

## The Ovid Academy and the Seneca Collegiate Institute

### Introduction

In the early 1800s, a community would establish an “academy” to provide a college-preparation education for students. In time many of these academies went out of business or were superseded by the formation of a Union Free School District, the forerunner of the Central School District as we know it today. In some cases, the public high school kept the name “Academy.” Of the three Academies established in Seneca County—Waterloo, Seneca Falls, and Ovid—today the only one still using the word “Academy” in its name is Mynderse Academy, the public high school of the Seneca Falls Central School District.

The Ovid Academy, which later became the Seneca Collegiate Institute, provided a sound college-preparatory education for many students who went on to become important contributors to Seneca County and/or the United States.

### The Ovid Academy

In 1824, William Irving opened a school for the study of the classics in the room of the old Court House in Ovid. His success in this pioneer effort led to a meeting of interested local persons and the formation of a Board of Trustees for the incorporation of an academy and the erection of a school building. On April 13, 1826, the New York State Legislature incorporated the Ovid Academy. Construction began almost immediately on a brick building on the lofty knoll in the old orchard of John B. Seeley facing Main Street. (Currently this is the site of Sheldon Hall of the Federated Church.) The original brick building was 32 feet by 48 feet and three stories in height, with a cupola and bell. The 1980 history of Ovid included the comment that this building was “an elegant structure for those early times. From its cupola the eye could sweep over portions of nine counties, viz.: Tompkins, Chemung, Steuben, Yates, Ontario, Wayne, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Seneca, while the waters of Seneca and Cayuga Lakes were plainly discernible, the former at a distance of three, and the latter, at six miles.”<sup>1</sup> (As a side comment, the cupola was lighted for special community events, such as the April 1856 announcement that the New York State Legislature had passed the necessary legislation to create the first NY state agricultural college at what is today Willard.<sup>2</sup>) In time the school building was enlarged to a length of 102 feet and 40 feet wide.<sup>3</sup>

Even before the construction of the building was completed, the school started holding instruction in a room in the southeast part of the building. Mr. Irving served as the principal until 1831. He was succeeded by Zenas Clapp who was known as “scholarly and severe.” William Eastman was the next principal. He was succeeded in 1837 by William Gookins.

An 1837 notice in *The Ovid Bee* reported that 114 students were enrolled.

During the presidency of the Rev. Amos Brown (fall 1852 to 1857) the Ovid Academy has its greatest period of prosperity.<sup>4</sup> In the summer of 1852, Amos Brown toured New York in search of an academy where he could return to teaching. He had stopped for church services at Ovid and learned about Ovid Academy that was seriously in need of leadership. The Ovid Academy at that time had only about six students. Brown seized upon the challenge and the opportunity. He promised the trustees of the Ovid Academy that he would revive the school and make it a success. An especially important part of Brown’s plan for the revival of the Ovid Academy was the introduction of a course in agricultural science. This was especially appealing to the farmer trustees who made up a majority of the board.

Brown immediately set about implementing his plans for the 1852-53 school year. There were five teachers—two of whom were women—and 23 students. A new faculty member was William H. Brewer, whom Brown hired to teach agricultural history and botany.<sup>5</sup>

That school year was the first of a few successful years for the Ovid Academy, as demonstrated by this notice that appeared in *The Elmira Gazette* on December 29, 1853:

The Winter Term of this institution will commence on Wednesday, December 28<sup>th</sup>; and continue for fourteen weeks. This school is open to both sexes. Instruction is given both the ancient and modern languages, in General Agricultural Chemistry, in Civil Engineering, in Music, and in all branches of study pursued in the most approved schools in the country. Lectures are given in Chemistry in all its branches; Physiology; Natural Philosophy, the science and art of Teaching, and on Morals. The Board of Instruction consists of the Rev. Amos Brown, Edwin Pierce, William H. Brewer, George B. Vose, and Misses Isabella Mead and Angelina Jameson. The Gentlemen are all of them graduates of some of the best New-England Colleges; and the Ladies have proved themselves entirely competent in their stations.

