

Gilbert & Bennett School: Center of the Georgetown Community



Julie E. Hughes / 2024

Edwin Gilbert Trust & Education in Georgetown

When Edwin Gilbert, President of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., died in 1906, his will laid out a number of philanthropic gifts to be distributed from his estate following the death of his wife, Elizabeth, who would pass away in December 1910. Among his several bequests to the people of Georgetown was a trust fund of 300 shares of Gilbert & Bennett stock (valued at \$15,000), which was to be invested and the interest applied “towards and for the education of the children in the Public School” in Georgetown.”¹

The proceeds of this gift were immediately applied to teachers’ salaries at the old four room frame school house in Georgetown’s School District #10, allowing the neighborhood to boast of being able to recruit and keep the “highest priced tutors” of all schools in the area.²

Joint School District #10

A complication in this arrangement soon arose when the state legislature passed Public Act 146 in 1909, which eliminated school districts and consolidated control of schools under town management. Because the old Georgetown district drew students from Weston, Wilton, and Redding, it stood to be eliminated under the new system. To continue using Gilbert’s bequest given the intent and wording of his will, it was necessary to save the district. This was achieved through Public Act 173 of 1911, which carved out an exception to the 1909 law and re-established Georgetown’s School District #10 as a new joint district under the same name and with the same boundaries as before. School District #10 was officially part of and paid for by Wilton, but Wilton would be reimbursed by Weston and Redding for its expenditures on students who resided in those towns.

Georgetown’s Identity

While Georgetown had long had an independent identity distinct from all of its constituent towns – particularly due to the pervasive cultural and economic influence of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. and the Scandinavian, Irish, and other European immigrant workers it attracted – the unifying force of having its own school district cannot be overstated. Rather than being dispersed among three different schools – something that might have eroded the cohesiveness of the neighborhood – the revived School District #10 would continue to bring the children of Georgetown, and also their parents, together on a regular basis, long after neighborhood-based schools ceased to be common elsewhere in Wilton, Redding, and Weston.

Overcrowding in Georgetown’s Old School

Even with the new joint district and Gilbert’s generous bequest, however, not all was well with Georgetown’s extant school house by 1914. Residents realized that year that the incoming class of students expected the following term would exceed the number of seats available. Their “old frame school house of 4 rooms [was] already overcrowded,” and the condition of the structure and site made any “further additions” to the building impractical.³

Funding a New School in Georgetown

In response, the leadership of Wilton's 10th School District appointed a committee at their annual meeting that summer to "investigate the advisability of a new school," to recommend where in Georgetown it ought to be located, and to obtain architectural plans for the building. The sub-committee members were William H. Hunter, John Ferriss, and Michael Connery.

Because the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. owned "sixty per cent of the assessable property in the school district, . . . the wish of the company's representatives was quite naturally recognized" throughout the planning and financing stage.⁴ More than that, they provided the vast bulk of the funding necessary to purchase the land and build the new school.

On July 7, 1915, the directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. sent a letter to its stockholders asking them to vote in favor of funding "a modern 8-room school house" in Georgetown at a cost of "about twenty-five thousand dollars." The letter pointed out that if the project was funded by a special tax, the company would still end up paying the bulk of the bill, though its employees would also shoulder a substantial balance. The directors stated their preference to see their "employees relieved of this burden, and also to see them enjoy the advantage of a greatly improved school." They proposed to build the school "on a plot of ground in a desirable location . . . at the sole expense of this Company, and all to be deeded to the School District as a gift." The school in addition was to have all necessary furnishings provided at the Company's expense. The directors argued that doing this would "be to the ultimate advantage of this Company, as a good school must necessarily produce good results." At the annual meeting on July 27, 1915, the stockholders approved the motion and the Company immediately started looking at potential properties.⁵

Finding a Suitable Site

The Company's original intention was to locate the school "not far above the factory plant" on a site they already owned, but that "plot did not afford sufficient space suitable for play grounds on account of comprising a steep hill."⁶ The ultimately chosen site proved attractive because it was flat and afforded plenty of room for physical education. It was purchased by Company president Samuel J. Miller from Charles and Hilda Rosendahl on July 2, 1915 – three weeks prior to the stockholders' vote. A month later, Miller transferred ownership of the property to the Company.

Notably, the land purchased for the school at this time was only three acres. It did not include two one-acre parcels along Route 7 that were owned respectively by the Dyckmans (later the Ljunggrens) and Edith Bennett (later by Harry Batterson). The Dyckman/Ljunggren parcel was purchased by School District #10 in 1948. The Bennett/Batterson parcel was later condemned and then purchased by the State of Connecticut for highway purposes in the early 1950s. The eastern fifty feet of the original three-acre Rosendahl parcel was reserved for a "highway" by the deed that later transferred ownership of the whole property to the School District. When developed, this highway was designated as New Street.

Design Specifications

Initial plans for the school house called for a three-story brick structure.⁷ The building material was dictated by the state, which required any school house of eight rooms or more to be built of “brick or other fire-proof material” as a matter of safety.⁸ By the time contractors’ bids were solicited in the summer of 1915, the idea was to have a two-story brick building. When every bid came in over budget that August, the architect was asked to draw up new plans for a one-story building, still in brick.⁹ The architectural plans were finalized in late October.¹⁰

The number of rooms was determined by the need for a minimum of five classrooms to accommodate the incoming class size, plus three “additional rooms for special studies, to be provided for by the fund left for such purposes by . . . Mr. Edwin Gilbert.”¹¹ As a result, the new school would have recreation rooms for boys and girls, as well as a “domestic science” room equipped with modern “range, oil stoves, refrigerators, sinks, and . . . cooking tables.”¹² In the 1930s, the trust was also paying a music teacher’s salary. By that time it had also paid for a concrete sidewalk around part of the school’s property.

Architect of the G. & B. School

The architect of the G. & B. School has long been the subject of popular rumors. He was identified in some newspaper articles as the prominent New York-based architect Sanford White, but he died in 1906.¹³ On top of that, a 1915 newspaper article in the *Bridgeport Evening Farmer* indicated that the architect of the school was based in Boston, not New York.

