



# Haverford Township Historical Society



## THE FEDERAL SCHOOL (1797)

By Richard D. Kerr

Alexander Symington, in a deed recorded on November 7, 1797, sold for five shillings a parcel of land “situate in the said Township of Haverford beginning at a stake in the line of land of Simon Litzenberg ... containing one quarter of an acre and three perches ... for the purpose of erecting a school house thereon, for the use of the said Township of Haverford.” (A perch in this usage is a measurement of area, being 1/160 of an acre.) On this land a fieldstone one-room schoolhouse was built. It was called the Federal School, not because it had any relation to the federal government, but in celebration at that time of the existence of a new federal presence, the United States of America. The U.S. Constitution had rather recently been adopted in 1787, ratified by eleven states, and gone into effect in 1789. Among the trustees of the Federal School in its early days was Benjamin Hayes Smith.

The Federal School is located on the northeast side of Darby Road in the Coopertown area, just south of present-day Marple Road. A date stone in one gable end reads “1797.” When built, it served students from that small community and the surrounding farms, ranging in age from five or six to sixteen or more. While the normal education of the time was only to eighth grade level, it could take longer than eight years to achieve this, since older children were needed to help out with work on the farms.



*The Federal School, built in 1797, as seen today from Darby Road in the Coopertown section of Haverford Township. (photograph by Jeanne Angell)*

In 1834, Pennsylvania passed the Public Schools Act, enabling the establishment of school districts throughout the Commonwealth. Some areas welcomed this, while others resisted it, noting the expense and that the constitution did not contain any explicit provision for the schooling of children through governmental auspices. Haverford Township was an early adopter, and the Federal School was incorporated into the new township-wide school district. Court-appointed inspectors of schools, who served until the township elected school directors, were Bertine Smith and John Williams.

Several small school facilities in the township were consolidated into the new school district, including the Federal School. In 1849 the school received the name "Haverford Seminary No. 1." It continued to serve as a public school until 1872. As larger, multi-room schools were built, the older one-room schools fell out of use. The Federal School building became a private residence from 1872 until 1911.

The Federal School property was later incorporated into a larger estate, called Allgates, built by Horatio Gates Lloyd, Sr., a wealthy Philadelphia financier who lived in Haverford Township and served as a township commissioner. The Allgates estate was large, with a 55-room mansion built in 1910, quite a number of ancillary buildings and a sizable staff. The old one-room schoolhouse served as a tool house, and this new purpose served to keep the building intact until 1968.

At about that time, the School District of Haverford Township bought the Allgates estate. There was a need for immediate classroom space, which the Allgates mansion could provide, as well as a longer-range plan to construct a new, modern "middle school" on the property. As a result, the old Federal School became school district property for a second time. It was partially restored by the Optimists Club of Havertown in consultation with the historical society. Reproduction wooden desks and benches were built by industrial arts students in the shop classes of the high school. The plans to build a new school facility on the estate land did not work out, and the school district later resold the land. Under the sales agreement, a permanent easement was attached to protect the Federal School land and building.

During the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976-1977, the Federal School was opened for the public from May through October. When the Haverford Friends Meeting on Buck Lane was celebrating a major anniversary in 1983, classes from the associated Friends School Haverford used the Federal School building over a one-week period to experience what school life once had been like. Ongoing restoration and conservation have been continued since, by the historical society and the township public works department.

Today the restored Federal School of 1797 serves as home to an innovative schooling experience provided cooperatively by the school district, the township and the Haverford Township Historical Society. Since 1990, all fourth grade classes in the school district, as well as some classes from outside the township (on a time-available basis), spend a day in spring at the Federal School. They experience and learn first-hand what school and living conditions were like in earlier times. There is no electricity, no climate control or even window screens, and the restroom or "Necessary" is in an outbuilding back behind the school. The volunteer historical teachers, technically hired as part-timers by the school district, join with the regular elementary school teachers to conduct these classes, and the day counts as an official school day. Many Haverford Township School District graduates retain vivid memories of their fourth-grade day at the Federal School.

For a long time, the Federal School was believed to be the first school building in Delaware County; however, recent historical deed searching by Delaware County amateur historian Keith Lockhart has uncovered a one-room school that dates to 1790 and was established in Folcroft, in the southern part of the county. Its derelict remains have recently been located.



*Interior of the Federal School in Haverford Township, as recorded by photographer Jack E. Boucher for HABS, the Historic American Buildings Survey.*

The Federal School was listed on the prestigious National Register of Historic Places on November 5, 1971. One of six listed Federal Register sites in Haverford Township, it is entry 045-HA-034 in the 1994 *Historic Resources Survey of Haverford Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania*, prepared by the Delaware County Planning Department.

### ***Explore for More... The Federal School***

See the 1994 Delaware County *Historic Resources Survey* entry for the Federal School (on page 15 of 30):  
[http://www.haverfordtownship.com/egov/docs/1350415113\\_157562.pdf](http://www.haverfordtownship.com/egov/docs/1350415113_157562.pdf)

Here's the Wikipedia entry for the Federal School:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_School](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_School)

The Federal School is on the Haverford Heritage Trail:  
<http://hht.havtrail.com/hhtmap.htm>

Read a 1997 Philadelphia *Inquirer* news story on the two-hundredth anniversary of the Federal School:  
[http://articles.philly.com/1997-09-28/news/25550391\\_1\\_school-land-middle-school-farming](http://articles.philly.com/1997-09-28/news/25550391_1_school-land-middle-school-farming)

See a recent short 2013 video feature about the Federal School, done by WFMZ-TV 69 News:  
<http://www.wfmz.com/news/One-Tank-Trip-Federal-School/-/121458/21689960/-/wpundwz/-/index.html>

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