

History of Schools in Manchester

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Prepared for the Manchester Historical Society about 2006.

Matthias Spiess wrote in his 1923 History of Manchester “Of all the achievements that have marked the history of Manchester in the last fifty years, the most outstanding in permanent value is the development of its schools. The schools of Manchester as they stand today, thoroughly modern in system and in equipment, are the product not only of a wisely generous policy on the part of the town fathers, aided by private subsidies from Cheney Brothers; they are also the fruit of self-sacrificing endeavor on the part of many public spirited men and women. Some of them, as school visitors and trustees, without compensation devoted much time and high intelligence to their tasks, others as teachers gave the best years of their lives to the instruction of the growing generation, setting forth in their own lives an example for better living.”

The very early educational history is sparse and begins with East Hartford historian Joseph Goodwin's statement “There were no schools on this side of the Great River prior to 1708.”

In 1718 what is now East Hartford and Manchester was divided into two school districts – North and South – with the Hockanum River used as the dividing point. Since this made the North section much shorter a comprise line was established through the center of the towns.

At a town meeting held in 1745 it was voted “that those persons living in the Five Miles have their ratable list of school money amongst themselves by direction of the School Committee” and a school was allowed in the Five Miles with the one sole teacher, and under the direction of the same committee the rest of the town had. This established the first school of any kind within the present town limits. It appears this was not a building but rather a class held in a rented room.

In November 1751 it was voted to allow a schoolhouse to be built in Hop Brook village “always provided that the house be built without cost to the Society” and that a school could be kept in Buckland, Manchester Green, Keeney Street and the Center. It was further voted that the places where the

schoolhouses are allowed to be built shall each have their part of the public money for the support of the schools according to the lists of the respective districts, on condition that they add so much money as will keep the school three times as long as the public money would have kept them.” At that time the school year was divided into a winter and summer session.

The story is told that the Hop Brook school was the first to be built. The Olcotts, Simonds and Marshes had prepared the frame and lumber while they waited for the vote and on Thanksgiving day of 1751 the frame was erected and the clapboards put on. Capt Daniel Marsh rode on horseback the next day to invite the people of Buckland and Manchester Green to see the school. This school stood across the road from the Bunce School. In the following years the other schools were also erected. When Orford Parish was established in 1772 the town was divided into six school districts.

There are no records remaining about those early schools. It can be assumed that reading, writing and ciphering were taught by, in the beginning, a schoolmaster and later, possibly a school mistress.

Bible

The Connecticut Courant

Benjamin Cheney's half dictionary

hornbook

Handwriting pages

ciphering change from English to American money

Ad for a teacher

By 1816 Manchester Green was a thriving village and in need of a larger school. An agreement was reached on February 29th of that year between the committee composed of Benjamin Lyman, Calvin Cheney and Isreal Carrier and Chauncy Bryant. It called for a one story brick building 32 feet by 22 feet divided into two rooms with oak floors and a total of 12 windows. There was to be a fireplace in each room with a setting bench around the room for the writers and two tiers of setting benches with backs. It was to be constructed in a workmanlike manner of the best materials. Chauncy Bryant was to be paid \$340 together with the old schoolhouse. The work was to be completed by October 1. Before he had a chance to begin the work the committee was back with another proposal. He was to add a second story for the Proprietors of the Publick Hall so called, 7 feet high with a fireplace at the west end and 12 windows, all to be finished by October 1. For this additional work he would receive \$200.

The public schools were not the only show in town. In March of 1826, George Griswold, a physician and Enoch Burt, a minister ran an ad in the Courant for the Manchester Private Academy in which would be taught Latin, French and Greek languages together with academics taught in public academies. Particulat attention will be paid to whatever is connected with good manners and morals. In addition, Enoch Burt added that “Young ladies and Gentlemen from abroad, may be accommodated with board, in my family, at the moderate rate of \$1.25 per week, exclusive of washing. Tuition \$4 per quarter for the languages and higher branches of the Mathematics and Philosophy – for all others \$3.” There is no indication that this academy ever opened. Enoch Burt, who had built a clock that ran when he was twelve, was dismissed as the pastor of the Congregational Church in February of 1828 and spent the rest of his life as a gifted inventor with a number of patents to his name.