In fact, the architects of the school are identified in Wilton’s 1916 Annual Report as W. H. and Henry McLean of Boston. This is supported by the visual evidence provided by the school itself. A very similar school at 214 Main Street in Southport, Conn., originally known as the Pequot Public School (1918), was designed by W. H. McLean.¹⁴ Another very similar school, originally known as the John Fitch School (1922), is at 156 Bloomfield Avenue, Windsor, Conn. It is also credited to McLean. Another example of McLean’s work that bears a striking resemblance to the G. & B. School is the Newton Street School (1915) at 70 Shelburne Road, Greenfield, Mass.

William Herbert McLean (1871-1943) was a member of the firm McLean & Wright up through 1912, and practiced with his father as W. H. & Henry McLean, or as McLean & McLean, after that date. Often in partnership with Wright, McLean designed over a dozen Carnegie libraries in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire. A local example of a McLean designed Carnegie library is the South Norwalk branch of the Norwalk Public Library, opened in 1913. McLean’s designs were predominantly in the Beaux Arts style, though some – like the library in South Norwalk – are better classified as Greek Revival. Many of his schools – like the G. & B. School – were single story for reasons of both fire safety and economy. McLean’s aesthetic and forward-thinking designs made his schools and libraries into beloved center-pieces in communities across New England. In recognition of this, many of his buildings have become contributing properties to historic districts, or are registered independently as historic buildings in their own right. As a McLean design, the G. & B. school is of national significance.



Fig. 1. Pequot School, 214 Main Street, Southport, Conn. (Library of Congress)



Fig. 2. John Fitch School, 156 Bloomfield Avenue, Windsor, Conn. (John Phelan)



Fig. 3. Newton Street School, 70 Shelburne Road, Greenfield, Mass. (Anonymous)

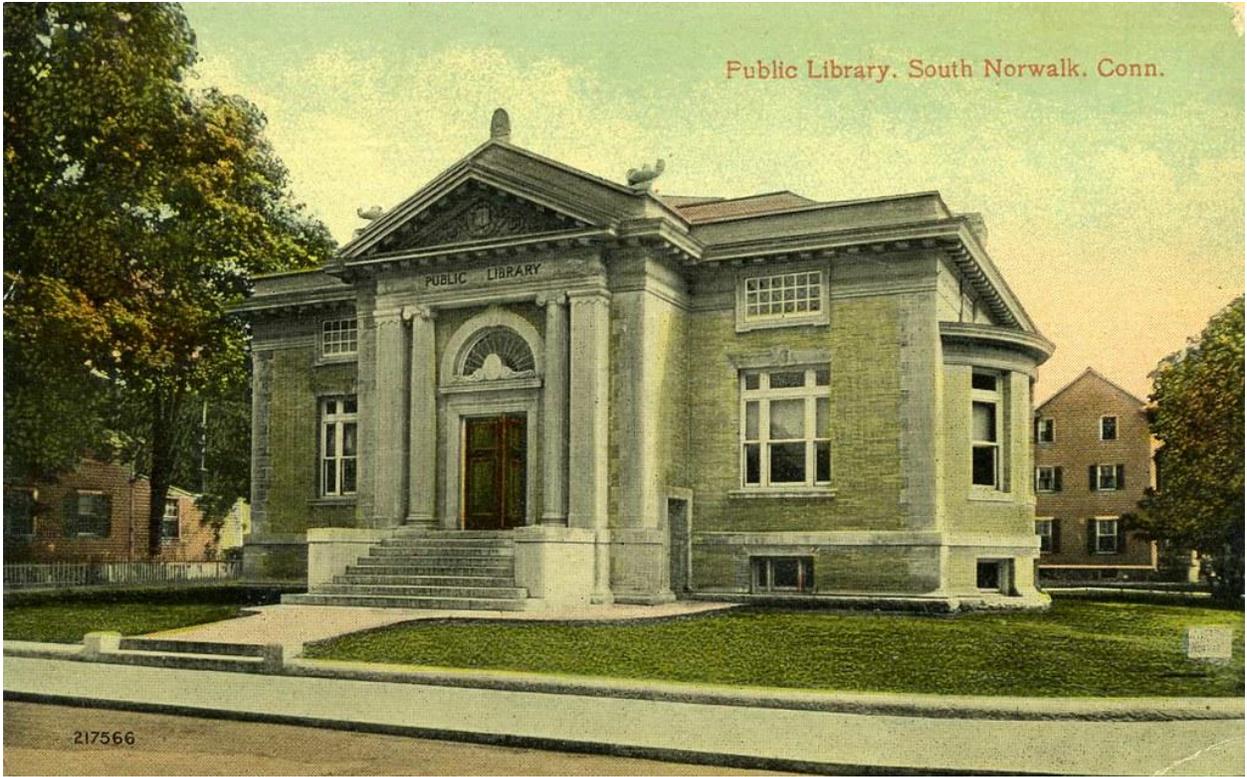


Fig. 4. South Norwalk Public Library, designed by William H. McLean (Norwalk History Room)

Groundbreaking & Construction

In Georgetown, site preparations for the G. & B. School began in September 1915, with S. H. Osborn of Redding Ridge excavating for the foundations and basement. As the architectural plans were not finalized until late October, construction work presumably did not begin until then. Louke & Clarke of Wallingford were the contractors. Work progressed swiftly and the building was nearly complete by the following spring.

What Was the Role of Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. Employees?

Several secondary sources written long after the G. & B. School's construction claim that employees of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. "agreed to forego pay raises for a number of years to help defray costs of the building."¹⁵ This claim appeared first in the National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form for the Georgetown Historic District (1986), which said "that the employees indirectly helped pay for [the school's] construction since they agreed to forego pay raises for a specified number of years to help defray the cost of the building."¹⁶ A few years later this claim was reiterated by Mary E. McCahon, author of the Historic Resources Inventory (1989) entry for the school, who wrote that "funds for the construction itself were made possible by the workers of the company who opted for the school project rather than a pay raise."¹⁷ Most recently, Town of Redding historian Brent Colley has repeated the claim on his website, writing that "G&B Employees also have to be credited for agreeing to postpone wage increases and bonuses to help finance construction of the school."¹⁸

