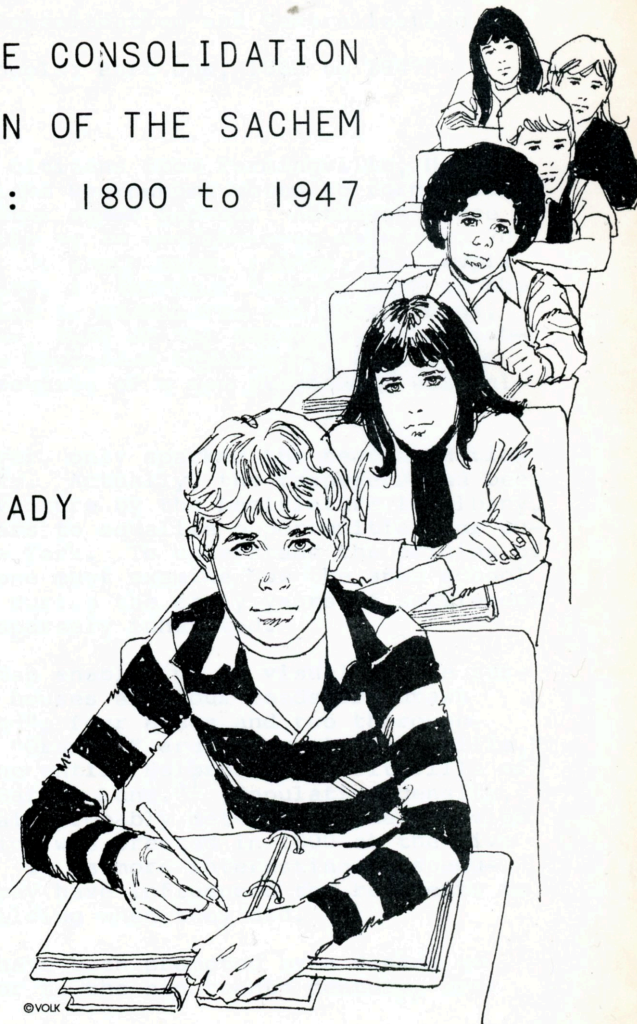


THE HISTORY OF THE CONSOLIDATION
AND CENTRALIZATION OF THE SACHEM
SCHOOLS, PART ONE: 1800 to 1947

BY KENNETH BRADY



THE LOCAL STUDIES COMMITTEE OF THE
SACHEM SCHOOLS, HOLBROOK, NEW YORK

The History of the Consolidation and Centralization of Sachem Schools

Part I: 1800 to 1947

Written by Kenneth Brady, The Local Studies Committee of Sachem Schools

Retyped, edited and digitized by Chris R. Vaccaro (2013)

On April 21, 1955, citizens from Farmingville, Holbrook, Holtsville, and Lake Ronkonkoma voted to form a central school district, later named Sachem. Although these residents decided to unify by an overwhelming majority, 707 to 26, the results were not surprising; rather, the people were responding predictably to internal forces, such as the rapid growth of population in Brookhaven and Islip Towns, and to external pressures, such as the manipulation of public opinion by the State Education Department, a combined weight which made the creation of a new attendance unit almost inevitable.

These events, however, only sparked the reorganization movement in the community. Actually, the taxpayers had been well prepared for this venture by the Legislature in Albany, which had worked for years to equalize opportunities for pupils living in rural New York. To understand the origins of the merger, therefore, one must examine how the area school systems were structured during the early years of settlement when our villages were sparsely inhabited.

A Brookhaven Town map enables us to visualize the surroundings in 1797: five houses and four roads are drawn north of “Rockonkeny Pond”; four homes and two thorough fares, “Horseblock” and “Granny,” are shown at “Bald Hills,” or Farmingville; and, the entire Holbrook and Holtsville of today is described as “Barren Land.”¹ Population density, therefore, though minimal, probably determined the location of our first school, which was erected in 1800 at the Five Corners in Lake Grove.² It is more interesting to speculate, however, on what may have influenced the residents to construct this frame building when they did.

The leaders could have been prompted by a desire to seek local control; prior to the 19th century, area youngsters were taught by “tutors at points distant from the bounds of the present district.”³ The spread of Methodism also may have been a variable. A “society,” a local church organization, was founded in the area in 1796; services were held on the east side of the lake in the home of Caleb Newton.⁴ It is plausible these parishioners and their visiting clergymen pushed for a school where children could learn to read the Bible: the surnames of the charter members of this “meeting” group⁵ and prominent on a list of subscribers who later paid the salary of Elijah Terry, an early teacher of record.⁶ In addition, the people might have been aroused by the spirited national debates between the Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians; the town’s support of public education, therefore, may have been a reflection of community identity with the Democratic-Republicans.

It is also conceivable that the citizens were responding to the new role being played by Albany. In 1795, after years of disregarding elementary education, the Legislature passed “an act for the encouragement of schools,” which authorized residents

¹ Isaac Hulse, surveyor, “The Brookhaven Town Map of 1797,” Map Collection, Brookhaven Town Historian, Port Jefferson, New York.

² Roscoe Craft, *Directory of the Public Schools of the Second Supervisory District, Suffolk County, New York, 1928-1929* (Port Jefferson, New York: n.p., n.d.), p. 8.

³ Craft, p. 8.

⁴ Rev. David L. Sloatman, *History and Souvenir of the 140th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Lake Ronkonkoma Methodist Episcopal Church, 1796-1936* (Lake Ronkonkoma, New York: n.p. 1936), pp. 3 and 5.

⁵ Sloatman, p. 14.

