A young man in upstate New York in about the year 1843 was in search of a career. Son of a merchant in Gowanda, Benjamin Roberts had chosen to seek a law license, which he indeed accomplished soon thereafter. But his life and future took a turn when he accompanied a friend to a revival meeting. This was during a time when many religious groups were springing up in the upstate area, sometimes called “The Burned over District”.

At this point Benjamin the lawyer became a seminary student at Wesleyan University in Connecticut where he earned a reputation as an outstanding student. Now a devout Christian, he wanted to devote himself to the ministry. He served several pastorates for the Methodist Church of the Genesee Conference until 1860 and the turbulent years of the Civil War. At a meeting of the annual conference, Benjamin Roberts took to the podium and delivered a fiery and passionate plea for the emancipation of slaves. He implored the church to take a leadership role. Not willing to step on the toes of the southern churches, the conference chose not to, at that time. With this disappointment, he established a new denomination, Free Methodist, and eventually landed in Rochester. He felt that, in addition to freeing slaves, that pews should be free (many churches sold or rented pews which left the underclass to stand during services), and that women should be free to take leadership roles – a progressive view in those days.

Always an advocate for education, Roberts’ new passion for a private school was taking place in his thinking and dreaming. In 1866, he learned that the Rumsey farm in North Chili was for sale. That farm extended from the south on Buffalo Road to the north past Westside Drive into Ogden. Catherine Rumsey was quite anxious to sell the farm and move downstate. Benjamin Roberts and his wife Ellen contacted the agent overseeing the sale and, invited him to visit them in Rochester to talk about a possible deal. He replied, “On my way to Albany by train, I will stop for a few minutes to hear of your idea.”

Which us exactly what Garrett Wilcox did. Roberts laid out his plan for the school, utilizing the farmhouse for classrooms, and laying out the curriculum. “How do you expect to pay for this?” Wilcox asked.

“Here’s what I’m prepared to do,” Roberts replied, “I will turn over my house to you as a down payment.”

“Oh no. That will never do,” said Wilcox, “Catherine will not agree to that, I’m positive.”

Not willing to let go of his dream, Roberts pursued the plans vigorously. They haggled back and forth until they realized that Wilcox had missed his train, the last one for the night.

Roberts apologized, “Please stay the night. Ellen will cook you a good breakfast and we’ll get you on the morning train.”

When morning came, Wilcox had a change of heart. “Something in your passion and intelligence has touched me. I will try to convince the owner of your vision.” And the deal was finally sealed.

That first year, the new Chili Seminary was a success, but in need of a lot more room. By this time Roberts and Wilcox had become friends. Wilcox suggested the Olde Stagecoach Inn, now vacant, as a supplement. He felt he could get funding. When that was accomplished, the building was transformed. The ballroom became classrooms and there was room for faculty and a kitchen. This was the forerunner in 1867 of what would become Roberts Wesleyan College. Desperately needing still more facilities, another building, four stories high, was built on the present campus soon after. When that building burned to the ground in September 1890, two days into the semester, the caring people of Chili quickly offered room and board to all the students while churches and large homes were opened as classrooms. Benjamin Roberts never forgot their generosity. He knew he had chosen the right place to establish his dream of a quality education and, hopefully, an enduring legacy for the town of Chili. Roberts Wesleyan became a four-year college in 1948, and though it had many rough times including the period of the Great Depression, it has endured for almost a century and a half.