

# THE MAKING OF MANLIUS PEBBLE HILL: A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

by Tina Morgan, Director of Development

Head of School Baxter Ball often refers to Manlius Pebble Hill as the “little school that could.” A casual visitor to the campus might interpret this to mean that the accomplishments of the students, alumni, and faculty are amazing despite the small physical plant...and they are indeed. However, when referring to MPH’s history, perhaps a more apropos analogy would be “the little school that almost wasn’t.” A child of its two parent schools, Manlius and Pebble Hill, MPH retains qualities of each. Its history is one of struggles and triumphs, and alumni can be proud of the part they each played in making MPH the success it is today.

## The Manlius Heritage

“To rear men well-built and vital, full of wisdom... full of energy... full of faith.” With these words the Rev. Frederick Dan Huntington founded St. John’s School in 1869. St. John’s was a non-military, all-boys school for the first ten years of its existence. The military component was added to St. John’s in 1879, but by 1887 dwindling enrollment left the School on the verge of closing. To survive, St. John’s needed to change.

The man responsible for turning around St. John’s was Gen. William Verbeck. Assuming all financial responsibility for the School, he was a man with a gift for educating, managing, and inspiring boys. Military schools were gaining in popularity and Verbeck capitalized on the country’s enthusiasm for military education. He placed emphasis on and refined military training for boys believing that “under such a system a truly manly and independent nature is cultivated.” Under his leadership, the School thrived and was renamed The Manlius School in 1924.

Verbeck served The Manlius School until his death in 1930. For the next 40 years, The Manlius School continued to thrive and gained national acclaim as one of the country’s premier educational institutions, both militarily *and* academically.

## Manlius’ Position at the time of the Merger

For all appearances, The Manlius School of 1969 was in a great position. It was graduating some of the finest students in the nation, was recognized as a Military Honor School, had recently built a new dorm, and had just kicked off its Centennial Campaign to raise money for the endowment. A mere 12 months later, however, The Manlius School merged with Pebble Hill. More than one Old Boy asked “*What happened?*”

Fiscally, Manlius was standing on thin ice. The School relied on an enrollment of 300 students to meet its operating costs. Without an endowment, something the Board was trying to address through the Centennial Campaign, even a slight decline in enrollment meant the School was operating in the red. Unfortunately timing was also not on Manlius’ side as the country’s enthusiasm for military education was quickly waning. Vietnam had a profound effect on America’s perception of the military and military schools. Although Manlius seemed to be busting at the seams, as evidenced by the necessity of building Pixley Hall in 1967, it was in a precarious position. Much of the Manlius infrastructure was in need of updating and repairs, and operating costs had increased dramatically with the oil embargo in effect. Manlius treasurer, Al Wertheimer ’55C remembers that the heating costs had increased from around \$40,000 annually to over \$300,000 in just two years.

To meet the fixed operating costs, Manlius was forced into further debt, which they took on in good faith, counting on an upswing in enrollment, a promised bequest, and the success of the Centennial Campaign. The fiscally minded Board, however, started working on an alternate option. It was during the spring of 1969 that the Board first approached Pebble Hill School about a partnership. Even after

Pebble Hill’s initial rebuff, Manlius knew it needed to change with the times. That spring, the Board’s Executive Committee voted unanimously to recommend that Manlius be converted to a non-military prep school.

Despite these precautionary measures, Manlius remained confident that the tide would turn. However, when only 285 cadets returned for the 1969 school year, Manlius knew it would have to act soon. Although the Board appealed to parents, alumni, and faculty, and all fought valiantly to boost enrollment, solicit Centennial Campaign pledges, and cut back on as many programs as they could, Manlius was quickly running out of time. By December of 1969 the banks were unwilling to lend Manlius further funds and called on the Board to form an action plan. Without the banks willingness to lend further money, Manlius would have to shut its doors mid-year. As Manlius Board Chairman Bob Kallet ’39B said in a December 10, 1969 Board memo: “We have been requested by our supporting banks to present a realistic program for the continued successful financial operation of the School. Our deficits continue, due largely to the failure of 15% of accepted candidates to register for the fall term, and despite the imposition of every possible economy upon the School’s operation.” The talks with Pebble Hill took on a new urgency and with Pebble Hill’s renewed interest, a formal proposal was planned for the January 17 Board meeting.

## Pebble Hill’s Story

Pebble Hill was founded with a mission that mirrors that of Manlius. In 1926 a group of Syracuse fathers decided to establish a school where their “boys could receive the benefits of an academic and physical education to train their minds and bodies for the future.” The current DeWitt campus was purchased and classes were held in the Farmhouse until 1929, when a new building was constructed to



Robert M. Kallet '39B, 1970 Chairman of the Manlius Board of Trustees, Robert B. Simonton '50, 1970 President of the Pebble Hill Board of Trustees, Dr. Richard Barter, 1970 Headmaster of Pebble Hill, and Col. Hugh Irish, 1970 President of The Manlius School.