⁶ “School papers and documents,” TS, pp. 10-12, The Osborn Shaw Notebook Collection, Brookhaven Town Historian, Port Jefferson, New York.

“to associate together for the purpose of procuring good and sufficient schoolmasters, and for erecting or maintaining schools ...”⁷ Direction and supervision came from commissioners, such as the three selected by the freeholders of Brookhaven Town on June 3, 1799.⁸ Financial assistance was included to insure the success of the program: 20,000 pounds was set aside annually for five years; each town, in turn, was required to raise by tax half as much more as it received from its appropriation.⁹ New York’s failure to renew these support provisions at the end of the trial period temporarily suspended most efforts to organize school districts; the measure remains significant, however, for it became the foundation upon which the Common School Law of 1812 was built.

Among its many provisions, this statute empowered local commissioners “to divide their respective towns into a suitable and convenient number of districts, for keeping their schools ...”¹⁰ On Nov. 3, 1813, therefore, Mordecai Homan, John Rose and Franklin Thompson met at Coram and formally acknowledged the educational system at Lake Ronkonkoma:

No. 8 is to embrace the inhabitants of the western Middle Island about Rocconcoma Pond to Smithtown line.¹¹

Second, the bill gave the officials the right to create new districts.¹² Farmingville must have been a part of one of the original sections with petitioners from Bald Hills who applied “to be set off ... by themselves,” a request which was granted on May 1, 1817:

... the west bound to extend to the east line of Daniel Saxton’s land, extending northward so as to include Christopher Tookers and eastwardly so as to include the house and premises of John Hulse Jur which will be District No. 27.¹³

Holtsville was officially recognized on May 18, 1857:

On the north by a line three quarters of a mile from and running parallel with the Long Island Rail Road – on the west by Lakeland District No. 11 of Islip, on the south by a line two miles from, and running parallel with Long Island Rail Road, and on the east by the west line of District No. [blank] of Brookhaven and a line running north from said line until it strikes the north boundary of the within described district No. 40.¹⁴

⁷ New York State, Laws of 1795, chapter 75.

⁸ Brookhaven Town, Records of the Town of Brookhaven, Suffolk County, N.Y., 1788 to 1856 (Port Jefferson, New York: Times Steam Job Print, 1888), pp. 20-21.

⁹ New York State, Laws of 1795, chapter 75.

¹⁰ New York State, Laws of 1812, chapter 242, section 7.

¹¹ Brookhaven Town, p. 178.

¹² New York State, Laws of 1812, chapter 242, section 7.

¹³ Brookhaven Town, pp. 188-89.

¹⁴ Brookhaven Town, Records of the Town of Brookhaven, Suffolk County, N.Y., 1856 to 1885 (New York: The Burr Printing House, 1893), p. 449.

Although Holbrook became a separate entity as District No. 14 in 1859¹⁵, it was not referred to by name in available official records¹⁶ until Jan. 17, 1866, and only then in a passing reference to a border extension:

... thence Southerly by line of the Old Saxton Farm until it comes to the Holbrook School District thence Westerly by and with the Northern line of said District until it comes to the Northwest corner thereof – thence Southerly by Westerly line of said Holbrook District until it comes to the Long Island Rail Road ...

Third, the law enabled the authorities to alter the existing school systems in several ways. This power, expanded through enabling legislation, was enjoyed by commissioners, 1819-43, the superintendent, 1843-56, and the county school commissioner, 1856-1910. To illustrate, during the period 1842-69, Farmingville was renumbered once, becoming District 13 on Oct. 24, 1842; Lake Ronkonkoma, three times, finishing as Five on Aug. 22, 1866; Holbrook, twice, emerging as Ten in 1867; and, Holtsville, once, ending as 35 on March 4, 1869. Further, while the boundaries of Farmingville remained constant between 1846-75, the lines of Lake Ronkonkoma were changed on five occasions and defined once.

Much of the land in Joint District 10 (Islip-Smithtown), which was created in 1838¹⁷, was cut off to form Lakeland, 1855, and Central Islip, 1858, the borders of the remaining area in this subdivision, Holbrook, were modified on Dec. 31, 1875. A new district, 36, Medford, was carved out of the eastern part of 35, Holtsville, on June 16, 1903.

Fourth, the enactment described the duties of those charged with district management. The trustees, for example, were authorized to pay teachers from state and local sources of revenue. After a community exhausted its share of the common school fund, determined by New York on the basis of town population and earmarked for the master's wages alone, the officials raised the money required to meet any deficiency in the instructor's salary by placing a levy on those sending children to the school in proportion to the number of days these pupils were in attendance. In Bald Hills, for example, Willard Ruland was assessed \$3.52 ½ for the 175 days of education received by his youngsters during a tuition period ending on March 7, 1818. Another role, also defined by the Legislature, emerged from this taxation process. On Nov. 26, 1858, for instance, Hiram Terry, Scudder Terry, and Sidney Terry, the trustees from Farmingville, forwarded a warrant to the collector of District 13 and directed him to contact all the residents listed on a rate-bill and to secure from them "the amount for which each person is liable."¹⁸

¹⁵ "School District No. 10, 1856 to 1859," MS, n. page, and "School District No. 14, 1860 to 1859," Office of the Clerk, Town Hall, Islip, New York.

¹⁶ Neither Holbrook nor its school is mentioned in the following: Islip Town, "Town Board Minutes and Highway Records, 1850-1905," MS, pp. 3-96, Office of the Clerk, Town Hall, Islip, New York.

¹⁷ Patrick Joseph Thomas Curran, "A History of Public Education in the Town of Islip, New York" (Ph. D. dissertation, North Texas State University, 1971), p. 158.

