

# 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary – the Arden School

9 November 2024

Good Afternoon and a warm welcome to everyone – it is great to see so many here today. Many of you are local and I am sure have been in and out of this building quite often. Some of you, however, have come over many miles and, perhaps, over many years to be here today. And to you, especially, I say “Welcome Home.” We have missed you - It is very good that you can be here today.

I do have a small PSA I would like to mention. The Arden Craft Shop Museum at Millers Road and Cherry Lane will be open tomorrow, Sunday afternoon from 1 – 3 PM. Our new exhibition *Treasurers of Childhood - Growing Up in the Ardens* is open and is a great addition to today's event.

Now – as we are in a school, I have been given an assignment. My role here today is to provide a brief history of this building. That seems to me like carrying coals to New Castle – for the real story of any place is told by the people who called it their own – and that is all of you. So, I hope you will bear with me. (There will not be a quiz.) To put this story together, I do some research and found much helpful information in the work of two talented women of the community. In 1969, when the school was officially closed and sold back to the village for \$1, the minutes of the June Town Assembly meeting rather casually noted that Mayda Brandner would write a history of education in the Ardens. Mrs. Brandner was member of the Arden School Board and an active participant in many important causes. And she did indeed write that history. And we are very fortunate that Connee McKinney expanded her Masters degree project and with diligent effort created her book on the Arden

School. Both women have left us more than just memories.

So – let us begin. You will remember that in the early days, Arden was only a summer community, so the concept of a school year was not important. At the beginning Mrs. Potter ran the Arden Summer Camp School of Organic Education. Additionally, a number of pre-schools, kindergartens, playschools, and the “Mothers’ Cooperative School” existed. Classes were held in homes and in the Red House. Some of these groups continued to meet into the 1950’s and 1960’s. Around 1908 residents started staying through the winter months. School aged children attended the Hanby School at Naamans and Marsh Roads, where the bank is located today or the Forward School, recently demolished on Silverside Road next to Richardsons. These were public schools and in 1920 the Arden School District #3 was formed by the State Board of Education.

This District would draw children from Arden and the other existing schools.

In the early years classes were held in the lower Gild Hall. The founding of Ardentown in 1922 brought more families and a bond bill was organized to fund the building of a school. This being the Arden, however, it was not without controversy. Some residents felt that larger school districts would provide more opportunity. Other opponents believed town funds should not be used for schools – that education should be handled privately. The supporters were firm enough in their desire for a school that some even pledged \$1000 to build the school. Fortunately, the school bond passed. A stone foundation was laid on the Sherwood Green and two World War I surplus buildings were acquired and the school became a reality. From the very beginning, the community pitched in – providing landscaping, playground equipment, and especially teaching in the

arts. They purchased a victrola for the school. From 1924 until 1931 there were grades 1 – 8, then grades 1 – 6. The local PTA joined the national organization.

On March 10, 1945, the school burned to the ground. There were already many concerns about the condition of the building. Coal dust from the heating system created problems and the walls were in very poor shape. The cause of the fire was never discovered. So, it was back to the Gild Hall - with the community again providing the necessary equipment and supplies.

As Connee McKinney describes the process in her book, it was “serendipity” that created the building we know today. Frances Rothwell Harrison and her family moved to Arden in 1941 and she was chair of the Arden School Committee. When it came time to rebuild the school, the community wisely rejected the State provided proposal and asked her to design the new

building. A trained architect, Harrison designed an imaginative building with state of the art details. Heated floors, huge windows, direct outdoor access from the classrooms, and interiors which could be reconfigured to fit any number of uses. The building was embraced by the community. In 1950 the construction of a fourth classroom was finally completed.

Through-out the 1950's and 60's, the Arden School was treasured by the community, especially by its students. There are so many marvelous stories about those days that I will not even attempt to tell them – because there are people here today who will do a much better job than I could ever imagine.

It is important to recount one historic note. In 1950, the village of Ardencroft completed the trio of the Ardens. Part of its founding documents state that “...for here in Ardencroft ... we do not hold to any theory of

racial superiority.” This was in the early 1950’s, when all sorts of overt and covert practices were used to restricted home sales and red-line certain districts. In Ardencroft, there were active efforts to recruit African-American and other minorities to apply for leaseholds in the new community. One of the families that moved in were Dr. and Mrs. Anderson and their six children. The Andersons registered the younger children at the Arden School and the older two girls at Claymont High School. In keeping with the times, both schools were “white” schools. The Arden School Board wrote to the State Board of Education that the community would support the request and included a signed petition. The State asked Arden to wait – Brown vs. the Board of Education was making its way through the courts and it included a school in Hockessin. I am sure the State felt they would win the Federal case and that would be the end of it. I also think that State did not want to deal with those

people up in Arden. The Arden School did not wait, the Anderson children were enrolled and the older girls entered Claymont High School and in 1952 the Supreme Court transformed the law of the land.

Things began to change in 1968 when the State passed a Consolidation Act, requiring all school districts to provide instruction for grades 1- 12. This was not possible in Arden. The School Board worked consciously to find the right place – the right setting for their students where they could do their best. The then Mt Pleasant School district was chosen and our students moved into a brave new world. The last class finished in 1969. At that time, each student was asked draw a picture and write a Haiku about the school – you can see them in the display window in the hallway.

For about four years the building was used as a public kindergarten. In 1973, the Montessori Association



first leased the building for five years – a lease that was renewed several times. The June 1974 Arden Town Assembly minutes noted that the Buzz Ware Village Center had been officially dedicated that May. Jimmie Ware and her family celebrated around a new sign made by David Burslem for the occasion. Hamilton Disbrow Ware, a son of Mother Bloor, an artist, gallery owner, dedicated public servant, known as Mr. Arden for his service to all the Ardens would have a permanent place in our community. Finally, in the 1990's the building began a new life as a full-time village center.

Many other activities that were held here over the years continued and many new uses were discovered. ACRA has always found a home in this space. In 1991, the Archives Committee was able to enclose the stage and house the collections here until the Museum opened in 2004. The over 80's parties, the Centennial celebration in 2000, coffee houses, Art on the Town, a

fabulous Roaring 20's party, artists receptions, art classes, Georgists classes, exercise classes, committee meetings, public forums, training programs, town offices; to say nothing of the many groups who rent the space for their own functions – and who could forget the Arden Fair and Potions, Peddlers, and Practitioners! Please think about a place that has gone from WWI army surplus buildings to a home for Wizards – this is indeed a magical space.

As always when we think about the Ardens, and when we think about the Arden School and the Buzz, we must remember the community. It has always been the generosity and grace of our community that makes this place work and makes it all so very worthwhile.