Sharon King '71, Richard Clemow '71B, O'Hara Humphries '71B, and Dorothy Maffei '70 collaborate on merger ideas.



Sharon King '71 and Richard Clemow '71B reflect on the impending merger.

house Upper School students. Twenty-three years later, Pebble Hill began to accept female students.

Throughout the next twenty years, Pebble Hill had its own challenges and champions. Like Manlius, it had a Board of Trustees that was instrumental in assuring its growth and success. Slowly but steadily, Pebble Hill continued to grow and by the late 1960s the School was in desperate need of more space.

### Pebble Hill at the Time of the Merger

To the students of the 60s, Pebble Hill was a thriving institution. In 1969, it boasted an enrollment of 292 day students, the highest in its history. Financially, although Pebble Hill was better off than Manlius in that it had a low mortgage on the property and did not carry many outstanding debts, it too had been funding capital improvements out of operating income. According to Pebble Hill's Board of Trustee President, Bob Simonton '50, during the summer of 1969 Pebble Hill had arranged for short-term borrowing to meet its operating costs and had operated at a slight deficit for the past few years. The proposed merger was seen as a collaboration that would potentially decrease some overhead costs in administration, student aid, and faculty salaries, while increasing campus facilities. The Board viewed the other option, expanding the DeWitt campus, as too limiting. As stated in the School's January 22, 1970 press release, "further expansion of Pebble Hill is possible, but only at particular grade levels because of the size and inflexibility of its present plant."

But increasing physical space and lowering the overhead costs were not the only concerns for Pebble Hill. Although enrollment was at an all time high, there were still only approximately 100 Upper School students. A 1970 Pebble Hill press release elaborates: "the present size of the School does not permit parallel programming of honors and advanced courses." A survey of Pebble Hill students who left before graduation, mostly to attend boarding schools, further confirmed the need to expand the student body. Survey results showed that many students would not have left Pebble Hill had the size of the Upper School permitted greater scope and depth of athletic, cultural, and social activities. Even current students, parents, and administrators recognized the limitations that the small student body had on Pebble Hill. The question wasn't if Pebble Hill should expand, but rather,

how Pebble Hill should expand. It was at this time that Manlius approached Pebble Hill with the idea of collaboration.

### The Rocky Years

Although there were the obvious downsides to a merger, the potential benefits for each school were intriguing. Manlius had the opportunity to disengage itself from the military stigma, which they had already planned to do *before* approaching Pebble Hill, while having an instant influx of students who would accommodate for the attrition of demilitarization. Pebble Hill saw the merger as a solution to its space concerns and felt that the addition of the Manlius cadets would quickly enhance their academic, athletic, cultural, and social offerings.

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## NOT ALONE IN BATTLE

*The conditions that led to the merger and subsequent demilitarization of The Manlius School impacted hundreds of military schools nationwide. During the heyday of military education, there were 116 military secondary schools in the Northeastern United States. Today, only three remain. For a listing of schools that had to choose between evolving and changing, or closing their doors, go to [www.cadetweb.net](http://www.cadetweb.net).*

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On paper, the merger seemed like a great idea but neither School foresaw all the difficulties that would arise. Had the merger gone as envisioned, both the Manlius and the Pebble Hill campuses would be preserved and alumni and friends would continue to support their alma maters. In reality, the newly formed Manlius Pebble Hill faced challenges and trials that no one anticipated.

Once the merger was officially announced in January of 1970, Manlius and Pebble Hill moved forward with the consolidation plans. Richard Barter, Pebble Hill's Headmaster, was appointed as Headmaster of the new School, with most of the Board of Trustees from Manlius and Pebble Hill agreeing to serve on the newly formed Board. Although Barter used his considerable skills to keep the School going, the

merger affected morale, enrollment, and financial support more negatively than anticipated. Enrollment dropped rapidly and neither School had an endowment to weather such a decline.

By April 1973, MPH was forced to close the Upper School on the Manlius campus as a cost-cutting measure. Board members started holding the first of the “save the school” meetings. Faculty member and alumnus Tom Denton ’65 remembers the “lean years” and credits the Board of Trustees, and current and former parents, for keeping MPH open. Often they reached into their personal pockets to pay heating bills and even faculty salaries. Denton recalls these meetings as revival-type forums which took place in the Barn. During this time, even faculty members were expected to tighten belts.

From the heroic efforts of MPH parents and Trustees, the School was able to reopen in the fall of 1973 by consolidating onto the DeWitt campus. Although the MPH Board gave careful thought and consideration to moving the School out to the Manlius campus, the cost of rehabilitating the buildings was prohibitive and there were no facilities to accommodate Lower School students. In addition, the “superhighway” that would have connected Manlius to the city of Syracuse was never constructed, limiting the Manlius campus’ accessibility for day students.