Charges to pupils from abroad, for board, tuition, room-rent, wood and lights, are \$2.50 per week. Charges for instruction on the Plan Forts is \$10 per quarter and \$4 per quarter for French. Painting or Drawing 50 cents. Pupils boarding themselves or with their particular friends are charged \$4, \$6, and \$7 per term of fourteen weeks for tuition according to studies pursued. The Trustees beg leave to assure the public that no measures on their part will be spared to make this a First Class Institution. They will immediately erect additional buildings to be used as a boarding-house for Young Ladies, Chapel, etc., at a cost of \$10,000 or more and will make all other necessary improvements.

Catalogues with an appendix affording all requisite knowledge of the school will be sent to persons requesting it, on application to the Rev. Amos Brown, Principal.<sup>6</sup>

As indicated in that notice, in 1854 construction began on a boarding house for the young lady students and a chapel. It was a four-story building 102 by 40 feet and adjoined the Academy building on the north. It was dedicated on August 1, 1855. (Later that same day that a meeting was held to make serious plans to have the state's agricultural college located in the town of Ovid.) With two students per room, the new building could accommodate thirty gentlemen and forty ladies, "in distinct departments." One of the yearly catalogues stated these rules

**Things Required of Students:**

1. To be regular in rising and retiring, and punctual at table, class, chapel, bible class and church, and to take three studies.
2. To treat each other with courtesy, and every member of the Faculty with becoming respect.
3. To ask no favors of the servants but prefer every request for any thing connected with the kitchen or dining room departments directly to the housekeeper.



4. To be responsible for any disturbance in one's room, and for all damage to it or its furniture, and to admit a teacher demanding admission without delay.
5. To put rooms in order early in the morning, and never to sweep dirt in the hall after 8 o'clock, A.M.
6. Every light must be extinguished at 10 o'clock, P.M.

**Things Forbidden to Students:**

7. To go all at another's room during study hours without permission of the teacher in charge of the hall.
8. To hold conversation with any student in any recitation hall or recitation room during study hours.
9. To be absent from the premises during study hours or at night without proper leave.
10. To throw any thing or converse from the windows.
11. To smoke upon the premises.
12. To keep any sort of firearms or gunpowder in room.
13. To play cards or indulge in gaming; use spirituous liquors as a beverage; use profane or indecent language, or do any thing contrary to good morals and good order.
14. For ladies and gentlemen to visit each other's rooms.
15. For ladies and gentlemen to associate together in walking or riding, without the consent of the Principal; also for young ladies to receive calls from young gentlemen without the consent of the Principal.

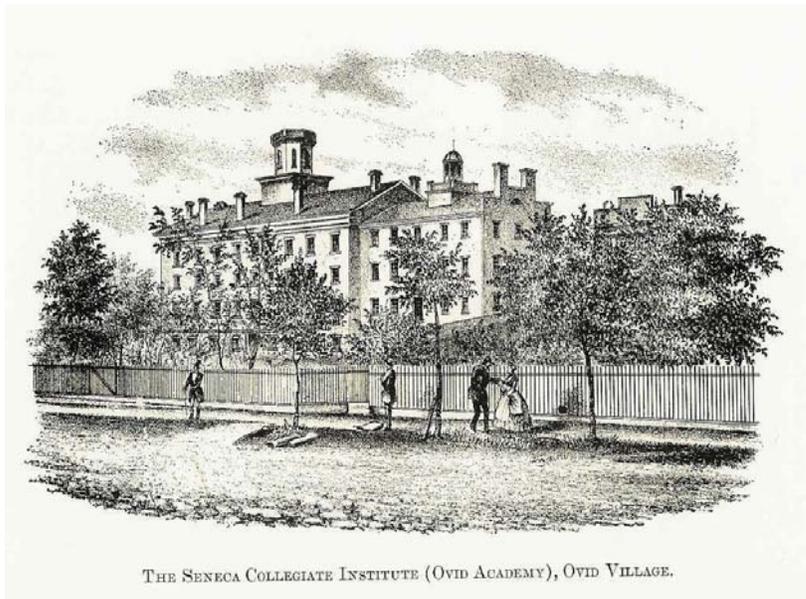
**Such other regulations as shall from time to time be made must be observed, equally with these, by students.**<sup>7</sup>

**The Seneca Collegiate Institute**

Within three years, the New York State Board of Regents described the Ovid Academy as the best organized school in the state. In 1854, student enrollment was 356 (compared with 114 in 1826). Ovid Academy was so successful that by 1855 it had outgrown its building and was planning to change its name to the Seneca Collegiate Institute.<sup>8</sup> The name Seneca Collegiate Institute was adopted in 1856.