Not to be outdone V R Osborn, also a minister, ran an ad in April of 1826 for the Manchester Academy. His school had opened the previous November on Middle Turnpile near Manchester Green and he stated, “ the rapid progress of the pupils is all the recommendation it requires. He added, “ a large and convenient boarding house is now building and will be ready to receive

scholars by the first of June.” In May another ad was run and the name had been changed to the Manchester Seminary. He promised “ Young gentlemen over 14, who have a good knowledge of the English studies necessary, can read all the Latin and Greek required to enter college in one year; if not, there will be no farther charges for tuition. Young ladies in one term of 12 weeks can read any book in the French language with facility.” In August of 1827 the following testimonial ran as a reprint from the Boston Statesman: Without the least knowledge of the Latin, previous to my entering Mr. Osborn's school, within the term of 11 ½ weeks I read 12 books of Virgil besides committing my Latin grammar. The latter part of the term I used to parse from 30 to 40 lines in A M and construe from 3 to 400 lines in P M. Seth W Cheney

The school must have been fairly successful as ads ran into the 1830s.

In 1846 the East Academy was founded on Parker Street neat Pitkin probably near what is now Academy Street. Its backers were prominent citizens of Manchester Green. In 1856 there was a notice that arrangements had been made for the formation of a Normal Class of those desiring to teach during the winter.

The Center Academy opened in 1847 in a building that ajoined the Methodist Church on the northeast corner of Main and Center Streets. By the 1860s both schools no longed operated. The East Academy was torn down and in 1926 when the Masonic Temple was built the old Center Academy (it had been renovated several times) was moved to Birch Street where it stands today.

Bissell's map of 1849 shows the 8 school districts of that time. The town resembles a doughnut with the center cut out because the majority of the population was clustered around the many small villages that had sprung up. There is little information available about the individual schools with the exception of Edward Lincoln Bidwell's reminiscences of his schooldays. E L lived on Prospect Street and attended South School.

“It was in the presence of Miss Strong that the writer learned the mysteries of the alphabet. There were three of us in the class, two girls and myself. Slates were not considered unsanitary then and our health was not impaired even though we cleaned them by the simple process of spitting on them and rubbing them dry with our fists.

Inside the building a platform at the front was occupied by the teacher's desk. In the open space in front of it stood a cast iron stove flanked on each side by a couple of recitation benches. It was customary to delegate a boy for each day to tend the fire and we enjoyed the task as it gave us an opportunity to leave the room whenever we wished to bring in wood from the shed. Sometimes a boy would throw a handful of rock-salt into the stove on the sly, and when we raked over the live coals to make a foundation for fresh fuel we would start up a pyrotechnic display.

On cold winter mornings we would occupy the recitation benches near the stove. Each scholar furnished his own ink and as the bottles often froze we would place them on the stove to thaw. Sometimes we would forget to loosen the tops and as they thawed the gas generated blow the corks out and they would fly to the ceiling leaving a round spot there. Sometimes we would chew up a wad of paper until it was quite soft and pulpy and then throw it up against the ceiling where it would stick and dry on, giving the ceiling the appearance of having some sort of facial eruption.

The desks were liberally embellished with initials and other artistic designs, carved by the knives of the occupants. Some of them were equipped with subterranean passages through which a boy could puncture the anatomy of the boy in front of him with a pin.

The drinking water for the school was furnished by a pail and tin dipper kept on a bench in the entry. Generally two boys were delegated to keep the water pail full. As the neighbors disliked to have children around their wells we generally brought the water from the neighboring brook.”

One other happening from the 1860s was the tragic case of Hattie Wheeler. Some of you may have heard the story before but it bears repeating because it touches on an accepted form of discipline from that time.

The Mysterious Case of Hattie Wheeler

Hattie was born in 1860, the daughter of Sarah and Daniel Wheeler. The family lived in North Manchester on what is now known as Oakland Street.

In October of 1869 Hattie was 9 and attended the 8th District School. She was in the intermediate department and her teacher was Miss Emerette Campbell. Miss Campbell was 27 and had been teaching since she was 18.

On the 30th of September, a Thursday, Hattie missed her geography lesson (which consisted of three questions) and was told by Miss Campbell that in addition to preparing her lessons for Friday she would also have to repeat the missed geography lesson.

