

West School in Colebrook

The West School, a private residence since 1923, is located at 124 Stillman Hill Road.

The Town of Colebrook was incorporated in 1779. As a newly formed town, certain requirements had to be met in order to satisfy certain mandates of the Colonial Legislature; one of these was the establishment of public schools. Initially, there were two districts; North and South with an arbitrary line drawn east-west through Colebrook Center. After the end of the War of Independence, Colebrook's population began to grow, making it necessary to upgrade our school system, the result being the formation of The Colebrook School Society in 1796.

Their first order of business was to "appoint a committee to form the several school districts and make report of their doings to this meeting, and that said district committee be empowered to employ school teachers for the several districts to which they belong". The formation of 7 school districts resulted. The West District was not one of these seven, its area being part of what was then known as "Porter's District". This district extended along the Norfolk-Colebrook town line from Loon Brook on the north to the Winchester town line on the south. As the town's population continued to grow, more adjustments were required, and in October of 1810, the southern portion of the old Porter's District was renamed the Southwest District, and the northern portion was called the West District. In March 1811, a committee appointed for that purpose "set a stake", as they referred to it, for a schoolhouse in this new Southwest District. The exact wording was "...on the easternmost knoll on the cross road leading from Pinney Street westward by Church's old sawmill on which said knoll we have this day erected a stake and stones". On January 28, 1811, a committee was appointed by the School Society of Colebrook for the purpose of affixing a place for a schoolhouse in the newly created West District. This they did by setting their stake "at the corner north of the Turnpike Road [Stillman Hill Road today] and east of the road by John Phelps and about 660 feet west of the dwelling house of Frederick Brown". Today, the schoolhouse is 124 Stillman Hill Road, Brown's house is the Morgan Horse Farm at 3 Pinney Street and John Phelps lived where the Cords now live at 61 Phelps Road.

The West School remained in use for the next 97 years, but as the twentieth century dawned, road conditions began to be improved, and with better roads came better transportation. This, coupled with a decreasing population in the region, forced another revamping of the school system, and in 1908 the West School closed its door as a schoolhouse for the last time; the remaining pupils were transported to the Center School.

For many years the now abandoned West School, which remained town property, lay vacant. Finally, in 1923, the voters of the Town of Colebrook instructed the selectmen to sell the West, Southwest and South Schoolhouses, along with the land they stood on. From that time to the present, the old West School has served as a private dwelling.

In order to gain an insight into the workings of the West School during its period of service in the nineteenth century, here are a few statistics gleaned from the surviving School Society documents: To begin with, there used to be an office of School Visitors. These men were charged with visiting each school twice a year and making a report on their assessment of

the teacher, the pupils and the general state of affairs in and around the building itself. The earliest visitor's report still in existence is for the year 1839-1840, and was conducted by Mr. Harvey Whiting, a prominent citizen of the town. The winter session was completed in November, shortly after the beginning of that part of the school year. Here is what he had to say about the West School:

“The West School was kept by Mr. Charles B. Phelps, whose reputation as a teacher is justly generally known to this society. I understand it is established rule with him to undertake no more business than can be well done – does not distract the minds of scholars by imposing on them several studies at the same time without making progress in any. He also makes it a primary of object to attend to the elementary branches. This school was also in good order. At the first visit, this school was large and contained among others several young men, some of whom I conclude were preparing for teaching, and I was not a little gratified with their scrupulous attention to the orders of the school. The same remark would apply to a smaller number of females of nearly the same age. At the second visit, several of the larger scholars had left, those that remained acquitted themselves honorably.”

The following year, there had apparently been some dissatisfaction about the teachers expressed by some parents, which he addressed as follows:

“The plea of incompetence so often made is not well founded; and I am satisfied there is not a respectable member of any district but may render some service by visiting the school in the district where he resides.

Many of the prejudices against teachers would be prevented by personal acquaintance with the teacher in, as well as out of school. This would afford opportunity to observe the deportment of the scholar's condition of the home and enable then to take measures to prevent waste and damage to the house and its appendages; to preserve the books, clothes, etc. of their children from un-necessary injury. I am aware that this is the appropriate duty of teachers, but they cannot be expected to put any great interest in the performance of a duty in which none is manifested by parents. In several of the districts the want of a comfortable [school]house is severely felt, and it is hoped that when new ones are provided, measures will be adopted to prevent them from being defaced and destroyed”.

The last visitor's report we have is for the year 1857. At that time the number of students in Colebrook between the ages of 4 through 16 was 324, with the actual registered number being 270, and an average daily attendance of 187 in the winter. The number of registered summer students at 236, with a daily attendance of 162; those attending the West School during the winter term of three and a half months was 13, with a daily average of 9. The three-month summer term had 8 registered pupils with a daily average of 4. The compensation to each teacher, estimating board at \$2.00 per week, was \$14.00 per month in the winter session, when there was a man teacher, and \$9.00 per month in the summer, when there was a woman teacher. [The disparity of wages between the sexes is painfully obvious in the teaching profession throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, when I began my studies in the first grade in the

Center School in 1938, all four of Colebrook's teachers were female, and the starting wage was \$800.00 per year!]