This period of prosperity and success for The Ovid Academy/The Seneca Collegiate Institute was short-lived. Amos Brown resigned in principal in 1857. There was a rapid succession of principals serving brief terms. Student enrollment declined, especially as the country moved closer to what would become the Civil War. Financial difficulties mounted.

The Seneca Collegiate Institute closed its doors.<sup>9</sup>



**THE**  
**EAST GENESEE**  
**CONFERENCE SEMINARY,**  
 AT  
**OVID, N. Y.**

**FACULTY.**

REV. J. EASTER, A. M., *Principal,*  
 GREEK AND LATIN.

HENRY S. DENNIS, A. M., *Vice-Principal,*  
 Mathematics and Natural Science.

MRS. J. E. D. EASTER, *Preceptress,*  
 Modern Languages and English Literature.

MISS CYNTHIA MCKINSTRY,  
 Music and Drawing.

MISS HATTIE CORYELL,  
 Primary Department.

**The East Genesee Conference Seminary,**

Long known as the Ovid Academy—has one of the finest locations in the country. It is situated upon an elevated plateau, between the Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, and commands one of the most

**MAGNIFICENT AND EXTENSIVE VIEWS**

to be found anywhere. It is easy of access, being connected by steamboat with the N. Y. Central and Erie Railroads. The Seminary building is a fine brick edifice, four stories high, and one hundred and fifty feet long.

REV. S. L. CONGDON, *President,*  
 SILAS M. KINNE, *Treasurer,*  
 JAMES FERGUSON, *Secretary,* } **BOARD OF TRUSTEES.**

### East Genesee Conference Seminary

The citizens of Ovid raised funds to pay off the debts of The Seneca Collegiate Institute. The building and apparatus were donated to the East Genesee Conference of the Methodist Church. On February 11, 1864, the facility was incorporated as the East Genesee Conference Seminary.

This Seminary enjoyed brief success. The course of study was arranged for a Graduating Course, a College Preparatory Course, a Teacher's Department, and Select Studies. There was a three-year course of study, with those who completed it and passed examinations would receive a diploma. On June 28, 1871 the last graduation was held, with Chester A. Congdon, Wilbur H. Johnson and Nat. M. Wheeler the last graduates. Following this last graduation, church conference ended its patronage and the East Genesee Conference Seminary ceased to exist.<sup>10</sup> (The ad shown at left was taken from the 1867 Child's business directory for Seneca County.<sup>11</sup>)

### The Seneca Academy of Music

On April 4, 1870, the facility reopened as The Seneca Academy of Music, as an enlargement of the music department of the East Genesee Conference Seminary. Several rooms in the Seminar building were used for practice rooms. The Session Room of the Baptist Church was used as the general class room. A.N. Johnson and John M. Chadwick had secured a twenty-five year lease on the building. Principal was John M. Chadwick who had been a teacher of music in the Seminary. A.N. Johnson of Boston was President of the Seneca Academy of Music as well as the Miami Academy of Music at Xenia, Ohio. In 1871, he published *The True Singing School Text Book* and *The Domestic Concert Collection No. 1*.<sup>12</sup>

