



Olmsted 200

Bicentennial Notes about Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township –
First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

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Olmsted Led the Way in School Consolidation

The people of Olmsted can take great pride in their schools. For many years, the Olmsted Falls City School District has been rated academically as among the best in Ohio, and a few state championships attest to the quality of the athletic programs. It's nothing new for the school system to be out ahead of others. But that wasn't so common almost a century ago, when it became a leader in public education in Cuyahoga County.

At the turn of the 20th century, Olmsted Township had eight schools situated so that students generally did not have to walk more than two miles to attend classes. Most of them were one-room schools, but in 1889, the one serving the West View area was rebuilt with two stories. (That building later served as West View's Village Hall. After West View's merger with Olmsted Falls in 1971, it became one of two city halls for the new City of Olmsted Falls. It still stands along the west side of Columbia Road not far north of Sprague Road.)

In 1904, the township formed a single, five-member school board that took over authority for all of the schools. Until then each had been in its own small school district. The new board appointed a superintendent for the unified district, as well as directors for all of the schools. Several years later, the township district lost three of those schools, after North Olmsted separated from the township. In 1909, North Olmsted (with a small part of Dover Township) became its own village.

Olmsted Falls had its own school district, separate from the township's district. Students attended the Union School, which had been built in 1873-1874. It was located on what is now the Village Green, about in the location of the current Schoolhouse

Pavilion, which is meant to be somewhat architecturally reminiscent of the old school. Although the Union School stood until its demolition in 1960, it was in bad shape when it was only 40 years old. In 1914, officials declared the building to be structurally unsafe, so classes were relocated to the town hall. That helped spur a movement for a merger of the Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township school districts, which occurred in 1915 (which was 100 years after James Geer and his family became the first settlers in the township).



The Union School stood on what now is the Village Green from 1873 until 1960.

Even before the merger became final, members of the village and township school boards met together on May 11, 1915, and agreed to build a new school to serve all of the students of the combined district. They couldn't get voters to approve a \$40,000 bond issue for it in a June 8 election, but voters did approve a \$65,000 bond issue in a November 2 election by a count of 146 to 138. The result was the construction of a two-story building near the corner of what now are known as Bagley Road and Mapleway Drive. When the new school opened for classes in 1916, the Olmsted district gained the distinction of becoming the first one in Cuyahoga County to eliminate use of all one-room schools.

The opening of that school also gave Olmsted students their first opportunity to attend four years of high school without having to go to neighboring communities to finish. Although it later was expanded, that school served as the only one for all of the district's students until 1954, when Falls Elementary School opened nearby. After the current Olmsted Falls High School opened in 1968, the old 1916 school served as a middle school for many years. Now it is Olmsted Falls City Hall and Community Center.



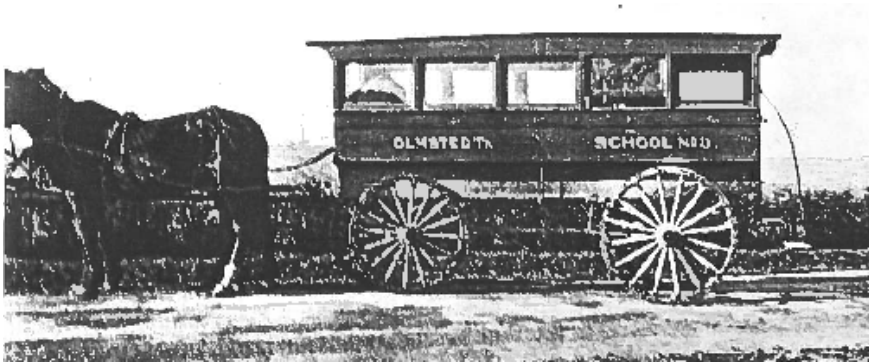
Putting all students into the 1916 school made Olmsted the first district in the county to eliminate one-room schools.

Busing Evolved in the 20th Century

Bringing all of Olmsted's students to one consolidated school in 1916 allowed them to get a better education, but it also created a new challenge for the school system. No longer were all the students within a two-mile walk of their schools. An article in the June 4, 1915, edition of the *Berea Enterprise* explained how school leaders intended to address that problem:

Children living at any distance from the school will be transported between their homes and the school in properly equipped wagons, under the supervision of a competent driver, who will have the necessary authority to preserve perfect order in the wagons.

