

THE STORY OF A SCHOOL FOR ARENZVILLE KIDS

Researched and compiled by Molly Daniel

The first school erected in Arenzville - not a brick building - was built in 1839 with the assistance of Francis Arenz, who donated a piece of land in what is now the Village Park and arranged for a small building to be built in the northwest corner. This was known as the Union Church or the Union School since it served as the gathering spot for all religious denominations as well as a place for holding school.

In 1875, the village built a brick building behind the church, which served many purposes over the years – town hall, town jail, school, and presently (2024) the Arenzville Library and Tutoring Center. School classes moved from the Union building to the little brick school in the Village Park in 1884.

It was the generosity of an immigrant from Prussia which provided means for educating Arenzville children at a time when there was no state funding for public schools. When bachelor John Zuschka died in 1843, he left his estate to the Village of Arenzville for the purpose of providing public education to the children of the village. His farm was operated as "the school farm" for many years, with proceeds directed toward the expenses of public education.

Zuschka's generosity allowed the town to build a permanent, dedicated home for the school, and in 1892, Arenzville constructed the first permanent school building on the southeast corner of town, adjoining the "school farm." This building was a two-story brick building and was used until November 1908, when it was destroyed by a fire.

The community rebuilt the school on the same site under contractor R. L. Gonsalves from Jacksonville. The building opened for students in 1910. In the meantime, students gathered for classes at Trinity Lutheran Church and in the Bode brick building which once stood on the northwest corner of Main and State Streets.

The second (1909-10) Zuschka School served the community for more than 75 years, with some additions made over the decades.

FORMATION OF DISTRICT 27

With the closing of the many rural schools in the district's service area beginning around 1947, Arenzville became part of Community Unit School District, #27, consisting of schools in Arenzville, Chambersburg, Chapin, Concord and Meredosia. The initial composition of Consolidated Unit No. 27 included students from Arenzville, Chambersburg, Chapin, Concord and Meredosia. And for a time,

there was even a suggestion that Unit No. 27 join a mega-consolidation which included all schools in Morgan County (that didn't suit the voters, though.) Over time, Chambersburg and Meredosia petitioned to form their own districts, and Unit 27 coalesced around three communities of Chapin, Concord and Arenzville.

END OF RURAL SCHOOLS

Ruth K. Brasell, in her interview filed with the Illinois State Library, recalled that West Point was closed and its students went to Arenzville in the fall of 1949, when her grandson was in second grade.¹ The respective communities continued to maintain separate programs, facilities and staff. But elimination of the rural schools in Cass, Morgan and Scott counties brought additional students into the Zuschka school building at Arenzville, and space became a premium. Zuschka school, more commonly by then known as "Arenzville High School" continued to operate independently under the new district.

ADDITIONS TO ZUSCHKA SCHOOL

In November 1936, the school board issued a contract to Smirl and Gibson contractors, Jacksonville, for construction of an addition to enlarge the main building of Zuschka School. This addition included a study hall, library, classrooms and gymnasium, incorporated on the southeastern corner of Zuschka School. The work was completed by the following fall, and the school hosted an open house for the community on August 5, 1937 in their new "auditorium."

In 1949, seeking added space for its hot lunch program and a new home economics department, the Arenzville school added two Army surplus buildings to the school grounds, located directly west of the main building.

Population growth in the late 1940's crowded the available classrooms in the main building, so in 1951, a cinder-block building was erected on the southwestern corner of the school grounds at Arenzville. Beginning in January 1952, the seventh- and eighth-grade classes met in the two eastern rooms of the building, while the western room accommodated the school's agricultural education department.

CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL

At its December 1958 meeting, the school board of Unit District 27 voted to merge the football teams of Chapin and Arenzville, primarily because most area schools had transitioned to 11-man football squads and the schools were still

¹ In her interview, Mrs. Brasell states that West Point closed at the end of the 1947-48 school year, but it was actually one year later. This also agrees with the timeline of when her grandson, J. Robert Clark, was in second grade. An article in the *Jacksonville Daily Journal* dated August 21, 1949 also incorrectly reports the switchover when it stated, "West Point school, taught by Mrs. Ruth Brasell, is the only rural school to be in operation in Cass County within the Arenzville district during the coming term." However, after that item was published, the school district reversed its decision to keep the country school open one more year, and the West Point students enrolled at Arenzville Grade School in the fall of 1949.

fielding 8-man teams. With too few 8-man teams in the conference, the schools struggled to compile a schedule of games. Merging their programs would solve the issue, and it also accelerated consolidation of other programs. Under a ruling received by the board, the football merger also made it necessary to change the names of Arenzville High School and Chapin High School to a new name used by both schools. In addition, the board was advised that teams in competitive sports and other contests (e.g., music, speech) must be comprised of students from both schools.

During the 1959-1960 academic year, the board challenged students to devise a new name for the Unit 27 consolidated school. The name "Triopia" was suggested by the students, evoking a Greek twist for something to mean "three towns." Former English teacher Ruth Hierman credited Mark Abernathy and his friends Mervin Beets and Robert Clark (the "ABC boys") with coming up with the school name. The student body also selected the school mascot (the Trojan)², school colors (Columbia blue and white) and wrote the words for their school song to the tune of the anthem "Navy Blue and Gold."

In May 1960, Arenzville High School and Chapin High School conducted their final graduation ceremonies at their respective high school buildings. Beginning with the Class of 1961, students of Consolidated Unit School District #27 were graduates of Triopia High School. Though the intention was that graduation ceremonies would be held in a single town in 1961, Arenzville and Chapin again conducted separate ceremonies that year. Subsequent commencement exercises for graduates of the newly christened Triopia were conducted in Chapin until 1969, when graduates celebrated in a new high school building erected near Concord.

The 6-3-3 PLAN AND THE SHUTTLE PERIOD YEARS

With the closing of rural schools and population growth of the 1950's, both Arenzville and Chapin schools struggled with providing adequate space for classes. In each community, calls for support of a building plan were made as early as 1953, but once Unit 27 was formed, the expense of maintaining multiple school buildings required a new strategy. At its December 1960 meeting, the school board of Unit 27 adopted the "6-3-3 plan" put forth by a committee of building consultants and state education officials.

This plan called for the district's junior high (grades 7 through 9) to be housed at Arenzville, with the senior high (grades 10 through 12) in Chapin. The elementary grades (1 through 6) attended respective centers in Concord, Chapin and Arenzville. To accomplish this, some modifications were made in the

² For a brief period of time, from about 1961 to 1969, the Triopia grade school teams went by the name the "Titans." That changed in 1969-70, when grades 7 through 12 all moved to attending at a new school near Concord. At that time, all the school teams were known as the "Trojans." Prior to consolidation, the Arenzville teams were the Raiders (high school) and the Eagles (grade school), the Chapin teams were the Bearcats, and the Concord teams were the Flashers.

Zuschka School building i.e., a partition was erected in the study hall of the main building to make a classroom, study hall and library. On the west end of the building, a partition was removed between the bookkeeping room and the typing room to form a larger classroom. The cinder block building was designated to house grades 1, 2 and 3, requiring the addition of a restroom on the west end of the building. Band practice was moved from the band room in the basement to the home economics room in one of the annex buildings. Transportation of students to the designated attendance centers required a complex bus-shuttling system, resulting a "shuttle period" at the start and end of the day, which was essentially a study hall period.

This plan was followed starting in fall 1961 and continued until 1969, when all junior high and high school students attended a new school erected near Concord. From 1969 to the end of the 1984-85 academic year, Arenzville elementary students continued attending classes in the Zuschka school building. However, in May 1985, the Arenzville building was abruptly closed because it could no longer meet the state's safety codes. For a couple of years, the Arenzville elementary students attended classes in Chapin along with other elementary students of the district.

