

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 24, 2010

The Old Wilmington Friends School at 4th and West: (Parts of this story were covered in the *News* of 3/16/09). There was a Friends School at this location from 1748 until 1937. My father, his siblings, and cousins on both sides of his family attended here about 1900. I attended the last seven years at 4th and West, before we were moved to the new school in Alapocas. The school I knew was on the east side of West Street between 4th and 5th, with a series of drab brick buildings built over a period of 100 years, attached together to make them look like one. The “new” gym, built about 1918, was along the 5th Street hill, and the large Quaker Meeting House built in 1816 was across West Street, and with its surrounding cemetery, covered a city block.

A ramshackle place, the old school was a place to have fun, especially when its pupils were exploring tunnels that were full of electric wires and were off-limits. These tunnels, running under the school from one end to the other, under West Street to the Meeting House, and from the Meeting House toward the Christina River, had been used to hide and move runaway slaves as a part of the Underground Railroad in the mid-19th century. Some of the school's basement was still in use, however. Girls had cooking classes and an old-fashioned kitchen there, and boys had a shop (the course was called “manual training”). The first floor of the school was at street level, almost, but even here there were a few steps up and down as you went from one end to the other. The ceiling heights varied too, so the second and third floors had even more steps when moving from one end to the other. Two large classrooms toward the rear of the second floor had deep stairwells with six or more steps for access from the adjoining hallway to the floor of the classrooms themselves.

The third and top floor was the most interesting of all. The auditorium was on the 4th Street end of the building above the classrooms of the Lower School. From this auditorium, there was an outdoor fire escape on the side toward downtown Wilmington. A great view of the city was afforded from the top landing of this fire escape. Next to the auditorium and up a few steps was the lunchroom and cafeteria. What a terrible location for those who had to supply it and remove trash, etc.! On the other side of the lunchroom, and almost like a glass-enclosed penthouse was Herschel Loomis' chemistry lab. Since it was not very practical to access this through the lunchroom, a second outside fire escape seemed to be the route used by the popular teacher/coach and his students.

There was a small playground with crushed stone surface behind the school for elementary pupils. Skinned knees were the order of the day. Those in the Upper School had to use the Meeting House yard across West Street. A small plot near the corner of 5th and West was used for touch football and served as a softball diamond. A tree served as first base; second was a post in the fence between this plot and the graveyard, and third base a less definitive area on the brick sidewalk close to the Meeting House. The outfield was entirely in the cemetery. For Varsity and JV teams, one of the two ancient school buses (one was a Model A Ford, the other was even older) made the trip after school to Rockford Park, where we practiced and played our home games. If a delinquent student missed the bus, he or she could walk to Delaware Avenue, about six short blocks, and take the trolley to a stop close to the park. The dressing room was in the basement of the old gym. The fun ended in 1937 when we went to Alapocas in September.