As suggested by that article, the school board bought eight horse-drawn wagons for about \$170 each. They became known as "kid wagons." Barns to house the wagons cost about \$1,000. Drivers were paid \$45 a month for handling their routes.



This 1918 photo shows one of the kid wagons. The photo is courtesy of Tim Atkinson, who got it from Richard Biefelt, who said his grandparents took the photo. The location was 27270 Cook Road, which was not paved at the time.



Not all of the kid wagons have disappeared from Olmsted. Bruce Banks, who took this photo, found one in a backyard in Olmsted Township. It had been used as a doghouse and then for storing wood.

The kid wagons served for about a decade after the consolidated school opened. School board minutes in 1925-1926 indicate that the board entered into seven contracts for motorized trucks with wooden passenger boxes. In his 1966 book about Olmsted's history, Walter Holzworth said one of them was "a sort of motorized tent with a tarpaulin stretched over a framework and a set of steps from the rear end gate for entrance and exit."

Within several years, the school board contracted for vehicles that began to look a bit more like modern school buses. That's when the Atkinson family began its involvement in operating school buses. Ira Atkinson already had experience providing daily bus service with stops in Olmsted Falls, Fairview and Cleveland. On January 28, 1925, he received a certificate from the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to begin that service. Atkinson operated the Cleveland-Olmsted Falls Bus Line Company for more than four years until he sold it on May 7, 1929, to the McCarren Bus Company. At the time, the line had five buses: a 29-passenger Pierce Arrow, a 21-passenger Yellow Coach, a 27-passenger Schacht and two 21-passenger Studebakers. Atkinson left Olmsted Falls to farm near New London, Ohio.



*Chester Atkinson poses with one of the buses that ran between Olmsted Falls and Cleveland in the late 1920s. Note that "Olmsted" is misspelled with an "a" in it. For more on the long history of misspelling that name, see pages 14-16 in **The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township**.*

Sometime after Ira got out of the bus business, his brother, Chester, started the Southwestern Bus Company. School board meeting minutes from 1930 and 1931 show that the board paid Southwestern for transportation of the football team and other school groups.

Buses of the Southwestern Bus Company parked behind the Atkinson homestead along Columbia Road in 1930. To the right is an apartment building where Chester Atkinson's sister and brother-in-law lived. It later was transformed into a chicken coop. The other building is the barn where cows were housed and milked daily. It also was used to store farm equipment, cars, buses, horses and just about anything else that needed to be stored on the farm.



In 1929, an event outside of Olmsted had an effect on school transportation within the community. On January 22 of that year, a Berea school bus was crossing railroad tracks in Middleburg Heights when a train struck it, killing nine children. Two days later, the Olmsted Falls Board of Education began discussing ways to improve safety at railroad crossings. In a resolution enacted on November 26, 1929, the board passed a resolution requiring school buses to have appropriate markings to identify them.



These buses parked near the 1916 school show the identification markings required by the school board beginning in 1929. However, the men shown have not been identified.

Atkinsons get into school busing.

In 1934, Chester Atkinson became one of three owner-operators of school buses. The others were Elmer Cook and Howard Wise. It also was then that the board required buses to have steel bodies, so all the buses were new that year. In 1937, the board renewed the contracts of the three owner-operators for another three years. However, in 1940, the school system needed a fourth bus, so the board decided to solicit bids. Chester Atkinson had the winning bid to operate as the owner of all four buses. But following an agreement he had with Cook and Wise, he bought their 1937 buses from them and bought one new 1940 bus.

Beginning in 1940, the Atkinson Brothers' school bus service began with Chester as the principal owner and his younger brother, Bruce, as a minor partner. But Bruce soon took on a bigger role. From September 1941 until October 1945, he had to handle the school bus contract while Chester was away, first to work briefly with Lakewood Rapid Transit and then to serve in the U.S. Army during World War II.



These were the four buses in the fleet beginning in 1940. The one on the far left was a 1940 International and the other three were 1937 Dodge Brothers buses. Bruce Atkinson is on the left. The identities of the two by the middle buses are uncertain, but they might be Elmer Cook and Howard Wise. On the far right is Chester Atkinson and to the left of him is Jack Otterson. The location is behind the Atkinson homestead along Columbia Road. Photo courtesy of Tim Atkinson.

