

One-Room Schoolhouses of Delaware County

By Tim Duerden

In the 19th century over 400 one-room schools dotted Delaware County's landscape, the last remaining open until the 1960s. Today they are fondly remembered by former teachers and students alike. Many one-room schools have been converted for use in a multitude of ways.

The most common schoolhouse seen in Delaware County was a small, one-room, wood framed structure, varying in size. A common misconception about one-room schools is that they were painted red. In fact, most schoolhouses were white. The care of the building was the responsibility of the trustee.

"The school trustee in Delaware County was generally a successful, though not necessarily wealthy, farmer who was considered to be a man of integrity and had some ability to make good decisions."

Pamela S. Hillebrand, "Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse"

Each district had its own trustee who was elected to office for a term of one year. Generally his responsibility included hiring a teacher, determining the length of the school term and seeing that the building was properly maintained. Minutes taken at the district meetings included

such information as the trustee for the year, the teacher's salary and who would supply the wood for the school and at what cost.

The door would open into a hallway where coats and lunch pails would be stored along with wood for the fire and the water pail. Some schools had two doors, one for the girls and another for the boys. Boys and girls would sit on different sides of the room. Schools that only had one door would have the girls and boys line up and enter separately

"Boys would always go to the right, girls to the left. They never sat together." - Cleo Moore, Jefferson, Fuller District School, 1925-32, Joint District, Town of Harpersfield.

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in "Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse"

Stone schoolhouses were rare in Delaware County. Dunraven a one-room stone schoolhouse still standing on its original location is now a museum.



Many earlier schools didn't have desks or chairs for the students, only benches with no backs.

"The summer days were long and little boys must sit on the hard seats and be quiet. The seat I

sat on was a slab turned flat side up and supported on four legs. My feet did not touch the floor and I suppose I got very tired. One afternoon the oblivion of sleep came over me and when I came to consciousness again I was in a neighbor's house...I had fallen off the seat backward and hit my head."- John Burroughs, Old Stone School, 1842, Town of Roxbury (From *My Boyhood*, by John Burroughs, Doubleday, Page & Co. NY 1922)

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in "Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse"

By the late 1800s conditions for the students had improved somewhat. By then schools were supplying desks for students.

Each school district size was no more than three to five square miles to allow for the fact that most students walked to school. Other forms of travel included riding a horse or hitching a ride with a friend or neighbor. Stu-

dents and teachers would travel in all kinds of weather. Many students went barefoot, both to save wear and tear on their boots, and often times because their shoes did not fit well. By the time each spring rolled around kids were happy to kick off their shoes and go barefoot.

"The thing that I remember most is that we always went barefooted. As soon as there wasn't any snow, we took our shoes off and didn't put them on again until winter." - Janette Hebbard Gilbert, Delhi, Sand Bank School, 1920s-30s, Town of Davenport

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in "Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse"

"I often took the cutter to school, and would set the mules free when I got there. They would go home." - Alton Bartlett, Upper Pines Brook School, 1910s, Town of Walton.

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in "Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse"



Number of Districts per Town, early 1900s

Andes	23
Bovina	12
Colchester	30
Davenport	20
Delhi	19
Deposit	13
Franklin	27
Hamden	16
Hancock	25
Harpersfield	19
Kortright	18
Masonville	16
Meredith	17
Middletown	26
Roxbury	20
Sidney	17
Stamford	14
Tompkins	22
Walton	21

Classes generally consisted of first through eighth grades, incorporating children ages six to fourteen. The number of students could vary from as many as 20-30 to as few as 5-8. It was not uncommon for the oldest student to become the teacher's helper. Typically the teacher would work with one grade in the front of the class while the other grades practiced lessons on their own. All grades heard every lesson. This often helped them as they moved on to the next grade because they had already learned a few things by hearing the lessons the previous year.

The main lessons taught were the 3 R's, "Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic," along with geography and music. Some schools had an organ and if the teacher did not play, a student or a traveling music teacher would give a lesson. There were no standard hours for one-room schools in Delaware County during the nineteenth century. Morning bell and afternoon dismissal time would be set by trustees and/or teachers. The school day was divided into two

sessions with a short recess midway through each session and a longer break for lunch.

"The school assembled at nine o'clock and was dismissed at four. There was a short recess at eleven o'clock; and then at twelve there was an intermission of an hour."

From *History of Delaware County* Edited by David Murray

Another important subject was spelling. Spelling bees were very popular, but most students were only encouraged to learn how to spell large words - not their definition.

