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Historical Presentation at the 100 Year  
Celebration  
Rogersville City School  
Rogersville, TN



## ROGERSVILLE CITY SCHOOL

I wish to thank Director Edwin Jarnigan and other distinguished guests for being here today. I also would like to welcome back many alumni of this school who are here today who I hope will have fond recollections of those happy days of yesteryear. We welcome each of you back with joyful hearts.

Seeing this brilliant assembly now before me, with today's present circumstance of celebration, we must first pause to recognize the working heart of a great nation that is still teeming with patriotism. We reflect on days of those early men who gathered in those great Halls to declare Independence to create a Land of the Free and Home of the Brave. 247 years have now passed, and our mother land has now taken rank as the greatest nation of all the Earth. The Constitution of our nation has granted more benefit upon mankind than any other parchment bestowed upon our intellect. The question now, just as our fathers before us asked, is how to preserve the principles of this lasting document and ensure that these graces showered upon us by it, are passed to those who live after us. If we take serious inquiry into these matters to see how the Great Architect has blessed this land so abundantly, we may yet learn to avoid the same fates of those mighty nations of antiquity who have perished. Our merciful Creator has provided such blessings our way, and we must act to preserve our Country from the perils of darkness that threaten our Republic.<sup>1</sup>

Have we not seen in recent times the results of unbridled liberty that oversteps the bounds of reason? Our freedoms are coveted by all, but the vileness of many tyrannical rulers threatens those very freedoms. Our ancestors fought against such ideological oppressors many times across the ages. But the same question persists - how do we preserve the principles of our constitution?<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is better answered by the Reverend J.D. McCabe in 1849, who spoke at the laying of our original cornerstone of this building. The Rev. McCabe stated:

*“The people must be educated—the seeds of virtue and intelligence must be scattered broadcast over the country—the common school must be erected in every neighborhood. It is to these that the lovers of the constitutional freedom—the friends of law and order—must look for the protection and perpetuation of our free institutions. So entirely and profoundly were the fathers of our country impressed with this truth, that in their communications to Congress, they urged it as of the first importance.”*

Reverend McCabe continued by quoting our nation's most well know war hero,

George Washington:

*“There is nothing which can better deserve your patronage, than the promotion of Science and Literature. Knowledge is, in every country, the surest basis of public happiness...To the security of a free Constitution, it contributes, in various ways, by convincing those entrusted with the public administration, that every valuable end of Government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people; —by teaching the people themselves to know and value their own rights, to discern and provide against invasions of them To distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority.”*

In his farewell address to the nation, Washington again declared:

*“Institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge, are objects of primary importance to the nation.”*

James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, remarked:

*“a popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy.”*

Thomas Jefferson, argued that governments

*“derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.”*

Education makes that consent possible. Jefferson also warned against the ‘*tyranny*’ of government that would follow unless the “*people at large*” were “*educated at the common expense of all.*”

John Adams was also very clear on the importance of educating

*“every rank and class of people, down to the lowest and poorest”  
had “to be the care of the public”  
and “maintained at the public expense.”*

In his Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, John Adams also placed education at the very core by declaring,

*“wisdom and knowledge, diffused generally among the body of the people are necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties”*

Tennessee Governor Austin Peay, speaking at this very same school at its dedication in 1923—

He spoke of the extension of education to all classes of people, and stated that the decline of the empires of Rome and Greece fell through neglect of their education of the populace.

Such knowledge and wisdom from these founding fathers and early leaders now leads us to our story in Rogersville, Tennessee at our Historic Rogersville City School.

Today is a symbol of great and enduring principles for our Rogersville City School. We gather to celebrate 100 years of strength in education. Even this year, we have seen the Teacher of the Year for the entire State of Tennessee come from these very halls. Yet, let us not forget that our school structure was also erected as a memorial to those local brave souls who gave their lives during WW1, The Great War. Though the cannons have quieted their roar, the names of those soldiers, 100 years later, are still etched on the honorable tablet that towers near the North entrance. As a student, I walked to this school every day for 9 years, but I was unaware of the mighty history of this inspiring place, and of its lasting stories buried deep within its foundation. So, let's dive into our far past together and learn of our school's monumental chronicles.