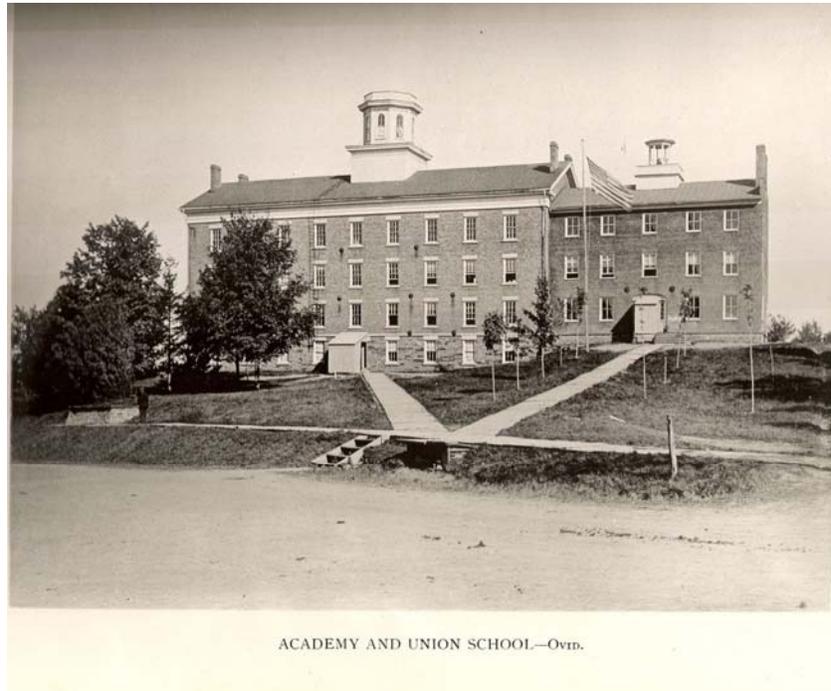
Tuition for a full course was \$25 per term. This price included the use of instruments and the practice rooms. This full course program included all the studies which a student could take and complete successfully. For a lesser number of studies, the tuition was proportionately reduced. A two-weeks Normal Course was held at the beginning of each term. Tuition for the Normal Course was \$3.00.

The Seneca Academy of Music attained a very high standing for musical excellence. From time to time it presented concerts in neighboring villages. Miss Anna Burlew, Miss Nellie Seeley and Miss Inez Clough were the first to complete the course of study and graduated on June 27, 1871.

Despite the lease on the building, the complications of the financial troubles that had led to the closing of the East Genesee Conference Seminary led to a mortgage sale of the property on April 17, 1872. The property and building became the property of the Union Free School District No. 1. The Union School had been holding classes in the Union School building, a brick building that had been completed in late 1858 on the east side of Prospect Street, just north of the intersection with Seneca Street. Starting with the fall 1872 term, classes of the Union School were held at the The Ovid Academy/The Seneca Collegiate Institute building.<sup>13</sup>

On June 26, 1872, *The Ovid Bee* reported that “the Seneca Academy of Music has quietly subsided, gone ‘where the woodbine twineth,’—and tho’ lost to sight, to music dear.”<sup>14</sup> On November 4, 1872, the Union Free School commenced classes with the Rev. Henry Osborn as Principal.

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- <sup>1</sup> *Town & Village of Ovid, Seneca Co., N.Y.: An Early History*, compiled by Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison and Co. Printers, 1990, p 43.
- <sup>2</sup> Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., *New York State Agricultural College*, Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison & Co, 1978, p
- <sup>3</sup> *History of Seneca County, New York*, Philadelphia: Everts and Everts Publishing, 1876, p 56.
- <sup>4</sup> Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., *New York State Agricultural College*, Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison & Co, 1978, pp 82-83.
- <sup>5</sup> Daniel W. Lang, *Origins of the American Land Grant College Movement*, p 36.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Elmira Gazette*, December 29, 1853.
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www/rootsweb.com/~nyseneca/60ovidac.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> Daniel W. Lang, *Origins of the American Land Grant College Movement*, p 36.
- <sup>9</sup> Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., *New York State Agricultural College*, Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison & Co, 1978, pp 88.
- <sup>10</sup> *Town & Village of Ovid, Seneca Co., N.Y.: An Early History*, compiled by Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison and Co. Printers, 1990, p 47.
- <sup>11</sup> Hamilton Child, *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Seneca County, N.Y. for 1867-8*, Syracuse: The Journal Office, 1867, p 155.
- <sup>12</sup> *Town & Village of Ovid, Seneca Co., N.Y.: An Early History*, compiled by Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison and Co. Printers, 1990, p 47.
- <sup>13</sup> *Town & Village of Ovid, Seneca Co., N.Y.: An Early History*, compiled by Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison and Co. Printers, 1990, p 47.
- <sup>14</sup> Wayne E. Morrison, Sr., *New York State Agricultural College*, Ovid, NY: W. E. Morrison & Co, 1978, p 90.