When Chester Atkinson had just one school bus, he housed it at the Atkinson homestead along Columbia Road near the intersection of Cook Road. When the Atkinsons expanded to four buses, they rented garage space along Depot Street, where Columbia Building Products is located now. In 1947, they began building the first portion of a new bus garage on Schady Road. By that time, the company was operating five buses. The garage was built to house six. By 1950, the population of the school district had grown so much that the garage received an addition to hold three more buses plus room for repair equipment and supplies. But in those early years of the Baby Boom, that expansion wasn't enough for very long. In 1951, Chester Atkinson had to add space to the garage for three more buses.

By then, he was the sole owner of the business. Chester and Bruce dissolved their partnership in 1948, but the company kept the Atkinson Brothers name, and Chester retained Bruce as a driver.

(A side note from Tim Atkinson: "My father once owned 50 acres of land between Schady Road and Bagley Road. When the Ohio Turnpike came through in 1953, he sold off the north portion to a developer who eventually was the developer who sold the property to the Olmsted Falls schools for the construction of our Olmsted Falls High School." Tim said his father retained the five acres where the bus garage is located.)

By the time Chester Atkinson retired in June 1973, after 39 years in the business, 13 buses were in the fleet. At that time, his son, Chester Atkinson Jr., who had just graduated from college, took over the school bus business. But it didn't last long. In

1975, the school board decided to assume ownership and operation of school buses. The board bought all new buses, and the drivers became employees of the school system. Under a new contract with the board, Chester Atkinson Jr. retained ownership of the bus facility on Schady Road and maintained the bus fleet. His brother, Tim, went to work for him in 1978 after his own graduation from college. In 1981, the board bought the Schady Road facility from Chester Atkinson Jr. Tim Atkinson had become a school system employee in 1980.

Thanks to Tim Atkinson for much of the information and most of the photos used in this story. After about five decades of exposure to school buses, he said, "I think my blood flows yellow."

Damp's Mill Was an Olmsted Falls Landmark

By Bruce A. Banks

Have you wondered what once stood on the large sandstone foundation on the west bank of the Rocky River behind the Falls Family Restaurant in downtown Olmsted Falls? This is the site of Ed Damp's grist mill which was operated by water power from a large dam across the Rocky River.

As early as 1845 maps of Olmsted Falls show a dam at that site. In 1870, the mill was owned by Col. H. N. Whitbeck who also owned a sandstone quarry where Drug Mart now stands. It is probable that sandstone from that quarry was used to construct the first dam and foundation of the mill. Col. Whitbeck was a veteran of the Civil War who was badly injured during the war but quite able to run the mill and maintain an active political career. In 1876, he sold the mill to Ed Damp, who then operated the mill.

Ed Damp, born in 1843, was a member of the Union Army during the Civil War. He had the misfortune of being captured by the Confederate army and then held as a prisoner of war in the infamous Libby prison. However, Ed was spared the ill fate suffered by many held in that prison because he was able to escape by jumping off a moving prison train during a transfer of prisoners.

Damp operated the mill with the help of A. L. Difford for a while and also his brother Joseph when it was known as the Damp Brothers Mill. The mill was highly productive and ground 15,683 bushels of grain in 1879. At the time, Mill Street extended east across Columbia Road and turned north in front of the mill to allow farmers to drop off their grain to be ground in the mill.



Past Olmsted Falls resident, Hazel Hoftzyer, told me that she remembered going to the

mill as a child with her grandfather on a wagon carrying grain to be ground. The mill suffered greatly from the consequences of seasonal flooding in 1883 requiring a whole new dam to be built by stone mason Joseph Gibson. He constructed a 13-foot-high sandstone dam, which extended 175 feet long as a curved wall across the Rocky River. A new two-story frame building was also constructed on the mill foundation, whose remains can be seen today. The dam of Damp's mill was so high that it caused the water from Rocky River to form a lake that extended all the way to the old West View area. The lake was used for boating because it was navigable over the entire distance. The water beneath the Bagley Road bridge was deep enough to allow youngsters to safely dive off the old bridge into the lake below while today the water is typically only about one foot deep.

Ultimately, a great Ohio flood in March of 1913 brought a halt to the mill's operation by destruction of the high dam as a result of huge ice flows, which were washed down the river as a consequence of heavy rainfall and a sudden thaw after a long cold winter.



