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SPARKS AGRICULTURAL HIGH SCHOOL - 1909 - 1000 Sparks Road, Sparks. Stone school house designed by Thomas Jones and Sons as high school with an agricultural curriculum. Several times expanded. Later turned into an elementary school. Celebrated 75th anniversary in 1984. A nature trail built by students leads through the woods.

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Burned Sunday, January 8, 1995
See vertical file

line, as the names of the trustees included people that lived in that area.

Tax-Supported Public Schools

Public money for the support of public schools had been on the minds of the state legislators since the early 1800's and finally, about the time of the Civil War, an act was passed which set our public educational system in motion. The County Commissioners were authorized by this act to appoint a Board of School Commissioners, to establish schools, to employ teachers and to levy a tax of not more than four cents per one hundred dollars of property value to pay for these schools. The commissioners immediately began to take over existing schools and to build new ones where needed. Ten years later there were ninety-nine schools in all Baltimore County, forty-six of them log construction.

Memories of the little one-room school are still vivid in the minds of the older generation in Northern Baltimore County. Quite a few of the schools are still in use — as private houses; churches (Monkton's Isaiah Baptist); or fellowship halls (Oakland & Wiseburg). At least one, Shamberger's, was torn down to make way for Prettyboy Reservoir, and some, such as Kidd's and Baker's, were torn down in recent years.

One by one, the old log schools were replaced by neat brick or frame structures as authorized by the Board of Education. However, even after the turn of the present century, heat still came from pot-bellied stoves, water was dipped up by a dipper used by all, slates were used for written exercises and bad weather and farm chores kept the absentee rate high. Teachers' salaries which averaged \$250 in 1850, rose to \$600 a year in 1914. All students paid seventy-five cents a term for the use of books. There are a number of receipts for these payments kept as mementoes: the late Mrs. Sarah Hammond had one for School No. 7, District No. 6, signed by her grandfather, L. M. Williams in January, 1879. Mr. Lyman Huff has an earlier one for a School No. 2 in the same area.

The Agricultural High School

The Agricultural High School at Sparks made its appearance on the Northern Baltimore County scene in 1909, the first real secondary school for pupils in this area. Previously some of the larger rural schools, such as Shane and Mt. Carmel, had been given high school status because of the inclusion of algebra and geometry in their curricula.

The people of the Sparks area remain proud to this day of the part they played in the building of

Sparks School. Residents of the community provided some of the money, building materials and labor, especially in the grading of the hilly site near York Road at Sparks. This school served as a high school for the entire northern area of Baltimore County until 1953 when Hereford Jr.-Sr. High School was built to replace it.



The Agricultural High School at Sparks

Sparks was one of the very first agricultural high schools in the entire United States and became a pilot school in its course offerings in forestry and farming for the boys and domestic science for the girls, instead of the academic courses offered at other high schools in Baltimore County. Alumni from the early years recall the forestry camp that was located on the Gunpowder Falls in a remote area called The Devil's Backbone (very close to where Prettyboy Dam is now located). Pictures in old albums show the boys and their teacher in front of the cabin in which they stayed for several weeks at a time . . . and of the boys and girls at a picnic site on the banks of the river. There are also photographic records of parades in which costumed students on horseback were carrying the Sparks Banner, both at the local school and at another unidentified school. The first class rings, appropriate for an agricultural school, had golden ears of corn engraved on them! Hereford High School, built to replace Sparks as a high school in 1953, is overcrowded, and a new middle school will open on Corbett Road in 1984.

Not all the public school students in Northern Baltimore County attended Sparks High School. Previous to 1909 those wishing a high school education went to Towson High School and even after the

establishment of the local high school, some students preferred the academic courses at Towson. Attending Towson High School meant traveling the railroad to Timonium and then taking the trolley to Towson. Since early Sparks High graduates entered such colleges as Harvard, the University of Wisconsin and the University of California, it is doubtful that the preparation at Towson was really better.

Negro Schools

The schools in the early years, whether private or free, were for white children only. The concept that Negro children should receive the benefits of education was not recognized by the state legislature until after 1865 and, when schools for Negroes were first established, only the tax money collected from Negro property owners was used for these schools. There is evidence that the Negro churches in Northern Baltimore County took the lead in securing education for their young people by starting schools in their church buildings.

By 1900 there were schools for Negro children in Sparks, Hereford, Butler and St. James on My Lady's Manor. At the time of the merger of schools following the Supreme Court decision in 1954 there had been similar schools in the Cuba Road, Shane and Blue Mount areas, although some of them had merged previously with larger schools. The school on Quaker Bottom Road, abandoned by the white children in 1909 when Sparks was built, was used as a Negro elementary school until shortly after 1954. Negro children who wished to attend high school had to travel by bus to the Negro High School in Towson until the merger.

