

ADDING IT UP IN THE DISTRICT SCHOOL

A hard look at schooling brought about reforms in the 19th century

by Mark Sammons and Sandra Gibson-Quigley



Some of the people whom you'd least expect to come out and say so announced in later life that they hated going to school. Henry Ward Beecher was one. The fact that he became a clergyman of some influence might suggest that his school days in a New England district school had been a source of pleasure. Not so.

He had nothing good to say about the way he had been taught. There were no rose-colored notions for him of days spent in a little red schoolhouse reciting his three R's for a firm, yet loving teacher. "It was our misfortune in boyhood," he wrote, "to go to a district school." Nor did he remember the building and its location with any particular pleasure. "It was a little, square pine building, lazing in the sun, upon the highway, without a tree for shade . . . near it." Under the circumstances he could find no reason why he and the other scholars were sent to school. "Certainly we were never sent for any such absurd purposes as educa-

tion," he noted with a measure of sarcasm.

Had Beecher ever taught a district school, he might have been more sympathetic to the school teacher's plight. As Beecher looked back, he felt no sympathy for the teacher's efforts to encourage each student to work alone at his or her own pace, with recitation times at the teacher's desk punctuating the day. In Beecher's recollection there might have been occasional moments of recitation, usually twice a day, unless something happened and they were postponed. "The rest of the time we were busy in keeping still. And what a time we had of it."

Beecher's memories of discipline were that this, rather than instruction, was the teacher's specialty. "All of our little legs together would fill up the corner with such a noise that, every ten or fifteen minutes, the master would bring down his two-foot hickory ferule on the desk with such a clap that sent shivers through our hearts to think

how that would have felt if it had fallen somewhere else." This emphatic pounding of the stick was, we are told, followed by a bellowed "Silence in that corner."

Recollections like Beecher's give us some harsh and unromantic truths about the actual character of early 19th-century schooling. Even though one must consider the Rev. Mr. Beecher a truthful man, he, too, had a point of view. When we read these reminiscences, we must bear in mind that he believed strongly in the need for school reform. Matters might not really have been exactly as he recalled in every single district school. What we need to remember is that the climate of reform in the second quarter of the 19th century was influencing what was being written — and believed — about New England's district school education for the rest of the century.

Each day when visitors enter the District Schoolhouse as they tour the Village they are struck with the starkness of this building. It is our task as interpreters to describe schooling, what it was and what it was becoming. We use the Candia School exhibit to talk about what was typical and what was increasingly perceived as being wrong with New England's rural schools.

Architecturally the Candia Schoolhouse resembles many that were found around 19th-century New England. They were frequently on an otherwise useless corner of land without space for a playground. Inside they were bare and dimly lit. On one wall there was a fireplace or stove flanked by closet and vestibule doors. Backless school desks usually faced this windowless wall, though sometimes they faced outwards towards the windows. The teacher's tall desk stood in one front corner and a special "writing desk" occupied the other corner. Deskless recitation seats formed the front row. The narrow open space between these and the fire was called the "reading and spelling parade." A dipper and pine bucket and an old chair or two for use by guests usually completed the classroom furnishings.

Educational aids like blackboards, maps and globes were not standard equipment, although reformers urged that they be provided. However, using this equipment would have required teachers to revise their teaching techniques completely. This would be part of the agenda of the reformers, also.

School records show that a classroom included a group of students ranging in age from three or four to sixteen or even older. Teachers' reminiscences, an important source for learning about education in the early 19th century, indicate that the older



Penmanship exercises around the parlor table at home.

boys in the group seem to have been the most dreaded. These students were often as big and strong as the school-teacher, and as a result they were hard to discipline and their behavior was the most unruly. The disruptions they caused included burning offensive items in the stove, insulting the teacher, making the older girls blush and the small ones cry, and by one or more of these techniques succeeding in bringing any learning to a halt.