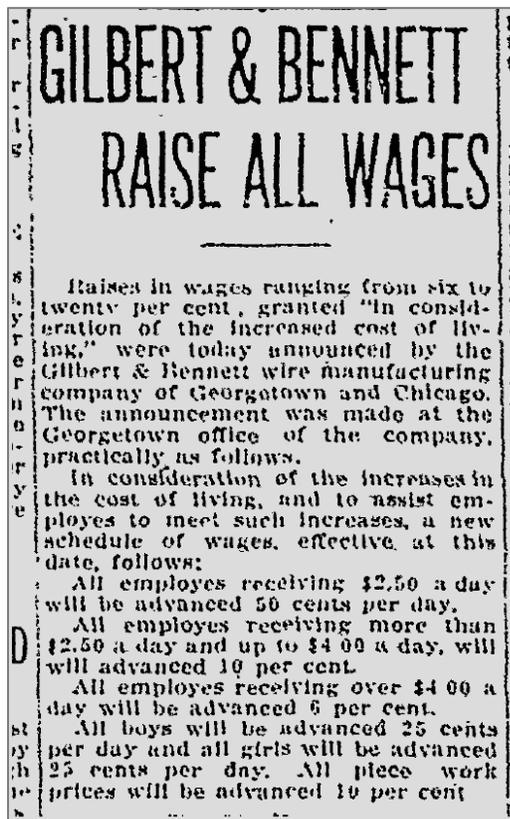


Fig. 5. "Gilbert & Bennett Raise All Wages," *Norwalk Hour*, December 2, 1916

Although the story is quite appealing, none of it is supported by primary sources or newspaper articles dating to the time of the school's construction. In fact, every single Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. employee actually received a pay raise "ranging from six to twenty per cent" in December 1916, just three months after students started attending the newly built school.

Often paired with the claim about deferred pay raises is a further assertion that Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. workers actually constructed the school during their off-hours. Once again, this claim only appears in secondary sources long after the fact. It is not supported by newspaper articles or primary sources from around the time of the school's construction. The earliest version of the claim seems to date to a 1976 League of Women Voters study on the G. & B. School, which reported that "long time residents remember their families helping build the school." The study also claimed that the school's playground equipment "was erected by Georgetowners."¹⁹ Loose interpretations of these two statements seem to have snowballed into the later assertions that the mill employees physically built the school themselves.

In fact, contemporary evidence from multiple newspaper articles dating to 1915 clearly shows that contractors were invited to submit bids, and that S. H. Osborn of Redding Ridge did the excavating, while Louke & Clarke of Wallingford did the construction work.

Ladies New School Fund Association

Contemporary newspaper articles do indicate, however, that Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. workers and their families *were* involved in building the school in the sense that they engaged in (or contributed to) fundraising efforts to pay for specific amenities. As early as 1914, a Georgetown School Fund Society was holding lawn parties to sell ice cream, cake, fruit, and "fancy work" to raise money for the school.²⁰ Within a year "several hundreds of dollars were secured by lawn parties." These funds would be used "to furnish the new building."²¹

The list of goods on offer at these fundraisers strongly suggests the involvement or dominance of Georgetown's women in these successful efforts to outfit the new school. Indeed, by the end of 1915, the Society was known as the Ladies New School Fund Association.²²

Katherine W. Miller is one of the few members of the association ever named in the newspaper coverage.²³ Katherine was unmarried, middle-aged, and a powerful figure in Georgetown on account of her family connections. Her father was Maj. David H. Miller, Sr., longtime President of Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. One of her brothers, Louis P. Miller, was Superintendent of the company. Another brother, Samuel J. Miller, succeeded their father as company president in 1915. Yet another brother, David H. Miller, Jr., was Vice President of the company and a director of the South Norwalk Trust Company.

Katherine was still active in the Association in 1916, when she, Edith M. Foster, and Susie Foster – all members of the piano committee – used Association funds to purchase a new Emerson piano for the school from a shop in Danbury.²⁴ Susie's husband Frederick was either an invoice clerk or a wire drawer at the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., depending on whether one believes the 1910 census or the 1920 census. Edith – apparently a childless widow – was the daughter of

Aaron H. Davis, who was one of the original three trustees appointed in Edwin Gilbert's will to oversee his Georgetown School Trust.²⁵

So it appears that Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. workers themselves neither literally nor figuratively built the school, though some money they had earned as wages likely went towards the project as donations or via small purchases at Association fundraisers. It is also evident that the family "members" and "Georgetowners" of the 1976 League of Women Voters report and of "long time residents" memories were the wives, daughters, sisters, and perhaps widows of Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. employees. These women did not literally build the school any more than the men did. Instead – exactly as the 1976 report says – they "helped build" it, specifically by fundraising for the cause.

Deeding the School to District #10

On September 1, 1916, the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. formally deeded the property and the new school house to School District #10. The deed included a number of covenants applying to "the grantee and its successors." The first was that they could neither sell the property nor use it for any purpose other than a public school. The second was that they must "forever" maintain and conduct a public school on the premises. The third made the assembly room in the center of the school house available to the community, when the school did not need it, as a "Community Hall for the benefit of the people of . . . Georgetown and its vicinity." The fourth required there to be a Hall Committee to manage bookings and community use of the Community Hall. The fifth required that sufficient rooms in the school be dedicated to purposes that could be funded by the Gilbert trust. The sixth allowed for the construction of New Street on the eastern fifty feet of the property. The seventh made violation of any of the preceding six covenants subject to "forfeiture of said premises to the said grantor and its successors, at its or their election."²⁶

Opening Day

Regional newspaper coverage of opening day in early September 1916 was effusive with praise for the new G. & B. School. The *Norwalk Hour* declared that "the new school is said to be the most modern in architecture and equipment of any in the state. . . . It is a building that meets every requirement in convenience, ventilation and all sanitary conditions. Its heating power is sufficiently strong to insure [sic] perfect comfort the coldest days of stern winter. To cover each and every room we can say the appointments are superb, as they are the best obtainable." The entire structure would "arouse an ardor for the best of efforts on the part of each and every one within the doors of the fine new school house that is so much appreciated in this town."²⁷

Community Use of the School

Immediately upon opening, the school emerged not just as a center for education, but also as a gathering place for the local community, just as the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. had dictated it should be. In 1917 a troupe called the Beverly entertainers, associated with the Lyceum Arts Conservatory of Chicago, Ill., performed "a bright, snappy program" on the Assembly Hall

stage.²⁸ In 1918 in the midst of World War One, adult and junior Red Cross volunteers used the Assembly Hall for their meetings and activities, primarily the production of bandages and knitted items for the troops, including blankets and sweaters.²⁹ Community organized Christmas plays were also held on the Assembly Hall stage, as in 1919 when “‘The Dust of the Earth,’ was given as a community affair, with the hall of the school packed to the very doors.”³⁰ Similar community use for charitable efforts, theatrical entertainments, and social events has continued to the present day.

