

History of Strong School

The Historic Village, now includes the Strong School, a one-room school moved from its original site. The Strong School was one of the rural one-room schools consolidated into the Vicksburg School District in 1947.



Strong School was originally located in the northwest corner of section 6, Mendon Township, St. Joseph County. The building stood on the east side of Silver Street, which is the dividing line between Mendon and Park Townships.

History: Though located in St. Joseph County, Strong School was one of the 21 rural school districts consolidated with the Vicksburg district to form Vicksburg

Community Schools in 1947. The history of school buildings on this Mendon Township site is murky, but we can assume there was more than one building at this location over the years, as a school was standing on that site as early as 1858. And, we do know a bit about how the second building, the one now located in the Historic Village, came by its name.

Ezekiel Strong was born in Vermont and came to Michigan in 1844. After three years in the Centerville area, he bought a farm situated in the extreme northwestern corner of Mendon Township, right on the line between St. Joseph and Kalamazoo County. The Strong's had three children.

An 1873 Mendon Township Map continues to show a schoolhouse on the site, straddling the property line between the E. A. Strong farm and land owned by Henry Holmes. Since the Strong's owned over 200 acres in Section 6, it is understandable that the school was named for the family.

The 1877 History of St. Joseph County lists Henry Holmes as a carpenter and joiner. The Historical Society has a photo of Strong School as we know it today, dated 1903. Could a new building have been built about 1900 replacing a deteriorating 50-year old structure? Could neighbor Henry Holmes have built, or work on, the new schoolhouse? We may never know.

Prior to the formation of Vicksburg Community Schools as we know it today, there many individual rural school districts in the area, each served by a building much like Strong School.



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These one-room schools educated students from kindergarten through the eighth grade. Each school was located with easy walking distance—a mile or two—from the farm homes of those children residing in that particular geographic district. A single teacher in a single classroom taught students in all grades. Many of these unique buildings remained in use long after the rural districts consolidated with Vicksburg in 1947.

A few of these buildings can still be seen standing along our rural roads, some turned into residences, but most still recognizable for what they once were. Because Strong School was never remodeled or re-designed for another use, it was the ideal candidate for restoration.



Strong School Class of 1937

Prairie Grove School District 08, was established in 1861. Once located on the south side of XY Ave. at the south end of Portage Road, the building was destroyed by fire in 1991 after being used as a meeting place for the Chain-of-Lakes Association for many years. The is now home to Vicksburg Community School's Outdoor Education facility.



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While other Vicksburg area one-room schools also met the strict "standards" set down by the State of Michigan, Prairie Grove was the only one often referred to as a "Standard School".

In 1914 the Michigan Department of Public Instruction asked that standard rural schools conform to various specifications. The buildings should rest on at least one-half acre of land, with trees and shrubs about the building. Two "widely separated" outhouses or "indoor sanitary closets" should be provided for the student's use. The building should have a room heater and ventilator, or a basement furnace. The floors should be hardwood and lighting should be so arranged so that neither the teacher nor students should have to face windows while doing their work. The state also called for 12 "good blackboards, some suitable for small children", and "attractive indoor decorations".

In the 1930s the federal government used Works Projects Administration (WPA) funds to make improvements in all "standard" one-room schools. These improvements included the installation of a furnace to replace room heaters inside chemical toilets to replace those outhouses that remained, and windows on at least one wall of the building, usually situated so that the light would come in over the students left shoulders. The WPA standards of the 1930s remained more or less the standard for one-room schoolhouses when they slowly began to close in the 1950s.

Jenny Weinberg: Jenny Weinberg received her teaching certificate in Rural Education from Western State Normal School (now W.M.U.) in 1914. She taught at Strong School from 1913 to 1915.

In that day, a teacher could accept a school before her education was completed. Many young girls went directly from the school desk to the teacher's desk with little actual preparation—if you were taking a class or two at "Normal" and intended to get your certificate, that was often enough to get started in a rural school.

Restoration: Vicksburg Community Schools provided funds to move the building from its original location on Silver Street to the Historic Village, and contribute money toward its restoration. Many volunteers worked long hours to restore and refurbish the building.

One of the first steps in the restoration was recreation of the long missing bell tower. The man who constructed the Strong School bell tower was Walter Wesoloski, a descendent of one of the Polish families that were brought here to work in the Lee Paper Mill.



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