"We always had spelldowns every Friday afternoon. You had to see who was the last one standing, which one was left, by pitting the two best spellers against each other." - Evelyn Rowell Monroe, Delhi, Colchester school, early 1900s, Town of Colchester

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in "Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse"

Once students finished eighth grade they would take the regents exams held at the high schools in town. If they passed the regents they could then continue their education in high school. Not everyone liked, or dealt well with going to a larger school and some could not afford to go to high school.

"We had to take Regents exams in the eighth grade, and we'd have to go to the Cannonsville School, which had four or five rooms, to take the exams. I guess the way they stared at us we were kind of an odd lot!" - Cecil Francisco, West Meredith, Granton School, 1930s, Town of Tompkins

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in "Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse"

"I never went to school a day after the eighth grade. We lived too far away from a high school, and I would have had to pay room and board. My folks didn't have money enough for me to do that, so I went to work with my father

in the stone quarry.” - John Scofield

As quoted by Anne McCall & Mary Jane Henderson in “Fragments of Yesteryear”

Chores were a part of everyday life in the 1800s. Students drew water from the well and fetched wood for the stove. Drawing water was the most sought after job, because it allowed you to go outside and miss some of the lesson.

“Going for water was a special privilege. We had two farms close by and you could go to either one to get the pail filled. Everyone - boys and girls- got a turn, but you had to ask if you could go. You got out of school; it was a treat!” - Agnes Sutherland Hinz, Delhi, Cabin Hill School, 1910s, Town of Andes

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

Students would get a break for recess after lunch, at which time they would play numerous different games, depending on the weather. The children would play outside as much as possible. Activities included baseball, gathering nuts and berries, boiling down maple syrup and ice fishing. The teacher would ring a bell



for them to know when to return to the school. One of the most popular games was “Ollie Over,” also known variously as “Annie Annie Over,” “Anthony Over,” “High Kitty Over,” or “Keely I Over.”

“One person would throw a ball over the schoolhouse and run fast to get to the other side before anyone caught the ball. As soon as they’d catch it, they could come running after you. If they caught you, you had to be the one to throw it over again.” - Burdette “Bud” Long

As quoted by Anne McCall & Mary Jane Henderson in “Fragments of Yesteryear”

“I loved that game! It had everything – suspense fun, excitement. You had to yell “Keely, Keely Over” when you threw the ball over the roof. Then there’d be silence. You didn’t know whether the other team caught the ball or not. All of a sudden they’d all come charging over! Eventually there was only one child left and a whole gang of kids on the other side.” - Hugh Lee, Historian, Town of Bovina

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

In the winter another popular recess activity was sledding. Sometimes the teachers even got into the act.

“I remember sledding with the kids. I’ll never forget when I was thirty-six years old. The sled shot out from under me; I went sledding on my stomach and landed face-first in the brook! I still have the scar on my lip. I guess that experience taught me I wasn’t a kid anymore.” - Nettie Sutton Smith Brainard, Walton (teacher), Town of Walton Schools, 1914-55

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

“The children slid downhill on homemade scooters or schooners made with a barrel stave, post, and seat of board six inches by two feet nailed on a post.” - Amy Hoyt Rhinebeck, Walton (teacher), Town of Walton Schools 1922-27, 1932-34

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

Teachers were often only a few years older than their oldest students. Many teachers had only a 6-8 week teacher training course by way of preparation. From 1800 to 1875 the school year was generally split into 2 terms and teachers often rotated with the terms. Male teachers were preferred for the winter term – November/December to March/April - because the older boys would be in school then and it was thought male teachers would keep better control of the class. Accordingly, female teachers taught the summer term - May to August/September - when only the younger children went to school. This seasonal way of dividing the school year was to allow the students time off to help on the farm at the busiest part of the year.

“Miss Maynard had been a school teacher since she was sixteen years of age.” - Florence Canfield Van Dusen

As quoted by Anne McCall & Mary Jane Henderson in “Fragments of Yesteryear”

“Our attendance would run around fifteen average. In winter some of those larger boys would come and we’d get up to maybe twenty-five.” - Harry Benedict, Meridale, Pine School, 1905-12, Town of Meredith

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

The teacher was responsible for more than just teaching. In the winter, along with keeping the school clean, s/he also had to make sure the school was heated and sometimes make a hot lunch for the children.

“I have memories of building my own fire on cold mornings, after a two-and-one-half-mile walk.” - Annis Hume Hillis, (teacher), Town of Hamden Schools, 1921-34

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

Lunch was different in the days of the one-room school: homemade bread with homemade butter or maple syrup drizzled on it, an apple, cold pancakes and pieces of cake.