Going to the G. & B. School in the Early Years

In an essay assignment that he wrote in 1923, G. & B. School student William Arthur Smith described school assemblies. These were held every morning in the large Assembly Hall at the front center of the building and included student plays as an entertainment on Fridays. All the students would march into the hall to the sound of a Victrola or sometimes a piano, and were seated by grade. In accordance with the requirements of Edwin Gilbert’s trust, “the principal reads from the Bible and the children then say the Lord’s Prayer.”³¹ School announcements followed, and then the children would sing. Following these assemblies, “the children then marched to their respective rooms and took up their studies.”

In another essay written a year earlier describing Georgetown’s assets, Smith declared that “The school is also a great pride of the town. It was erected in 1915 by the Gilbert and Bennett Mfg. Company or the wire mill. It contains a large auditorium in which entertainments are given every year. The children hold Assembly in it every school day morning.”³² He added that “the most important persons in Georgetown are Louis Miller, Mr. William Hunter and Major Miller was, but he is dead now,” emphasizing the continuing importance of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., and its ongoing connections with the school. Louis P. Miller was Superintendent of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. and a wealthy and influential resident of the Georgetown neighborhood. William H. Hunter was Vice President of the Norwalk Savings Society and treasurer of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. Hunter’s wife, meanwhile, was president of the Georgetown P.T.A. Major David H. Miller, Sr., had been president of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. from 1906 up through his death in 1915. He had been a driving force behind modernizing the educational infrastructure in Georgetown.³³

Students in the early years of the G. & B. School were a creative and spirited group. Besides each grade in succession being in charge of Friday entertainments, many lively school traditions soon developed. One was the publication of a “Class Will” for each graduating class (8th grade). The 1923 Class Will has survived. Among the humorous objects and distinctions passed on to the class of 1924 were some broken typewriters and a lock of red hair (red hair being regarded at this time as a sure marker of a student’s propensity towards misbehavior and mischief).

Physical activity was prioritized, with ample playground space outside and recreation rooms for boys and girls inside the building, as well. Early students recall taking their sleds to school in snowy weather and sledding during recesses. One of the earliest images of the G. & B. School, taken before the development of New Street, shows students outside engaged in calisthenics.



Fig. 6. Students practicing calisthenics at the G. & B. School, ca. 1916 (Wilton History Room)



Fig. Girls with mixing bowls, spoons, and hand-crank mixers; cooking abbreviations on the blackboard; kerosene water heater, ca. 1925 (Wilton History Room)



Fig. Girls distribute a meal they have cooked to younger students in their classroom, c. 1925, photo by Harold D. Sylvester (Wilton History Room)

In these years, girls took classes on domestic arts, particularly cooking, in one of the special classrooms funded by the Edwin Gilbert trust. Some of the dishes they learned would be distributed to their peers at their desks.

Controversy around School District #10

The G. & B. School weathered its first scandal in 1925. A power struggle broke out between Principal Roland P. Car, Louis P. Miller, G. & B. Mfg. Co. Superintendant and Committeeman of District #10, and the State Board of Education's local school Supervisor, Harold D. Sylvester. Miller accused Sylvester of overstepping his bounds and trying to take over control of the school. Sylvester then attempted (and spectacularly failed) to get Miller voted out of office (he was reelected 20-1). Teachers meanwhile chose sides while Car exacerbated the conflict and triggered a spate of resignations by "spy[ing] upon his associates at the instigation of the school committee" and spreading gossip "on the slimmest of evidence." This episode ultimately led to the reassignment of Sylvester and the dismissal of Car, whose actions N. Searle Light – Connecticut's Director of Rural Education – deemed "a menace to the moral welfare of the children with whose care he is entrusted."³⁴



Fig. Principal Roland P. Car (center) and teachers (back row, left to right) Kathryn Henry, Grace McIntosh, Charlotte Thornhill, Helen Carson, (front row, left to right) Lydia Oyster, Bessie Goetz, and Alice Leatherland, 1923 (Wilton History Room)

By the 1930s, some critics began accusing the G. & B. School of being overly influenced by the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. and, as a result, of being a “white elephant” and “a Corporation school with a chicken wire curriculum.”³⁵ Harry Lindstrom, “committeeman” of the district, defended it by pointing out that the Company had no control over who the district elected to his position, and thus over who “has charge of the school in some respects, as to hiring teachers, janitors, and keeping the school open and in good condition.” He conceded that part of the curriculum was influenced by the availability of funds from the Edwin Gilbert trust, which specifically had been paying a music teacher’s salary and all the funds, including the teacher’s salary, for the “domestic [science] room.” But he assured readers that the education of Georgetown students (despite the greater services they received) cost no more per head to their respective towns than any other students did. Lindstrom argued, furthermore, that he had “co-operated with the Wilton School Board in every way,” and that School District #10 was under the State Board of Education, just like Wilton’s Center School and others in the area.

Ina E. Driscoll, 1926-1957

The next principal was a complete contrast to Car’s example. Ina E. Driscoll likely tops many former G. & B. School students’ lists for their favorite teacher and principal. Affectionately (and respectfully) known as “Old Hawkeye” and the “Mayor of Georgetown,” Bertil Rosendahl, a member of the class of 1935, remembered that “When Miss Driscoll stood up and said, ‘Let me

have your attention,' she had your attention." While she could be a bit intimidating for the younger students who had not yet met her personally, closer interactions proved her to be "most gracious. She was a very straightforward, lovely lady." Another 1930s student, Serena (Bonsignore) Nazzaro, remembered Driscoll as a "wonderful woman" who was "strict but fair."³⁶ When in the classroom, Driscoll taught mathematics. She remained a fixture at the school from 1926 until her retirement in 1957, and her services were later honored in Wilton with the inauguration of the Ina E. Driscoll School in 1969, now part of the Miller-Driscoll Elementary School.

