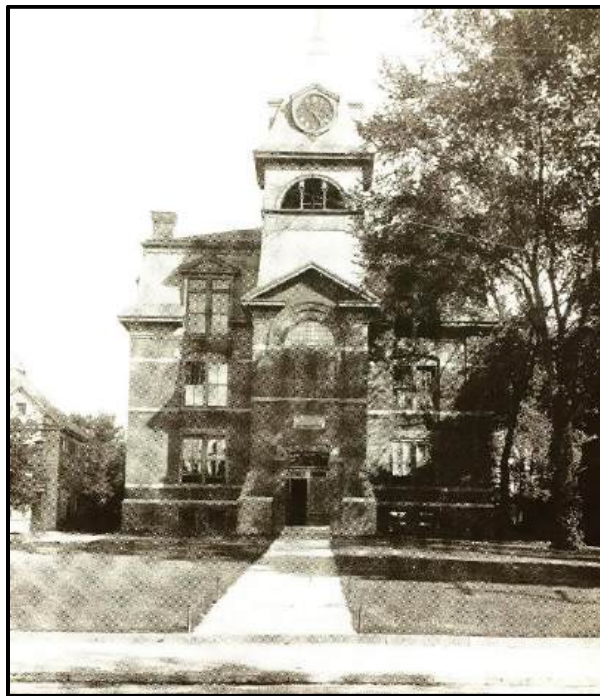


# **This Week in Saratoga County History**

## **Mechanicville's 1919 School Fire**

**Submitted by Sandy McBride, May 21, 2025**

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*Mechanicville School No. 1*

It was a very calm night. No wind was blowing and the ground was free of ice and snow and the moon was shining brightly. It was a beautiful winter's night, with no hint of tragedy. Communicants of the First Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church were meeting for special entertainments.

At Music Hall on Park Avenue, a dance was in progress. In the basement of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, a few yards north of School One, members of the Mechanicville Retail Grocers' Association were just sitting down to their banquet. The calendar said February 17, 1919 and the clock in the basement said 7:45 p.m. Forty-five minutes before, the School One clock had sounded seven.

In the new high school, adjacent to St. Luke's church, the Mechanicville basketball team known as the Halfmoons were handing the Troy Arsenal a drubbing by the score of 24-16 when someone rushed into the gym balcony and shouted 'School One is burning!'"

Hal Sheehan, Mechanicville's well-known newspaper columnist who for years recorded and recounted some of the most fascinating happenings in the history of our communities, gave us a vivid picture of what happened on that February night one hundred and two years ago. He recounted this tragic event in several of his columns, *Down Our Way*, in the *Saratogian*, in 1969 and again in his column *Over Mechanicville Way* in the *Gazette* in 1984, as well as brief mentions in others.

The school building was Mechanicville's first high school and was built in 1888. Its first class graduated in 1892, a class consisting of six young ladies. It had twelve large classrooms on three stories, as well as a library and a board of education meeting room in the basement. Atop what Hal calls the "ugly" mansard roof was the pride of the community . . . a tower with a large clock and a 1457-pound bell that rang the hour of the day and night faithfully for 31 years".

As the community of Mechanicville grew, a new, larger high school building was built on the other side of St. Luke's church and rectory in 1915, and the original building became an elementary school dubbed School One.

On that February night, Sheehan tells us, the Reverend James A. Tappe, rector of St. Luke's, looked out his window, only a few yards from the school building, at about 7:45 and saw flames shooting up from the basement. He sounded the alarm from a fire box in front of the church, and the Mechanicville Fire Department raced to the scene.

Firemen had to deal with no pressure in the hydrants, but soon got their pumpers into action. Seeing the magnanimity of the blaze, they brought in their ancient steamer and put it in action to reach the top floors. One of their big concerns was of the roaring flames spreading to the rectory of the church as well as the Mead home on the south side of the school. The school had wooden ceilings, wooden staircases and oiled birchwood floors and quickly became a roaring furnace.

At 8:57, the mansard roof collapsed into the basement. Three minutes later, at exactly nine o'clock, the bell chimed nine times and then clock and bell plummeted 60 feet from the tower into the basement. The fire would not be controlled until 11 p.m., but continued to smolder all night and the next day as 50 tons of coal stored in the basement burned. By morning light, nothing remained of the school but windowless walls and three chimneys towering above the rubble.

Lost in the conflagration were a thousand library books as well as the textbooks of the school's 550 students. The flag, which had not been taken down that night, also burned.

City residents wept as they watched the blaze consume the school of which they were so proud. The loss of the clock and the bell were particularly lamented, especially since it had rung just a few months earlier on November 11, 1918 to proclaim the end of the Great War. Many demanded that the bell be retrieved from the wreckage and used again on a new school building. Sadly, the damaged bell was eventually auctioned off, and the high bidder was the Meneely Bell Company of Troy which ironically had crafted the bell some 32 years earlier.

While the students were relocated to many locations throughout the city until a new School One could be built, in a later column, Hal noted an interesting side note to the fire. It seems that an annual occurrence was the migration of chimney swallows who flew into Mechanicville every year on May 15. They always made their home in the ventilating chimney at the rear of the school. Observers had noted that there were about 200 of those swallows living at the school in the previous September when they had left town and headed south on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month.

Said Hal, "When the fire destroyed the school building and left only skeleton chimneys standing, the swallows must have gotten the message, for they never returned."