

FROM THE NEW DEAL TO THE INTERNET: A BRIEF HISTORY OF WESTBROOK

Franklin Roosevelt was President, Hitler was invading Poland, and Westbrook Elementary School was founded in Bethesda. It was September 1939, and the new school was created because of pressure from parents living in the Westmoreland Hills neighborhood. Children living in what is now the Westbrook area were attending Somerset School, and that facility was getting crowded.

Even after Westbrook officially became a Montgomery County school, its students and teachers studied for a few months at Somerset and Chevy Chase Elementary. That's because the Westbrook building wasn't finished yet. At first, there was only one building, now called the main building, where the office is. It was constructed by a U.S. federal government agency called the Works Progress Administration, one of President Roosevelt's New Deal agencies set up to battle the economic Great Depression of the 1930s. You can still see a plaque, left by the builders, with Roosevelt's name, in the hallway in the main building a few steps away from the kindergarten room.

The builders finished their work in February 1940. A bus with teachers, students, and 28 boxes of books left Chevy Chase Elementary for Westbrook. As they approached the bus circle in front of the school, both teachers and students exclaimed, "Oh, it's just beautiful!" The red brick, Georgian-style building looked more like a luxurious private residence than a public elementary school.

Westbrook opened with 148 students, but as more families moved into the area, the school-age population increased and overcrowding became a problem. In 1948, a second building, the "white building," was constructed behind the main one. The new building was particularly welcome, because it had a spacious kitchen and an all-purpose room used as a cafeteria. The school's two buildings weren't connected, so children had to put on coats in cold weather to walk from one to the other. In 1955, the "red building" was built, combining Westbrook's different parts into one building.

Enrollment was high through 1970, but then the school-age population began to drop. In 1974, Westbrook's future was put in doubt when the Board of Education adopted a new Small Schools Policy that called for closing schools with enrollments of fewer than 300 students. In 1976 the school superintendent listed Westbrook as a candidate for closure. Neighborhood parents rallied to support the school, and formed a Local Evaluation Committee to explain why Westbrook should remain open. The group produced a well-researched and well-documented report that convinced the Board in 1978 to keep Westbrook open until enrollment began to climb again.

In the following years, a number of new programs were introduced to help attract more students. Together with the County Recreation Department, Westbrook set up a Creative Enrichment program providing a half-day of activities for kindergarten-age

children. It supplemented Westbrook's half-day kindergarten, offering parents the option of a full-day program. In 1980, this program was taken over and expanded by the Westmoreland Children's Center Inc. (WCC), a day-care center based at Westmoreland Congregational Church. In 1984, WCC began offering an on-site after-school day care program.

Special education classes, which also added students and staff to the school community, were introduced in 1982. In 1987, the Board of Education approved establishment of an extended-day magnet program at Westbrook. It offered before- and after-school day care as part of a plan to achieve racial balance by attracting minority students. The Board also placed a full-day kindergarten at Westbrook. Children from the Rosemary Hills community transferred to the school to take advantage of these magnet programs.

In the 1980s, both teachers and PTA leaders lobbied to modernize the school. The roof leaked, the heating and plumbing systems were old, and the school still didn't have air conditioning. Eventually the funds were obtained, and the renovations were done during the 1989-1990 school term. During that year students studied at Radnor Center, a former elementary school off Goldsboro Road. The PTA's leadership in pressing for modernization was one of numerous examples of the active, crucial role the organization has played over the decades in helping the school to flourish.

As Westbrook approached its 60th birthday, it became a "Global Access" institution, providing students with computers linked to the Internet and creating its own school web site.

Unquestionably, the most important individual in Westbrook's history was Hazel McNamara, who was its first principal starting in 1939, and who served 29 years until retiring in 1968. The school has had six other principals: Jeremiah Sullivan (1968-75), James Connor (1975-82), Dr. Johnie Harris (1982-87), Dr. Mary Holly Allison (1988-96), Michael Thomas (1996 to 2005), and John Ewald (present).

Students have long enjoyed a variety of extracurricular activities. The annual Halloween parade always attracts a big audience, and Field Day, a celebration of fitness, began in 1974. During the 1940's and 50's, the May Day Festival, with its colorful costumes, dances, and Maypole, was a spring favorite. Class plays have been a tradition students have enjoyed since Westbrook's earliest years. The Student Government Association was established in 1969. A student publication, the Babbling Brook, was printed from 1939 to 1972. Safety patrols help children get to and from school safely. Remarkably, girls were allowed to be patrols starting only in 1969.

Westbrook students also have done much to help the broader community. From 1940 to 1970, the girls participated in the Big Sisters program. In recent years, students have carried out food, clothing, and toy drives to help those in need. They have brought the Community of Caring project to life through such activities as establishing a relationship with seniors at Brighton Gardens and making bead lizards for patients at the Children's Inn. Evidence of Community of Caring is everywhere in school, from bulletin

boards to class meetings to 5th graders working with 1st graders. Stream Team, a group of 5th grade students, studies local bodies of water, monitors their status, and works to improve their ecology. This culminates in the annual shad release.

Westbrook has many wonderful traditions, but three in particular deserve special mention. One is for educational excellence. In academic achievement, Westbrook ranks in the top 2 percent of Maryland public schools. Another is the annual Book Fair, started in the fall of 1941. Finally, there is Carnival, held every year in early May. This beloved event began in 1944 with a "Western Jamboree." The games, rides and other events are a spring highlight for the whole neighborhood.

(Compiled by Robert & Barbara McCartney, June 1999)