¹⁸ "Rate Bill of Sept. 25, 1858," MS, and "Warrant of Nov. 26, 1858," MS, The Beulah Terry Papers, Sachem Local Studies Committee, Lake Ronkonkoma, New York."

Fifth, the measure required residents “to purchase a suitable site for their schoolhouse, and build, keep in repair, and furnish it with necessary fuel and appendages ...”; a tax could be laid upon the property of the inhabitants for this purpose.¹⁹ Bald Hill’s became the first district in the Sachem area to act after the passage of this new legislation when, in 1816, the people of Farmingville built on the land still occupied by the second schoolhouse erected in this community, a one-room affair standing since 1850 when the original structure was moved.²⁰

Finally, the statute created the position of inspector, an officer charged with determining if a teacher was qualified for employment.²¹ To illustrate, Elijah Terry, who worked in both Lake Ronkonkoma and Bald Hills, as several other hamlets in Suffolk,²² was certified on Jan. 18, 1814, after having been found of “Good Moral Character” and competent in “literature.”²³

These provisions of the Common School Law, though seemingly unrelated to the events of 1954-55, bear heavily on our later unification for the principles, which governed reorganization evolved from the contacts our trustees and others had with Albany well before merger was even contemplated in this community. Generally, in accepting direction and revenue from the Legislature, area residents conceded that public education was a state function and that external funding brought outside supervision. Specifically, in permitting commissioners to form, describe, set off, number, and alter our districts, a precedent was established: the power, and often the impetus, to redraw boundaries, an authority synonymous with centralization, comes from without. Consolidation, in effect, began in 1812. The movement was often checked, however, by the very of this statute. By 1850, there were 11,397 districts in New York State: an average of one in every four square miles.²⁴ In order to slow this growth, the Union Free School Act was passed in 1853, an event which brought us still closer to merger.

This measure, which provided for a “union,” the combination of two or more smaller attendance units, was built upon the following premise: a larger tax base would result from increasing the pupil population; thus, the residents could establish a high school and also enrich elementary education, insure continuity in the curriculum, hire more qualified teachers, and make heavier expenditures for building construction. The act also encouraged broader participation in school affairs by permitting villages to elect up to nine trustees and by increasing the powers given to this governing body. Finally, the title of the law reflected the aim of the Legislature to make the schools “free,” a goal which was not realized until 1867 when the rate bills were abolished through an increase in state taxes.

Although this enactment offered townspeople the opportunity to improve the educational program, communities were slow to change: by 1904, there were 9,961 common school districts, but only 690 union free systems in New York State. The voters in Lake Ronkonkoma were in the mainstream, therefore, when, in 1905, they turned

¹⁹ New York State, Laws of 1812, chapter 242, section 8.

²⁰ Beulah Terry, “The Old School Reunion,” Ronkonkoma (New York) Review, Sept. 1, 1977, p. 10.

²¹ New York State, Laws of 1812, chapter 242, section 6.

²² In addition to the two communities mentioned, Terry served in Commack, Coram, Hauppauge, Middle Island, Mount Sinai, Selden, Setauket, and Westhampton: “School Papers and Documents,” TS, pp. 4-24.

²³ “Elijah Terry Certificate,” TS, n. page, in “School Papers and Documents.”

²⁴ Samuel S. Randall, *The Common School System of the State of New York* (Troy, New York: Johnson and Davis, Steam Press Printers, 1851), pp. 85 and 91.

down an attempt to reorganize. Since literature is absent, though, we are left to speculate about their reasons.²⁵ The residents may have rejected the proposition because they saw no financial advantages in switching their district status: the measure guaranteed that those joining would receive the same amount of public monies as would have been apportioned to them had they been consolidated.

Even supporters may have had reservations: an affirmative vote did not necessarily mean that combination of the adjoining areas would begin, since any single district could become union free, or that a secondary school would be built, since there was no requirement to do so. The citizens also may have been rebelling against Albany, which had assumed a hardline position on merger for years:

I am convinced that the powers of the commissioners to consolidate school districts should be enlarged. The consent of the trustees should not be required in any case where a district is to be dissolved and its territory added to an existing adjoining district, or where a new district is created from the territory comprising two or more districts thus dissolved.²⁶

Additional explanations, such as tradition and independence, cannot be discounted; but, the year of the election invites still another interpretation.

The taxpayers may have been reacting to the power struggle between the University of the State of New York, with a Board of Regents directing colleges and academies, and the Department of Public Instruction, with a superintendent administering common schools, both of whom had been given some control over secondary education.²⁷ This conflict intensified after the Civil War as more high schools were constructed and each claimed jurisdiction: the former viewed the new institution as a type of lyceum, while the later saw the upper levels as an extension of the primary grades.²⁸ The problem of overlapping authority was resolved in 1904, however, with the passage of the Unification Act, which gave all “the powers and duties ... in relation to the supervision of elementary and secondary schools ...” to a newly named commissioner of education, elected initially by the Legislature and thereafter by the Board of Regents.

This settlement, though, was preceded by intensive lobbying from both camps as well as from journalists, lawmakers, pressure groups, and prominent individuals. Since Lake Ronkonkoma had waited 52 years to petition for union free status, but did not do so until one year after this clash, the timing suggests that enough residents were probably aroused by these debates or encouraged by the local commissioner, now enjoying more

²⁵ The results are not discussed in either the Patchogue Advance or the Suffolk County News, January 1905 to December 1905. In addition, the Lake Ronkonkoma Mirror did not begin publication until 1926: Richard Sealock and Pauline Seely, *Long Island Bibliography* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1940), p. 205. Further, on Jan. 4, 1946, the Lake Ronkonkoma School burned to the ground; records which could shed some light on this topic, such as minute books, were probably lost that day: “Lake Ronkonkoma School is total loss after mystery fire early this morning,” *Suffolk County News*, Jan. 4, 1946, pp. 1 and 5.