“We took our lunch in a dinner pail, made of metal. We’d go to the hall to get our pail, then take it to our desk. Our sandwiches were maybe maple syrup or honey on homemade bread, an apple, cookies. In later years we had hot chocolate, but otherwise you went to the water pail for a drink.” - Maude Worden Bramley, Delhi, Palmer Hill School 1904-12, Town of Andes

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

Many children would bring a potato to be heated up on the stove providing a hot lunch. Once hot lunches became mandatory families would take turns providing them, usually some type of soup. Sometimes the hot lunch would consist of baked beans, or hot chocolate to go along with the lunch kids brought from home.

“We had “hot lunches” before the state ever thought of it! We put a potato in a coffee can, put it on the grates on the wood stove, and baked it.” - Frida Norberg Brown

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

“One day two boys brought soup in a tin quart pail with a tight cover. They put it on the stove to heat for lunch. Well, soon there was a big boom! The cover and soup exploded clear to the 12-foot painted ceiling! Lucky no one got scalded, but it sure scared all of us. Then we all laughed ‘til the teacher brought us under



control. Last we knew the chunks of tomatoes were still dried on the ceiling.” - Jean Butts Jump & Joan Butts Houck. Tacoma School, 1930s, Town of Masonville

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

Some basic school rules included no whispering, spitballs, punching, passing notes, general restlessness and intractability. Corporal punishment in the 19th century included a ruler, rod or whip, which could be brought down upon a miscreant’s hand or on the back. Teachers might also pull hair, tweak noses, shake pupils by the shoulder or pinch and box their ears. After 1900, however, most teachers did not resort to corporal punishment. Other forms of punishment included ridicule and embarrassment - standing in the corner, in the middle of the floor or in a dark closet, sitting on top of a desk or being crammed beneath it.

“I remember there was a boy named George Stevens in my class. He used some very strong language that the teacher didn’t like. She washed his mouth out with soap and water.” - Edith Hume Crook

As quoted by Anne McCall & Mary Jane Henderson in “Fragments of Yesteryear”

“My father had one teacher who was very strict and very mean. My uncle and a friend were caught whispering. The teacher tied the

two boys back to back and then whipped their legs [McMurdy School, 1890s].” - Helen Gould, Hobart

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

Arbor Day and Christmas were the two most important holidays in the school calendar. Christmas was celebrated by having the kids put on a show for parents and neighbors.

“Seasons were big. Every holiday meant decorations, sometimes programs for parents, and gifts to make. Anticipation was high!” - Alice Norberg Nichols, South Kortright, Kludas School, 1935-39, Town of Davenport

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

“We did recitations and our parents came. I remember reciting ‘Hang Up the Baby’s Stocking,’ ‘Night Before Christmas’ and many others we learned through the years.” - Eva Kellert Hager, Masonville, Beebe Hill School, 1920s, Town of Deposit

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

On Arbor Day, usually celebrated on the Friday following the first day in May, the students would clean up the grounds and plant a tree, often putting all their names in a bottle and burying it under the tree. They would also go on a nature hike and have a picnic.

“My happy remembrance was Arbor Day. We learned pieces to speak. Our parents were invited. We also set out new trees. Sometimes we all wrote our names on a paper and enclosed it in a bottle, which we buried under the tree when setting it out. We also raked leaves and made the lawn clean.” - Henry Wilcox, East Masonville School, 1903-1912

As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

Centralization (or consolidation) of most schools in New York State took place during the 1930s and 1940s, but some of the more isolated one-room schools did remain open as late as the 1960s. Many factors led to consolidation. Views of how children should be taught in America had changed during the early twentieth century, along with technology that made it easier to transport children a greater distance and to bigger schools. Consolidation was also considered a way to support the war effort by saving money, and indeed a great many rural schools were consolidated during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration into new school buildings built under the National Industrial Recovery Act (1930s). Not everyone was happy or agreed with the idea of consolidating the schools.

“Donald Davidson questioned the voters concerned about the safety of their children in case of a bombing raid on Delaware County. He asked: “Do you suppose that our children will be safer in the District School with about 700 others when that building offers such fine target for bombers? On the other hand, invad-

ers are not going to pick out individual district schools to bomb. If you [vote] to send our children to the Central School and it is bombed, then their blood and that of others is on your hands.”

From *The Binghamton Press*, February 6, 1942
As quoted by Pamela S. Hillebrand in “Treasures of the One-Room Schoolhouse”

In 1968 the lone surviving one-room school in Delaware County closed its doors. At the end of that school year Trout Creek School in the Town of Tompkins (School District #6) and its teacher Frances Gifford Mott, bade the era of the one-room schoolhouse in Delaware County goodbye.

The one-room schoolhouse is remembered by former students as a place where they came to learn, play and get their first look at the larger world. Many of these former students and their teachers look back on their years in a one-room school with nostalgia. They certainly remember some of the harder times, but often with a certain sense of a close-knit community now long gone.