NEW JR-SR HIGH SCHOOL BUILDING

After several tries, in December 1966 voters in the district finally approved a referendum for construction of a new, centrally located, junior-senior high school building. A bid for construction of the new building was approved in August 1967, and the new building was completed and ready for use in spring 1969. The building was designed by architects Horn, Meyer and Peter, of Quincy. As the 1968-69 school year was drawing to a close, the district pressed to open the new school in time for graduation of the Class of 1969. A longer Easter break was declared by the board, allowing an army of volunteers from across the community to move equipment and supplies into the building on April 3rd and 4th, 1969, and classes were in session the following Monday. Students of Triopia Junior and Senior High School were finally all housed in the same building. The Triopia Class of 1969 were the first graduates from this building, though they had attended classes in the new school building for only a few weeks.

NEW GRADE SCHOOL BUILDING

In August 1988, the district completed construction of a new Triopia Grade School on site at the high school near Concord, and the district's students were ultimately all gathered on the same campus.

FAREWELL TO CHAPIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

July 1988 – the Regional Board of School Trustees approved the sale of the Chapin Elementary School building, which was purchased by the Village of Chapin for \$2,100. Decision on how the building was to be used was pending, but its purpose as an attendance center for Chapin public school students came to an end.

FAREWELL TO ZUSCHKA SCHOOL

The Arenzville school building - Zuschka School - which had been vacated in 1985 became property of the Village of Arenzville, which intended to erect a senior living apartment building on the site. Both the cost of demolishing and removing the school building was more expensive than the Village could afford. Ultimately, a solution was proposed when several businesses and community members stepped forward to assist - most notably the donation of equipment and labor by Freesen, Inc. of Bluffs, donation of fuel by Ron Kershaw, use of trucks donated by Mike Schnitker, and donation of use of a loader tractor by Clifford Thomas. In January 1989, the walls of Zuschka school came down, and the site was prepared for construction of a senior housing development. The grounds were renamed Zuschka Square and the housing named the Ross Houston Memorial Apartments, in recognition Zuschka's gift to the village and Houston's persistent advocacy for and facilitation of the public funding for the housing project.

But this is not the end of the John Zuschka legacy for Arenzville school children. To this day (2022), the Community Unit School District No. 27 annually benefits from the proceeds of Zuschka's estate in the form of a small amount of annual interest from funds deposited after the 1950 sale of "the school farm," land he left for the benefit of the town in 1843.

Shorter version:

In the late 1940's, the state began to reform its education system and urged consolidation of rural schools. The baby boom was creating increased enrollment in some areas, while other places were shrinking. Before that time, schools were the purview of county officials, who were struggling with the costs of aging one-room school houses, each with its own teacher and board of directors. Each community maintained its own facilities for high school, and both Arenzville and Chapin made expansions or improvements to their high school buildings in the 1930's and 1940's. The state's reform led to the creation of consolidated districts that transcended county boundaries, and at first it was a bit experimental. The initial composition of Consolidated Unit No. 27 included students from Arenzville, Chambersburg, Chapin, Concord and Meredosia. And for a time, there was even a suggestion that Unit No. 27 join a mega-consolidation which included all schools in Morgan County (that didn't suit the voters, though.) Over time, Chambersburg and Meredosia petitioned to form their own districts, and Unit 27 coalesced around three communities of Chapin, Concord and Arenzville.

But each town continued to operate a separate program of elementary and secondary education for its own students, including maintaining its own facilities and extracurricular programs.

A key factor in the actual merging of the student populations was driven by – surprise – the extracurricular programs. Enrollment had shrunk to the point that neither Chapin nor Arenzville High School could field an 11-member football team, and there were too few schools remaining in the conference who would schedule games for an 8-member squad. So in 1958, the school board of Unit 27 decided to have a single football program. The Illinois Department of Public Education advised the district that this change could not be limited to merely the football program. That is, teams in other competitive sports as well as in other contests (e.g., music, speech) must be comprised of students from both schools, and it must be a school which had ONE name.

So with the 1959-1960 school year, the communities of Arenzville, Concord and Chapin were faced with the reality of consolidation. The students of Unit 27 were asked to come up with a name for their “new” school, a mascot, a school song, school colors, etc. Three senior students known as the “ABC boys” - Mark Abernathy and his friends Mervin Beets and Robert Clark – suggested the name “Triopia” as a contrived word meant to convey the idea of three towns. Other students contributed ideas for the school song, etc.