²⁶ Charles R. Skinner, “Superintendent’s Report,” in *New York State, Forty-seventh Annual Report of the State Superintendent, Department of Public Instruction* (Albany, New York: James B. Lyon, 1901), p. 11.

²⁷ *New York State, Laws of 1853*, chapter 433, sections 11 and 16.

²⁸ Frank P. Graves, “History of the State Education Department,” in *History of the State of New York*, ed. Alexander C. Flick, 10 vols. (Port Washington, New York: Ira J. Friedman, 1962), 9:12.

clout, to plan seriously for reorganization, but that the majority were so soured by the growing politicization of education that were rejected the overture.

This defeat was not final, however, for on May 28, 1915, the voters approved a proposition to change from a common to a union free system. Several factors could account for this reversal. First, it is plausible that the taxpayers were persuaded by the district superintendent: these officials, who succeeded the school commissioners in 1912, had been urged at their first meeting in Albany to “go home and consolidate.” Second, in 1913, responding to the pressures of increasing population, the townspeople built a modern, four room, frame school on Hawkins Avenue²⁹, an event which probably convinced skeptics that community growth would eventually justify more than an elementary program. Third, the electors may have been influenced by a new movement to reorganize education in the sparsely settled areas of New York State. In 1914, for example, the Legislature passed the Central Rural Schools Act, which sought to bring the high school into the country by encouraging contiguous districts to unify.

Although Holbrook did not change its status until May 10, 1924, it seems that the people here were reacting to the same forces that swayed their friends in Lake Ronkonkoma nine years earlier. We know that Roscoe Craft, then district superintendent, advocated the consolidation of a number of smaller schools in Brookhaven and Islip Towns. It is likely, therefore, that this official urged the trustees to seek union free standing; to determine how hard he pushed, though, remains a problem.³⁰ Nevertheless, at a meeting of the school boards of Suffolk County, held ten months after our election, several members, concerned about the loss of home rule, attacked the growing powers of these superintendents while others questioned the very need for these positions.³¹ In addition, population growth may have been a variable in deciding the outcome of the election: “like so many Long Island communities,” Holbrook was “suffering with ‘growing pains’” because of the rapid influx of newcomers from the city.

The affirmative vote, then, might be viewed as an attempt by this hamlet to prepare for the future. Finally, the tenor of this period cannot be ignored since the balloting occurred in the aftermath of an “extensive campaign of publicity” launched by the supporters of the Committee of 21 on Rural Schools. These educators sought passage of a bill for establishing a “community unit” to be composed “of districts related by lines of transportation, trade and social relations, grouped about some town or railroad center.” This focus on the advantages or merger may have predisposed the electors to opt for reorganization.

In Lake Ronkonkoma and Holbrook, to summarize, it appears the district superintendent encouraged the residents to seek union free standing; the rise in population and the mood in Albany then probably created a climate favorable to the success of each vote. Although these two variables also proved significant in Holtsville, Farmingville, which had consolidated earlier, the pact of a local organization became an additional factor in the decision-making process here.

²⁹ “Speech prepared by Charles Hawkins and Given Nov. 24, 1947 at the Laying of the Cornerstone Ceremony,” TS, The Jubilee Papers, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, New York”

³⁰ The district clerk of the Sachem Schools, Eileen O’Keefe, holds the minutes of the Holbrook Board of Education only for the period after May 1, 1951.

³¹ “Too much boss in rural schools?”, Patchogue (New York) Advance, March 26, 1925, sec. 2, p. 4.

On March 7, 1951, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Hamann, representatives of the Holtsville-Farmingville Civic Association, appeared before their Board of Education and asked them “if they would call a special meeting of the taxpayers to discuss the possibility of forming a Union Free School in this district³². Mrs. Hamann writes that she and her husband “were probably selected as spokesmen since we were both active in community affairs and had been instrumental in the foundation of the P.T.A. in the district,” but she believes that the idea of reorganization itself originated with George Still, then principal of the Holtsville-Farmingville School, who anticipated the need for a local high school, arguing that Bayport High School, which received our graduating students, would eventually become over crowded, forcing it to reject area youngsters. The board members, however, did not make a decision that evening since one of their numbers was absent.³³

Upon reviewing the proposal, the trustees refused to honor the request; rather, on March 28, 1951, the board wrote that it was planning to announce its own meeting after gathering the facts on merger and that it was impossible to assemble on the premises at that time because of on-going construction. The members, however, did not rule out a future election; instead, they invited the submission of a petition on the matter.

Over a year elapsed, though, before the association revived the idea; but, upon doing so, it advocates pursued the plan more vigorously than before. First, after listening to an appeal from the civic group, the trustees allowed the students to take home mimeographed notices announcing a meeting of the organization on Nov. 14, 1952. Second, the association “informed the board that if the union free school proposition” passed, it would “assume full responsibility for any expense involved.”³⁴

More important, the civic group invited Walter M. Ormsby, District Superintendent, to speak at the gathering. This influential educator recommended the switch, maintaining it would permit “the responsibility of operating the largest ‘business’ in the community, the school, to be shared by more persons.” Further, he argued that Holtsville-Farmingville had reached the size where it was advisable “to let the duties of census taker, attendance supervisor, clerk and school secretary be handled by one competent person hired for these jobs,” an arrangement now possible under the law governing common schools. After his talk, the associated voted, without dissent, to ask the trustees to call a meeting to consider the change.³⁵

Late that same evening, the Board assembled, accepted the petition from these citizens, and set the vote on reorganization: Dec. 11, 1952.³⁶ On that day, the residents

³² “Minutes of the Meeting of March 7, 1951,” TS, p. 27, in “Minute Book of Union Free School District Number Thirteen, Holtsville-Farmingville, New York, July 5, 1950-Feb. 21, 1955,” Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, N.Y.

