

Education in Chelmsford

by GEORGE A. PARKHURST

With the taxpayers of Chelmsford being asked to approve a seven-million dollar school budget at the town meeting, it might be interesting to take a few minutes to look back into history and see what the school problems were years ago.

Perhaps the best criteria for judging a school system is: Does it provide the education and training necessary to meet the needs of a majority of the students? By this measure, our 18th and 19th century schools were quite adequate, although they would be considered little better than none at all by today's standards.

HOME INSTRUCTION

As early as 1642 the Massachusetts General Court had passed a bill requiring the selectmen of each town to see that all families taught their children and apprentices to read the English language and also provided religious instruction.

Five years later each town of 50 or more households was required to appoint a teacher. However, it was not until 1696 that Chelmsford complied, when Samuel Fletcher was 'Appointed to be scolle master.' By this time the town had more than 100 households and came under the law requiring 'a school of such grade as to prepare youth for the University.'

Since the town had not complied with this law by establishing a grammar school, the inhabitants were fined on several occasions by the courts. However, it was less expensive to pay the fines than to operate the school. There being no schoolhouse in town, the children received their instruction at the home of the nearest teacher or school dame.

FIRST SCHOOLHOUSE

The first schools were conducted in private dwellings. After a month's stay in one section of town, the school master would move to another area and teach there for a month or so.

It was not until 1718 that Chelmsford built its first schoolhouse. It was located at the easterly end of the burying ground on the site of the present brick building on Westford Street opposite the Central Baptist church. Donations by private individuals, rather than appropriation of town funds, raised the necessary \$100.

Two years later a second school was constructed in the Parkhurst Road-Smith Street area.



OLDEST SCHOOLHOUSE in town is subject of Article 61 on Town Meeting warrant. Frequently referred to as "the Hearse House," it was built in 1802 at easterly end of Forefathers Cemetery -- at a cost of \$500. (Photos by George A. Parkhurst)



EARLY TEXTBOOKS used in Chelmsford schools reflect (1) a potential area of controversy in forthcoming Town Meeting, (2) dramatic changes in methods and objectives of public school education. Current local trend is to substitute other materials for books.

SCHOOL BUDGET \$600

The earliest mention of a School Committee appears in 1792 when, 'after repeated adjournments and reconsiderations, the Town voted: That a select committee be chosen to provide the grammar School masters and that said committee inspect and Regulate Said Schools.' Nine men were named to the committee, one from each district or 'squadron.' By 1800 twelve schools were in operation at a total expense of \$600.

OLDEST SCHOOLHOUSE

The oldest schoolhouse that is

brick building adjacent to Forefathers Cemetery where it replaced the original structure. Today it is frequently referred to as the 'Hearse House.' It was erected in 1802 at a cost of \$500.

It derives the name 'Hearse House' from the fact that in the 1850's, when a new school was built where the central fire station now stands, the cemetery Department took over the brick building for the storage of the town hearse and other equipment. (In those days it was customary for the town to

own the hearse and make it available for funerals. For instance, the Town Report for 1875 shows an expenditure of \$1,115.05 'for hearses.'

It is this early schoolhouse on which the Chelmsford Historical Society requests an extension of its lease under Article 61 of the town meeting warrant.

EARLY SCHOOLBOOKS

It is difficult for us to understand the instruction given in these early schools. However, a look at several schoolbooks of that period, in the private collection of the present writer, shows how different the teaching approach must have been.

One is a book entitled 'A Concise Introduction to Practical Arithmetic; in which, All the Rules, that occur in common Business, are applied to the Federal Currency. Designed for the Use of Schools in the United States.' It was printed in Boston in 1796.

Another with an equally long title is: 'A Short But Comprehensive Grammar, Rendered Simple and Easy by Familiar Questions and Answers; Adapted to the Capacity of Youth, and Designed for the Use of Schools and private Families,' published in 1800.

Geography was taught from 'A Short But Comprehensive System of the Geography of the World; by way of question and answer.' (1801). To develop proficiency in reading and spelling, the student of the 1830's had 'The Young Reader; To Go with the Spelling Book.'

A knowledge of history was provided by Goodrich's 'A History of the United States of America on a plan Adapted to the Capacity of Youths, and Designed to Aid the Memory by Systematic Arrangement and Associations.'

BUDGET UP TO \$5000

Advancing to the year 1880, we find a summary of the expenses involved in supporting the schools of Chelmsford includes several items that do not appear in the 1970 town report and the costs were somewhat less: Teaching, \$4,121.50; care of schoolhouses, \$174.50; fuel (cord wood), \$248.89; schoolhouse repairs, \$89.09; school supplies, \$40.85; Superintendent, \$182.99; postage 75¢; Truant Officer, \$3.00; and an interesting item, 'J. C. Butterfield, use of horse for committee meetings, \$4.00.' This adds up to \$4,865.57 for the support of ten schools and the school administration for the entire year.

By 1890 the school system had expanded to 15 schools (including two high schools: one at the Center and one at the North village) with 464 registered pupils and a teaching staff of 18. The total school budget that year was \$7,092.65, of which a little more than \$5,000 was for teachers' salaries.

MORAL VALUES

The report of the School Department for 1890 is quite detailed and includes, among other items, a section entitled 'Morals and Good Behavior.' It states that the General Statutes of this Commonwealth direct: 'All instructors of youth to inspire on the minds of children and youth committed to their care and instruction the principles of piety and justice and a sacred regard to truth, love of country, humanity and universal benevolence, sobriety, industry and frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance, and those other virtues which are the ornament of human society and the basis upon which a republican constitution is founded.'

It would be interesting to know whether this law is still on the books and how it is enforced today.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Ten years later, in 1900, school enrollment in Chelmsford had increased to 728 and 18 public schools were being operated. The cost of books and supplies was \$1.34 per pupil and school transportation was \$1,077.80. The Superintendent of Schools received \$750. In another 10 years, the taxpayers were asked to underwrite a school budget of \$26,079.00. In 1920 it cost the town \$78,937.92 to support one high school and eight grammar schools to instruct 1,173 young people.

By 1940 the enrollment had increased to 1624 and the budget reached an alltime high (up to then) of \$112,837.17, but still only 1/60 of what it is today.

Then, with rapid population growth, the necessity of greatly expanded programs to meet the needs of the times, and inflation, school expenditures soared to over \$6,000,000 in 1970.

Although it is interesting to look back to the 'good old days' and see where we have been, today's taxpayer is mainly concerned with where we are going and how much is it going to cost to provide an adequate educational system.