

A New Ypsilanti High School

BY TOM WARNER

Out with the Old

A new high school was built on the southeast corner of Packard and Hewitt, just west of the Ypsilanti School District's administrative center. I remember walking past the location in 1960 when that plot of land was a cornfield. Twelve years later, it opened for the class of 1973.

Various adult education and other programs were housed at the old high school until the 1990s, when it was abandoned. A Michigan firm purchased the property and reconfigured the building as affordable apartment living for those fifty-five years of age and older. In 2002, the rehabilitation of Cross Street Village was completed. The renovation created 104 one- and two-bedroom units with many amenities and modest prices to attract low-income seniors. But twenty years later, with the lapsing of low-income housing tax credits, Cross Street Village apartments are now market-rate rentals. The project has been a big success.

It was a sad day for former students, however, when the gymnasium and auditorium were demolished. The loss of both led to the creation of a courtyard behind the school. It has become a favorite destination for reunions of students who attended school in the building. The transformation of the former high school into an attractive rental option for older downsizing couples and others has been a great gift to the community and a wonderful example of historic preservation at its finest.

Changing Demands

I recall my school day at Estabrook Elementary in the 1950s consisting of a morning session from 8:30-11:30 a.m. with ninety minutes for lunch with afternoons from 1:00-3:30 p.m. There was one fifteen-minute recess period in both morning and afternoon sessions.

Rackham was a nationally known school on the campus of Michigan State Normal



Old Ypsilanti High School, now Cross Street Village, 2022

College (now Eastern Michigan University) that served students with special needs, and because of its reputation, the school attracted families from other states. But I recall that services for special needs children were not available locally at the elementary level.

The junior high and high schools offered extensive extracurricular activities, and these were significantly expanded after the passage of Title IX in 1972, guaranteeing women equal participation in athletics. Today, women students participate in soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, water polo, crew, gymnastics, bowling, synchronized swimming, and equestrian at many schools.

Today, when one reads an administrative directory of schools it is commonplace to see titles such as homeless liaison, marketing coordinator, director of technology, online learning director, resiliency center, and homeless student services. Pre-School/Young Fives programs, as well as meal assistance programs, are offered at both at breakfast and lunch.

In the 1920s, Michigan State Normal College established Roosevelt School on its campus, and this had an important role in the placement and training of student teachers. Roosevelt was known as a laboratory school because of its mission in educating future teachers. Roosevelt was a K-12 institution, and many of its students were the children of college faculty. For this reason, many referred to Roosevelt as “snob hill.” Following a national trend of consolidation, however, the school closed its doors at the end of the 1969 school year.

On a smaller scale, St. John's Catholic Church closed their elementary and high schools during 1970 and 1971.

The appropriateness of mascot names has been a national issue for many years. It reared its head in Ypsilanti in the early 1990s when Ypsilanti High's mascot, the Braves, now became offensive to many. Highly contentious board of education meetings about a name change finally led to the decision to rename the mascot the Phoenix, in November 2007. With the merger of Ypsilanti and Willow Run schools, in 2013, the name was changed again to the Grizzlies.

Then and Now

In the early 1970s, Ypsilanti had eight elementary schools (Erickson, Adams, Woodruff, Perry, Chapelle, Estabrook, Central and Fletcher), East and West Middle Schools (they were originally junior high schools) and the newly built high school. The Willow Run District had six elementary schools (Cheney, Ford, Holmes, Kaiser, Kettering, and Thurston), Edmonson Middle School, and Willow Run High School.

Today, only seven elementary schools remain in the consolidated Ypsilanti Community Schools. Three of these are K-1 schools: Beatty Early Learning Center (named for Eugene Beatty, longtime Ypsilanti educator and principal of Perry Elementary), Ford Early Learning Center, and Perry Early Learning Center. The other elementary schools enroll up to the fifth grade and are Erickson, Holmes, Estabrook, and the Ypsilanti International Elementary School (formerly Adams). Ford and Holmes are the only former Willow Run schools

East Middle School is now open as the sole Ypsilanti Community Middle School while West Middle is home to the Washtenaw International High School and Middle Academy. A new middle school was built in the Willow Run District around 2005, but it closed after the merger. Ypsilanti High on Packard Road now serves as the one and only high school.