The dam for Damp's Mill stood on the west branch of Rocky River prior to 1913.

The wooden building of Damp's mill was torn down in 1937-38 by Stan Capell, who purchased the wood for \$50. However, much of the wooden structure is still with us today because Stan and Millie Capell used the wood to build their home at 8293 Metropolitan Boulevard. The frame structure and two doors of the Capell home are from the wooden building that once stood atop the sandstone foundation of Ed Damp's mill. Like many of the early Olmsted area buildings, the materials were frequently reused and now exist in another structure.



Door from Damp's Mill was reused on the Capell house on Metropolitan Boulevard.



Today, it is difficult to imagine the two story mill building, the dam, the lake and Mill Street curving in front of the remaining old sandstone foundation. This foundation narrowly missed being demolished as a result of construction in the area. However, when area developers were made aware of the historic significance of Damp's mill, they were kind enough to adjust their construction plans for the area to allow the preservation of the sandstone foundation.

The Damp's Mill foundation remains today.

Damp's Mill's foundation next to Mill River Condominiums can be seen from the east side of the west branch of Rocky River, although that vantage point is not easy to reach. When the water is low, the foundation of the former dam can be seen curving across the riverbed. Parts of the dam still stand on each side of the river.



*Bruce A. Banks is a physicist by vocation and a local historian by avocation. He is co-author of **The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township** and took the color photographs for this article.*

News of the Past

The pages of the *Berea Advertiser* from 125 years ago this month included a few items that give insight into both small industry and agriculture in Olmsted. In the Olmsted Falls column from the October 26, 1888, issue was this item: "Ed Kidney is building another addition to his works – this time half brick and very substantial. This is about fifty additions and still there is land in the neighborhood not under cover. Build away." Kidney operated Kidney Bending Works (also called Cleveland Bending Works) on the west side of what is now River Road. It made bows for buggy tops, felloes (wheel rims) and other curved parts for wagons. In 1886, it added a night shift. A fire destroyed

the factory in 1890, but Kidney rebuilt it. However, in 1901, he moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to take charge of another company's bending works.

Under that item was this brief one: "Chestnuts! lots of them."

The column about West View, which now is much of the southern portion of Olmsted Falls, included this item: "Threshing grain is the order of the day in this vicinity at present." It also noted that two houses were under construction and another was being renovated as a summer residence for a woman living in Cleveland.

Editor's Note

Many of you might have read an article in the latest newsletter from the Historical Society of Olmsted Falls titled "When Did Our Town Begin?" by Bill Eichenberg. In it, he takes up the issue of whether 1814 or 1815 should be considered the year Olmsted was founded, an issue explored in past issues of *Olmsted 200*. I welcome further exploration of the issue, especially considering that the organization declined to publish articles I contributed on that issue.

As I told Eichenberg in a personal letter, I'm glad he made it clear that James Geer merely cleared some land (to plant corn) in the future Olmsted Township in 1814 and that it wasn't until 1815 that he built a cabin in the township. One of my reasons for addressing that issue from the beginning was to bring out the facts. Even if people want to mark 1814 as the year Olmsted was founded, they should know that settlers did not begin to move into the township until 1815. Until recently, few people realized that.

In the first issue of *Olmsted 200*, I acknowledged that the dictionary definition of "found" does not provide much precision in deciding when to credit the founding of a community. I did say that the planting of a meager corn crop seemed like a flimsy interpretation of the meaning of "found" and suggested it was unlikely that Geer's corn planting would have put 1814 in contention for consideration as Olmsted's founding date if he had not subsequently moved into the township. But that said, I also wrote that "if the trustees of the township and the council members of the city want to continue to consider 1814 as the 'official' year of Olmsted's founding, that is something they, as 'officials,' can do." So Eichenberg and I really don't have much disagreement on those points.

However, I do disagree with a few of the arguments he used to support his point. He suggested that my position is that the beginning of anything – America, an organization or a church – can be marked only by when a building was erected. But that is a straw man argument. That never has been part of my position. Again, I merely stated that it would make more sense to date Olmsted's founding to the year that settlers actually moved into it rather than when one man planted a little bit of corn.

