



# Rural Education in New York State

## One-Room Schools of the 1840s

### **OVERVIEW:**

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the one-room school was the standard for education in rural America. In New York State, the one-room school was an integral part of the common school system established by the state in the early 1800s. During the first half of the 19th century, the focus of education was to establish and maintain the common school. Beginning in the 1840s, the focus shifted from school maintenance to improving the quality of education throughout the state. The 1840s saw vast improvement in school administration, teacher training, school curriculum, and the overall improvement of conditions in the one-room school. The purpose of Rural Education in New York State, One-Room Schools of the 1840s is to highlight rural educational during this period and to help students today compare the educational experiences of the mid-19th century rural students with their own school experiences.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

- Identify several items found in a typical one-room school of the 1840s.
- Discuss the roles of the teacher and the students during the 1840s.
- Describe several subjects taught during the 1840s.
- Discuss several forms of punishment commonly used by teachers in the mid-19th century.
- Compare and contrast a typical school day in a one-room school of the 1840s with a typical school day today.
- Make generalizations about changes in education since the middle of the 19th century.

### **RELEVANT CONCEPTS AND THEMES:**

- Change
- Citizenship
- Culture
- Environment

### **WORDS TO KNOW:**

- **Civics**—the study of the rights and duties of citizens
- **Ferule**—a flat stick or ruler sometimes used for punishing children
- **Moral**—dealing with the distinction between right and wrong

- **Psalm**—a sacred song or poem; one of the hymns that make up the Old Testament Book of Psalms
- **Recitation**—the act of repeating or saying aloud something that has been memorized
- **Rural**—relating to the country; the open area outside of towns and big cities
- **Schoolmaster**—a male school teacher
- **Schoolmistress**—a female school teacher
- **Term**—a division of a school year

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Prior to 1784, New York State did not have a formal school system, though individual schools did exist. As they settled, pioneers built a variety of types of schools. They included church and town sponsored schools and independent schools run by private schoolmasters. None of the colonial era schools were public schools in the modern sense. Many had religious overtones and tuition, and attendance was voluntary.

During the late 1700s, government leaders believed that a revolutionary republic had a responsibility to educate its citizens. In 1784 they established by law the Regents of the University of the State of New York. The Regents main purpose was to create a network of educational institutions throughout the state. Beginning in 1791, the state legislature began to authorize public schools in each community on an application basis. The first authorized school was in Clermont, Columbia County. In 1795 the legislature instituted a system of state aid to encourage communities to establish and support common schools, which provided a total of \$50,000 to be divided among the various towns. Within a few years, over 1,300 schools, enrolling almost 60,000 students, qualified for state aid. Unfortunately, in 1800 the aid program lapsed, though the schools generally stayed open. This system was partially remedied in 1805 when the legislature enacted the Common School Fund, which was based on the proceeds from the sale of state land. In 1812 a new common school law divided the state into school districts and, as amended in 1814, provided for administration and financing of schools through state aid, local taxes, and the rate bill (a form of tuition paid by the parents of students attending the school).

During the 1820s and 1830s, the state made progress with the quality of the common schools. The focus was instead on establishing and maintaining schools. The public did not wholly support its schools during this time period. As the 1830s drew

to a close, New York State's common schools were underfunded, barely supervised, taught by poorly trained teachers, housed in inadequate facilities, had no formal curriculum or textbooks, and suffered from public apathy.

The state spent the first five years of the 1840s improving the public schools. They addressed seven problem areas—administration, teacher training, free schools and taxes, schoolhouse conditions, libraries, curriculum and religion—very effectively. Common schools grew; by 1840 557,229 students, ranging in age from five to twenty-one, attended 10,127 schools for approximately four months a year.

In the 1840s, school trustees, who were elected by town voters, supervised the schools. They hired, licensed and supervised teachers. The typical teacher had a common school (eighth grade) education and two weeks of training at a teacher's institute held annually in most counties. In general, teaching was a part-time and the wages reflected this. Women were paid up to \$7.50 a month, and male teachers often earned double. The terms of a teacher's contract were negotiated with the school supervisors.

During the 1840s, teachers were paid at the end of each term. State and local tax funds paid part of the school's operation, and the remaining amount was paid by parents of the students. At the end of each term, parents would receive a rate bill, which was based on the number of the children who attended school and the days they attended, for their share of the teacher's salary. The teacher was responsible for keeping accurate attendance records, and the school trustees prepared the rate bills using the records and the amount of "short fall" there was between the tax revenue and the actual school costs. Parents paid their bills directly to the teacher, who often had to wait up to 60 days after the end of term to be paid. The movement to make common schools free to all and to pay teachers on time was first proposed in 1844, but it was not implemented until 1867.

### The One-Room School of the 1840s

The rural school of the mid-19th century was a one-room, one-teacher school in which students of various ages took their lessons. Larger villages might have had an academy, and cities typically had larger schools that enrolled several hundred students. Attendance was voluntary, but a fairly large proportion of children attended school. It is estimated that, in the 1830s, 90% of all non-urban youth in the state attended school at least part-time. A child's school years might be intermittent, especially for older students who often attended in winter and worked the farm during the other seasons. Few students stayed in school past the age of 15.