Two centuries ago, an adventurous Irish Immigrant planted his Peach and Cherry orchards in our community's early settlement. Our present school and town name of Rogersville are born from his, Joseph Rogers. Rogers arrived here when our area was known as Spencer County in the newly formed State of Franklin before later becoming Hawkins County, NC and Hawkins County TN. Now, we all gather on that same plot of land where Rogers grew those orchards. Just as the fruit trees sprung from seedlings to maturity under harsh conditions of those days, so has our local frontier land and its people surmounted obstacles to advance our people's movements within our educational system and families.

We now arrive to the year 1849, and the Odd Fellows Lodge purchased a 66-acre parcel from Matilda Nall Rogers, the daughter-in-law of Joseph Rogers, for the purpose of building the Rogersville Female Institute. After clearing the land of the withered orchards, the original cornerstone was laid July 4, 1849 by the Lodge, and the Institute was opened in 1850. Broadway Street, now in front of the school, was built after the school's construction. The road was originally known as Institute Avenue, then College Avenue, then Broad Avenue, and finally

Broadway. The Reverend William Jones was the first Principal at the Institute. This facility gained fame and recognition throughout many states. The East and West wings were added in 1853, although the interior of the East wing was not completed until 1863.

In 1882, the Presbyterian Synod of Nashville (4 presbyteries made up this Synod-Nashville, Colombia, Knoxville, Holston) purchased the school for use as a female seminary. Although already known as Rogersville Synodical college by this time, the Synod registered the school with the State in 1892.<sup>2</sup> This became a leading institution in the South for the education of women for many years. There were already females from 8 different states attending in 1888. By 1914, local public schools such as McMinn Academy were closing their doors, and the Synodical College began accepting local grammar and high school students. In 1919, the Town of Rogersville borrowed \$10,000 from King College, and purchased this facility to house elementary through high school students. There was a small fire in the structure in 1921, and the building needed to be replaced. Construction on a new school began in 1922 on the original foundations of the Old College. The original 1849 cornerstone was discovered, but all that was found inside were the old silver and gold coins and papers that had turned to dust. Local churches opened their doors and allowed students and teachers to use their space for classrooms until the new school was completed. The \$125,000 school was completed during the Spring of 1923 and had state-of-the-art classrooms for its day and an impressive teaching staff.

On July 4, 1923, a great ceremony was conducted by the Town of Rogersville to dedicate the new Rogersville School. It is said that 10,000 people attended the day's festivities, packed tightly into the streets of our tiny town. There was a grand parade through town, many speakers of great stature, a band concert on campus, and fireworks from the southern hills of town.

Speakers scheduled for the day included:

- Tennessee Governor Austin Peay who gave the patriotic address
- General L.D. Tyson, distinguished officer who helped to break the Hindenberg line in WWI  
Today's McGhee Tyson airport in Knoxville bears the name of General Tyson's son who was a naval aviator who died during The Great War. General Tyson also spoke separately to Hawkins County parents that day who had lost their children to the War. The names of the lost Hawkins Countians are still on the tablet located at the North entrance of the school.
- Sergeant Alvin York, designated as the "most distinguished soldier that the World War produced." However, his wife fell suddenly ill, and he was unable to attend.
- Major George Berry, war officer and President of the Pressman's Union in Rogersville. Member of the National Council of Defense. Spent War time in Verdun, Paris, and Bordeaux.
- W.L. Gentry, well-known educator, and a force at Carson Newman college.

That Fall, 22 Seniors were entered into the school. Part of the school was known as Rogersville High School and the other part was known as Rogersville Grammar School.

Only 5 years later, in 1928, the school burned to the ground on a very cold, wintry night. The city was experiencing near record temperatures and much of the water from the hydrants was freezing up. The townsfolk were helpless and could only watch in despair. In 1929, the school was rebuilt nearly as an exact duplicate of the 1923 structure, costing only \$65,178. The foundations, front and East walls were used in restoring the new building.

Throughout the 1930's the school continued its academic excellence that it was known for while continuing to build its athletic programs. After a 1926 State Championship in Men's Track & Field, the school saw both 5-man and 11-man football schedules begin during the 30's, and the basketball teams were a force. Baseball had been a staple of Rogersville athletics since the 1800's, and several also played tennis. Some of these sports were a part of the Upper East Tennessee Athletic Association (UETAA). Several of our oldest, long-standing sports rivals from the region include Newport, Greeneville, Morristown, Kingsport, Erwin, and Elizabethton. During the 40's, Rogersville football teams used makeshift equipment such as leather helmets and homemade pads laced together with shoestrings.