Going to the G. & B. School in the 1940s

In the early years, most G. & B. School students were able to "walk to school and lunch at home and . . . can have teachers' help after school without conflict with bus schedules."³⁷ The ability of many students to head home for lunch was particularly handy as a hot lunch program did not start at the G. & B. School until 1942.³⁸ Remodeled for the purpose in 1941, part of the school's basement served as the cafeteria.³⁹

According to a Weston Historical Society newsletter, "one longstanding school custom" at the G. & B. School by this time "required each girl in the graduating class [to] design and sew her graduation dress. This white dress would later be worn at confirmation time. Another tradition was the annual Swedish smorgasbord of home-cooked foods, a P.T.A. fund-raising affair to provide special extras for the school, such as a motion picture camera to record school programs and activities."⁴⁰ The camera was capable of filming in color no less.⁴¹

But the 1940s also had their share of challenges. The G. & B. School was "seriously overcrowded" at the start of the decade, though this was partly due to the temporary transfer of some of Wilton's Center School's seventh and eighth graders to G. & B. that year. Seven of the school's eight classrooms were now being "used for grade rooms," when only five had originally been allotted for those purposes (the others being reserved for student recreation rooms and a domestic science room paid for by the Gilbert trust). Grades, in fact, were doubled up with the "six lower grades . . . crowded into three rooms, each room with two grades and one teacher, and with more than 30 pupils in each room."

Another difficulty that had begun to draw comment in this decade was the G. & B. School's lack of a "proper" library.⁴² The Wilton Library Association helped bridge this gap in services by the late 1940s, when they began offering a "new program of transporting books to the Gilbert and Bennett School in Georgetown for loan each week." This program almost single-handedly produced a "sharp increase" in the Library's circulation of children's books, more than doubling from 5,741 to 11,234 annually.⁴³

World War Two

Students at the G. & B. School during World War Two were very much aware of the conflict. Among the many small and large changes, those with a sweet tooth likely took particular notice when sugar rationing was instituted at the school.⁴⁴ As part of the Civil Defense movement,

farm work and food production were emphasized throughout rural areas, with increased numbers of women and children taking on these roles as the men went off to war. Georgetown enthusiastically participated in this trend and G. & B. School teachers encouraged their students to join the 4-H Victory Corps and to assist their families in growing Victory Gardens.⁴⁵ In addition, home nursing courses were offered at the school in the evenings to adult women, so that they would be prepared “to take care of patients in their own homes in case hospitals are overcrowded in an emergency.”⁴⁶

Some school staff even underwent training to become official Air Raid Wardens. Zuleme Nunzarro taught seventh and eighth graders and was “probably the first woman to receive her certificate as an air raid warden” in the Georgetown area.⁴⁷ Among the lessons she learned were practical advice and demonstrations on “how to cope with incendiary bombs,” and information “to be considered in equipping an air raid shelter room.”⁴⁸ Nunzarro’s job at the school was convenient for her wartime service: “the Gilbert and Bennett School will be the center of operations in case of a disaster. It is here that instructions and information will be relayed and that the key persons will meet when the blue flash comes through.”⁴⁹

Going to the G. & B. School in the 1950s and 1960s

1952 was a watershed year in Georgetown history, with the construction of the Route 107 overpass and additional improvements to link Wilton’s Route 7 with Route 53 in Redding. This entailed running a new highway through the center of Georgetown, bisecting main street. Long-time residents remember it as a great blow to the neighborhood. For the G. & B. School, it meant reduced walkability for students living north of campus.

By the early 1950s, Center School’s seventh and eighth graders were no longer attending the G. & B. School; Center School’s fourth graders had taken their place.⁵⁰ Ever since Center School students had started attending G. & B., busing had been necessary. But as Georgetown continued to grow, and particularly with the planned construction of Route 107 and new housing developments on the west side of Route 7, Georgetown parents began calling for bus service for their own children, too. Parents in the newer residential developments where the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. had offered their workers affordable company housing and home loans since the 1930s, namely Portland Avenue and Own Home Heights, were especially vocal.⁵¹ The School Board granted their wish with new bus service to these areas in February 1952.⁵²

G. & B. School eighth graders in the mid-1950s were traveling annually to Washington, D.C., for an extended educational field trip. In the nation’s capital, they would visit a veritable laundry list of patriotic and educational sites:

the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, Washington Monument, Pan-American Building and the White House. In the afternoon the pupils went to Arlington National Cemetery and to the home of George Washington at Mount Vernon. During the evening they saw the cherry blossoms under colored lights, the Lincoln Memorial and Jefferson Memorial and the Congressional Library. On the last day of the trip they explored the Old and New Museums of the Smithsonian

Institute, Mellon Art Museum, Supreme Court Building and the United States Capitol.⁵³

In 1956, part of the G. & B. School basement was made into a shooting range.⁵⁴ The primary users were the Georgetown Junior Rifle Club, which accepted both boys and girls.⁵⁵ The club was active and the range in use up through 1964.⁵⁶

Summer community events were also held on the grounds of the school in these decades.



Fig. Summer event, ca. 1960s, photo by Perry Ruben (Wilton History Room)

Dissolution of District #10

In 1933, Weston withdrew from the joint Georgetown district when their new Hurlbutt School opened.⁵⁷ By the early 1960s, different plans and progress in building schools in Wilton and Redding were causing both to reevaluate their relationship through District #10 as well. Wilton was proposing to make the G. & B. School a K-3 institution. Redding wanted G. & B. to continue as a K-6 institution. On top of this, there were state and federal pressure and incentives to eliminate the joint district, which was the last of its kind in the state.

Other reasons for dissolution included the district's awkward population size, which produced grades that were a bit too large for one teacher to manage, yet too small to break up into separate classes for students who were average, advanced, or needed extra attention. In addition, the hot lunch program – which was considered a necessity by the 1960s – was too small (averaging sixty to seventy lunches per school day) to break even and it consistently operated in the red.

As for the school building itself, there was no indoor space for physical education (the assembly room was then used as a cafeteria) and its administrative offices were inadequate. Finally, it had been designed in a way that made additions difficult if not impossible and, despite having exterior doors in every classroom, posed a considerable fire risk. 1960s standards particularly condemned the lack of any protective barrier between the basement area, with its boiler and other equipment, and the wood floor directly above it.