Students who attended rural schools after 1840 were most likely equipped with goose-quill or steel-nibbed pens, slates and slate pencils, and a ferule (ruler). The classrooms also included ink kept in a common pottery jar, a blackboard, sheepskin erasers, chalk, a water bucket and dipper, a shelf clock, a stove for heating in the winter and a globe. Teachers kept an attendance ledger, pointer, books, a hickory stick and other teaching aids. Sometimes the schools had a small cloakroom for the student's belongings.

Students' ages generally ranged from four to seventeen; state law provided that students could legally attend school

between the ages of five and twenty-one. The state directed a census of each school district for the purpose of determining state aid. Children attended school until they met their parent's expectations, and then they stayed home to work on the farm, in stores or in factories. Young men in rural areas rarely attended school past the age of apprenticeship (about 14). By then, they were expected to read, write, cipher at a basic level, and know enough about civics and government to work and be good citizens. Girls would often remain in school until seventeen or eighteen.

By 1840, the school years averaged 8 months. The rural school year consisted of two terms: a winter term from November to March and a summer term from May to late August. The school week was typically six days long, with a half day on every second or third Saturday. The district set the dates and length of the two terms and the school week when they negotiated with the teacher.

During the winter term, the rural school teacher was usually a man because of the larger number of older boys who could attend school at this time. School trustees felt that a male teacher had more control over the older boys than a young woman did. During the summer term, women were most commonly the teachers because attendance was limited to girls and the younger boys. Teachers in both terms were expected to maintain the school house by sweeping the floors, cleaning the blackboards and filling and cleaning the lamps each day.

The 1840s common school general offered students ungraded classes in a variety of subjects. Without grade levels, the teacher grouped students according to their equivalent reading and spelling levels at the beginning of each term. Each classroom typically had four or five groups of students, each with its own learning objectives based on the textbooks. There were no promotions: student groups tended to progress together over multiple terms.

### A School Day in the 1840s

A typical school day was divided into morning and afternoon sessions with several short recesses with each session and a longer recess for lunch. During the winter, the school day began around 9:00 a.m. and lasted until 3:00 p.m. In the summer, the school day was longer, starting around 8:30 a.m. and ending at 5:00 p.m.

- **Opening Exercises:** The school day began with a reading from the King James version of the Bible and with prayers, demonstrations, reading and recitations. Moral lessons were an important part of the curriculum. Students were often asked to sit in respectful silence during opening exercises with their feet together on the floor and their hands folded on their desks. The school teacher would read a psalm, then pray out loud. He or she may have prayed something like this: "*Our Father in heaven, who has kindly preserved the pupils and the teacher of this school during the past night, come and grant us a continuance of thy protection and blessing during this day. Come then, and be in this school-room during the day and help us all to be faithful and successful in duty ...*" (Abbott, p. 162)
- **Lessons to be Learned:** For older children, emphasis was placed on math problems, including bookkeeping, and plane geometry and reciting readings. Younger children

learned to read and write and do simple arithmetic. The students learned geography and history from studying people of other lands and times, but textbooks were often inaccurate since many areas on the globe were still very isolated in the early 19th century. Children drew pictures on slates, learned colors, collected minerals and other specimens and recited items they had read. At recitation, students were encouraged to speak clearly and show the teacher how well they had learned their lessons.

Teachers also taught moral habits as a general subject through phrases that contained a moral or in readings that provided a moral lesson. The morals were either secular or religious and were often based on student actions behaviors observed by the teacher. Moral lessons helped students distinguish right from wrong and often included the topics of lying, cheating, stealing, respect for authority and elders, patriotism, and the love of God.

Teachers rarely instructed the entire class together. He or she assigned work to each group and then called them up for recitation when they were finished. The front benches were for recitations, and each group would be brought forward when it was their turn. While they were reciting, the other groups continued to work on their own assignments. Each recitation would last 15 to 20 minutes, followed by a brief recess and then more assignments, while another group was called on to recite.

- **Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child:** Discipline and punishment were important components of 19th century education. Teachers and parents believed that good behavior was an important part of the educational process. Some teachers employed a system of strict discipline, ridicule, and harsh punishment. The old proverb *Spare the rod and spoil the child* was more than just a saying. The rod was one of the most important instruments of instruction. The teacher maintained good order in the classroom and on the playground by judging the degree and nature of punishment when he or she deemed it necessary. Teachers had a great deal of freedom in punishing student misbehavior, though there were limits to what he or she could do. The teacher was liable to the injured party for any abuse of his or her authority. Occasionally, parents dismissed an inadequate teacher. More often, however, teacher were removed on moral grounds or incompetence rather than for being too strict in their discipline.

