

NOT SO GOOD OLD SCHOOL DAYS

By Ellen Knight¹

Forget nostalgia for the good old days. In looking back to the first school houses in the Winchester area, "primitive" might best describe them. They were built in 1794 (when the territory now in Winchester was still part of Woburn, Medford, and Charlestown) by Woburn in the two school districts of South Woburn,. The first was on Richardson's Row (Washington Street) and the second, known as the West Side School, on Cambridge Street.

According to Rev. Leander Thompson who attended school in North Woburn, "As they were remarkably similar...a brief description of the one...will answer for a likeness of all."²

"This spacious edifice," he wrote, was twenty feet square and eight feet high, with two small windows on each side and a small porch on one side.

"The house was unpainted, dingy and dirty within and without. On the right, and close by the door of the entrance, was the large high desk of the teacher. No maps; no pictures; no blackboard; no clock were on the blackened walls. No globe and no bell were upon the teacher's desk; but, instead, a very significant ruler and a well-remembered rod.

"In the centre of the room stood a large, shaky, old-fashioned 'box-stove' which was generally kept full of wood and was often 'red hot,' making the stove pipe, which went straight up and straight out at the four-cornered roof, quite musical."

Three tiers of seats ran around three sides of the building. "Only a few feet distant from the stove...was a very narrow plank seat for the smallest scholars, the seat having a perpendicular back considerably higher than the heads of the little ones when seated upon it, and absolutely nothing in front on which to rest hand or head. Sometimes the poor little sufferers, exposed to a suffocating heat, fell asleep and rolled from their seats, to the great merriment of the older and more wakeful scholars.

"Just above and closely connected with this 'little seat' was another with an inclined plank desk, if desk it could be called, before it, for the 'middling' scholars." These seats had no backs.

Against the wall of the house was a continuous desk "for the largest and oldest scholars," who often ranged from 18 to 21 years old. "The occupants of this seat...generally sat facing the wall with their backs turned towards the teacher's desk and most of the scholars. This seat was also unprotected with a back and when, for change or relief, or mischief, a scholar turned in it and faced the other way, he placed his back against his desk and his feet on the seats, sometimes against the backs and always in provoking proximity to the persons of the 'middlers.'"

The seats, Thompson wrote, were continuous “and all were of plank, the widest being only seven and one-half inches wide. Truly the world has moved!”

Warren Teel attended the West Side School in the 1830s. He remembered that “They located the school houses a mile and a half from any dwelling house, building them in such a manner that they were anything but comfortable. ... In these badly ventilated rooms boys and girls of every age and size were huddled. No quietness could be obtained where such a crowd was packed.”

The West Side school was later moved and replaced. Several Wyman schools succeeded each other in that district through the middle of this century.

The eastern school house was also replaced in 1818. In 1843 it was replaced a second time by a larger building at the corner of Church and Dix streets. Like a contemporary little red schoolhouse in Woburn of the 1840s described by a former pupil in 1900, it probably had rows of seats instead of the tiers of plank benches of former days.

For over a century after incorporation a remnant of the old South Woburn schools survived in this building, known as the District No. 5 schoolhouse. Until 1865 it was used as a school, with the upstairs room serving as the first high school.

In 1865 the building was sold, moved to the corner of Elmwood and Church streets, and converted into a two-family house. In 1928 it was converted into a funeral parlor. During the late 1950s it was remodeled with brick siding and continued to sit next to the Winchester Co-operative Bank for many more years until demolished during bank renovations in 1965.



The old District Five school house, after renovation into a residence

TRYING TEACHERS

Going along with the primitive buildings built locally for schools in the early nineteenth century was the elementary education offered in them. However simple the education by today's standards, there was a continuing problem obtaining or keeping qualified teachers. One of the necessary qualifications that stands out in old reports was the ability to impose order.

Warren Teel, who attended the West Side School during the 1830s, described a school day.

"The forenoon session was devoted to thawing out ink-stands while the master was mending the quills. Unless the day was unusually cold, this branch of the school business was gotten through with by morning recess, which lasted as long as the big boys took the notion it should. In vain did the master rap upon the window....

"The balance of the morning session was a noisy one. From all quarters of the room might be heard these and like exclamations, 'May I leave my seat? –Please, may I go out? –Link Emerson is pinching me–Brainard Pike threw a spit ball at me...' and so on until the poor Harvard or Dartmouth student was glad to dismiss his unruly crowd for the noon intermission.

"In the old west side district fifty years ago there were some pretty tough boys for the master to handle. Scarcely a week passed without a circus performance between master and pupil, the master generally coming out second best.