As a result, “a study committee from Wilton and Redding recommended in 1962 that District #10 be dissolved and that . . . students attend school in the town where they lived.”⁵⁸ Legislative approval was obtained in 1963 and dissolution of the district was set for June 1964.

To compensate Redding for “their share of the assets of the Gilbert and Bennett School,” the Town of Wilton agreed to pay the Town of Redding \$77,000. To seal the deal, School District #10 quit claimed the entire property and school house to the Town of Wilton.⁵⁹

Conditions of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co.'s Quit Claim to the Town of Wilton

The dissolution of District #10 was predicated on the cooperation of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., because the Town of Wilton required a Quit Claim Deed from them as well. A committee composed of members of Wilton's Board of Education and representatives of District #10 approached the Company in 1961 to gauge “their attitude toward any change in the use of the school.” To the committee's dismay, the Company felt that “the less that is done to change the status quo the better.”⁶⁰

Indeed, the Company was correct in thinking that the people of Georgetown would object to the Town of Wilton strong-arming them into some new arrangement. Speaking on behalf of the community before Wilton's Board of Education in 1961, Georgetown resident Adolph Mayer declared “We don't like to be told what we have to do.”⁶¹

Negotiations continued but the Company remained adamant. In the end, they only agreed to quit claim the G. & B. School to the Town of Wilton once “the main features of the original Deed of Gift from the Company [were] agreed to by the school boards and selectmen of both towns.” In particular, they insisted that the G. & B. School continue its function as a community center for the people of Georgetown: “Wilton has agreed that facilities of the school will be available to Georgetown residents on the same basis that school property is available to Wilton residents.”⁶²

Echoing and, if anything, going further than the Company's own language as recorded in its official minutes, the District #10 Sub-Committee of the Wilton Board of Education (including

representatives from the Redding Board of Education, the Wilton Board of Education, Wilton administrators, the District #10 Committeeman, and the District #10 Dissolution Committee) accepted with no discussion or objection the principle that “it is further understood that the Town of Wilton will make the Gilbert and Bennett School available for such community use as is reasonably required by the residents of the area formerly known as District #10.”⁶³

The mechanics of how such use would work were detailed by Wilton’s Assistant Superintendent, Anthony G. Katsiaficas, in a letter to Richard J. Margolis, President of the G. & B. Parent Teacher Association in 1964. For starters, Katsiaficas indicated that Wilton’s Board of Education had instructed him that the new guidelines must “in no way conflict” with a Rental Policy adopted by the Hall Committee of District #10 in 1952.

There were some differences, however. One departure from the 1952 policy that Katsiaficas proposed was a new \$25 rental fee for use of school facilities by “any group or individual organized or operating for private gain.” Otherwise, usage fees of \$5 remained the same and custodial charges were nominally increased to \$2.50 per hour (\$3.50 on Sundays), with no usage fees to be paid by municipal agencies or non-sectarian non-profits “primarily concerned with the welfare of youth.”⁶⁴

Other refinements to the 1952 policy included new requirements that renters acquire liability insurance coverage if they intended to charge admission, that they assume responsibility for any damage caused to the property, that an adult must be present at all times, that tipping of custodial or school staff was banned, and that usage, rental, and custodial fees could be divided up and shared if multiple groups held events in the school at the same time.⁶⁵

Besides securing the Town of Wilton’s agreement that the school would remain available for community use, the G. & B. Mfg. Co. also insisted that Georgetown residents must still be able to send their children to the G. & B. School – so long as the property continued to be operated as a public school – if they so desired. Wilton’s School Board and Selectmen therefore “agreed to accept the Georgetown area pupils who may wish to attend the Georgetown school, upon payment by the Town of Redding for each pupil.”⁶⁶

While these agreements were not written in the 1964 quit claim deed from the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. to the Town of Wilton, that deed did refer back to the 1916 deed with its covenants. In addition, these agreements were recorded in the minutes of the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Finance, and the Board of Education, as well as in correspondence between these boards and the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co.⁶⁷ Independently of Town of Wilton records, they were also recorded in the minutes of the Board of Directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co.

Thirty years after these agreements were made, the Town of Wilton proposed to sell the G. & B. School without respecting their obligations to the community of Georgetown. One former member of the Wilton Board of Finance, who had participated in negotiating the original agreements between the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., the Town of Wilton, and the Town of Redding, condemned their plans:

It is against this background that the citizens of our town are now being asked to validate a sale that deprives Georgetown people of a property that they have been long assured would be held for their permanent usage. There is no question that Gilbert & Bennett believed that they had such a credible assurance from Wilton's government. And, as one of the assurers, I have no doubts that all of those who represented the town believed firmly that we were entering into an inviolable transaction.⁶⁸

G. & B. School After Dissolution

After dissolution of the joint district, the Town of Wilton continued to use the G. & B. School as an elementary school up through 1971. That year the Wilton High School was completed, and so the G. & B. School was “closed and the elementary grades shifted among the six other schools” then extant in town.⁶⁹ In 1976, the Town of Wilton entertained the idea of converting the G. & B. School into senior housing, but the idea was negated due to insufficient sewer capacity.⁷⁰ Ultimately, between 1971 and 1981, the G. & B. School continued to be used by Georgetown residents as it always had been, but the Town of Wilton otherwise used it only for storage. Besides these purposes it largely “remained idle” and was without a regular paying tenant.⁷¹

Landmark School

When the Colonial Christian School (the Landmark Academy after 1982) signed its initial 10-year lease with the Town of Wilton in 1981, they promised to undertake and pay for some necessary renovations meant to bring the building up to code. At that time, a number of the roof's Spanish tiles needed replacing, having been smashed by errant golf balls. It is unclear exactly what other renovations were undertaken, but building permits were issued to “correct structural and fire hazards” at the school.⁷²

Also under the terms of the lease and in the spirit of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co.'s original covenants, the school's auditorium was to be made available to the Georgetown Community Association, so long as there was no conflict with planned school events.