One student recalled his early school days by describing the various forms of punishment used by his school teacher. Though he most likely attended school in the early 1800s, his description describes common practices in the 1840s school room:

*“The first morning of the school [the schoolmaster] read us a long list of regulations to be observed in school and out. ... Half the time was spent in calling up scholars for little misdemeanors, trying to make them confess their faults, and promise stricter obedience, or in devising punishments and inflicting them. ... Some were feruled on the hand; some were compelled to hold out, at arm’s length, the largest book that could be found, or a great leaden inkstand, till muscle and nerve, bone and marrow, were tortured with the continued exertion. ... He had recourse to another method ... it was standing in a stooping posture,*

*with the finger on the head of a nail in the floor. It was a position not particularly favorable to health of body or soundness of mind, the head being brought about as low as the knees, the blood rushing to it, and the pressing unnaturally on the veins, causing a dull pain, and a staggering dizziness. ... The above punishments were sometimes rendered doubly painful by their taking place directly in front of the enormous fire, so that the ... culprit was roasted as well as racked. ... Then we occasionally had our hair pulled, our noses tweaked, our ears pinched and boxed, or snapped. ... There were minor penalties, moreover, for minor faults. The uneasy urchins were clapped into the closet, thrust under the desk, or perched on its top. Boys were made to sit in the girls’ seats ... and the girls were obliged to sit on the masculine side of the aisle, with crimsoned necks, and faces buried in the aprons.” (The District School As It Was, By One Who Went To It, p. 43-45)*

- **Recess:** Following the morning session, students generally had one and a half to two hours for lunch. Some students lived close enough to go home for lunch. Many students brought their lunches to school. A student’s lunch may have consisted of bread and butter, cheese, or perhaps some cold beans. In winter, a student might have brought a potato to heat in the stove. In season fruit, such as an apple in the autumn, would also have been common in a student’s lunch

At recess, children played active, seasonal games and sports. Few playgrounds had exercise and game equipment, so students played hide-and-seek, snap-the-whip, follow the leader, tag games, or London Bridge. Boys carried jackknives and they carved and whittled any wood in sight. Sometimes older children played pranks on younger children or even the teacher. Students also enjoyed playing word games like tongue twisters, reciting rhymes or telling stories.

- **Closing Exercises:** At the end of the day, the teacher would lead closing exercises that often included a brief lecture or moral lesson, a hymn and a closing prayer. Students rarely took their books home. Teachers did not generally assign homework because most students had chores at home and because lighting would have been a problem in the evenings. Following a full day at school, students often had to walk long distance to get home and do their daily chores.

## LESSON ACTIVITIES

Begin the lesson with a class discussion about school. In the discussion, students might give a physical description of their school, identify the kinds of things they would find inside their school, describe a typical day at school, etc. After the students have had a chance to discuss their concepts of school, ask them what they think it was like to go to school over 150 years ago. Allow students some time to discuss what they think it was like to attend school during the 1840s. Before the students read the lesson, you may want to make sure they are familiar with the *Words to Know* for this lesson.

1. Have the students read the lesson *Rural Education in New York State, One-Room Schools of the 1840s*. You may want

to read the lesson together as a class or have the students read on their own.

2. Make a comparison chart of a typical school day of the 1840s with one of today.
3. Make a comparison chart of the subjects taught in the 1840s versus those of today.
4. Have students do some of the 1840s textbook lessons in a modern textbook.
5. Make a comparison chart of different characteristics of schools, for example:

Characteristics	1840s	Today
light source	windows	electricity
bathrooms	outdoors	indoors

Other items that might be included are:

- Water source
  - Heat source
  - School books
  - Transportation
  - Number of classrooms in the buildings
  - Number of students
  - Lunches
  - Playground equipment
  - Classroom equipment
6. Create historic postage stamps or postcards showing some aspect of one-room schoolhouses.
  7. Do a mock 1840s day. Begin the class with opening exercises by giving a moral lesson and having students sit in respectful silence. Assign students to different groups and have each group work on a different lesson. Use the teaching methods of rote memorization and recitation. Have each group participate in recitation of their lessons. Include several short recesses and a longer recess for lunch. Have a typical 1840s lunch and play some games there were typical of that time period.
  8. Have students conduct oral interviews with individuals who attended one-room schools, if possible (One-room schools were in use well into the 20th century.)
  9. Research the history of your school. Have the class prepare one of the following:
    - A. An exhibit showing the history of your school using photographs and primary source documents.
    - B. a written and illustrated history of your school
    - C. A skit or short performance based on some aspect of the history of your school
    - D. A media presentation such as a video that documents the history of your school

10. Plan a visit to the schoolhouse at The Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown and take part in a mid 19th century school experience. Students will use quill pens, write on slates, participate in recitations and play games. To plan your museum visit, call 607-547-1410.

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## **RELATED YOUNG YORKER LEAFLETS**

- *Unlocking the Mysteries of the Past: Using Maps to Learn about a Community's History*
- *Postcards: Windows on Your Community's Past*
- *From Candy to Gunpowder: A Visit to the General Store in 1845*.

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