

From school dames to house deans Nov 26, 1986

The local tavern was the gathering place of the men of the community in the early 1700's. It was here that the problems facing the town were debated. One of these problems dealt with education — not the tenure of teachers or the expansion of the athletic program but something more fundamental: should we have a school at all? Could Chelmsford afford to support a school?

In 1642 the General Court had passed an act requiring the selectman to "have a vigilant eye over their brethren and neighbors to see, first, that none of them shall suffer so much barbarism by any of their families as not to endeavor to teach, by themselves or others, their children or apprentices so much learning as may enable them perfectly to read the English tongue."

Five years later the law required that a town of 50 people must have a teacher and one with 100 householders must have a school. This was, of course, before Chelmsford was settled.

The first record of a teacher in this town was when Samuel Fletcher was "Appointed to be a scolle master for the year 1696 by order of the selectman." By then the town had 100 families and was required by statute to have a school of such grade as to prepare youth for the University, i.e. Harvard.

However, it was not until 1718 that our first school house was built.

Housewives in the various sections of the town were appointed school dames. Children of the neighborhood gathered at the home of the school dame for instruction in reading.

Writing was left to the school master who rotated his residence to the different sections of the town for periods of a month or so. For a time, Chelmsford, like other towns, found it to be less expensive to pay a fine to the court than to operate a school.

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



In 1718 the town set aside three-and-a-half rods of land in "the most easterly corner of the burying (burying) place" for its first school. This was where the brick schoolhouse stands today across Westford Street from the Central Baptist Church. The cost, about \$100, was borne by public subscription, the minister, Rev. Samson Stoddard, being the largest donor. The town treasury was not tapped for school construction until 1794.

The town voted, in 1747, to keep the grammar school in the center of town (defined as the area extending two miles each way from the Meeting House) while permission was granted for writing schools in the "outsirts" of the town. The schoolmaster was expected to teach "reeding, Righting & Cyphering."

The second school was opened soon after the first near what is now 24 Parkhurst Road. By 1753 there was also a schoolhouse at the South End (near where Park Road crosses Proctor Road).

Until the formation of the school districts in 1792, the schoolmaster divided his time between the South End, the center, and the North End.

The first schoolhouse "at the neck" (the area that would become the Town of Lowell in 1826) was located on School Street in Lowell, near the cemetery, by 1767.

The greatest advance in our educational system occurred in 1792 when the town was divided into nine school districts, or squadrons, and, for the first time, management of the schools was placed in the hands of a School Committee, one member coming from each squadron.

Schoolhouses were provided for those squadrons that had not had them previously.

By 1800 the town supported 12 schools on a budget of \$600. School houses were situated at the South Row, at North East, and West Chelmsford and, in what is now Lowell, at the corner of Powell and Parker Streets and on Pawtucket Street near St. Joseph's Hospital. There was also one in what would become Carlisle, near the Great Brook Farms State Park.

Albeit the education was primitive by today's standards, there were several who went directly to Harvard from the local schools, some becoming leaders in their professions.

One of the unfortunate consequences of inaugurating the district school system was the loss of the town's grammar school. The town was too poor to support a high grade school in addition to the 12 district schools. However, the desire for more advanced schooling led to the establishment of the Chelmsford Classical School in 1825 with Ralph Waldo Emerson of Concord as the teacher.

Now, in 1986, we have an excellent educational system, but... that's the way it all started.

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