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A HISTORY
OF
THE SCHOOLS IN BETHEL, CONNECTICUT

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The history of Bethel schools began when Bethel was only a settlement of the town of Danbury. First Connecticut school laws were very general but became more specific as time passed, with reference to support and supervision of schools, selection of teachers, and the length of the school term.

In the early eighteenth century, Parishes, subdivisions of larger towns and organized primarily for religious purposes, were given authority for schools. Bethel was set apart from Danbury as a separate Parish in 1759 and was then responsible for its own schools. At that time and for many years to come, schools and education of youth was of little concern to most people. The problems facing these early residents in organizing their Parish and their homes consumed their interest. The establishment of the Connecticut School Fund in 1795 and later the abolishment of the local tax for support of schools, took financial responsibility from the people and led to a decline in the quality of education, not only in the Parish of Bethel but all of Connecticut as well.

An attempt to improve this situation was made in 1839 when the state legislature declared that each school district of a Parish or town would be entirely responsible for its own schools. Reports by District School Visitors reveal that

there was little improvement in education, primarily because of public and parental apathy. Efforts of the Bethel Parish at this time were being devoted toward separating from Danbury; this was accomplished in 1855 when Bethel was incorporated as a town. The six school districts retained control of their own schools until 1888, although all towns were given the power in 1866 to consolidate the districts and assume their authority. Under the town management system, school affairs were more efficiently carried out and from this point on, a slow but steady improvement in the educational system can be noted.

After 1940, especially between 1950 and 1960, Bethel experienced a tremendous population increase which put a great strain on the existing school facilities. Due to the fact that several years lapsed from the time a school was needed to the completion of that school, the major problem which Bethel educators have faced is that of providing adequate room for the ever-increasing number of children.

The purpose of this paper is to enable one to better understand the present Bethel school system by studying its history and realizing how it came to be. Necessarily intertwined with the growth of its schools is the growth of Bethel itself. An important characteristic of this growth, which one must recognize in order to understand Bethel, is the cautious reluctance with which Bethel people accept change and progress. It took several years for leaders of the Bethel

Parish to convince the people to separate from Danbury. Consolidation of the school districts was another change which was a controversial issue for nearly thirty years. Bethel has had difficulty in keeping its school building program at a pace with the population growth; appropriations for new schools are usually reluctantly approved.

In 1968, the Bethel school system is besieged by problems with its inadequate facilities, its changing curriculum and an unusually large number of resignations from its professional staff. With capable, patient guidance, these problems are not insurmountable; similar problems in other times were overcome by dedicated educational leaders. These people whose advice at times went unheeded, nevertheless persisted in the direction they knew must be taken if Bethel was to keep her schools in step with a changing community and nation. Knowledge of the obstacles encountered by the founders of our school system and how they were gradually surmounted should provide both the educational leaders and the people of Bethel with the confidence to face any current and future problems.