³³ “Minutes of the Meeting of March 7, 1951,” TS, p. 27, in “Minute Book of Union Free School District Number Thirteen, Holtsville-Farmingville, New York, July 5, 1950-Feb. 21, 1955,” Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, N.Y.

³⁴ “Minutes of the Meeting of March 7, 1951,” TS, p. 27, in “Minute Book of Union Free School District Number Thirteen, Holtsville-Farmingville, New York, July 5, 1950-Feb. 21, 1955,” Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, N.Y.

³⁵ “Holtsville-Farmingville May Adopt Union Free School District Plan,” Patchogue Advance, Nov. 20, 1952, p. 4.”

³⁶ “Minutes of the Meeting of March 7, 1951,” TS, p. 27, in “Minute Book of Union Free School District Number Thirteen, Holtsville-Farmingville, New York, July 5, 1950-Feb. 21, 1955,” Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, N.Y.

approved the transformation by a wide margin, 46 to 1; in addition, the taxpayers decided to increase the number of trustees from three to five.³⁷

Even though the association had fared well, the real victor was the legislature, which at the time, was working energetically to reduce the number of school districts in New York State; thus, for whatever reasons the civic group sought union free standing, it became an arm of the Education Department, which supported most efforts leading to combination. This cooperation between boards, community organizations, and the district superintendent would later prove significant in the creation of Sachem.

Although the shifts from common to union free status that occurred in our area never resulted in immediate starts on high school construction or simultaneous mergers with neighboring systems, they did pave the way for our later reorganization. In voting for these changes, the citizens modernized district administration, recognized the need for a secondary program, planned for population growth, accepted the inevitability of "union," and earned prestige in the educational community. The switches, therefore, placed each of the three boards in a "ready" position for centralization. The residents in Holtsville-Farmingville, however, were more prepared for the future than their neighbors, for they had experienced merger over 20 years before.

In 1925-26, Roscoe C. Craft, District Superintendent with the complete support of the Education Department, urged the consolidation of 10, one-room schools: Centereach, Coram, East Middle Island, Farmingville, Holtsville, Ridge, Selden, West Middle Island, West Yaphank, and Yaphank.³⁸ To realize this goal, he launched an elaborate public relations campaign. First, on March 10, 1925, in an attempt to demonstrate the feasibility of his plan, the students at Farmingville were bused to Coram, where it was hoped a school servicing all the communities would be built.³⁹ Second, the official arranged for a tour of a reorganized district; Mrs. Carrie Holmes, Septer E. Terry, and James Wetsell of Farmingville joined fellow trustees from the surrounding areas in this April 1925, motor coach trip to Yorktown Heights, Westchester County, N.Y. Third, the educator conducted a number of meetings at which people from throughout the state spoke of their experiences with unification. Fourth, the administrator distributed a pamphlet describing the advantages centralization would bring, including increases in taxable wealth, efficiencies in costs, and reductions in dropout rate. Craft's strongest arguments, though, were provided by the Legislature, which passes what came to be known as the Cole-Rice Law of 1925.

This act encouraged taxpayers to consolidate by granting additional financial assistance to those who merged. A central rural district received all the apportionments that a union free school district was permitted; all the allowances to which the component districts were entitled; a "transportation quota," one-half the amount paid in busing the pupils; and, a "building quota," one-quarter of the sum expended in erecting, enlarging, or remodeling a school.

³⁷ "Minutes of the Meeting of March 7, 1951," TS, p. 27, in "Minute Book of Union Free School District Number Thirteen, Holtsville-Farmingville, New York, July 5, 1950-Feb. 21, 1955," Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, N.Y.

³⁸ Dist. Supt. Craft Points Out Advantages of School Consolidation," Port Jefferson, N.Y. Echo, March 11, 1926, p. 1.

³⁹ "Motor Bus Will Boost School Consolidation," Port Jefferson, N.Y. Echo, March 5, 1925, p. 1.

Despite these inducements, the 10 districts never consolidated. The attitudes of the residents living in these hamlets could account for this rejection of Craft's reorganization scheme. Many were fiercely independent; they wanted to remain free of outside influence or control. Some feared a loss of identity; they might be forced to surrender their district name or number. A few were selfish; they were more concerned about their own petty interests than with the welfare of the larger community. Others believed in maintaining the status quo: the school had been good enough for them, thus it would be good enough for their children. Several questioned the motives of their neighbors; the careers of local leaders, current and prospective, were involved. A number vetoed the idea merely because it was "pet project" of the district superintendent; they were jealous of his power.⁴⁰

The plan, however, was not a total failure; on Jan. 6, 1928, by a unanimous decision, the people of Farmingville and Holtsville voted to combine their districts into one joint, common school system; thus, when centralization came, a segment of our population was already familiar with reorganization. Further, in working out the mechanics of merger, the residents established some of the precedents that would guide us 27 years later. First, the taxpayers elected three trustees, Septer E. Terry and James Wetsell of Farmingville and Charles Aitken of Holtsville; a treasurer, John Hopes of Holtsville; and, a clerk, Douglas Beard of Holtsville.⁴¹

When Aitken later resigned, his seat was filled by Beard, who, in turn, was replaced by Irene Jones, also of Holtsville. With this "gentlemen's agreement," the citizens informally pledged that both areas would be assured of a voice in school affairs; in 1955, accordingly, we were not without direction when seats were distributed on the newly created board of education. Second, the district was named "Holtsville," but numbered "13," therefore, both hamlets contributed to its designation. This step foreshadowed a more refined solution to the problem of local identity: the later selection of the word "Sachem," or chief, a noun of which could easily apply to any of the communities included in our centralization.