Even vacant, the Manlius campus cost the School in excess of \$100,000 a year for debt service, amortization of the Pixley Hall loan, sewer, security services, insurance, and other miscellaneous upkeep costs. These expenses forced MPH to put the Manlius campus on the market in the fall of 1973 with an asking price of \$3 million. Even though the Manlius campus was appraised at \$2.9 million, it turned out not to be a quickly liquidable asset. Zoning restrictions, rehabilitation and/or demolition costs, and rising interest rates turned away prospective buyers.

After a few years on the market, the asking price was dropped to \$1.2 million, an amount that barely covered the School’s debt on the buildings and land. During the time the Manlius campus was for sale, MPH was able to survive largely because of the \$1 million Pixley bequest it received in 1975. This money allowed the School to survive by paying creditors, meeting current operating deficits, and buying more time to sell the Manlius campus. Despite

marketing efforts, the Manlius campus sat vacant until 1979, when Longely Jones purchased it for a little over \$800,000. Contrary to rumors, the sale amount barely covered the School’s remaining debt.

### Stronger Together

At times, alumni of both Manlius and Pebble Hill have questioned the wisdom of the merger. There is no question that the School has evolved. Manlius had no choice and Pebble Hill took a chance. And MPH continues to evolve. Even alumni from the 1990s sometimes find it hard to recognize “their” school. But by the looks of MPH in 2007, all alumni have had a hand in its success and can be proud of their roots.

As a key player in the merger, former Trustee Les Deming ’46A sums up the reasons for the decision to merge: “I just couldn’t stand to see all the money and work that had been poured into Manlius for the past 100 years, be sold off and used to make some ‘banker’ richer. By reinvesting our efforts into academia, we would ensure that the work of our predecessors was not in vain. Boys, and yes, girls too, would continue to benefit from the vision of Manlius.” To survive, Manlius needed to change. To grow and continue in its success, Pebble Hill needed to change, too. Together they succeeded.

MPH was truly created by the blood, sweat, and tears of its predecessors. As reflected in the October 11, 1969 Manlius School Board minutes, it was the Board’s heartfelt wish that “the gates of Manlius always remain open for those who seek knowledge and, once attained, signify a friendly welcome to all ‘Old Boys,’ their families, and friends, down through the years.” Judging from the hundreds of students who seek knowledge in our halls and the scores of alumni who attend Clambake each year, the valiant men and women of Manlius and Pebble Hill ensured that those gates remained open. At MPH, all alumni are welcomed with open arms and encouraged to see for themselves just how much they have to be proud of. The Phoenix has indeed risen from the ashes.

*A special thanks to the following individuals who contributed to this article by sharing their memories or simply reviewing it for accuracy: Chuck Beeler ’54, Les Deming ’46A, Tom Denton ’65, Harold “Bud” Edwards ’40, Jon Lichtman ’70, Bob Simonton ’50, and Al Wertheimer ’55C.*

## VOICES FROM THE MERGER

*“The old Manlius is not a place, nor buildings; but it is rather people and ideas with whom we have become friends. In this sense, the old Manlius is not gone, but is still Manlius and ever will be. Those of us here view the merger of the two schools with mixed emotions – the mixed emotions of a father who regrets the passing of his son’s boyhood yet looks ahead with hope to his son’s future. We can look to the future with the hope inherent in Sir Walter Scott’s words, ‘Nothing that was worthy in the past departs... it lives and works through endless change.’”*

– Dave Edwards, head of the English department at Manlius for the past 24 years, as printed in the Winter 1970 Old Boys Bulletin.

*“During my 30-years at Manlius, I have witnessed three cycles in public acceptance of military schools. It’s hard for us to remember that prior to World War II many parents harbored unfavorable opinions of the concept. Many expressed their disapproval in writing and in their reluctance to send their sons here. Shortly after WWII, military schools became extremely popular and it was fashionable to have a relative at Manlius. Twenty-five years ago, classrooms were full. The years since have seen a steady decline in both parents’ and students’ interest in attending even as good a military boarding school as Manlius. No reflection on our honor school, but rather a complete turnabout in adult and juvenile attitudes...no, Manlius School is not dead. Instead, it has a new life and a new meaning for today’s students, tomorrow’s leaders.”*

– Bernie Shaw, former Manlius and MPH faculty member, as printed in the Summer 1970 Old Boys Bulletin

*“It is my personal opinion that the merger of the two schools should not bring to an end the traditions and memories of either school, but should reinforce our conviction that through the merger we are able to continue the quality education both offered. Each school brought its strengths to the merger and hopefully we can continue to offer a much needed service to young men and women.”*

– Chuck Beeler ’54, Director of Admission, as printed in the Winter 1971 Alumni Bulletin.