

A History of the Common Schools of De Kalb by Bryan Thompson

At the time the town of De Kalb was settled (1803) there was no law in New York State mandating any form of public education for children. In colonial New England rudimentary public education was mandated from an early time, largely due to the Puritan beliefs that each person should learn to read and interpret the bible themselves.

New York was given to the Duke of York as his own private income producing possession. He had no interest in spending tax money educating the populace and so public education lagged. By the time of the American Revolution the colony of New York had the lowest literacy rate of all the 13 colonies. An experimental act encouraging some public schools in NYS was passed in 1795. This law only supplied funding by petition and required a local community match. It was allowed to expire in 1800 and the Regents were forced to fund the few schools established under the act by lotteries.

In 1812 the legislature passed the Common Schools Act, which set up a permanent system of common schools, with school districts for each township. The major force behind this legislative innovation was Jedediah Peck of Otsego County.

The majority of the first settlers of the town of De Kalb were from New England via Otsego County. Whether it was their early New England experience with public education, or their association with Mr. Peck, these settlers showed a remarkable dedication to providing schooling for the children of the town well before state law mandated it.

According to Hough (1853) "the first school in the town was taught by Bela Willes, a Methodist minister, in the winter of 1807, at De Kalb Village, then called

Cooper's Village." In 1808 according to Goff and Spencer two more log schoolhouses, 20-foot square, were built in the township. The first was located on the Lime Kiln Road on the edge of the current village of Richville. The second was located on the farm of James Jackson (Lot 117) in what was known as Bristol's Settlement (On the Old State Rd. near the intersection with Mud Lake Rd. now in the town of De Peyster). Sometime shortly after this a fourth school was established at Chester Dewey's Corners (now the site of Hermon-De Kalb Central School). The Dewey or East school was first referred to in town highway district records in September of 1810. At least two years before the state mandated public funding of elementary education the residents of De Kalb had already built four schools.

These first four schools were identified in the 1813 town records as follows," District #1 Including all living in Farr's tract except John Ross, the Smith's and Jared Durkee..."(East De Kalb)

"District #2 Including all living from Rich's settlement to the Canton town line except those in Riches and Bristol's settlements." (De Kalb Village)

"District #3 Including all living in Rich's settlement." (Rich's)

"District #4 Including all living in Bristol's settlement."(Now Southern part of De Peyster and N part of De Kalb)

The 1812 Act required each town to elect three school commissioners at their annual town meeting. The School Commissioners were empowered to draw up district boundaries and oversee the operation of individual school districts. The School Commissioners were required to be native-born citizens of the United States and legal voters in the town where they served. No guidelines were given for the educational qualifications of the Commissioners. At least one of the first school commissioners had substantial educational background. Joshua Dewey

was a graduate of Yale, the founding master of the first school in Cooperstown and is credited with teaching James Fennimore Cooper to read and write.

De Kalb Commissioners of Common School

Joshua Dewey, Potter Goff, Elisha Griffin

Joshua Dewey, Potter Goff, Elisha Griffin

Joshua Dewey, Potter Goff, Elisha Griffin

Joshua Dewey, Potter Goff, Russell Goff

James Burnett, Seth Pomeroy (replaced by Joshua Dewey), Asa Sprague Jr.

Potter Goff, Elisha Griffin, John C. Rich

Joshua Dewey, Dr. John Seeley, John C. Rich

Dr. John Seeley, John C. Rich, Jerod Durkee

Dr. John Seeley, Jerod Durkee, James Phelps

James Phelps, George Dies, Harry Smith

Solomon Pratt, Elisha Griffin, Daniel Wilkins

Wm Floyd, James Phelps, Abner McMurphy

Wm Floyd, Elisha Griffin, Archibald McMurphy

Wm Floyd, Elisha Griffin, Josiah Walker

Henry C. Miller, Dr. John Seeley, Seymour Thatcher

Henry C. Miller, Harry Tanner, Nathaniel Martin

Nathaniel Martin, John C. Rich, Harry Tanner

Nathaniel Martin, John C. Rich, Harry Tanner (Seth Alexander replaced)

Nathaniel Martin, Orson Shead, James Burnett Jr.

