in a letter postmarked from Adrian on May 4, 1840, and sent to her family back in Ira, New York, wrote: "We shall have a schoolhouse here if they ever git it done it is raised but it does not git along very fast."<sup>4</sup>

The log school stood "in the midst of the dense forest with no roadway within a half mile." From the school "seven wild woods paths" led out in the various directions toward the homes of the area.<sup>5</sup> These paths must have headed northwest, north, northeast, east, southeast, south, and southewst.<sup>6</sup> Emma Orinda Sprague taught the first term here in the summer of 1840.<sup>7</sup> She was then married to John Strange Oct. 1, 1840. Miss Sprague had only eight scholars that first term: Sarah Preston, Jasper Preston, Frances Russell, Jane Russell, Frank Kent, Matilda Houser, David Huckens, and Maria Nichols.<sup>3</sup>

Daniel Strange states that there was no school that first winter. Evidently it was that winter when no school was kept, that Edward McMullen arrived with his numerous family and occupied the schoolhouse. McMullen had but 50 cents when he arrived, and with his last money he purchased a pig. His pig was not kept in a parlor as a folksong and dance of the period suggested; neither was it kept in a pighouse. It was kept in a hollow log securely fastened at the ends. A knot hole in the top served as a feeding place. After a light snow, bear tracks were often discovered around this log and even on top "where bruin had smelled the pig beyond his reach. One morning bruin left his tracks upon the window sill."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Strange, Pioneer History of Eaton County, p. 120

<sup>2</sup> D. Strance, op. cit., p. 121

<sup>3</sup> Ben McMullen, A History of our School, written about 1899, as quoted by Mary LaBatt.

<sup>4</sup> "Sprague-Strange Letters" in the Michigan State University Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Strange, Autobiography.

<sup>6</sup> In early times, there was a log cabin on the back of the Griffin farm which would have been straight east from the schoolhouse.

Nobody lives west of it.

The early township meetings were held in the Canada Settlement area, beginning with the organization meeting April 2, 1838 at the home of Truman W. Nichols. For two years most of the township board meetings were held at the Nichols home. For the next two years or so, the annual town meetings were held at the Canada Settlement school. But the Canada Settlement was in the southeast corner of the township. Settlement was now increasing somewhat across the township. The site of the township meetings was changed to the Strange School,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles west, which was more central.<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Strange, infant son of John and Emma, was born March 4, 1845. He relates that in the winter of 1847-48 before he was three years old, his sister Mary, then  $5\frac{1}{2}$  years old, was attending the log school. On some days that winter when the snow was deep and she could not walk to school, their father hitched the horse to a homemade sled which had room in front of the seat for grain to be taken to the mill. The father set baby Daniel in his baby rocking chair in this space, and transported him to school with his sister. The schoolhouse had an immense fireplace occupying one end of the room. Dan was picked up, chair and all, and set before the great open fireplace. He remembered long afterward, "Placed before the fire I rocked so vigorously that my chair hitched back so far that I could call out, 'Teacher, I'm cold.'" The winter teacher was always a man. "He would gather me up, chair and all and replace me near the fire, when the process was repeated until I was again cold."<sup>2</sup>

The teacher determined that this youngest attendant at school should learn something. Dan wrote, "I remember distinctly the teacher's calling me up several times during the day to spell my word of three letters. At the last lesson he asked if I could remember to tell my mother when I reached home. I remember distinctly climbing out of the sled and saying, "Let me go first." I ran bang against the door, B-O-Y, boy.. I learned boy, and cow. The next summer I didn't like the girl teacher and I remember I refused to spell. I insisted that I was tired."<sup>2</sup> The perversity of three-year-olds evidently has not changed.

One summer morning Dan started out to walk part way with his sister, as she started on the path leading northward toward the school in the woods. He turned around to return home and found that their cows were between him and the house. One of the cows was known as 'Miss Hooker'; evidently she had long horns and a mean disposition. The little boy dared not try to pass those cows. He climbed a high fence into a yard next to the house. The grass was tall and he was quickly lost and began crying. His mother heard him and told the father to go and rescue him. But just then Dan stumbled upon his tame deer "cuddled into the grass. I grabbed at once for the bell strap around his neck and was having a tussel when father arrived."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hilah Perry, pc. cit., p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Strange, Autobiography