"I remember one term in the late thirties we had for a teacher a real smart, dapper little fellow from Harvard. It was before Harvard had inaugurated her boat-clubs and the students lacked the muscle they are supposed to have now. The first morning he made his appearance, he, in somewhat a hurried manner, laid down his rules by which he intended to govern the school. Us little fellows were frightened at his presence but the large boys rebelled at once and for a couple of weeks it was a miniature House of Representatives in point of order and decorum. But at last the Cambridge young man threw up the sponge, and we never saw him after.

"The committee man for the district was Mr. Luke Reed, a genial, quiet pleasant man, a farmer living not far from the school house. He called at the school house the day the master resigned and very pleasantly informed us, he had applied for the position himself and that on the following Monday morning he wanted us all to be in school promptly by 9 o'clock. Said that he as the district committee man had done his best to provide a good teacher but that the boys were so unruly that no one would stay long in this district, but that he should stay through the term, that he had cut down a little mulberry tree in his front yard and had it made into ferules and he intended to wear the whole lot (6 I think) out on the boy's hands that were the ring leaders in this district.

"Monday morning came and so did the big boys. Rebellion written all over their countenances. 9 o'clock came, no teacher with his half dozen mulberry ferules. 10 o'clock, as yet Mr. Luke Reed had not put in an appearance. Bedlam reigned out and inside of the school house. About noon a

messenger arrived from where or whom we never learned, but a message came that there would be no school for a week. Upon sifting the matter we found that Mr. Reed had been up to the examining committee, which consisted of the Orthodox and the Baptists ministers and an old gentleman by the name of Bartle Richardson.

“The first question they asked him was how many letters there were in the alphabet. ‘Well, really,’ says Reed, ‘I don’t know as I ever did know but I should say there was something like forty or fifty.’ With a broad smile on Father Bennett’s face, he asked him how many parts of speech there were. ‘Too many for any one man to remember,’ says Reed. A broad grin from all the committee, and the third and last question was propounded, “If a third of six be three, what will a fourth of twenty be?’ It is said that Mr. Reed grabbed his hat and left in disgust throwing his Mulberry Ferules into the Middlesex Canal when he crossed the bridge at the foot of Horn Pond. We had no school that winter, Reed taking his revenge by letting us go school-less.

“Was it any wonder that the next generation, seeing the faults of the preceding one, should lay the foundations for a better state of things and that now every boy and girl in the land can, if he so desires, obtain a good education” (and know that a third of six be two).

The Harvard man was not an exceptional case. Several school reports from Woburn comment on “the lack of order of the pupils and lack of general discipline” (1848), “misconduct of scholars” (1849), and teachers who “could not enforce order and discipline.” (1850)

One South Woburn member of the School Committee, Dr. David Youngman, tried an extreme and horrible measure to impose order at a Woburn primary school. According to a former student identified as O.S.B. in the *Woburn Journal* of 1900, “He walked into school, the first morning carrying a rawhide whip about four feet long, over an inch in diameter at one end and tapering to the size of a little finger at the other. His fierce countenance and his savage weapon struck terror to the hearts of the small boys and aroused a rebellious spirit in the minds of the big ones.”



David Youngman

Treating school boys like slaves was, fortunately, exceptional and did not last long. O.S.B. commented, “The boys needed a strong hand to be sure, but they did not require the lessons in brutality that this teacher gave them....The rule of the rawhide continued only one term, and it was succeeded by something far better morally as well as physically, for as the boys were flogged less, they studied more and learned things that were for their advantage.”

The next teacher was “a gentlemanly fellow,” and O.S.B. wrote that they learned much from him.

The reports from the South Woburn schools also varied from teacher to teacher. For example, Hannah E. Chase “taught very successfully and profitably” in 1844 but Mr. Daniel Hoyt’s teaching

was “imperfect, and so much hesitancy and inability to apply his knowledge on the part of the teacher, that he was incompetent to teach with profit.” In 1848 “Mr. Colby had trouble from misconduct of the scholars,” but of Miss Gowing it was reported, “work excellent.”

The history of local schooling is not all tales of uncomfortable buildings, inadequate staff, and chaotic pupils. But the development of a good school system took a very long time, and school departments had to learn as they went. The problems—adequate facilities, competency of teachers, regular attendance, discipline, developing an effective course of instruction—were perpetual and were met over and over again. Grappling with them over the centuries laid the foundation for the current school system, which continues finding new solutions to many of the same challenges.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Sept. 9 and 10, 1998. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Quotations in this article come from typescript histories in the Winchester Archival Center.