Roswell White, Nathaniel Martin, Otis Green

John C. Rich, Nathaniel Holt, Henry Ames

John C. Rich, Nathaniel Holt, Henry Ames

Danford Johnson, Nathaniel Holt, Otis Green

Danford Johnson, Nathaniel Holt, Otis Green

Danford Johnson, Nathaniel Holt, Otis Green

Harlow Godard, Nathaniel Holt, Otis Green

Harlow Godard, Nathaniel Holt, Otis Green

Nathaniel Holt

SR Brown, James Saunders, James P. Martin, Nathaniel Holt

Nathaniel Holt, John A. Brown, Asa Sprague

Nathaniel Holt, John A. Brown, James P. Martin

Each town was also required to elect up to six, school inspectors, whose job it was to examine each teacher candidate and certify their capabilities and also to inspect the operation of individual schools. These inspections were a spotty affair. The 1828 commissioners report shows that district #3 was inspected 4 times and #9 once. None of the other districts were inspected at all.

Inspectors of Common Schools

1813 Isaac Burnham, Wm. Cleghorn, Timothy Newell, Richard Merrill

1814 Isaac Burnham, Timothy Newell, Richard Merrill, R. Goff

1815 Russell Goff, Isaac Burnham, Timothy Newell, Jonathan Rounds

1816 Timothy Newell, Isaac Burnham, Elisha Griffin, Peter F. Thatcher, John C. Rich

1817 Elisha Griffin, P. Goff, John Borland, Timothy Newell, Parvis Rounds

1818 Jonathan Pain, Seth Pomeroy, Joshua Dewey, John Seeley, Thomas B. Benedict

1819 T. B. Benedict, Seth Pomeroy, Abel Cook, Jonathan Rounds, Gideon Townsley

1820 T. B. Benedict, Abel Cook, Joshua Dewey

1821 John C. Rich, Seth Pomeroy, Elisha Griffin

1822 T. B. Benedict, Gideon Townsley, John Borland

1823 Gideon Townsley, Seth Pomeroy, Timothy Utley
1824 T. B. Benedict, Seymour Thatcher
1825 Seymour Thatcher, Abner McMurphy
1826 Seymour Thatcher, Henry Miller
1827 Harry Tanner, Harlow Godard
1828 Hamilton Cooper, John White
1829 Hamilton Cooper, John White, Harry Ames
1830 Seymour Thatcher, John White, Hamilton Cooper
1831 Seymour Thatcher, Hamilton Cooper, John White
1832 John C. Rich, Edward D. Sergeant, Harry T. Holt
1833 Elijah Morton, Edward D. Sergeant, Harry T. Holt
1834 Elijah Morton, John White, Orin M. Fisk
1835 Harlow Godard, Elijah Morton, Orin M. Fisk
1836 Danford Johnson, Nathaniel Holt, Otis Green
1837 Elijah Morton, Orin Fisk, John C. Rich
1838 Elijah Morton, Orin M. Fisk, Allen Gurnsey
1839 Elijah Morton, Orin M. Fisk, George Fredenburgh
1840 Orin M. Fisk, George Fredenburg, Elijah Morton
1841 Orin M. Fisk, George Fredenburg, Elijah Morton
1842 Orin M. Fisk, Elijah Morton
1843 Orin M. Fisk, Elijah Morton



1830 De Kalb School District Boundaries.
(Drawn on Beer's 1865 map of De Kalb)

District Names in 1830: #1 Dewey, #2 Well's, #3 Rich's, #4 De Kalb Village or Isaac Stacy jr.'s, #5 Burnett's, #6, #7 L. Dewey's, #8 Cleghorn's, #9 Bishop's Corners.

Each school district was required to hold an annual meeting the first Tuesday of October each year. They were to elect a moderator for each meeting and three school trustees. A budget was to drawn up and a tax collector for each district appointed. At first each school was only required to hold a winter term beginning

on or before December first each year. Each district had the option to hold an additional summer term.