After giving the account of Geer's planting a crop in 1814 and building a log cabin the following year, Eichenberg then wrote: "From this statement it is obvious that the people who chose the year 1814 did so fully knowing that a farm was started in 1814

and that a cabin followed in 1815.” But that is not obvious at all; it is an assumption on his part. We do not really know who decided to count 1814 as the year of Olmsted’s founding, when that decision was made or on what information it was based. I have been searching for such information and still have not found it. Contrary to his suggestion that the decision was made with full knowledge of the facts, I suspect it might have been made after reference to Crisfield Johnson’s 1879 history of Olmsted by someone who saw the date 1814 but did not read carefully that it was only the date of the corn planting, not settlement. Of course, I can’t say that for sure. It’s just a suspicion, but I don’t see that Eichenberg or anyone else has any more evidence for the viewpoint that the decision was made with full knowledge of the facts.

What is more important, as the bicentennial approaches, is that people who want to celebrate it should know what they are celebrating. If they want to celebrate the 200th anniversary of a corn crop, that’s fine. I have suggested that the celebration could go on for two years, instead of just one, to include the 200th anniversary of settlement.

In the end, discussion is good, because too often, errors about Olmsted’s history have been repeated over and over until many people have accepted them as fact. The best example is the erroneous story that “Olmsted” once had an “a” in it that was removed at some unspecified time. Bruce Banks and I devoted a whole chapter in our 2010 book, ***The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township***, to dispel that mistake, and I hope we have put it to rest.

Olmsted’s bicentennial will be celebrated, and it will be good for it to call more attention to the community’s history. And perhaps more people will understand what really happened almost 200 years ago – in both 1814 and 1815.

Following Eichenberg’s column was another piece, presumably by the newsletter’s editor that referred to me as the “former resident who chooses not to mail his columns to the President, Historian or Editor of the Historic Society of Olmsted Falls.” As already noted, that statement is not true. I tried a few times in emails and letters to the organization’s president and editor to get my pieces used in the newsletter but was rejected. Why should I keep sending in contributions to the newsletter if there is no intention to use them? However, I welcome contributions to this newsletter from anyone. I am grateful to have received an article for this issue from Bruce Banks and for extensive help on another article from Tim Atkinson.

Still to Come

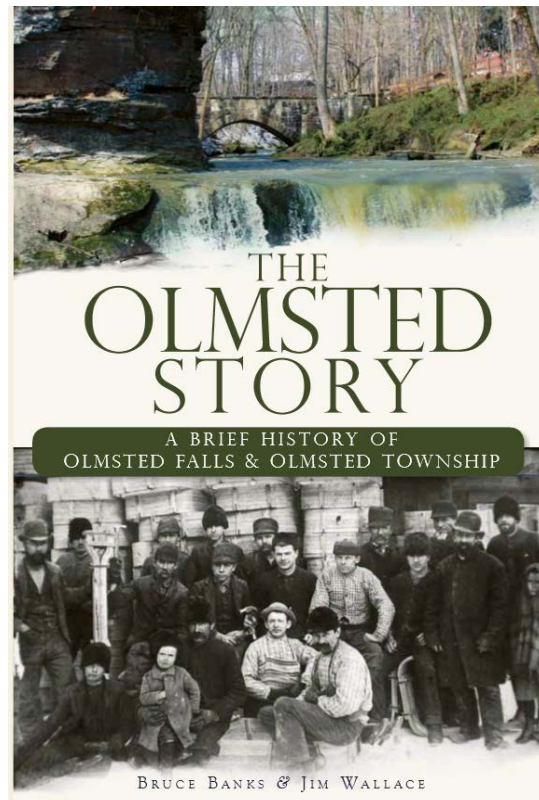
Because of the opening of the new Olmsted Falls branch of the Cuyahoga County Public Library earlier this year, the building that housed the library for almost six decades is destined to become a senior center. That building on Main Street is almost 180 years old and has had many uses since early settler Newton Loomis built it as his residence. We’ll consider the history of both Loomis and his building in the next issue. Also in that issue, we’ll examine a reason why so many New Englanders wanted to move to Ohio about the time Olmsted was being settled.

If you know of others who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. If you are a new reader and would like to receive the first four issues, let me know that at the same address.

Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like me to pull out of my extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information about the community's history that you would like to share.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Written contributions, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: wallacestar@hotmail.com.

Olmsted 200 is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of ***The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township***, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. ***The Olmsted Story*** is available at Clementine's Victorian Restaurant at Grand Pacific Junction and through online booksellers.



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