When the Landmark School unexpectedly vacated the premises in the winter of 1999 months before their lease ran out, their hasty exit – which included ripping out water fountains and lockers they had earlier installed – left gaping holes in the walls and caused “significant damage to the plaster walls and wood moldings” and to the wood floors.⁷³

Georgetown Community Association Saves the School, 1998

Beginning around 1993, the then tenant of the G. & B. School, the Landmark Academy, opened negotiations with the Town of Wilton, seeking to purchase the property. These negotiations dragged on for several years. By April 1998, the Landmark Academy was offering 2.5 million for 8.5 acres including the school, pending approval of their site plans.⁷⁴

Rather than agreeing to Landmark Academy's offer, the Board of Selectmen opted to schedule a public hearing on the matter that May. A Special Meeting of the Board of Selectmen was then held to discuss the results of the hearing. The minutes indicate that the Board had been particularly impressed by "sincere and earnest requests that Georgetown residents be given a chance to develop an alternative plan as to how they could develop, maintain and utilize the Gilbert & Bennett School and property." Pursuant to this, First Selectman Robert H. Russell advised the citizens of Georgetown to form a committee to study the issue. Members of the Board also appear to have been impressed with the argument that "the future value of this land will be far greater than any current benefits that are derived from the sale of this property."⁷⁵

The Georgetown Community Association's *Report to the Board of Selectmen on Alternative Uses of the Gilbert & Bennett School Property* was delivered at a Special Meeting of the Board of Selectmen on October 8, 1998. While the GCA reported their preference that another school pre-approved by their association lease the facility, they alternately suggested that

a significant need exists in the immediate area for a multi-use events facility. This option presents an opportunity to convert the school building into a facility that could be rented for meetings, social events and cultural activities. Conference rooms may also be made available to both community and area residents.⁷⁶

Discussion of the *Report* included how, under the tenure of the Landmark Academy, the community's rights of use of the school (in accordance with the 1964 agreement) had stagnated. The Landmark Academy had "isolated itself from the community" so completely that it had "taken to padlocking the playground when school is not in session." This, as pointed out by selectman Marilyn Gould, was in direct violation of their lease: "Mrs. Gould stated that the lease Landmark has with the Town provides for the community to use the facility."⁷⁷

Following the recommendations put forth in the GCA's *Report* and in an additional report the Board commissioned from Vollmer Associates on the best municipal uses for the G. & B. School (submitted September 1999), the Wilton Board of Selectmen opted not to sell to the Landmark Academy. Instead they brought in a new tenant pre-approved by the GCA: the Linden Hill School (2000-2009).

Agreement Between GCA and Town of Wilton, 2011

After the Linden Hill School's lease ended, the GCA began negotiating with Bill Brennan, First Selectman of Wilton. The parties reached an agreement by April 2011: the GCA would "handle third party rentals, routine maintenance (up to \$600), utility bills, liability insurance and trash removal." The Town would cover "larger maintenance repairs, property insurance, field maintenance and plowing and sanding."⁷⁸

Prior to formalizing this agreement, the GCA had already begun renting out portions of the school to various tenants. Continued up through the present, this practice has provided the income necessary to cover maintenance and other expenses.

While the GCA has had oversight since 2011, day-to-day operations have been undertaken by the director of the G&B Cultural Center, Pat Hegnauer. Hegnauer has operated the G&B Cultural Center in accordance with GCA directives, which in turn reflect the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co.'s original designs for community use of the building. The school has become a place for local artists to create, hold classes and have art shows. Music teachers and students make regular use of the facilities. Various clubs and organizations meet on the premises. Even dog obedience classes have found a home there.

Building Largely Unaltered Since Its Construction

While both the Landmark School and the Linden Hill School committed to \$100,000 in renovations when signing their leases, neither made significant changes to the building. Indeed, the interior and exterior of the building have been little altered since the school first opened in September 1916. According to the *National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form* for the Georgetown Historic District (1986), the school remains as it ever was: “an elaborate buff brick building constructed in the Beaux Arts Classical style” that “also displays a red terra cotta tile roof and utilizes molded plaster consoles under the overhanging eaves. The Flemish gable of the entrance is elaborated by decorative brickwork.” Because of its unaltered condition and highly aesthetic design, the G. & B. School is a particularly precious and unique historical structure in Wilton, as well as an outstanding example of a McLean designed building still standing in all of its original glory.

¹ *The Last Will and Testament of Edwin Gilbert and Five (5) Codicils Thereto* (Nov. 12, 1898), 2 and 17.

² *Georgetown, Norwalk Hour*, April 2, 1915.

³ “Georgetown,” *Norwalk Hour*, April 17, 1914; Annual Meeting of Directors, July 27, 1915, Record Book no. 1, p. 283, Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co. Collection, Redding, Conn.

⁴ “Georgetown,” *Norwalk Hour*, April 2, 1915.

⁵ Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., July 27, 1915, Record Book no. 1, pp. 283-285.

⁶ “Redding,” *Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, July 29, 1915.

⁷ “New School Granted,” *Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, July 30, 1915.

⁸ Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., July 27, 1915, Record Book no. 1, pp. 283-285.

⁹ “Redding,” *Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, August 25, 1915.

¹⁰ “Georgetown,” *Norwalk Hour*, October 21, 1915.

¹¹ Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., July 27, 1915, Record Book no. 1, pp. 283-285.

¹² “Georgetown,” *Norwalk Hour*, September 6, 1916; “Bennett School Critics Answered,” *Norwalk Hour*, June 14, 1934.

¹³ James R. Hanley, “Renovation Commences at School,” *Norwalk Hour*, April 14, 1981; Mike McIntire, “Georgetown A Historic District?” *Wilton Bulletin*, March 5, 1986.

¹⁴ “Pequot School,” *Historic American Buildings Survey* (Library of Congress).

¹⁵ Susan Elan, “Georgetown will be ‘Historic Place,’” *Wilton Bulletin*, December 10, 1986.

¹⁶ “Georgetown Historic District,” National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form (1986), item no. 8, p. 4.

¹⁷ Mary E. McCahon, “49 New Street,” Historic Resource Inventory – Buildings and Structures, May 1989.