But things didn’t go smoothly for quite some time because change is hard. Some community members felt like they were losing their school when there was no longer to be an Arenzville High School or a Chapin High School, and there were those in each town who feared the day would come too soon when their beloved school buildings were closed. So the commencement ceremonies for the graduating class of 1960 still conferred diplomas for graduates of Arenzville High School and Chapin High School. In 1961, the seniors were graduates of Triopia High School, but both Arenzville and Chapin hosted separate commencement ceremonies for their graduates in their own school gymnasiums.

However, by 1962 the powerhouse Triopia football and basketball teams were starting to generate a different attitude (thank you, Don Kemp!), and the rivalries between Chapin and Arenzville diminished.

Other milestones:

December 1960 – the school board adopted the 6-3-3 plan which called for the district’s junior high students (grades 7 through 9) to attend classes in Arenzville while the high school students (grades 10 through 12) attended classes in Chapin. (Elementary students attended schools in their respective towns.) A shuttle bus system got kids to the right place at the start and end of the day.

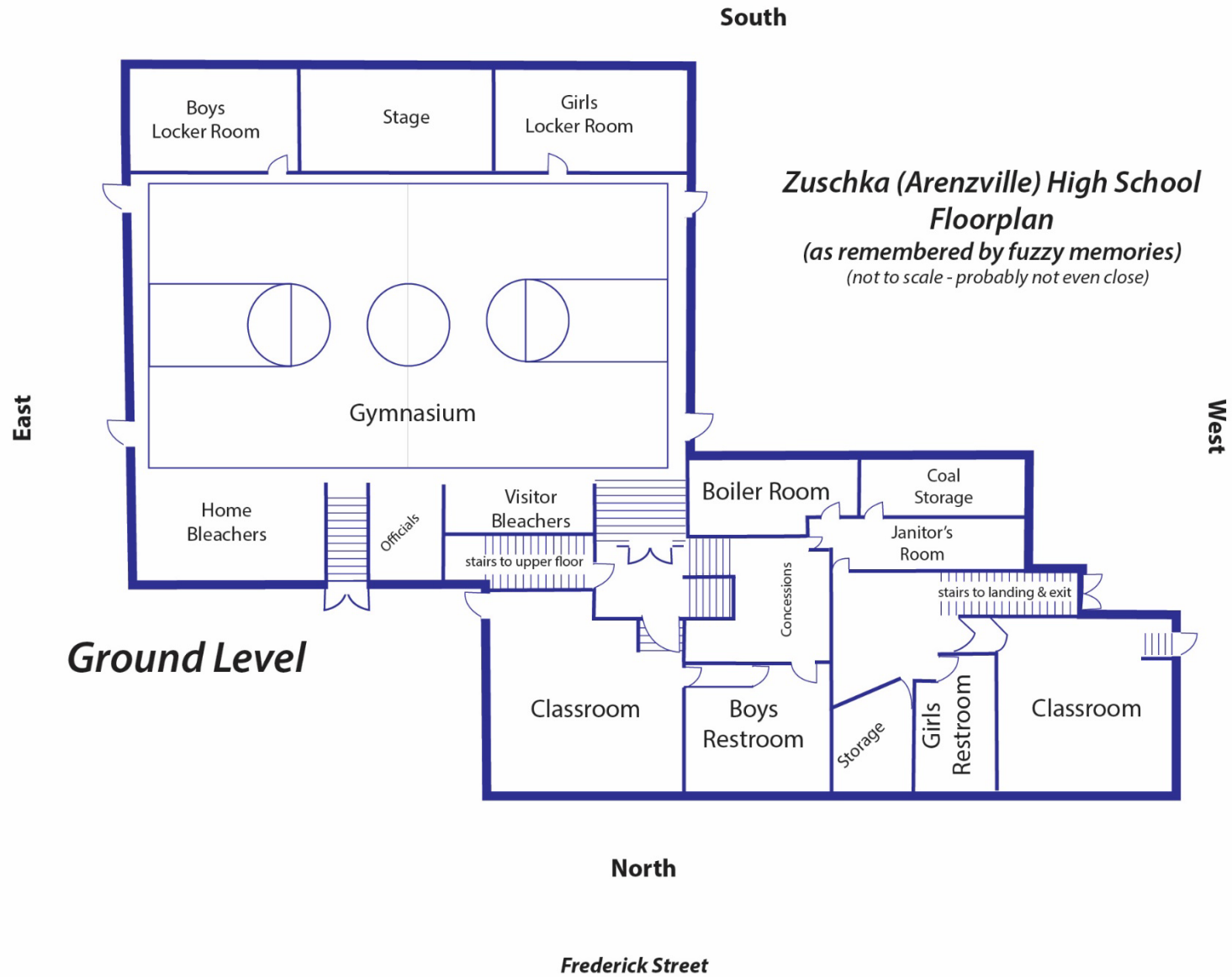
April 1969 – The new junior-senior high school opened near Concord.