Washtenaw International High School and Middle Academy deserves special recognition. It is "a public consortium International Baccalaureate Middle School and High School for academically focused students from school districts in Washtenaw, Ingham, Jackson, Lenawee, Livingston, Monroe, Oakland, and Wayne Counties." In September 2022, it served 569 students in grades nine through twelve, with a student ratio of 16 to 1. One ranking system placed it 2 of 780 in "Best Public High School Teachers in Michigan," while *U.S. News and World Reports* ranked it 4 of 783 "Best Public High Schools in Michigan."

Former School Buildings

A few of the many former schools that have been sold in the last thirty years or more include:

The Elizabeth Fletcher Elementary School on Cornell is an outstanding example of a building that was purchased, repurposed, and continues to be a success story. Named Cornell Elementary School when it first opened, in 1963, it was subsequently renamed after an early Ypsilanti educator, Elizabeth Fletcher, who served on the school board from 1910 to 1920. In 2009, EMU purchased Fletcher School for \$2.2 million. It is now the Autism Collaborative and Children's Institute, serving approximately 150 children from 18 months to six years of age.

In March 2010, the Ypsilanti Board of Education voted to close Ernest T. Chapelle Elementary School, on South Wallace Street, the oldest elementary school in the district. Cost savings were always an issue, but in the case of Chapelle, it was the school with "the lowest capacity and is less than a mile from Estabrook." In 2016, the Ypsilanti Schools Foundation Resale Shop found a home in Chapelle. It also was the site of the Salvation Army, with its grade-school family distribution center. It is now known as the Chapelle Business Center with community groups in various classrooms. A February 2020 article by Chanel Stitt at mlive.com reports that "the building's former classrooms now house educational programs, churches, a human rights resource center, and even a gardening operation. Antioch Church, Mentor2Youth, Willow Run Arches, Bottles-n-Backpacks and the YMCA are among organizations now operating out of the space."

One of the groups using the Chapelle Elementary School deserves attention. The Ypsilanti YMCA Child Development Center is devoted to the care of children from eighteen months to five years old and is uniquely supported by the Ypsilanti Community Schools, the Ypsilanti Housing Commission, Eastern Michigan University, and the Ann Arbor YMCA.

Woodruff's Grove was Ypsilanti's original name, so it is not surprising that several iterations of Woodruff School on East Michigan have been constructed. The school was sold in 1981 to the Word of God Community, for \$150,000. The school on the site became New Beginnings Academy, until its closure in 2018. CHS Group LLC, a health care provider, now occupies the building.

Declining Enrollments

There are many factors contributing to this decline in numbers, all with varying degrees of importance and affect. The presence of private schools in Washtenaw County have had only limited impact. Greenhills and the Rudolph Steiner School, in Ann Arbor, are two of the most well-known institutions in Washtenaw County, but their tuition costs are beyond the reach of most families in our area. In addition, there are many private schools, some with and some without the prohibitive tuition requirements. Many are church based.

Schools of choice was introduced in Michigan, in 1996, by the state legislature, responding to parents wanting a more active role in deciding where their children will



New Ypsilanti Community High School, 2022

be educated. Ann Arbor, Saline, Dexter, and Chelsea districts all participate in schools of choice. These schools are held in such high regard that they entice many families and are a factor in the enrollment decline in Ypsilanti schools. Admittance does have conditions attached, however. The number of students is limited by the district, sometimes by using a lottery method, and transportation is not provided by the chosen district.

Michigan governor John Engler signed into law, in 1994, the provisions establishing the creation of charter schools, also called Public Service Academies. Nine charter schools opened that fall. By the 1997-98 academic year, 106 charter schools had been formed with the cap of 150 on schools reached, in 1999. Governor Rick Snyder passed legislation removing this cap on charter schools, in 2011, and now there are more than 300 schools with over 150,000 students in the state. Nearly 80% of Michigan's charter schools are run by for-profit entities. A distinct profit motive leads to significantly lower teacher salaries and a lack of services beyond classroom instruction. Charter schools have a certain cachet, and this has had a serious effect on the declining enrollment in the Ypsilanti Community Schools.

I hope to have successfully shared some meaningful thoughts and memories as “one who has an abiding love for Ypsilanti” and that you will proceed further to learn more about these topics.

A Note on Sources

All images are provided by the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

About the Author

As with both parents and three siblings Tom Warner was born, raised, and largely educated in Ypsilanti. His respect and love of his hometown thus came naturally, and history was his chosen field of study. He graduated with honors from Eastern Michigan University in 1971, and deeply considered doctoral studies at the University of Michigan in Musicology. Even with extensive travels to Europe, the Near East, and Asia, he has always returned to the Ypsilanti area. He eagerly became a member of the Ypsilanti History Society, and he invites everyone to do the same!