Not all teachers responded to such situations with severity. David Goodale, from a family which numbered missionaries to Hawaii among its community-spirited members, was a teacher whose notebooks and textbooks are now part of the Village Research Library collections. He resolved in December, 1841, that "a teacher in the common schools should be familiar, pleasant, mild and accommodating, but firm, dignified and impartial."

The school day usually ran from 9 until 4 p.m. on Mondays through Fridays and on Saturday mornings. School terms ran from the Monday after Thanksgiving through March and again, from mid-May into August to dovetail with the agricultural year. "Vacations" were during the planting and harvesting seasons, when children could either help in the fields and gardens or by taking care of younger siblings.

Although during the late 18th century, American textbooks began to appear, which gradually replaced English schoolbooks, children came to their rural district school with a variety of books. The first step to change this situation was taken by the legislature of Massachusetts in 1827. Town school committees were directed to specify the titles and editions of texts to be used in

the local schools. The law also provided that if the parents persisted in sending their children to school with an unapproved textbook, then the committee was to provide the correct one and add the cost to the household's tax bill. Books for the poor were to be supplied at the expense of the town treasury. However, this law was only a theoretical triumph. It was not popular and was widely disregarded into the 1840s.

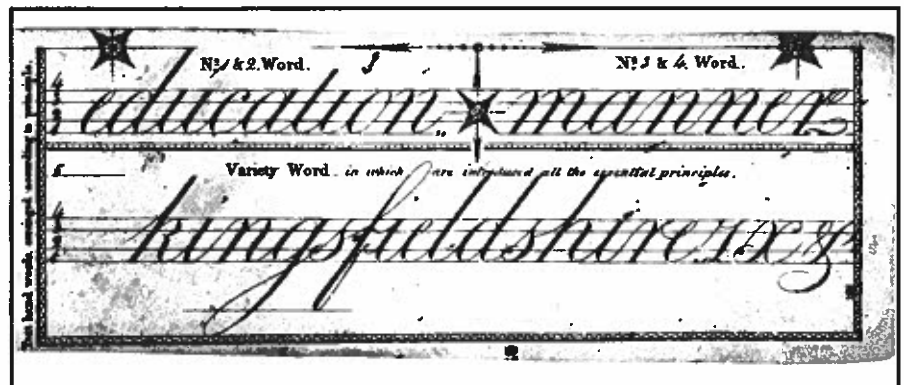
Each textbook was long enough that it provided study material for many consecutive terms of work. Webster's famous blue-back speller had about 150 lessons, and most four-year-olds began with that or another spelling book. They included the alphabet, simple and complex words, and proper names of places and people. They also included introductory reading lessons, using maxims, proverbs and simple fables to teach phonics, pronunciation and spelling. Comprehension was not part of a reading lesson.

Having worked his or her way through the lessons of the speller, the student was ready to take on a variety of

subjects. At the age of seven or eight, a child would begin to study geography. Early 19th-century geography books concentrated on America, and in most, New England received more space than the rest of the United States or South America. These books emphasized each region's principal features, cities, rivers and products in the written text. Some had atlases of hand-colored engraved maps.

Between the ages of nine and 11, the student was introduced to a greater variety of subjects: arithmetic, penmanship, readers, and grammar. Penmanship was a one- or two-year study, to master the use of a pen and ink on paper, the next step for a child who had mastered writing by using a slate pencil on a slate. Arithmetic began with simple numbers and operations, providing problems, explanations and rules. Readers consisted of passages from 18th- and 19th-century authors, including subjects and densely written material that would no longer be thought of as suitable for elementary school students. The editors of these anthologies favored moral philosophers, orators and poets. The Bible might also be used as a substitute for readers, but catechism books and religion disappeared as a subject of study in most district schools early in the 19th century. Grammar texts covered the subject with meticulous thoroughness. Students were expected to memorize the rules often without reference to speech or writing style.

A single classroom typically had students of many different ages and levels of maturity working in small groups through each of the texts. Ideally students came forward to sit on the recitation benches at the front of the desks to recite their lessons. One by one, students were asked questions from their reading, stood, bowed or curtsied, gave their answer, bowed or curtsied again and then sat down. With time at a premium, many teachers would resort to unison recitations by the whole group working together.



