

Van Antwerp Middle School

*Thank you to all the past and present contributors to this history, including:
Anthony Brandone and Owen South*

Built in 1877 as a one-room schoolhouse, Van Antwerp School was situated on the west side of Van Antwerp Road. The annual taxes raised for the school were about \$400; out of that the teacher was paid \$7.50 per week. A second room was added to this structure in 1898. This building was later converted into a house, which is still standing at 1204 Van Antwerp Road.

In 1910, a large brick two-story building holding four classrooms was erected for \$13,000 and housed classes ranging from kindergarten to ninth grade. Today this building stands as the southeast wing of the present building.

As the community rapidly grew, so did the need for a larger building. By 1925, the size of the building had doubled. The structure held eight classrooms, an auditorium (so lovely that New York State Gov. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was asked to dedicate it), a gym, woodworking shop, library and principal's office.

By 1928 the school became overcrowded again, and 12 classrooms were added and the playground facilities enlarged. The Home and School Association promoted plans for the building as did the Van Antwerp Civic Association, the Rosendale Highlands Association and the Grand Boulevard Association. Card parties and paper drives helped raise funds.

The start of school in 1929 found construction underway, but also overcrowding so acute that rooms in three private homes had to be used by the school. Eventually, Van Antwerp had classes in five private homes because of overcrowding.

1930

In 1930, the district was changed from a Common School District to a Free School District (this meant classes were from K-9, rather than K-

8). The local population was well-educated, and interested in the schools. They wanted foreign language instruction as well as algebra and general science. In 1930 Van Antwerp was chartered as a junior



Van Antwerp School, circa 1898



Van Antwerp School, circa 1950s

Niskayuna Schools at 50

high school. There was no high school at the time, so students who finished ninth grade went on to Schenectady High School.

During the Great Depression, teachers in the Van Antwerp School District helped relieve the burden of taxation on the local populace by twice accepting 10 percent pay decreases. In 1936, however, Van Antwerp was again overcrowded, and the Board of Education decided to add eight rooms. This addition ran from the old building northerly along Van Antwerp Road, then westerly along Dexter Street. The District provided the materials, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided the labor — paid for by the federal government under the “New Deal.”

1950s and 1960s

40

In 1949 the last addition to the school was completed; it consisted of a second gym, rooms for industrial arts, homemaking and art; a library; and 10 classrooms. Van Antwerp then consisted of a grades 7-9 junior high school in the new wing of the building, and a K-6 elementary school in the older part of the building. Arthur Putman, who had been principal of Van Antwerp school since 1923, was the principal of the junior high; his assistant, Laura Enders, served as principal of Van Antwerp elementary school.

Shortly after the last addition on Van Antwerp and following a two-year study of population trends showing rapidly increasing enrollment, a Citizen’s Committee on February 5, 1953, unanimously recommended that the Van Antwerp School District initiate plans to create a new central-

ized district. Affirmed by a vote on June 9, 1953, Central School District No. 1 of the towns of Niskayuna, Glensville, Clifton Park and Colonie was formed. Consequently, grades K-6 were moved to the elementary schools.

In 1959 to provide more space in already overcrowded elementary schools, all sixth-graders in the District were moved into Van Antwerp. The seventh and eighth grades in this setting continued to function as a junior high under the supervision of Arthur Putman, while the incoming sixth-graders were organized the same way they had been in the elementary schools under Hugh Diamond.

Principal Putman retired in 1964, and was succeeded by H. Edgar Pray who, as previously mentioned, organized the 6-7-8 middle school in more or less the form that it exists today.

Enrollment continued to grow at Van Antwerp Middle School. By 1967, the school was once again overcrowded. H. Edgar Pray had left Niskayuna and his assistant, Francis R. Taormina, became principal and organized an “overlapping schedule” to deal with the expanding population. In 1968, Mr. Taormina became high school principal, and John



Van Antwerp students display some of the hundreds of cans of green beans the school collected to donate to the Equinox Thanksgiving Dinner in this 2000 photo.

O’Connor took over as principal of Van Antwerp for the 1968-69 school year.

Second middle school built

By 1969 a second middle school, Iroquois, was completed. To maintain the concept of one middle school at two locations, Dr. Raymond Pressman was named middle school principal. Mr. O’Connor became the Iroquois building administrator, and James Purcell became the building administrator of Van Antwerp. Then in 1970, James Bowen became the Van Antwerp principal, serving until 1982, when a decline in enrollment led the Board of Education to close the school.

Closed in 1982

Van Antwerp very quickly became an important resource. Parts of the school were leased to the Brown School and several day care centers. The gymnasium and cafeteria became the Town of Niskayuna’s Community



Eighth-graders listen during German class with Teacher Pamela Bird in this spring 2001 photo. The following fall foreign language instruction was extended to the sixth grade at Van Antwerp and Iroquois schools.

Center. The library became the Niskayuna branch of the Schenectady County Public Library. The District's administrative offices remained at Van Antwerp.

1980s

A changing population, however, once again wrought its effect. The Iroquois Middle School became overcrowded as the population began to increase again in the late 1980s. The Board of Education once again asked a citizen's committee to study options.

The Board, responding to predictions of increasing numbers of students and the community's desire for a return to neighborhood schools, recommended that Van Antwerp be reopened as a middle

school. In December 1990, the community approved the funding needed to refurbish Van Antwerp and in September 1993 the school was re-opened under the direction of Principal Anthony Brandone.

1990s

During the 1990s the reconstruction of Van Antwerp continued. In 1995, the District Office complex was renovated to accommodate the needs of central administration. New offices were constructed for the superintendent and the two assistant superintendents. The Board Room was also renovated, giving the school community a more appropriate location for District meetings. While construction continued in the 1995-96 school year, the District Office staff worked out of a series of first floor classrooms at Iroquois.

In 1996 the classrooms over the District Office were renovated using the same room plans and color schemes that were in place throughout the rest of the building. Five full-size classrooms and one smaller classroom were added to the school. A seventh-grade team and a foreign language teacher moved into the space and still call it home. At the same time, office space was designated for the District's subject area directors. An additional and much-needed conference room was completed. The 1996 work finished the renovation of Van Antwerp.

In summer 2001 the director's space was renovated by staff to house the growing needs of the Office for Student Support Services. Their move to Van Antwerp was caused by the

growing space crunch at Niskayuna High School.

Finally, in summer 2002, space that had been used by the Director of Health Education was updated to house the newly-created position of Administrator for Human Resources and Counseling. Frank Tedesco, long-time principal of Hillside Elementary School, was appointed to this position.

10 years

During the 2002-2003 school year, Van Antwerp celebrated its tenth birthday with a half-day birthday party celebration. The building now houses 475 students and has re-established itself as a fixture in the neighborhood. Parent support remains a significant part of our success. Van Antwerp is happily looking forward to serving the needs of our middle school families well into the 21st century.

Van Antwerp Principals:

- Arthur D. Putman, 1923-64
- H. Edgar Pray, 1964-67
- Francis R. Taormina, 1967-68
- John O'Connor, 1968-69
- Raymond Pressman, 1969-70
- James Bowen, 1970-82
- Building closed: 1982-92
- Anthony Brandone, 1992-present