May 1985 – the Arenzville school building fails to meet new safety requirements and is closed. Elementary students were accommodated in other locations for the next three years.

July 1988 – the Regional Board of School Trustees approved the sale of the Chapin Elementary School building, which was purchased by the Village of Chapin for \$2,100. Decision on how the building was to be used was pending, but its purpose as an attendance center for Chapin public school students came to an end.

August 1988 – the new elementary school opened on the campus of the junior-senior high school.

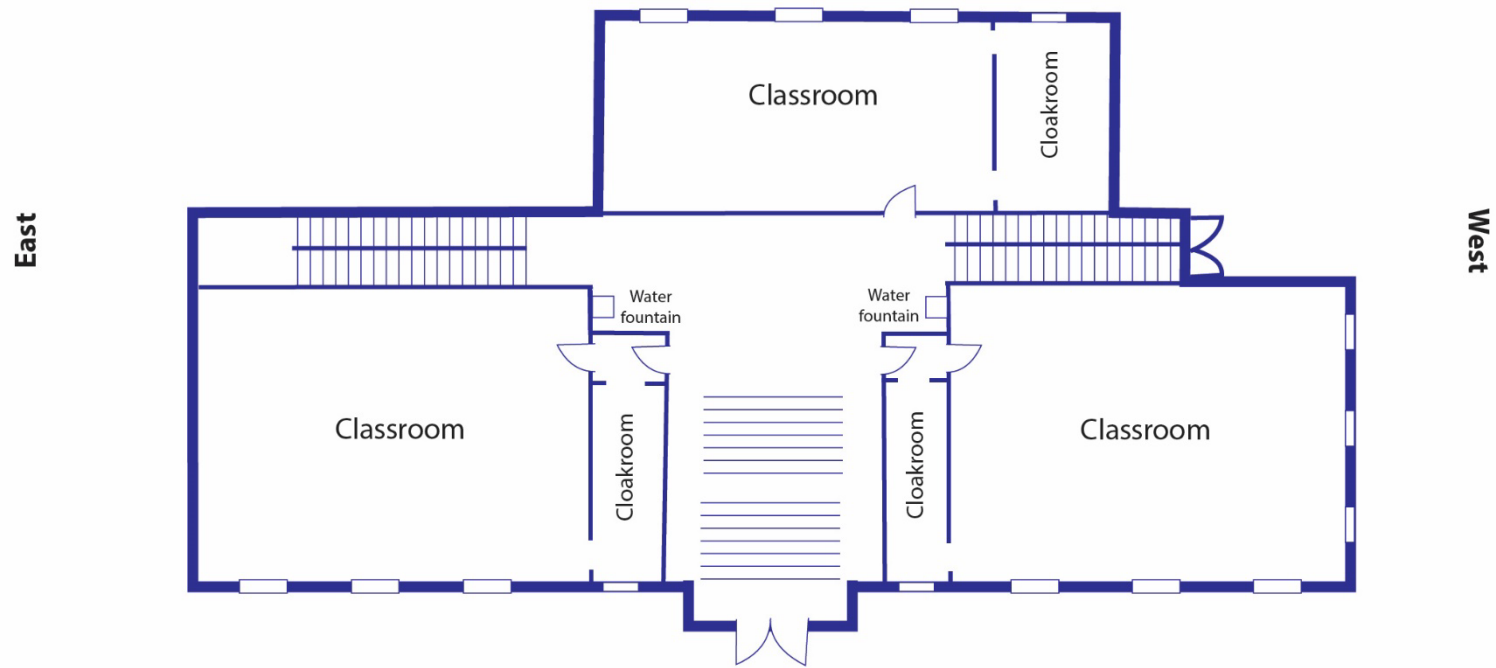
January 1989 – the old Arenzville “Zusckha” school (built in 1909) came down.