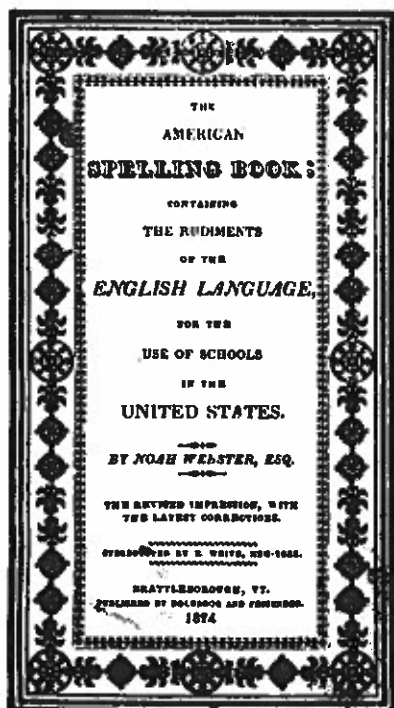
A page illustrating how letters should be formed and joined in writing script. A. Wrifford, A New System of Penmanship (Boston, 1812) provided rules for writing.

This system of education valued rote learning over understanding and students later recalled how they had developed strategies to succeed within the system. When a student felt confident with his lesson, he could volunteer to recite. "I got frequent, but very short lessons, only a single sentence at a time. Easily committed to memory, I could run up and toss it off . . . after which it did not trouble me more. . . . My teacher was so ignorant of the philosophy of mind that she praised me for my smartness." As another student recalled, he was being rewarded for being a "good monkey or parrot," and not for scholarship.

New England's rural district schools may appear to us to have been chaotic, unstructured and inadequate places for learning. But they also represent a considerable achievement, given the limited resources and educational



A contemporary illustration of a district school showing how little attention was paid to such amenities as a playground for the children.



The title page of Noah Webster's famous blue-backed speller, *The American Spelling Book*. It began with the alphabet, in both capitals and lowercase versions. Once the student had mastered that, it was on to pronunciation exercises, long lists of letter combinations, words of increasing complexity and then fables and other stories.

theories available to teachers and rural school committees. They provided a broad, if not quite universal, level of basic literacy for both sexes. Historians have concluded that about 90% or more New Englanders could read and write thanks to their district school educations.

What the district schools did provide was the springboard for educational change. Led by Horace Mann

and Henry Barnard, who eventually became the first superintendents of public instruction in Massachusetts and Connecticut, public consciousness about schooling was gradually raised. They addressed the curriculum, the choice of textbooks, school architecture and furnishings, and established state-run high schools, called normal schools, for training teachers. These changes came about slowly and took decades to complete.

These changes were above all a response to the changes taking place in society, which was becoming less agricultural and more urbanized and industrial. For example, legislation requiring minimum standards of school attendance was passed because when children worked in the textile mills and

other industries, their schooling was neglected.

Schooling gradually became education. The focus was transformed from the student's ability to read the Bible or a newspaper and do simple arithmetic to keeping accurate accounts. Teachers were to guide students' understanding of the principles behind their studies, providing a means for society to weather change and disruption. Educational reform was not merely changing what went on the district school on a day-to-day basis, but part of a greater concern about the goals of child-rearing in an increasingly commercial and moralistic society. The school provides us with a place to discuss those changes in a community setting.

A present from John McKinstry, Instructor of the School
in Sturbridge District No. 5. for the Year 1814.

To Miss Caroline Plimpton
of Sturbridge

Designed for a Manuscript, containing exercises in Grammar.

By learning to think accurately,

We learn to speak and write grammatically.

"This education that forms the tender mind"

Just as the twigs are bent the trees incline!"

Penmanship exercise book which belonged to Caroline Plimpton of Sturbridge. According to a note on the manuscript in the collections of the Research Library at Old Sturbridge Village, this volume was presented to Miss Plimpton by her instructor, John McKinstry, who taught in District School No. 5 in 1814.