"My uncle had gotten this tame fawn for me, a very...beautiful pet with the rows of white spots upon his sides." A few years later, Dan and his cousin Charlie Preston were playing in the woods near the schoolhouse, when "a tiny fawn bleated and jumped up. He caught it and after catching it would follow like a kitten. We had gone but a few steps when another fawn jumped up and I caught it, so we each had a tame fawn that season. A neighbor had shot a doe near there two days before and the creatures were nearly starved." <sup>1</sup>

The log schoolhouse had desks against the walls on three sides, with benches in front of them. "To write or 'cypher' pupils faced the wall, but to..recite they turned gracefully upon the bench and faced the teacher with the edge of the desk forming a back support." "Twice each day every class in reading, was called to recite. First of all 'toe the mark.'" Every toe was brought to a certain crack in the floor. 'Attention.'" All arms dropped to our sides." <sup>1</sup>

Dan Strange gives this example of a geography lesson, and of the kind of questions and answers that were approved in that day. "What is geography? The study of the earth's surface. What is the earth? The globe on which we live. What is its surface? The outside part. Of what is this composed? Of land and water. What is the water called? The sea or ocean. What can you observe of the ocean? Its saltness prevents it from becoming corrupt."<sup>1</sup> The correct answers must be learned and parroted back to the teacher. The same pedagogy was employed in the church of that time, with questions and precise answers to be learned in catechism classes.

Grammar was emphasized to an extreme. "We studied grammar..to what end? Why to learn to parse. We must be able to tell at sight the gender, person, number and case of every noun in the lesson. We did not learn until years later that, with the exception of a very few words as negro and negress, hero and heroin, czar and czarina, there is no gender in the English language."<sup>1</sup> Pupils also learned the person of each noun, and that meant nothing practically.

To our surprise, we learn that there were no arithmetic classes per se, in the log school. "After hearing classes the teacher asked who needs help in arithmetic? There were always plenty of replies. The teacher did set by each and help him out. He could not get half around. Pupils were allowed to whisper and so helped each other with their 'sums'. One problem I remember..If  $7/8$  of a yard will make one vest, how many vests can be made from 8 yards?"<sup>1</sup>

A great emphasis was placed on spelling in the log school, and later. The school often had spelling bees. The pupils stood in order as they had previously been numbered. They "toed the mark". They

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Strange, Autobiography.

folded their arms. The teacher announced a word to the head of the class, then to others in order. When "one misspelled a word, the one spelling it correctly went around and above him." If several people missed, the correct speller went past all these, and so worked toward reaching the head of the line (or the school). "At the end of the lesson the class "numbered" off for their positions the next day. A record was kept of the one "leading off ahead." The next day he took his place at the foot, "thus giving others a chance at the head. The one at the head the most times in a term won a prize."<sup>1</sup> Often the spelling was a real "spelldown". When a person missed a word, he had to sit down, taking his seat. The last one standing was the champion speller, and this was deemed a real honor or achievement.

Henry Trench, the early pioneer at Grand Ledge, had been educated at Oberlin College. For many years he was the township inspector of schools. He lectured in the log schoolhouses upon scientific subjects, and occasionally wrote educational articles in the press. He had a soldering iron and went about among the pioneers mending tin pans; he was popularly known as "Tinker Trench".<sup>2</sup> He must have been a character.

The early history of our school comes into a clearer light and focus in 1854, with the opening page of the earliest school record book now in existence. We learn first that the school district had been altered and cut down in size, to the four sections touching our present school corner, Sections 27, 28, 33, and 34. The book is captioned: "RECORD OF SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 3 in the TOWNSHIP OF ONEIDA including Sections 27-28-33-and 34. As altered and bounded by the School Inspectors of said Township. In the year 1854."

Previously the area to the north had sent pupils to our log school. Irving Guilford in Section 21 had been in the District, and had a bill outstanding from the year 1852. In 1854 the Oneida Center District, District No. 10, was established and their first school was held that year.

"The Annual meeting of the qualified voters of School District No. 3 of the Town of Oneida" was held in 1854 on Sept. 25 "at the school house in said district.. pursuant to public notice, the moderator presiding." John Strange was clerk. The following officers were elected: Emanuel DeGraff, Moderator; Edward McMullen, Director; and Hiram Hardy, Assessor. The voters were all men. It was voted "to allow Irving Guilford the sum of \$2.23 cts for materials furnished and services rendered for the year 1852." It was voted to allow John Strange one dollar for "materials furnished and services rendered said district for the year 1853."