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- ¹⁸ "History of the Early Schools of Georgetown, Connecticut," *History of Redding*, accessed April 7, 2024, <http://historyofredding.net/HGschools.htm>.
- ¹⁹ Report on Town Owned Properties: Georgetown (League of Women Voters, 1976), n.p.
- ²⁰ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, August 7, 1914.
- ²¹ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, August 27, 1915.
- ²² "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, February 25, 1915.
- ²³ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, February 25, 1915.
- ²⁴ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, August 18, 1916.
- ²⁵ *The Last Will and Testament of Edwin Gilbert and Five (5) Codicils Thereto*, Nov. 12, 1898, p. 2.
- ²⁶ Wilton Land Records, 30:396.
- ²⁷ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, September 6, 1916.
- ²⁸ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, November 14, 1917.
- ²⁹ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, February 8, 1918.
- ³⁰ "Georgetown," *Norwalk Hour*, November 22, 1919.
- ³¹ William Arthur Smith, "In the Assembly Hall, Friday Morning," April 23, 1923. For the requirement to read from the Bible, see *The Last Will and Testament of Edwin Gilbert and Five (5) Codicils Thereto* (Nov. 12, 1898), 2 and 17.
- ³² William Arthur Smith, "'Description of Georgetown,'" September 20, 1922.
- ³³ Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., July 27, 1915, Record Book no. 1, pp. 283-285.
- ³⁴ N. Searle Light, to Lewis [sic] Miller, Jan. 4, 1926, Wilton History Room.
- ³⁵ "Bennett School Critics Answered," *Norwalk Hour*, June 14, 1934.
- ³⁶ Susan Tuz, "A Reunion of Memories," *News-Times* (Danbury, Conn.), July 23, 2008.
- ³⁷ "Reports to Town Meeting School Survey Committee," *Wilton Bulletin*, October 10, 1940.
- ³⁸ "Gas Range to Help Hot Lunch Project," *Wilton Bulletin*, November 19, 1942.
- ³⁹ "School Opens on Wednesday; Hot Lunch Project to Start," *Wilton Bulletin*, September 3, 1942.
- ⁴⁰ Jeanne C. Howes, "A Special Corner of Weston (Part Two)," *Chronicle Quarterly* (Weston Historical Society), 1996.
- ⁴¹ "Georgetown P.T.A. to see Color Film of Events of Year," *Wilton Bulletin*, May 26, 1948.
- ⁴² "Reports to Town Meeting School Survey Committee," *Wilton Bulletin*, October 10, 1940.
- ⁴³ "Library Members Hear R. L. Tobin at Association's Annual Meeting," *Wilton Bulletin*, June 4, 1947.
- ⁴⁴ "News of Georgetown," *Wilton Bulletin*, n.d.
- ⁴⁵ "Two Boys Sign Up for Farming Work," *Wilton Bulletin*, n.d.
- ⁴⁶ "Course in Nursing at G. & B. School," *Wilton Bulletin*, n.d.
- ⁴⁷ "Zuleme Nunzarro Air Warden Now," *Wilton Bulletin*, June 4, 1942.
- ⁴⁸ "Teaches Wardens Bomb Chemistry," *Wilton Bulletin*, March 26, 1942.
- ⁴⁹ "Villagers to have a Surprise Drill," *Wilton Bulletin*, May 28, 1942.
- ⁵⁰ "Untheoretical," *Wilton Bulletin*, October 24, 1951.
- ⁵¹ "School Board Will Study Fourth-Grade Dismissal, District 10 Bus Service," *Wilton Bulletin*, November 14, 1951.
- ⁵² "PHNA Sets New Hours at School," *Wilton Bulletin*, February 20, 1952.
- ⁵³ "Gilbert & Bennett 8th Graders Take Annual Washington Trip," *Wilton Bulletin*, May 16, 1956.
- ⁵⁴ Beverley S. Koehler, "Twenty Five Years Ago," *Wilton Bulletin*, February 25, 1981.
- ⁵⁵ "Junior Riflemen Take New Canaan," *Wilton Bulletin*, February 20, 1957; Leslie Eike Yates, personal communication, April 4, 2024.
- ⁵⁶ "Farewell Photo for John Boncaro," *Wilton Bulletin*, May 20, 1964.
- ⁵⁷ "Bennett School Critics Answered," *Norwalk Hour*, June 14, 1934; Robert H. Russell, *Wilton, Connecticut: Three Centuries of People, Places, and Progress* (Wilton, Conn.: Wilton Historical Society, 2004), 415.
- ⁵⁸ Russell, *Wilton, Connecticut*, 415.
- ⁵⁹ Wilton Land Records, 105:693.
- ⁶⁰ Edward E. Booher, to Members of the Board of Education, c. 1961, Wilton History Room.
- ⁶¹ Adolph Mayer, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Board of Education, Nov. 21, 1961.
- ⁶² Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., May 13, 1964, Record Book no. 4, pp. 54-55.
- ⁶³ Minutes of District #10 Sub-Committee Meeting, Wilton Board of Education, March 5, 1963.

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- ⁶⁴ Anthony G. Katsiaficas, to Richard J. Margolis, April 21, 1964, Wilton History Room. See also the formally adopted rental policy, document 1410c-d, which was identical to the draft version that was appended to the referenced letter from Katsiaficas to Margolis.
- ⁶⁵ Anthony G. Katsiaficas, to Richard J. Margolis, Exhibit #3: Community Use of the Gilbert & Bennett School Facilities, April 21, 1964, Wilton History Room
- ⁶⁶ Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Gilbert & Bennett Mfg. Co., May 13, 1964, Record Book no. 4, pp. 54-55.
- ⁶⁷ Peter S. Levin, "School's Sale Would Be Blatant Breach," *Wilton Bulletin*, May 13, 1998.
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- ⁶⁹ Russell, *Wilton, Connecticut*, 447.
- ⁷⁰ Russell, *Wilton, Connecticut*, 461.
- ⁷¹ James R. Hanley, "Renovation Commences at School," *Norwalk Hour*, April 14, 1981.
- ⁷² "Christian School to Occupy Gilbert and Bennett School," *Wilton Bulletin*, April 22, 1981; "Building Permits for April," *Wilton Bulletin*, June 3, 1981.
- ⁷³ "Landmark Academy, Town at Odds Over Lease and Damage," *Wilton Bulletin*, November 18, 1999.
- ⁷⁴ Minutes of Wilton Board of Selectmen Meeting, April 20, 1998, p. 615.
- ⁷⁵ Minutes of Wilton Board of Selectmen Special Meeting, May 19, 1998, p. 642.
- ⁷⁶ Minutes of Wilton Board of Selectmen Special Meeting, October 8, 1998, p. 738.
- ⁷⁷ Minutes of Wilton Board of Selectmen Special Meeting, October 8, 1998, p. 739-740.
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