Friday came and Hattie was still unprepared for her Thursday geography lesson and as a punishment Miss Campbell sent her to stand in the outer coatroom and prepare. After standing for an hour she was brought back to the classroom and made to stand for another five hours without lunch until she could repeat the lesson. She was allowed to go to the outhouse twice and was also sent outside for a short period when her nose began to bleed.

Hattie was unable to repeat her Friday lessons and was kept standing after the other students were dismissed. Finally she was sent home. What happened next is told in her father's words.

From the Hartford Courant, January 17, 1870

“Next day (Saturday) her limbs began to swell, which swelling gradually increased, until her whole body was contorted out of its natural shape; her suffering increasing every day until her death, which must have been a welcome release. During the greater part of this time she was delirious constantly, vainly trying to recite the lesson for which she had been so inhumanely punished, and constantly asking her teacher if she might take her seat. Her last words being “Miss Campbell, Miss Campbell.”

*Hattie Wheeler died October 11, 1869 age 9yr 3mo
Dr. William Scott - hydrocephalus
Census Death Record of 1870 - brain fever*

The Board of school visitors publically heard all evidence relating to the case on October 16th and found that:

- punishment by standing up is not unusual, harsh or objectionable when reasonable in duration but in this case **it was too long continued to be sanctioned** and
- they do not find that the teacher acted from any other motive than a sense of duty and they consider her error was one of judgment and not of intention.

Why did Hattie die? In 1869 the term hydrocephalus was a catchall for illness that included fever, delirium, coma and usually death. Brain fever described either meningitis or encephalitis. It was probably not a contagious disease as there were no other deaths in Manchester that year due to either cause.

Kidney failure-early may produce no symptoms
lethargy, fatigue, swelling, alteration of thinking
decrease of mental functions, coma and death

Courant, March 1862

David S Calhoun was a longtime school visitor who made a report to the town in the fall of 1861 which was printed by the town. "It laid down, what all our readers will agree to consider sound doctrine, as to what every public school ought to be:

Every common school-house, however humble, should be a fountain whence shall flow little streams of patriotic feeling into every nook of the surrounding country. It should be a place where our children shall drink in, with their first tastings of knowledge, a love for their country, its emblems, and its history: a love which, finding root in their young hearts, shall become a part of themselves, to grow with their growth, and only to cease with their life.

It should be a nursery of patriots; a place where our nation's banner shall decorate the walls, where its songs shall be sung, and where the value of our government shall be taught so faithfully, and the seeds of loyalty shall be so thickly sown, that the vile weeds of secession and rebellion shall find no soil to root therein.

No person who is not a sincere and outspoken friend to our Constitution and the Union, and an uncompromising foe to rebels, should ever find a foothold within the doors of a common school-house as an instructor; and so far as the authority of your Board extends, no one shall. A traitor, open or secret, ought not to have the charge of his *own children*; much less those of others. That there are enemies of our country now among us, is doubtless the result, to a great extent of defective education. It should be, therefore, our sacred duty, earnestly and devoutly performed, so to train and temper the minds of the rising generation, especially through the agency of common school instruction, that if we, by God's blessing, succeed in preserving for them the priceless gift of a free government, made and delivered to us by our fathers, they may receive it with reverent hands, bear it on loving hearts, and not one of them be found so abandoned as to despise its blessings, or plot its destruction.

The committee of School Visitors report began to be included with the Town Annual report in the 1860s. These reports are available for viewing at Town Hall and contain the trials and tribulations that the School Visitors faced.

For example, in 1866 they reported “The teacher in the 6th District was placed in the school by paternal cupidity and against his own wishes. (Arthur B Carpenter from Bolton). The result was indifference respecting his duties and an abandonment of the position after 9 weeks.” The winter term of the school in the third district was poorly disciplined and unskillfully taught.”

It is important to note that these were not high paying jobs. In 1863 the average wage for males including board was \$28.60 and for females \$16.55. By 1866 it had risen to \$40.52 for males and \$24.32 for females.

The schools themselves were often in poor shape. “The buildings in districts 3, 5 and 8 are just passable and those in districts 4 and 9 wholly unsuitable and insufficient. Usually ragged walls and cracked doors. Dog-eared books and poor lessons are found together.”