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Strange, Autobiography.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Strange, Pioneer History., pp. 122-23.



This epochal school meeting then proceeded to move the site to our present location, as this would be the center of the newly cut down district. They also proceeded to vote for the building of a new frame schoolhouse. The Canada Settlement's log schoolhouse had burned down in 1843, the year the Millerites (later the Adventists) said that the "world would end and burn. When the children awoke in the night and saw the light of the schoolhouse burning they thought the world was surely on fire." The Canada Settlement had proceeded to build a "larger and framed school house and thereby they assumed to have better schools" our historian tells us.<sup>1</sup> This then was in the background of the action of our district. The people were about ready to advance from log houses to frame houses; John Strange would build a large barn in 1856 and the large frame house (part of it still standing today) in 1857. People were in a mood to improve their school, for schools were highly important to them. Furthermore it appears that the log school was now in very poor condition, in addition to being away from the center of the district.

At this 1854 meeting, the motion was made and seconded that the site of the schoolhouse be changed to "the North East corner of section thirty three owned and occupied by Henry Verplank. The motion was carried by 11 to 3." Voting affirmatively were Emanuel DeGraff, Asathel Geer, Samuel Preston, Benjamin White, Gasper Preston, Henry Verplank, Ephraim Stockwell, Charles Strange, George Strange, John Strange, and Theodore Thomas. Voting against the move were Smith Mitchel, Hiram Hardy, and Edward McMullen.<sup>2</sup> Did the negative voters feel the log school was good enough, or react against the prospect of higher taxes? We do not know their thinking.

The people at the meeting proceeded to bargain with Henry Verplank for a half acre of land on the northeast corner of his farm. They agreed on the price of \$20. "Said meeting bargained with Henry Verplank for one half acre of land on the North East corner of section thirty three (33) for a School house Site and agreed to pay him twenty dollars for the same and voted to raise \$20 dollars for the aforesaid site." They then voted to build a frame schoolhouse "about the size of the one in Wm. Henry's district" and that it be enclosed with pine wood, and the desks were to be made of black walnut. The voters agreed to raise \$150 toward the cost.

A Building "Comitty" of three was appointed: Ephraim Stockwell, Samuel Preston, and Emanuel Degraff. It was voted that the Committee draw up a draft of the desired schoolhouse and call for sealed bids to be presented within three months, and that the job be let to the lowest bidder. The "Proposer" was to give good "Security for the performance of the same in a good and workmanlike manner." It was

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Strange, Autobiography.

<sup>2</sup> From the minutes of the meeting, as found in this first record book of the District. Most of our subsequent material will be drawn from the school records.

voted that the old log school and the "appertenances therunto belonging" would be sold at auction to the highest bidder, after a proper notice of the auction. And finally they voted to raise "fifty cents" to buy a "blank book for district reckords." This first record book, a substantial one, cost only 50¢ in the fall of 1854.

A few days after the meeting Hiram Hardy filed his acceptance as Assessor, and Emmanuel DeGraff filed his willingness to serve as Moderator. But on Oct. 6th, the required 10 day period having expired, it was found that Edward McMullen had not filed "his acceptance as Director." John Strange was evidently elected Director, by the other members of the board. Edward McMullen was apparently so opposed to the school move and the building project, that he did not want to be associated with the school business.

At the 1855 Annual Meeting held on Sept. 24, it was reported that school had been held for two three-month terms. Theodore J. Thomas has taught for three months for \$50 salary, and Ellen C. DeGraff for three months for \$19.50. On the frontier it was customary to have a young woman teacher in the summer months, when only the smaller children and girls would attend. The spring and fall months were reckoned to be too busy for school; the children were needed at home to help in planting and harvesting the crops. In the winter months when farm labor was noticeably lessened, the older boys up to the age of 16 or even 19, would come to school for perhaps a "bit of larnin" and fun. They were notably undisciplined. The teacher had to be one who could horsewhip them if need arose, one who would be able to enforce discipline. Always on the frontier, a man would be employed for the winter term. Some moderns might hold that male chauvinism was evident in the much higher salary paid to the man teacher, but all must agree that he had a bigger school and a tough job. Theodore Thomas and Ellen DeGraff were the last teachers to be employed in the log school.