South

**Zuschka (Arenzville) High School
Floorplan**

*(as remembered by fuzzy memories)
(not to scale - probably not even close)*



Main Level

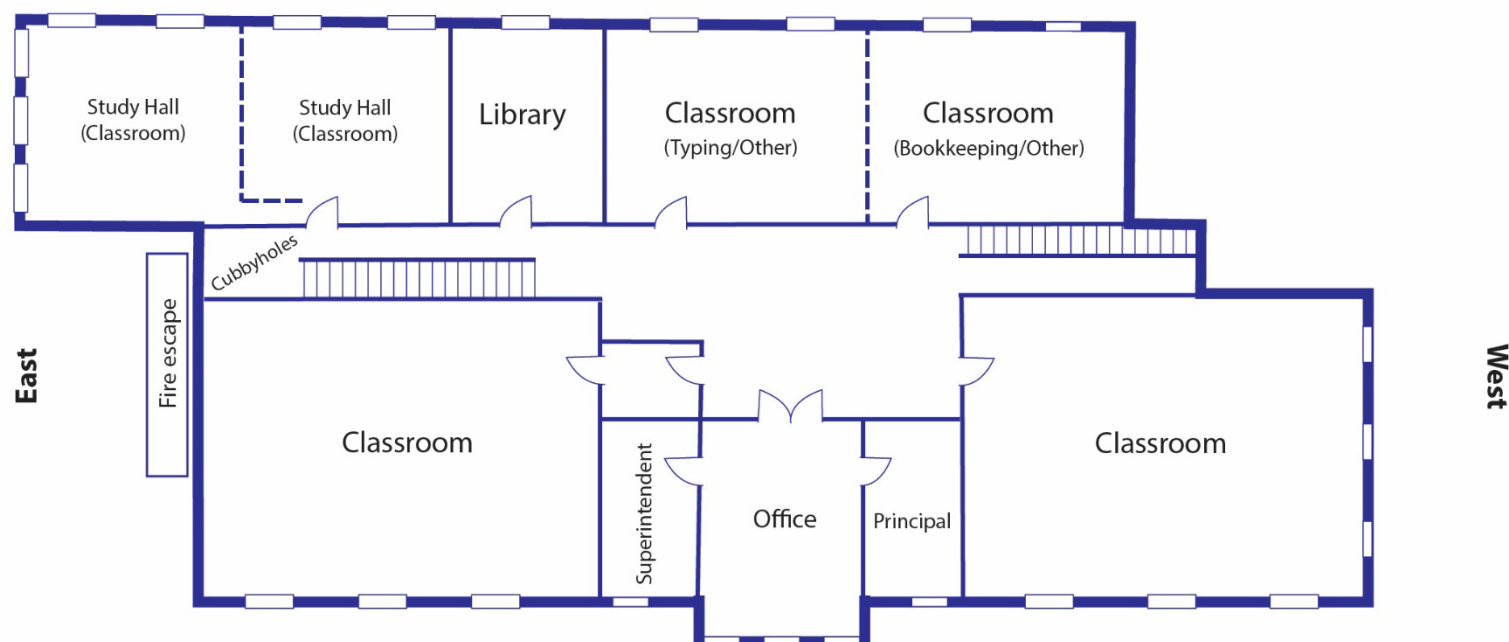
North

Frederick Street

South

Zuschka (Arenzville) High School Floorplan

(as remembered by fuzzy memories)
(not to scale - probably not even close)



Upper Level

North

Frederick Street

A classroom on the southwest corner was divided to make two rooms for typing and bookkeeping classes, and then later the partition was removed to create a single classroom again. Likewise, on the southeast corner, a large room which initially served as a study hall was later partitioned to create a study hall and a classroom.