With these actions, the voters demonstrated a spirit of cooperation, one seemingly at odds with their earlier refusal to enter into the consolidation advocated by Craft. Several factors could explain this shift in opinion. Although there was friction between each of the 10 districts proposed for combination, the differences between the people in Farmingville and Holtsville were not that great; simply, they "understood each other." There were also ties, though tenuous, that bound the areas together; the residents of Farmingville, for example, regularly traveled south to Holtsville to conduct business at the post office and railroad station, facilities nonexistent in their hamlet in the north. In addition, the dispute over reorganization may have prompted the citizens to reconsider a proposal made in 1925 to erect a joint school house.

By 1928, this building was sorely needed because the physical conditions in the two existing structures were poor: both lacked running water, electricity, and indoor toilets. Finally, the taxpayers may have been influenced by Septer E. Terry, a respected

⁴⁰ Taped telephone interview with Beulah Terry, president of the Sachem Historical Society, Feb. 5, 1981.

⁴¹ Taped telephone interview with Beulah Terry, Feb. 12, 1981, and "Minutes of the meeting of Jan. 6, 1928," MS, p. 63, inserted in "Minute Book of Annual and Special Meetings of School District No. 13, Holtsville-Farmingville, N.Y., May 1, 1928-May 9, 1951," Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, N.Y.

leader from Farmingville, who had worked tirelessly to bring the two communities together; he had been discussing the merits of unification for years.

Craft, however, did not attribute such high motives to the voters of Farmingville and Holtsville, nor to those living in Centereach, Middle Island, and Yaphank, the other areas which each built new schools in the aftermath of the “shakeup over consolidation.” Rather, while conceding that the debates over combination raised “local school consciousness” and “resulted in much improvement,” he suggested that the new interest in upgrading facilities was really totally consistent with earlier efforts to thwart his plan: “An idea seemed to fascinate some districts that if they built a new schoolhouse, quickly they would be anchored against the powers of consolidation.”

Further, he argued that in rejecting the proposal, the five hamlets spent nearly as much money as would have been required to erect one building for all 10 communities; deprived themselves of \$5,600 in public funds; and, lost all state aid on the construction of these schools and the busing of their pupils. Also, he warned of future population growth:

The high schools on the north and south shore, which now take care of the academic students from this area, are fast reaching a point where they can no longer take them. Some scheme much be devised shortly to take care of such students near at home. Doubtless within a short time, the district superintendent will give the people an opportunity to join in the establishment of a central high school to be supported by and to serve this area of small schools, and he confidently hopes that if such plan is presented, it will receive a better hearing than the one proposing centralization for elementary grades.⁴²

Finally, in what was to be a prophetic statement, he suggested “that a central high school could logically be established at Lake Ronkonkoma to take care of that district, Centereach, Ronkonkoma, Holbrook, Holtsville, and possibly Nesconset.”⁴³ The identical grouping was to be advocated by another state official 11 years later.

Merger though did not come as quickly as predicted, since the depression slowed down the trend, nor did Craft bring his idea to fruition, since he was succeeded by Ormsby in 1936; but as the economy began to recover, the Board of Regents re-addressed itself to improving school district organization throughout New York. The result of its work was a book “Education for American Life” which gave fresh impetus to the unification movement.

This study emphasized that the state will still sought to reduce the number of school districts in its rural areas, arguing that centralization would bring the benefits that many common and union free systems could never provide because of their small student population and low tax table wealth: adult education, art, music, and physical education

⁴² Roscoe C. Craft, *Directory and Year Book of the Public Schools of the Second Supervisory District, Suffolk County, New York, 1929-1930*, 2nd ed. (Port Jefferson, N.Y.: n.p., 1930), pp. 39 and 42.

⁴³ Roscoe C. Craft, *Directory and Year Book of the Public Schools of the Second Supervisory District, Suffolk County, New York, 1929-1930*, p. 16.

programs, efficient transportation, extracurricular activities, graded schools 1-6, guidance counselors, homemaking facilities, laboratories, libraries, and shops, kindergartens, modern structures, subject specialists 7-12, and supervisory services.

The report, however, was unique in its emphasis on the role of the citizenry in this modernization process. Under a home rule plan, School District Boundary Committees were to be created in each of the eight, non-city, judicial subdivisions of New York. After meetings, the representatives from each county were to work out new borders reflecting local school needs, financial resources, geographical convenience, natural lines and public sentiment. These recommendations then were to be submitted to and unpaid, temporary State School Districting Commission, which after notice, hearing and appeals to the Regents, was to draw up a new plan of reorganization for all of New York.