Transportation

Children walked to school in the early days, a practice which the older generation sometimes looks back on as being good for them. In actual practice, it



Our First School Bus, 1903
in front of Butler School

limited the attendance of the very young, the frail child and those who lived a distance from the village school. The fortunate ones who lived near a station on the Northern Central Railroad rode the train to the nearest village with a school and it was by means of the railroad that the pupils from the upper end of the county attended Sparks High School. For some there was always the farm wagon enroute to the railroad station with a load of milk cans. Mr. Pearce, who graduated from Sparks in 1915, remembered shortening his walk from the upper Corbett Road to Sparks in this manner.

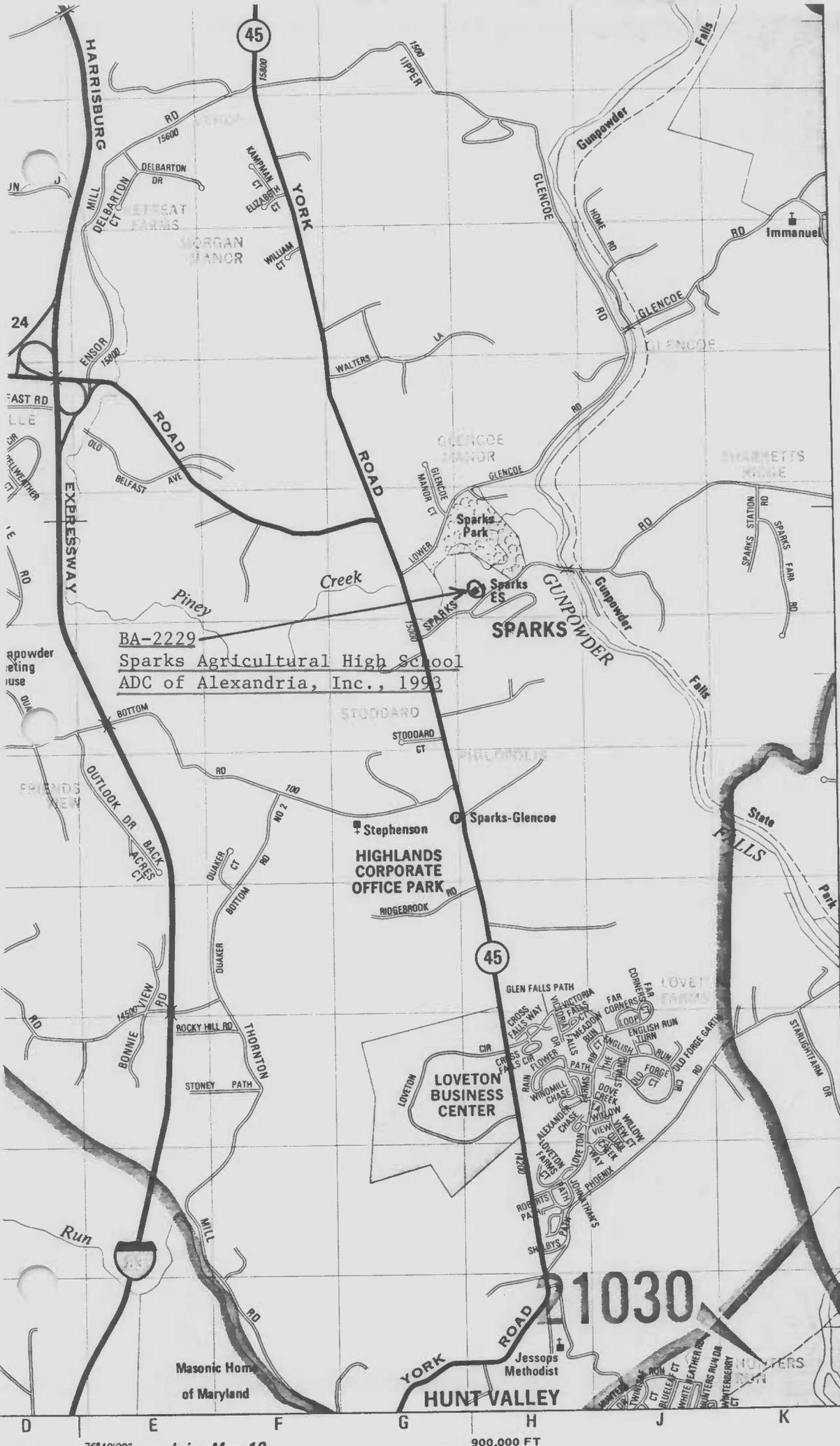
The first free transportation furnished by the Board of Education of Baltimore County was a horse-drawn vehicle with curtained sides to protect the pupils from bad weather, a sort of primitive school bus. It was used to take elementary school children to Butler School and the older students from the Belfast area to Sparks High School prior to 1920. Miss Eva Akehurst has memories of the bus and more joyful recollections of the sled which replaced it in snowy weather. According to her, the driver, Mr. Ensor, always attached bells to the harness when the horses were pulling an open sleigh.

