

How Somerset Won Its School

By Patricia Barry, Member, History and Archives Committee, Cumberland Avenue

In January 1928, a few Somerset mothers braved wintry weather to go door to door throughout Somerset, Friendship Heights and the communities now known as Kenwood and Chevy Chase West to determine how many children of elementary school age lived in the area. Their purpose was to convince the County education authorities that a new school was desperately needed.

At that time, most Somerset children attended the overcrowded E.V. Brown school on Connecticut Avenue in D.C. They hiked a mile across Wisconsin Avenue (which then had no sidewalks), across open fields and a stream, and past an open sewage dump. "Somerset mothers often organized relay services to see the children safely home," one resident later noted.



Original Somerset Elementary School. In later years, the school was frequently improved and extended with new buildings; the original block was demolished in 1971.

From Simmons, L.A., & Harman, D.K. (2005). Somerset: One Hundred Years a Town, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston SC. Page 55.



Edna Gish, with her son Donald.

From Simmons, L.A., & Harman, D.K. (2005). Somerset: One Hundred Years a Town, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston SC. Page 56.

The mother who led the survey, **Edna Miller Gish** (formerly Essex), acted fast. On February 6, she persuaded a meeting of Somerset Town Council to urge the Montgomery County Board of Education to establish a new school. By then, she had already:

- demonstrated that over 330 eligible children lived in the area;
- discussed the issue with the County's Superintendent of

Schools, citing his preferred policy of small schools located within walking distance of students' homes; and

- opened talks with a land agent to purchase a lot owned by Grace Shepherd Merchant (daughter of a notorious D.C. governor) at the top of Cumberland Avenue.

The project then progressed rapidly. In May, the County bought Mrs. Merchant's land for \$38,500, with the stipulation that her house there would not be demolished

until January 1, 1929. In the late summer of 1928, with the school still being built, her porch was used to enroll its first students. In October, the eight-room building was still not finished, but it opened with 138 students and six teachers.

The school's first principal – the beloved Kathryn Bricker, who ran it for 37 years – later described the red brick building as "hideous." She recalled that it had no paint or ceiling lights and only two lavatories. But the community finally had its own school, and Mrs. Bricker soon introduced a then-novel policy that brought the community even closer together: She insisted that PTA meetings be held in the evenings instead of afternoons, so that fathers could attend.

Edna Gish, who in 1928 also became the first woman elected to Somerset Town Council, is now recognized as the energizing force in the establishment of Somerset Elementary. Trained as a scientist, she graduated with a master's degree in chemistry from the University of Nebraska on June 9, 1915, and married Oliver Holmes Gish, a noted geophysicist and one of her former professors, later that same day. They lived on Essex Avenue, from 1922 to 1944, when he worked at the Carnegie Institution, and raised their four children there. Later they moved to Florida and finally to Athens, Georgia. But Mrs. Gish never forgot Somerset. After she died in 1990, just short of her 101st birthday, her family gave a generous bequest to the school in her honor.