Few records exist from the very first schools. Goff and Spencer noted that Miss Olivia Spencer was teaching 20 scholars at the Dewey School for 12 (? dollars?) per month in 1814. They note that the Master at Rich's School was paid \$14 per month. They also noted that the Jackson School averaged 30 scholars. Hough (1853) says the first teacher at Richville was Joseph Kneeland who was shot at the battle of Ogdensburgh. Rich's Settlement to Richville indicates that the first teacher at Richville was Richard Merrill.

The rural schools of this era had a long writing desk along the sidewalls by the windows for light and rows of rude benches in the middle of the room facing the master at the front of the room for recitation and lessons. According to town records all of the first schools were built of logs, which made them very drafty temporary buildings.

In the early days men were preferred for teachers over women. The early records of school district number 7 (originally #11 from 1826 to 1830) show resolutions passed annually specifically requiring the trustees to hire a male teacher. This practice continued from 1826 until 1847 when the trustees were directed for the first time, to hire a female teacher.

Books and paper were scarce and expensive. Most writing was done on slates before committing it to paper. According to the school commissioners report the books used in the De Kalb Common schools in 1828 were: The English Reader, Testaments, Cobb's Spelling Book, Murray's Grammar, Adams and Daboll's Arithmetic's. Cobb's Speller was a very up to date text at the time, first published in 1821 in Ithaca, NY. The text was written by Lyman Cobb an upstate NY schoolteacher. Murray's Grammar and The English Reader were both written by

Lindley Murray (1745-1826). His Grammar book was first published in 1795 and is still in print today! Adams New Arithmetic by Daniel Adams was first published in 1827. Nathan DeBoll's Arithmetic by Nathan DeBoll (1780-1863) was a text printed in Connecticut that taught the pounds shillings and pence system (Perhaps this was thought necessary for trade with nearby Upper Canada.).

Local decision-making was often contentious and complex under the early common school system. Farms and households could request to be included or excluded from a particular district, however all such matter were subject to district approval and tax revenues and rates were at stake. The sighting of schools was particularly contentious.

The experience of School District Number 7 seems fairly typical. The district organized in 1826 and voted to build a schoolhouse near Henry Lawrence's on land leased from him. At the district meeting in 1827 it was voted to move the schoolhouse onto the lot of Adolphus Preston. In Feb 1828 a special meeting was held to reconsider moving the schoolhouse site and the site was moved back to near Henry Lawrence's.

In October 1843 the schoolhouse was in need of replacement. A resolution was passed to relocate the school but the location was left blank in the record book. The vote was 13 to 6 with the Ayes and Noes recorded by name in the record. They resolved to use the old log school the ensuing year. Special meetings were then called Oct 28, 1843 and Nov 18, 1843 without transacting any business. In October 1844 they passed a resolution that the De Kalb School "Superintendent shall stick the stake for a site for a schoolhouse." A special meeting was called in January 1845, rescinding the request for the Superintendent to stick the stake for the school and assigning a location for the school.

This location was moved again at a meeting in June 1845. A special meeting of the district was called December 27, 1845 in the kitchen of Sylvanius Stiles. Evidently the new school was still not completed as they voted to rent rooms from Mr. Stiles for holding school that winter. In January 1845 they voted to build the school for \$150 on the lands of Henry Lawrence. On June 10, 1845, Henry Lawrence granted a deed, for the school site. June 18, 1845 one more meeting was held at which a final attempt was made and defeated to move the site of the new school North of Tanner Creek. The school was finally completed the ensuing summer. Perhaps because of the controversy, the June 10, 1845 deed for the school was not recorded in the courthouse until November 1867, some 22 years later.