Fond memories of these small schools are still a part of the recollections of many of our residents, as they are in rural areas in other parts of the United States. A brief recollection of a once very young lady from Shane may suffice for the whole subject. . . . "I went through eight grades in Shane School. Our teacher taught us to sew and to cook and to make tating. I still have the shuttle she gave me. We carried water and the teacher's lunch from across the road. In the spring we were allowed to go across the road at lunchtime and into the meadow to gather wild daffodils. This was a real treat. . . ."

Consolidation

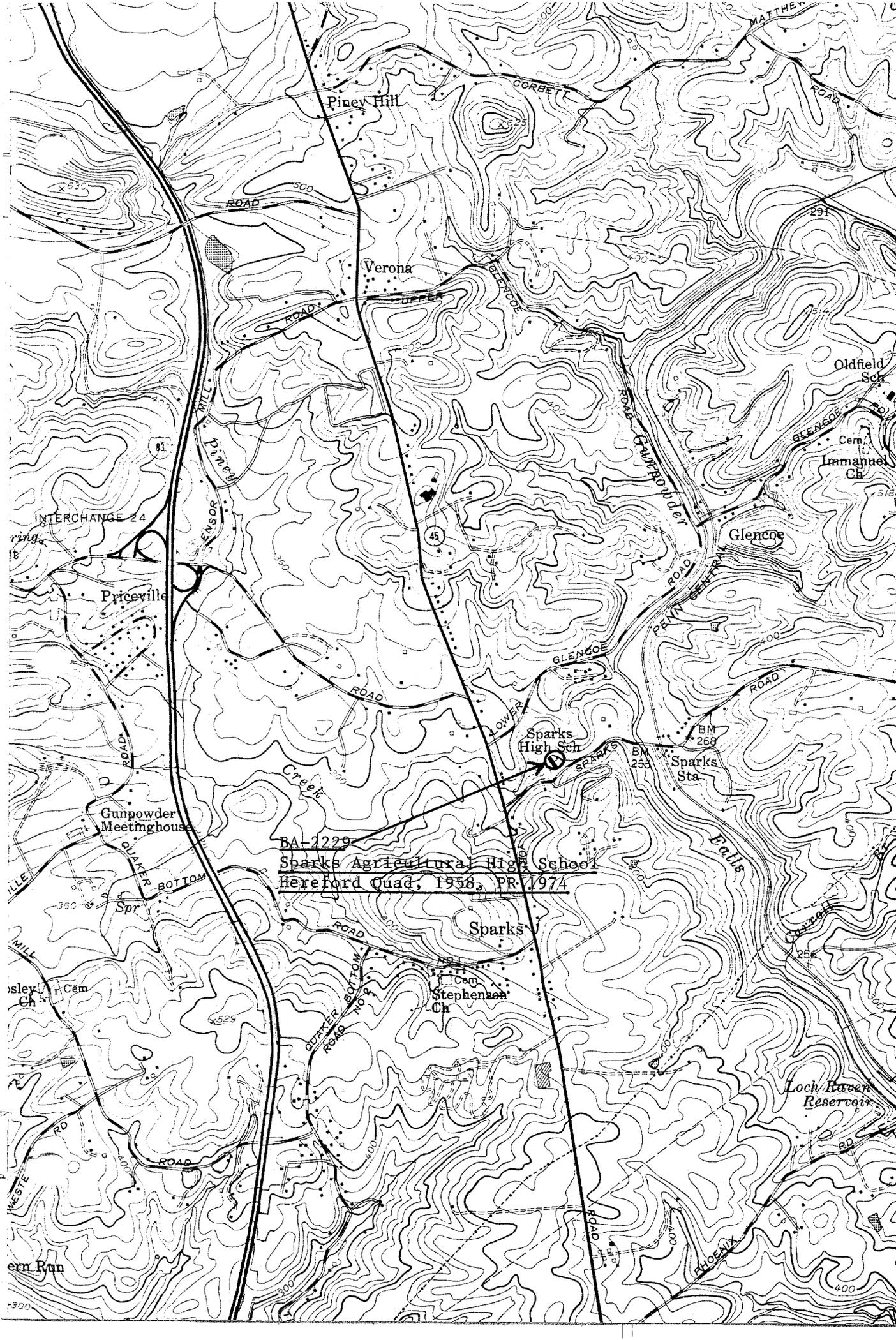
By 1930, Mr. Clarence Cooper, the Superintendent of Schools for Baltimore County, was determined that the children in this rural area should have a quality education identical to that being given in the suburban areas nearer to Towson. He began the process of building consolidated schools in the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Districts. These were large stone buildings with indoor bathrooms, central heating, gymnasiums . . . to name but a few of the conveniences the little school houses lacked.

For the information of the consolidations, we are indebted to the anniversary booklets produced by the administration and the P.T.A. groups of Fifth and Seventh Districts. Sixth District (now called



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 Sparks Agricultural High School
 ADC of Alexandria, Inc., 1993

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 Sparks Agricultural High School
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