Parents were also a problem. “In some cases great injury has been done to the cause of education, and the influence and ability of the teachers has been severely diminished by parental interference with the discipline and management of the schools as applied to individual pupils. Parents have demanded that their children should be made exceptions to the general rules of instruction in government, and have been quick to find fault with the teacher, and to insist upon their own wishes being the supreme law for their children within the school house as well as without.” In addition - “Nearly one-third of the youth of the town growing up in ignorance! Many perhaps in idleness and vice! Only a few more than 2/3 of the enumerated children attended school. At that time there were 831 children between the ages of 4 and 16 who were eligible. This problem placed Manchester third from the bottom in attendance according to the state report.

The Rise of the 9th District

Until 1859 there were only 8 school districts in Manchester. The largest was the 8th district due to the influx of workers for the mills and the advent of the railroad. However, as the Cheney silk mills began to grow and the population increased the 9th or Center District was established. It included what was known as Cheneyville and was taken from the surrounding districts. At first classes were held in part of the old Center Academy and in another small building on Center Street.

In the 1870s the Cheney Brothers offered to build and furnish a four room schoolhouse at an estimated cost of \$15,000, and give free use of it as a public school. In 1881 the building was raised and four more rooms were constructed under it. In 1887 another four rooms were added and in 1893 a still larger addition was completed. The result was a large wooden structure that could house at least a thousand students. By 1899 the school enumeration was 2,392 pupils with 1,301 listed in the 9th district, more than half the total. This was also reflected in the money appropriated for the 1897 school year. District 9 received \$20,000. This was more than the total allotted to all the other districts.

Beginning in 1891 instruction in kindergarten through grade 6 was given by supervised students from the New Britain State Normal School.

Between 1871 and 1882 Dwight Bidwell gave instruction in Latin and Algebra to small groups of students since there was no high school in Manchester. Some students traveled to Hartford High School for a fee of \$100 which was paid by the town. In September 1887 the Courant reported "there will be a strong movement in the annual town meeting toward the establishment of a high school. A petition calling the attention of the meeting to the subject is circulating and is signed by the leading tax payers and the most intelligent citizens in the community. Parents feel that their own town with a population of 8,000 and a grand list of three million, ought to provide educational advantages. The project may not succeed this year but it will certainly have a strong backing." The issue was sent to a committee which reported unfavorably and the subject was dropped.

In 1893 the 9th District Committee authorized the teaching of high school subjects and Frederick (Zip) Verplanck was appointed principal. He was able to recruit 6 students for the first class which graduated in 1894.

Classes were held in the 9th district school. The board of school visitors met **in March** of 1898 and took action on the course of study. It was decided to **drop** Greek. It was also reported that the teachers have had a good deal of trouble this winter in securing good results in the work of the pupils because of the incessant social gatherings in which the young people participated. The board passed the following resolution: Voted, in order to induce a higher degree of devotion to school work on the part of our people, the school board asks parents to discourage the attendance of their children upon evening entertainments and social gatherings.

As the 19th century drew to a close one important practice was instituted in the 9th district. "Principal Verplanck put into practice last Friday a plan for a fire drill which he has had in mind for some time. At a given alarm from the school bell the children leave their seats, form in line and march rapidly from the building. At the first trial 1,072 children distributed through nearly fifty rooms were out of the building in three minutes. As the code of signals is well learned the alarm will be given at unexpected times."

MANCHESTER SCHOOL DISTRICTS

District # 1	Oakland
District #2	Manchester Green
District # 3	Porter Street/Highland Park
District # 4	South
District # 5	Keeney Street
District # 6	Bunce/Verplanck
District # 7	Buckland
District # 8	Union Village/North Manchester
District # 9	Cheneyville/ South Manchester

Here end Brenda Paullo's school notes, which she prepared for a presentation at the Manchester Senior Center, where she frequently gave talks on various history topics. She may have planned to continue with information about the Ninth District school fire of October 23, 1913, school consolidation in 1932, etc. Website viewers can find information on these topics in separate documents, using the Search function available on the Home page, www.manchesterhistory.org

- Webmaster, Susan Barlow, February 2017