EDUCATION IN YORK, MAINE

PRIOR TO 1800

By Ann Dennett
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HISTORIC LANDMARKS AWARD PROGRAM

Historic Landmarks, Inc. is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of our colonial heritage. The society maintains Jefferds Tavern, the Marshall Store, the John Hancock Warehouse, the Elizabeth Perkins House, and the Old Schoolhouse as historical museums. Landmarks such as the Old Burying Ground, Maude Muller Spring and Snowshoe Rock are cared for by the Society. Funds are used to purchase books for the York Public Library, to arrange lectures on historical subjects, and to place markers in areas of historical significance.

The Award Program was planned to serve the student, the society, the school and the community by encouraging high school students to do research on problems relating to the colonial heritage of York, Maine. This paper, a product of such research, was submitted in April, 1963.

John D. Bardwell,
President
Society for the Preservation
of Historic Landmarks in
York County, Inc.

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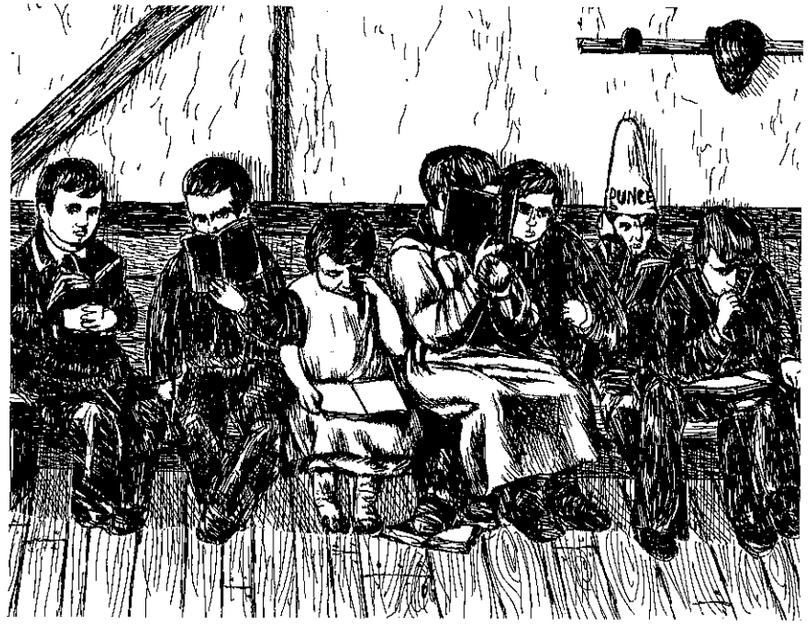


EDUCATION IN YORK, MAINE PRIOR TO 1800

In 1673 York was presented by the Grand Jury "for not providing a schoole and a schoolemaster for the education of Youth according to Law".[1] Records show that investigations were unable to disclose sufficient evidence and York was not indicted.

Positive evidence is available showing that Mr. Edward Woolecock was hired as schoolmaster prior to 1676, and traces of him are found up to 1680. There was no record of a schoolhouse existing in the land records so he apparently taught in his home opposite Harmon Park in the Lower Town.[2]

[1]Charles E. Banks, *History of York, Maine*, Vol. I, p. 257.
[2]*Ibid.*, p. 257.

The first official action on education was taken at a Town meeting on May 13, 1700 when the selectmen were impowered to settle a schoolmaster in the town.[1] On April 15, 1701 the town voted that Mr. Nathaniel Freeman should be hired to keep the free public school in York. The agreement stated that he should be paid three pence a week for reading and four pence a week for writing and cyphering, making a total of eight pounds a year. Mr. Freeman's year of teaching was to begin on May 5, 1701.[2] In 1702 his salary was increased to ten pounds to teach writing and cyphering for the year. As was always the case with educated men he was employed to draw deeds and wills to add to his slender income.[3]

In 1711 a more formal agreement was made with Mr. Freeman for York's schooling. It stated that five years would be the minimum age, and that pupils would attend seven hours of school daily. The hours were to be between eight and eleven in the morning and one and five in the afternoon. Subjects to be taught included reading, writing, and cyphering. The school house was to be built on Penwell lot and would be twenty-two feet long, eighteen feet wide, and eight feet between the joints. This structure was to be constructed before September, 1711 and would have a brick chimney, doors, stairs, and should be suitable to live in.[4]

Mr. Nathaniel Freeman was contracted for seven years, at thirty pounds a year. One third of this amount was to be paid in provisions and the other two thirds in passable money. This salary was to be paid on a quarterly basis. He taught in York until his death on October 3, 1723 at the age of fifty-three. Other grammar school teachers recorded as teaching before 1740 are Mr. Amos Maine, Mr. John Hoveys, Mr. Paul Nowell, Mr. Joseph Moody, and Mr. David Love.[5]

In 1725 the town voted to build a school house for the Lower End of York on Ministerial land at town cost. The school would be kept here for six months of the year, at the Upper End for three months and the South Side of the River for three months. This moving school system was adopted because the town was widely separated, and it needed schools. These moving schools were located according to population and the area.[6]

Scotland and South Side protested the moving schools. In 1726 Scotland was given permission to erect its own schoolhouse and was allotted forty pounds with which to build it. The money was voted to be used to finish a new meeting house on the condition that it be used as a school. In 1742 the town agreed to allow one-fourth of the town's money allotted to schools in York to go to Scotland.