Trustees and principals from Holbrook, Holtsville, Farmingville and Lake Ronkonkoma discussed these suggestions with other board members and educators from Brookhaven and Islip Towns at a meeting held in Bayport on Jan. 25, 1939. Ormsby, who presided at the gathering, said that if the proposals were implemented locally, the number of districts would be reduced from 42 to 10; the youngsters in the seventh and eighth grades of those areas having only an elementary school would be shifted to a central junior high school; and smaller communities without high schools would be relieved of the tuition charges they paid to outside districts. The participants though did not come to any final conclusions that evening, choosing instead to delay their evaluations until the Legislature introduced an awaited bill on the subject.⁴⁴

After this law was submitted to the Assembly and the Senate, spokesmen from the common schools within the second supervisory district, including Holtsville-Farmingville, assembled in Patchogue on Feb. 2, 1939, and in an informal vote, unanimously endorsed a plan to have Suffolk excluded from reorganization if Nassau was exempted. This movement, which had been launched in the latter county during the previous week, was also embraced here by those who saw merger as “destroying home rule.” It was decided, however, not to issue an official statement on the matter until the next general meeting, by which time local sentiment could be gauged.⁴⁵

When the trustees and principals gathered in Bayport on Feb. 15, 1939, they came prepared to reflect public opinion. Holtsville-Farmingville and Lake Ronkonkoma jointed 29 of the 37 districts attending in voting against the proposed school centralization bill, the balance abstained. Eight boards, including Holbrook, did not send representatives. These results then were forwarded to Assemblyman Edmund R. Lupton and to Sen. George L. Thompson.⁴⁶

These politicians, both of who attacked the legislation because of its compulsory nature and projected costs, mirrored the views of many Long Islanders. To our west, for example, the Nassau County Committee Opposing Mandatory Centralization of Rural Schools distributed a 20-page pamphlet urging the defeat of the measure, one which it saw as “unnecessary, undemocratic and ... ill-considered.”⁴⁷ This, coupled with

⁴⁴ “Educators speak of regents report,” Suffolk County News, Jan. 27, 1939, p. 6.

⁴⁵ “Minutes of meeting of Feb. 7, 1939,” MS, p. 86, in “Minutes of the Board of Education, Holtsville, New York, Jan. 4, 1937-June 3, 1947,” Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, New York.

⁴⁶ “School People Vote Against The Central Plans As Proposed,” Patchogue, Advance, Feb. 17, 1939, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Nassau County Committee Opposing Mandatory Centralization of Rural Schools, A protest against mandatory centralization of rural schools in the State of New York (Brookville, N.Y.: n.p., 1939), p. 19.

widespread resistance in other parts of New York, encouraged Albany to abandon the proposal⁴⁸, as well as to suspend for one year, July 1, 1939 through June 30, 1940, all laws authorizing the establishment or laying out of central rural school.

During the moratorium, however, a joint legislative committee, headed by Assemblyman Herbert A. Rapp and Sen. Frederic R. Coudert, was appointed “to concentrate on revision of the formula under which state aid for education is distributed.”⁴⁹ In its first report, this group of lawmakers called for a “master plan for centralization of rural school districts,” one “designed to effect considerable savings to the taxpayer . . .”⁵⁰ Thus, despite a setback in 1939, the supporters of reorganization were in full stride again when the new decade began, as one resident in Lake Ronkonkoma had already discovered.

In 1940, Mrs. Mary Hugelmeyer, on maternity leave from the New York City school system, had become very active in the Lake Ronkonkoma Mothers’ Club, partially out of her indignation that the local Board of Education had abolished the teaching of music, a subject which the trustees viewed as a “frill.” Mrs. Hugelmeyer soon convinced the women in the community “to stop baking cakes and playing cards” and to take a more active role in district affairs, which they did with the formation of a Parent-Teacher Association (P.T.A.). As the first president of this group, Mrs. Hugelmeyer pushed for the construction of a combination auditorium-gymnasium, one which was needed to hold large gatherings, such as assemblies and graduation; to conduct physical education classes when the weather was poor; and to free the school from its dependence on outside meeting halls, such as the fire house and the Lake Ronkonkoma pavilions. Accordingly, in September 1940, the P.T.A. petitioned the board to take steps towards building this facility.⁵¹

The trustees, in acting on this request, asked the State Education Department for an evaluation, one which was conducted early in 1941 by Frank Gilson of the Division of Building and Grounds, who after his inspection, withheld approval of the project “pending the exhaustion of all the possibilities of a consolidation or a centralization of a group of districts,” including Centereach, Holbrook, Holtsville, Lake Ronkonkoma, Nesconset, and Ronkonkoma. Gilson maintained that combination was desirable: the citizens would be able to maintain, for sometime, grades 1-6 in the existing buildings; local control would be restored to the communities that sent their secondary pupils to high schools in neighboring areas; and, all those “joining would benefit from the construction of the auditorium-gymnasium. He also emphasized the feasibility of reorganization: transportation problems would be minimal since each of the villages were located on good, hard surfaced roads; and, local tax rates would not increase significantly because of the high valuation and small bonded indebtedness of the systems involved.⁵²

The board members in Lake Ronkonkoma, wanting to place the issue before all parties, arranged for a number of sessions to explore the proposal. They also called for Ormsby “to assist in formulating preliminary plans on the subject.” On April 16, 1941, to

⁴⁸ “New Law Passed Would Bar Moves Central Schools,” Patchogue Advance, June 2, 1939, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Warren Moscow, “Lehman Approves Inquiry on Schools,” New York Times, April 20, 1940, pp. 1 and 12.

⁵⁰ “Ask Cut in Costs of Rural Schools,” New York Times, March 15, 1941, p. 18.

⁵¹ Taped interview with Mrs. Mary Hugelmeyer, president of the Board of Education of the Sachem Schools, March 24, 1981.

⁵² “Proposition for Central School Merger Explained,” Patchogue Advance, April 18, 1941, pp. 1-2.

illustrate, the trustees and P.T.A. presidents from each of the six hamlets reviewed figures, prepared by the district superintendent, on the tentative financial structure of the suggested union. In addition, the participants agreed to discuss the scheme in their respective towns and to place it on the ballot for a non-binding test at the coming annual meetings.

