

SCHOOLS OF SMITHFIELD

Highs and Lows In The Development of Education in Our State

An outline of the evolution of education in Smithfield was given by Mrs. Raymond Adams at our last meeting. Her notes were taken from a history of education in the town written by Thomas B. Davis, a former teacher and son of a teacher. The Rev. William Blackstone, coming from Boston, brought education to the town in 1635. He taught the fundamentals of the English language to the Indians who were his neighbors. After the defeat of Indian power in 1675 the early settlers pushed out into the hinterlands, feeling secure for the first time. Children then received the rudiments of education in the home. In the early 1800 with the great wave of cotton manufacturing which swept out of Pawtucket and across Rhode Island, cotton factory villages came into being. Masses of people coming in off the farms and concentrating in these villages to work in the mills were in great need of instruction, particularly children.

In 1800 with the passage of the free school act, school districts came into being. Smithfield was one of the first towns in the State to participate in this great social advancement.

"In 1834 we have the first authentic records of the school districts in the town. Before this there was undoubtedly records kept in the several districts, but with few exceptions they cannot be found. In the records of the first meeting in 1834 it is found that the committee had designated twenty-four districts, giving for their locations, names of some of the teachers. By 1840 the total had increased to thirty-five."

Each district had a taxpayer appointed to supervise the school until 1840 when the State directed the towns to name a School Committee, thus abolishing the neighborhood authority. This committee examined teachers, supervised the schools and made a report to the State.

"More than one of the venerable Smithfield homesteads still bear upon their interior walls the carved initials and mysterious hieroglyphics wrought by the restless school boys of the colonial days."

Mrs. Adams said that one of the oldest school houses in the State still standing is the Friends' Meeting House which was built in 1704 and beginning in 1706 was used for several years as a center of education.

As late as 1840 the school year in the various districts ranged from 14 weeks to year 'round classes. Some communities confined school days to summer. Others had a few months of school in the fall or winter and another term in the summer.

One of the first school houses in the Blackstone Valley was the Remington District No. 27 which was transferred from the Remington homestead. Many of the Smithfield districts were not only lacking in school houses of any kind in 1840 but a few showed a complete lack of interest in education. Freeholders with no children of their own presented a special problem. They opposed the schools.

"A curious situation existed in Blackstone District No. 34. There were twenty families with thirty children of school age resided, but among them there was but one legal voter. While he favored a school house he could see no legal means of obtaining one."

Joseph Pitts became the first school supervisor in 1839. An example of the poor school conditions existing in the Blackstone Valley in 1840 was cited in a committee report for Moasshassuck District No. 23.

"There were 100 children enrolled in classes conducted in the old Moffitt Mill. The noise of the machinery frequently drowned out the teacher's voice and interrupted the class recitations. Although the district had a school house at the time, it was poorly located and unfit for a school. Classes were later transferred to the house of Christopher Brown opposite the mill."

The work of distributing State funds thrust upon the School Committee in 1840 was not to be envied. Some districts had a lot of children while some had a bare few. There were no standard textbooks either.

"In a class of recitations half a dozen different textbooks were in use, thus burdening the teacher. Teachers or pupils moving from one district to another were faced with the necessity of getting all new books."

However, textbooks were soon standardized. Outline maps came into being along with districts libraries. By 1856 the Smithfield School Committee was authorized to examine and issue teacher certificates.

"A forerunner of the modern teachers' institute was the visiting day permitted teachers in 1857. One day each month they were allowed to spend in neighboring schools conferring with other instructors and observing methods used in other classrooms."

The first recorded closing of the Smithfield Schools so that teachers could attend an institute held in Providence was in 1869. By this time the School Committee also had adopted rules and regulations for the schools. These were rules of good conduct, attire and attendance. Mrs. Adams gave a sketch of some of the old districts in the town.

At Greenville the first school was kept in the Greenville Tavern. "Then a small house was built just north of the tavern on Maple-road now called Austin avenue, about 1750. This school served until 1804 when the Greenville Academy was built on the same site. Money for the building was raised by a lottery sanctioned by the State. It served for several years then was moved to the road originally Snake Hill Road now Smith avenue, leading to Scituate where it was turned into a dwelling. It was razed in 1938. After that a new two-story school house was erected in 1874 on the same site. It is still standing and now owned and occupied by the Greenville Grange."

Some of the background of various districts were given by Mrs. Adams as follows:

Angell District No. 29

The present school building was built in 1832 at the corner of Harris Road and Douglas Pike. The first supervisor 1839 was Ashel Angell Ethan Sweet 1840-1, Jonathan Harris 1842, Robert Harris 1843, Ethan Sweet 1844, Peter Ballou 1845. This was an organized district in 1766 and school was held in the house of Ashael Angell. This School building is still standing and has been remodeled into a dwelling and is owned and occupied by Elmo Pante.

Latham District No. 17

Before the erection of their school house in 1858, school was kept in the house of Junia S. Latham, the Mowry Tavern and on a hill on the old Evans Homestead stand the old stone fireplace of an old Cooper Shop where in 1834 Jenekes Mowry taught at a salary of \$12. monthly. According to the records the committee disapproved the quarters in the Mowry Tavern where the school was kept and plans for a new building were approved in 1852. The School house was finally erected in 1858. It is still standing and has been converted into a dwelling.

Evans District No. 13

Mann School House

The school was first kept in the attic of the home of Daniel Mann. The first school house was erected in 1826. In October 1851 it was disapproved by the School Committee, also the same report was made on Feb. 14, 1852. October 12th committee met and approved plans for the new building also of lot. The new School house was built in 1853 and is still standing and now used as a dwelling. The district was formed in 1806. School teachers in 1835 were Emeline S. Winsor - Mary Mowry. \$13 monthly.

Stillwater District No. 15

School was first kept in the home of John S. Appleby (1776). This building is still standing and is owned and occupied by Miss Myra Appleby.

In 1828 a building 20 x 30 was built just beyond the houses of the Woolen Company on the left side of the village street. February 14, 1854 the committee voted that the school house be disapproved.

In 1856 it was voted to erect a school house at forks of road west of the house of Alden Brown. The old school house was abandoned in 1864 and changed into a dwelling house now owned and occupied by Judge Joseph S. Wholey. Another school house was built nearer the Mill village but was discontinued later.

Spragueville District No. 28

Committee reports in 1840 30 families, 40 scholars, average attendance 30. School house owned by Mill Corporation in excellent order. School kept by a female throughout the year and school conditions were very good. Salary \$8. per month.

School was first held in the house of A. Smith which is still standing on the main road in Spragueville now owned and occupied by Robert Broadbent.

The village was settled in 1733, a school house was erected in 1808 on the side of the hill near Spragueville Dam. It was a one story building and was destroyed in or about 1920. A later school house now used as a dwelling stands on the road that leads to Wionkeige Hill.

Col. Sprague for whom the village was named owned the Mill properties lived on Waterman Street in Providence, and came to the Mill each morning. The Mill started at five thirty and closed at eight o'clock at night.

Georgiaville District No. 16

Committee report 1840, about 70 families, 57 scholars, average attendance 46. Term of Winter school three months, Summer school six months. The original name of the village in 1812 was Nightingale named after the proprietors of the Mill. This was changed to Georgiaville probably.

"Many prominent citizens of our country owe their success and esteem in after life to painstaking understanding and hard working teachers of whom it can be truthfully said: 'They did good by stealth and blushed to find it fame'."