In 1836 and 1838 the NYS legislature set aside money for libraries to be set up in each of the common schools across the state. These funds were to be supplemented by revenue from the sale of the literature lots in each town. Local records show that each of the districts complied, appointing librarians and purchasing bookcases. The Librarian of newly formed School District Number 19, Clark Frazier, compiled an inventory December 18, 1848 of the books in the library received from former District #6:

Border Adventure

Willard's United States

Mack's LaFayette

Goldsmith's Roman History

Memoirs of Harriet L. Winslow

Life of Alexander the Great

Life of William Penn

Life of Crocket

Scott's History of Scotland

The Life of Benjamin Franklin
The Life of Israel Putman
Stories for Young Persons
Advice to Young Men
Life of Sir William Wallace
Young Students 3 volumes
Physical Condition of the Earth

In October 1840, the voters of District #7 approved library resolutions limiting book loans to four weeks, and instituting a fine of six pence for every leaf turned down or grease spot.

The number of districts grew and changed over time. In 1815 a fifth district was added. By 1817 there were 8 districts, by 1825 10 districts. By the 1850's there were 24 districts in the town. . The number as well as the names changed and shifted from place to place. At various times there were two different school districts in the town, each carrying the names Dewey, Acres, Wells and Stiles.

Some of the districts on the edges of the town were joint districts with neighboring towns. At one time there was a joint district in the Northeastern corner of the town that included parts of Canton and Lisbon. There also were other districts formed jointly with Gouverneur and Hermon. There was always negotiating and compromising to be done by the governments of both towns with these districts. One of the more interesting compromises was joint District #22 between De Kalb and Oswegatchie. In 1852 this school was located on the Heuvelton and De Kalb Plank Rd. The trustees (John Backhouse, Duncan McMartin, and Hugh Kelly) located the school such that the town line bisected the building and the school lot, a perfect compromise. The school district did not last long however and the district number was reused as the first number assigned to the new school at De Kalb Junction in 1866.

Just as today the functions of the Common Schools were controlled by state regulations. At various times reforms were passed to improve local education. In 1843 the Common School act was amended, eliminating locally elected school commissioners and inspectors. One elected Town Superintendent of Common Schools and an appointed County Superintendent of Common Schools replaced them. The Town Supervisor and Clerk were required to take on the clerical and financial tasks formerly performed by the School Commissioners. An act clarifying the duties of the new Town Superintendent in 1847 was thirty-two pages long.

De Kalb Superintendents of Common Schools

Elijah Morton

John A. Brown

John A. Brown

John A. Brown

John A. Brown

1850 Henry Thompson

1852 Henry Thompson

1854 Dr. Emory Hastings

In 1847 a special law was passed requiring all clerks of Common Schools to keep records of births, deaths and marriages within their boundaries and forward the same to the Town Clerk. This act was repealed after only three years due to its unpopularity. About this time the common schools became involved with local burial grounds. School District number six purchased one-half acre for a burial ground in 1844 and School District number seven in 1854. Other schools on Maple Ridge Road and River Road allowed burial of local residents on the schoolhouse property proper.

In 1856 "An Act to provide for a more thorough supervision and inspection of common schools" was passed. This law superseded the laws of 1843 and 47. This act eliminated the position of Town Superintendent of Common School, dividing his responsibilities between the County Superintendent, the Town Supervisor and Town Clerk. About this time, Dr. Hastings, the De Kalb Superintendent died. He had been responsible for holding and accounting for all school monies in the town. He died with open books and \$43.96 was never accounted for. In 1861 the town forgave his widow the debt.

Regulations multiplied beginning in the 1860's. Compulsory attendance laws were first passed in 1896 requiring each town to appoint a truant officer to enforce attendance.

Horace L. Hills was the first officer appointed in the town. Rules also governed how far a child was allowed to walk, how closely related a teacher could be to the trustees of a school and how the classroom should be illuminated. Yes, in the 1920's a regulation came into effect requiring that all natural light in the classroom must enter over the left shoulder of the students as they were seated in the classroom facing the blackboard. This was to prevent the shadow of the student's hand from falling on their writing (Assuming everyone was right handed.). The effect of this regulation can still be seen in surviving Schoolhouses of that era as scars where window openings were filled in. Usually the windows removed from one wall of a schoolhouse were reinstalled on the other side of the building to provide sufficient light. (I can imagine some frugal school trustees grumbled about that requirement!)

Part two of the History of the Common Schools will appear here...

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