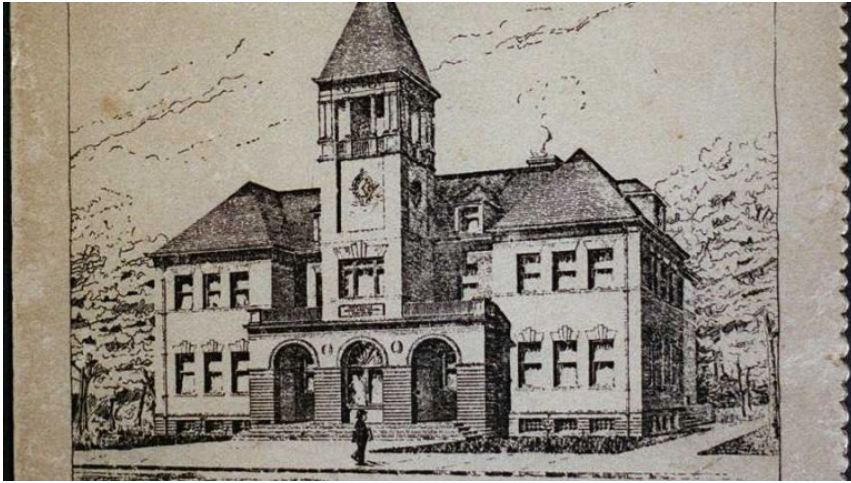


By ROBERT T. FARRELL

A long-ago win for school integration



Dedication program
for Amityville
School, April 6, 1895.
Credit: Amityville
Historical Society

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History buff Robert T. Farrell lives in Huntington.

It was snowing hard the night of Feb. 28, 1895, when the Amityville school board held its regular meeting, but the harsh weather didn't deter Charles Devine Brewster and some friends from traveling by sleigh to deliver a serious message.

A few months earlier, the school board had opened "a \$70,000 brick schoolhouse which had materially increased the tax rate," the New York Sun reported. Brewster - a Civil War veteran who was described by the Sun as "the richest colored man in Suffolk County" - and other black residents came to ask that their children be admitted to that new public school, instead of the "little tumble-down branch school" they were currently attending.

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Brewster told the board that either the district would close the segregated one-room schoolhouse and admit all nonwhites - including blacks and Indians - to the new school or face a boycott of the older school and possibly a court fight. They argued that they were promised admission to the new school in return for their earlier votes in favor of its construction.

Local headlines were immediate. "Color Line Drawn in the Amityville Public School," reported the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Some white parents, surprised by the demands of the black parents, protested. One writer for a Babylon newspaper stated that blacks generally took "little interest in educational

matters." This was far from the truth in Amityville.

Sandi Brewster-Walker, a descendant who lives in Washington, D.C., says today that the Brewsters took pride in their heritage and in a long tradition of education.

Eventually, the decision was left to the state superintendent of public instruction, who ruled in favor of Brewster. The black children started the next school year in the new building.

Five years later, in 1900, Gov. Theodore Roosevelt signed a law that abolished segregation in the state's urban school districts, leading to the closure of black schools in Hempstead, Jamaica and Flushing.

Brewster continued his quest for integration into greater society and was elected chaplain of a local Civil War veterans post dominated by whites.

It is appropriate during Black History Month to remember Charles Devine Brewster, who was a civil rights pioneer long before the term was common.

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He had a vision for fairness and was respected among his peers in the community, all of which affected the history of Amityville, Long Island and New York State.

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