

# *Peerless Places*

## *Rockville Academy*

*By Lorin V. Farris*

The handsome red brick building on the grassy knoll at the corner of South Adams and West Jefferson streets is referred to as Rockville Academy. The building represents one of the earliest private educational institutions in Rockville. The story of Rockville Academy begins in 1805 with a new law enacted by the Maryland General Assembly. The law appointed seven leading Rockville citizens to raise \$2,500 by lottery to purchase property and build a schoolhouse.

Construction of the two-story Federal style school building came to completion in 1812. The Academy was designed to face Jefferson Street located at what was considered the western limits of the town. Student tuition was \$10 a year and for an extra \$30 the students could board with local families or teachers. Enrollment varied from thirty to eighty students, all of which received a classical education studying subjects such as Latin, mathematics, English grammar, and geography.

Enrollment in the school started to decline when the General Assembly of Maryland passed a resolution in 1860 establishing countywide public schools. The future of Rockville Academy seemed bleak with the growing competition of newer schools in Montgomery County. Fortunately, Rockville Academy received the estate of attorney and farmer Julius West in the 1880s which allowed Rockville Academy Trustees to replace the aging school with a new one. The Trustees selected local builder, Edwin M. West, who recycled much of the material from the 1812 building and designed the school facing South Adams Street. Completed by the beginning of 1891, the Queen Anne style school included a three-story entry tower, patterned shingles and masonry, and pedimented gables with ocular windows.

Rockville Academy continued to struggle financially as it competed with



*Nineteenth century American education is often referred to as "The Common School Period." It was during this century that education went from being completely private to public. Above: The old Rockville Academy, circa 1880. Below: The new school in 1914. From the Peerless Rockville Collection.*



larger public and private schools. The school had to close its doors in 1916 when the State of Maryland stopped providing financial subsidies. For almost sixty years the building was passed from different tenants and leased to a variety of educational entities and community groups. After years of neglect and threats of demolition, Rockville Academy received local designation within the West Montgomery Historic District in 1974. The property's future turned around when Dr. and Mrs. Edward Halpern purchased the site and adapted the building into office space and the City of Rockville purchased one acre of the property to create a public park. Now knowing Rockville Academy's story, take a second look to appreciate the building's charm, history, and surrounding park land.