Mrs. Hugelmeier, who reorganized the advantages merger would bring, especially a high school for this area, immediately began making speeches urging residents to vote "yes" on the proposition. On April 24, 1941; for example, she addressed parents and taxpayers at a gathering held in the Ronkonkoma school, where, except for the warm support of John Pedisich, who eventually moved to Lake Ronkonkoma and later became a leader in the centralization movement, she found the audience unreceptive to her ideas, a feeling which was confirmed by the election results.⁵³

On May 6, 1941, Ronkonkoma defeated the plan, 89-2; Nesconset turned down the proposal, 37-12; and, Holtsville sandbagged the idea by an "overwhelming vote." Only Centereach endorsed the concept, 32-3. On May 14, 1941, despite a pleas from Orsmy, Holbrook became the fourth district to veto the resolution, 32-18. On June 17, 1941, however, Lake Ronkonkoma voiced its approval of "a preliminary survey ... to decide on the advisability of forming a central rural school," 65-6.

Several factors could explain the rejection of this reorganization scheme. Many feared an increase in taxes. Some were concerned about the disposition of property and the absorption of debt. Several believed that although combination had merit, it was not yet needed. A few were opposed merely because the idea originated in Lake Ronkonkoma. Others suspected that the high school would be located at a center of population outside their community. A number were provincial. Regardless, the defeat proved "to be a blessing in disguise." Today, had the plan been accepted, this mid-island union would embrace all of the Sachem Schools, as well as portions the Connetquot, Middle Country, and Smithtown districts, a system so large it would invite problems of administration. Of greater significance, many of those who worked on this project in 1941 became the nucleus of a group of citizens, who in the coming years labored to centralize Holbrook, Holtsville-Farmingville, and Lake Ronkonkoma. It was not until the end of World War II, however, that merger was seriously discussed again.⁵⁴

On Dec. 12, 1945, Robert Scott, director of the Rapp Commission, told members of the Brookhaven Town School Boards' Association, meeting in Centereach, that a tentative plan for centralization in Suffolk would probably be adopted by the committee in spring, 1946, "unless you offer something better." Further, he emphasized that merely grouping districts together in the proposal would not mean that those so clustered would face compulsory merger, but he cautioned that if and when the voters in a given area desired to reorganize, the boundaries stipulated in the report would have to be followed.

To avoid being locked into this state mandate, the Lake Ronkonkoma Parent-Teacher Association invited residents from their own community, as well as taxpayers from Centereach, Holbrook, Holtsville-Farmingville, and Ronkonkoma, to gather at Jack

⁵³ Taped interview with Mrs. Mary Hugelmeier, president of the Board of Education of the Sachem Schools, March 24, 1981. The date of the Ronkonkoma meeting, however, is cited in the following: "School district consolidation plan, six units, is explained," Patchogue Advance, April 25, 1941, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Taped interview with Mrs. Mary Hugelmeier, president of the Board of Education of the Sachem Schools, March 24, 1981.

Yerk's Casino on Jan. 14, 1946, to discuss unification in the mid-Island region. The meeting took an unexpected turn, however, when Justice of the Peace Harold C. Sorenson of Lake Grove, who was also the attorney for the Lake Ronkonkoma Board of Education, suggested the establishment of a central junior-senior high school district to service these five areas. Under his scheme, the component boards would remain in existence for the purpose of operating their own elementary schools; in addition, a trustee from each of these governing bodies would sit on the board for the junior-senior high school district. Following a discussion, a committee was formed to determine what could be done to bring his idea into fruition.

This group found a major roadblock in its path. In 1944, the legislature had prohibited the further formation of the central high school district, maintaining it was an unsatisfactory solution to the problem of merger. The members, therefore, were faced with persuading Albany to pass a special act enabling the local boards to go ahead with the Sorenson proposal.⁵⁵ In the interim, the Rapp Commission released its findings, effectively tabling the discussion.

These recommendations, which became the "Master Plan" following approval in the legislature in 1947⁵⁶, were revealed at a hearing held at Babylon High School in Dec. 1946. Under the proposal, 23 districts would replace the 116 existing systems in Suffolk. Holbrook and Lake Ronkonkoma would unify with Bayport, Bohemia-Oakdale, and Ronkonkoma with Sayville at the hub. Holtsville-Farmingville would join with Blue Point and that part of Medford west of Route 112 with Patchogue at the pivot. The citizens in each community would be given an opportunity to vote whether they wished to enter the central district for their area; but as Scott had forewarned, a rejection at the polls would not release the people from the boundaries set forth in the "Master Plan."

Although this report was probably discussed privately by trustees from Holbrook, Holtsville-Farmingville, and Lake Ronkonkoma, it was not alluded to in board minutes until Feb. 2, 1949⁵⁷ or mentioned in local newspaper articles, with reference to our districts, until a year after its release. It seems, instead, that the situation was entered into an interregnum: during 1947, knowledgeable area residents apparently paused, studied the proposal, assessed their options, and prepared themselves for the years of intensive activity that lay ahead, a period which will be explored in the next paper in this series: "The History of the Consolidation and Centralization of the Sachem Schools, Party-Two: 1948-1955."

⁵⁵ "Lake Ronkonkoma Plans School Vote," Suffolk County News, Feb. 8, 1946, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁶ The "Master Plan" was never frozen into law; rather, it remained as a recommendation to the Commissioner of Education and to the people of the state: New York State Joint Legislative Committee on the State Education System, Master Plan for School District Reorganization in New York State, Legislative Document 25 (Albany, N.Y.: Williams Press, 1947).

⁵⁷ "Minutes of the meeting of Feb. 15, 1949," TS, p. 96, in "Minute Book of the Board of Education, Lake Ronkonkoma, N.Y., July 16, 1946-Jan. 22, 1953," Office of the District Clerk, Sachem Schools, Holbrook, N.Y."