In 1746 the residents of York Corner requested and were granted permission to build a school house twenty rods from the Lewis Bane House at the Corner.[1] The Corner residents were to construct it at their own costs and charges. The house contained only the bare necessities, and in 1755 two pounds, thirteen shillings, and three pence was paid by the town to finish the schoolhouse.

In 1746 the Lower Town was granted a four month school at or near the dwelling house of Lt. Samuel Black deceased.[2] All these branches were just the beginning of the district system which was to follow. After the Revolution, in 1785, education standards were increased to five months of English schooling and twelve months of Grammar schooling. Each district was allowed a sum from the town treasury, equal in comparison to the Center District according to taxes. The first districts, made up of the Village, Scotland, South Side and Cape Neddick were not enough. The town was then split into seven districts; 1. Center District, 2. Cider Hill and Scituate, 3. The Upper Parrish, 4. South Side of the River, 5. Cape Neddick, 6. Ground Root Hill, 7. Tatnic and Agamenticus. Number 1 was held the entire year, numbers 2., 3., 4., 5., were held by the support of the taxes collected in them, and numbers 6., 7., were held for twelve weeks, teaching reading and writing by a school master not paid more than thirty-eight dollars. A child could attend the most convenient district schoolhouse. Reverend Samuel Moody taught the nucleus from which district number one was evolved.[3]

The first school committee was elected in 1800. Previously the York selectmen held full authority over the schools in the town.

Typical school life in the early years was exemplified by the one room school house. These barn-like, one-story, one room structures were rarely finished inside. An open fireplace with a log fire warmed the building. Often the teacher sat in the middle with the students sitting with their backs to him facing the wall which held the crude shelf they used for a writing surface. Lighting by window openings made the place very gloomy. Most of the scholars were young boys, as it was felt unnecessary for girls to be schooled.[4]

The first book from which the children learned their letters was the hornbook. This book resembled a square mirror with a handle made of a thin piece of wood four or five inches long. Upon this a printed paper was laid and a thin sheet of translucent yellow horn covered the printing. The horn was fastened on by narrow strips of metal and tacked down by nails. The printed matter underneath this horn began with the alphabet in capital and lower case letters. This was followed by simple syllables such as ab, eb, ob, etc., ending with a copy of the Lord's Prayer. The handle was often pierced with a hole through which a string was passed which enabled it to be carried around the neck or hung by the side.[5]

[1]George Ernst, *New England Miniature*, p. 135.
[2]George A. Emery, *Ancient City of Gorgeana*, pp. 160-161.
[3]Banks, II, "*op. cit.*," p. 257.
[4]*Ibid.*, pp. 257-259.
[5]*Ibid.*, p. 264.
[6]Ibid., pp. 259-260.

[1]Ibid.
[2]Ibid., p. 261.
[3]Edward G. Moody, *Handbook History of the Town of York*, p. 127.
[4]Catherine Fennelly, *Town Schooling in Early New England*, pp. 3-40.
[5]Banks II, "*op. cit.*," pp. 264-266

The New England Primer, a combination of religious, political, and pedagogical information, was widely used in schools in the region. This was a poorly printed, eighty page, duodecimo size book also called "the Little Bible of New England". It contained the alphabet, easy syllables, and one to six line rhymes about Biblical characters. An example is; "In Adam's fall, We sinned all". It was illustrated by crude woodcuts.[1]

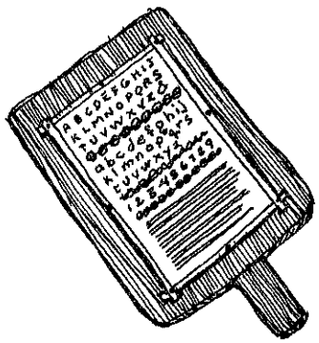
Webster's Primary Spelling Book was one of the best known books. It illustrated each word and used it in a sentence.

For Arithmetic the students used sum books to write down addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Colburn's Intellectual Arithmetic was often studied by advanced scholars.

Writing was practiced in home-made books provided by the teachers. Long goose quill pens were dipped in ink which was a domestic concoction made from the bark of swamp maple or oak boiled and diluted with copperas. Each child brought his own inkhorn filled with this crude concoction.

Children attended elementary schools at a relatively early age. The exceptional child could read the Bible at the age of four and be studying Latin at the age of six to eight years. Of the birch rod, little need be said. It was an integral part of one's education in Colonial days.[2]

School teachers were a sort of peripatetic class of public servants who went from town to town, as opportunity offered and rarely were residents of the place where they were employed. For some reason these itinerants were supposed to be beyond personal interests in their pupils and hence had greater influence with them. It is therefore impossible to provide a complete list of those who presided at the desks of our common schools prior to 1800.[3]



ANCIENT HORNBOOK

[1]Banks, "*op. cit.*," 266.
[2]Ibid., p. 267
[3]Ibid., p. 268.

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