

Brief History of Williams Elementary School as a High School, then a Junior High

Michael J Denis, 1995, rev 2019

The building housing Williams Elementary School was formerly a junior high, and prior to that was a high school, the third such building the Town of Oakland has had. Prior to 1898, high school students attended a building which is now an apartment house. From 1898 to the early 1970's, Oakland High School stood on School Street. Williams High School was opened in 1925, and remained as a high school until 1969, when Messalonskee High School opened, and Williams became a junior high school. As times have changed, some constants remain. The town of Oakland, and now the Messalonskee School District have tried to keep up with increasing enrollments despite limited financial resources.

OAKLAND HIGH SCHOOL, 1879-1924 - The early history of schools in Oakland is one of overcrowding. The high school which was built in 1898 to relieve crowding burned on 14 September 1900, but was replaced in 1901. But by 1914 Oakland High was graduating 6 students, but had 28 entering, and Superintendent John S Tapley's first report in 1919 recommended building a new high school. The process took six years.

WILLIAMS HIGH SCHOOL, 1925-1969 - Milton LaForest Williams grew up in Oakland, and made his fortune in New York. To show his affection for his native town, he donated money for several community projects, the chapel at Ten Lots on outer Oak St, and a new fence around Lakeview Cemetery. His will also bequeathed \$25,000 for educational purposes in Maine. The executor of the will in 1919 suggested that the town of Oakland be the beneficiary. At the same time, George H Bryant donated \$2500 for an athletic field at the proposed new high school.

As of 1922, with \$37,500 available for a new school, voters raised another \$5000, and voted to buy land on Pleasant Street as a site for the building. The 1923 building committee recommended a 150-student high school, a 2 story brick building with a basement, at a cost not to exceed \$75,000. Construction was delayed, however, as the voters passed over issuing bonds for construction, although they did raise another \$5000 toward the project.

Voters felt pressured by town meeting time in 1924. The executor of Milton LaForest William's estate advised that the town would have until May 1924 to begin construction on the new high school building, or the gift would be withdrawn. George H Bryant also noted that his gift of \$2500 would be withdrawn. Voters passed a school bond issue of \$25,000, to be added to the \$51,000 which had accrued by that time.

Milton LaForest Williams High School opened in September 1925, housing grades 8 through 12. Tennis courts and a baseball diamond were constructed in the summer of 1928 at Bryant Field. With the onset of the Depression, repairs to the high school were of an energy-conservation nature -- weatherstripping, lighting, and other improvements. Further renovations in 1935-36 included a boys' locker room located in an area excavated under the stage. A hot lunch program was begun at a cost per student of \$.08 per week. Also, the Home Economics course was changed to include care and repair of clothing, a sure sign of the Depression's effect on school curricula.

In 1937 Principal Norman Lothrop stated the need for additional space for classrooms, the gymnasium, manual training, and home arts. His wish was met with construction of the Tapley School in 1938. The plywood on the walls of the main building dates from 1939 when Lothrop suggested that something be done to cover the cracking original plaster, and in 1941 the resurfacing of the tennis courts added that sport once more to the physical education program.

Superintendent C J Cutts, in 1945 suggested that with elementary enrollment up 12%, and a projected high school enrollment up 42% within five years, Williams would not house the student body by September 1947. The need for an adequate gymnasium was obvious. The seating capacity was only 156, and programs were suffering as a result.

The 1947 the town provided \$66,000 for adding a 36 foot long classroom addition on the west end of the building; extending the gymnasium to the north 30 feet and to the east about 12 feet to add seating. The new gymnasium was opened on December 23, 1947, two classrooms were ready by March, 1948, and the other two were finished by 1950. But by September 1951, there was again a shortage of rooms, as the building housed 352 students. The building committee moved to enlarge school capacity, and set up a reserve fund of \$20,000 per year for three

years. Superintendent Hubert Redding said that since all available space was being used, more room was needed. By 1955, storage closets at Williams were being used for classes and the library; the teachers' room held three study groups per day. Based on current needs and moderate future plans, an eight-room elementary school was needed. A bond issue of \$125,000 was floated, and what is now the Ralph M Atwood school was built in 1956.

In 1959, a visiting committee recommended improvements in the library, laboratories, and locker room facilities. The cost of a two-story addition on the west side of the gym to house locker rooms and two science labs was estimated at \$40,000. These rooms, constructed in 1962, are now L-1 and L-2, and the library.

In late 1961, Superintendent John MacLeod and several citizens met with state officials to discuss forming a school district consisting of Oakland, Belgrade and Sidney. The idea was studied earlier, but no action was taken at that time. The process was reactivated in late 1965 by Superintendent Alfred Bracy, and SAD 47 became effective on 29 November 1965, with Ralph M Atwood, principal of Williams, as the new superintendent, a post he retained until the early 1980s.

On 20 January 1966, Belgrade applied to join the district, and on 26 January, both Belgrade and Rome submitted applications to the State Board of Education. Rome rejected but Belgrade favored joining. Thus, SAD 47 became the present three-town district. In 1968-69, all district eighth graders attended Belgrade Central School, as work was begun on a new district high school.

WILLIAMS JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, 1969-2003 - Messalonskee High School opened in September, 1969. Since Williams High was vacated, grades 7 and 8 for the district, and Oakland's 6th grade were housed here in a renamed Williams Junior High School. After being bounced around for two generations, 7th and 8th grade students finally had a school of their own. About 1972 overcrowding in Sidney resulted in 6th graders being sent to Williams, along with Oakland's 6th grade. In 1974 nearly identical additions were built at elementary schools in Oakland and Sidney, relieving overcrowding at Williams, which had almost 450 students at the time.

Rome voted in Spring 1984 to tuition 7th and 8th graders to Williams for 1984-85. Most of Rome's high school students had already been attending Williams High, and later Messalonskee.

In September, 1985, District residents approved plans to renovate and enlarge Williams JHS and state approval was secured in February 1986 for a \$3,000,000 project, roughly 40 times the expense of the original building. Construction began on 23 June 1986, and substantially completed by September of 1987.

During the school year 1986-87, junior high students were bused to the former Waterville High School on Gilman Street. When school opened on 2 September, students and staff were treated to the building you now see. On 18 October 1987, exactly 366 days after leaving Williams, the renovated and enlarged school was dedicated. Alumni of Williams HS and Williams JHS touring the facility could hardly believe the difference between the old and new. Even staff members who had taught in the "old" building for 19 years became lost for the first few days. After nearly ten years of trying for state approval, the project had been accomplished.

Plans were underway, and training was provided for a shift to the middle school philosophy for school year 1989-90. Deborah Bobotas (now Howard), as the first woman in a leading district administrative position, came to the job on 1 July 1989, and in 1989, the middle school philosophy was implemented. The accreditation which we was completed began shortly after, thus making the those few years extremely busy, to put it mildly.

When the new Messalonskee Middle School opened in September 2003, Williams JHS became Williams Elementary School. Thus, this building will celebrate its centennial in jut a few more years.

(NOTE: This was written by me in 1995 for the Accreditation Committee, and slightly updated in 2019.)

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