Some of the school's trophies from the 20's and 30's still exist and are housed today at Rogersville Middle School. The 1926 State Championship Men's Track & Field trophy can be seen here today, on display in the Rogersville City School "Ben Cunningham" library. It is the only known State Championship title of any team from the Hawkins County or Rogersville areas.

After the City of Rogersville weathered much of the Great Depression years of the 1930's, it experienced an era of growth during the 1940's. Not only were businesses in the area beginning to bounce back stronger, but the enrollment numbers of the school increased. The growth was so significant there became a need for a separate high school. After collaboration between Rogersville City School and Hawkins County Schools, the County school district began construction on a new, separate Rogersville High School which opened in 1950. Although this alleviated some of the congested population at Rogersville City School, the Rogersville City School enrollment continued to climb, and a \$122,000, 14,000 sq. ft. addition was added in 1955, known as the West Wing, complete with a new cafeteria. Fifteen years later, the East Wing was constructed in 1970 to accommodate further enrollment numbers, and this wing contained a new library.

The final expansion arrived in the year 2000 with a massive 46,000 sq. ft., \$7 million construction on the south side of the school, complete with the latest technology, modern classrooms, and a new gymnasium.

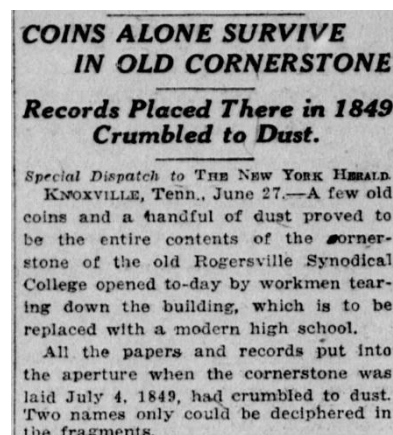
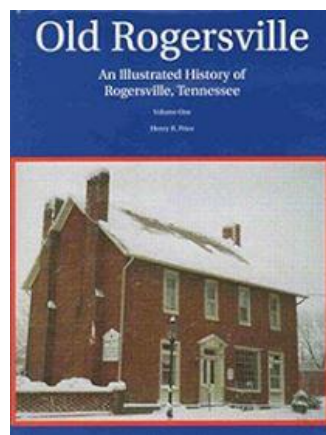
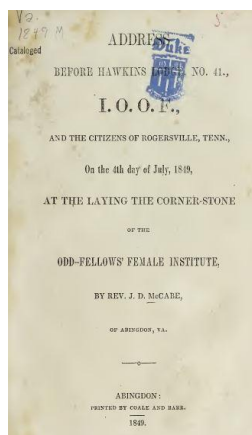
Enduring through wars, famine, and financial crises, The Rogersville City School still towers tall and strong, a beacon of patriotism, strength, and education. I still recall those sounds of music from those bygone grammar school days, beating with "America the Beautiful," and the "Star Spangled Banner." The staff and students of our institution during the old days were known as The Greatest Generation as they built our country, our towns, our schools, fought in the World Wars, and anguished throughout The Great Depression. Yet, they marched onward with intestinal fortitude and exemplary lives. Let us not forget those from our very ranks who have answered our Nation's call throughout all our generations. Some alumni here today are battle worn with the scars of war emblazoned upon your memory. Let us give great honor to these brothers and sisters, for they have made this a "Sweet Land of Liberty" so that educational establishments such as Rogersville City School may continue.

In closing, I leave you with this:  
"Time is the impartial trier of man's work."

100 years of work before us can now be seen. Our townsfolk produced every type of laymen and occupation. What we all do today will be tested by Father Time, and our ancestors will judge us by our work that is before us now. Let us labor with love to build what is good and lasting for our children and their grandchildren. Let us teach and build both minds and hearts. As our founding fathers understood, and fought for very clearly, the education of our people is of utmost importance for the continuance of our existence as a nation. May we forever give thanks to our Great Creator. May God continue to pour his blessings upon Rogersville City School and all who travel upon its distinguished grounds or between its venerable walls.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted for 2023 from Rev J.D. McCabe's 1849 speech at the laying of the cornerstone.

<sup>2</sup> From Henry Price's book *Old Rogersville* (2002)



Consulted sources:

*Address Before Hawkins Lodge No. 41, I.O.O.F., And the Citizens of Rogersville, Tenn., on the 4<sup>th</sup> Day of July, 1849 At the Laying The Corner-Stone of the Odd Fellows Female Institute* (1849) by Rev. J.D. McCabe.

*Old Rogersville* (2002) by Henry Price

Many Newspapers articles from 1848-2000.