

Forge School Growing Pains

The evolution of schools in the United States is a long and complicated one. In rural areas, which of course accounted for the majority of our population, the most basic essentials were supplied to students from age five or six until the age of sixteen. Education did not necessarily end then, but the law required that children attend to that age in order to meet the minimum requirements for a public education.

As we are all well aware, even in these early years of the twenty-first century, there are lively debates ongoing about accessibility to public schools; should public transportation be made available to students from one district or town to another school of the parent's choosing, should urban schools be racially in balance and so on. One argument heard around the state, and indeed the country, is the matter of government mandates, especially in regard to education, whereby laws are passed, but without the accompanying funds to implement and maintain these laws. In a sense, this is an ongoing evolution that probably began with the Pilgrim's first school.

Every so often Historical Societies are given documents by their benefactors, and Colebrook is no different. Of our staunch supporters over the years, none have consistently come up with more interesting items than Bob and Joann Deming of Robertsville. Demings have been in Colebrook since Daniel Deming was mustered out of the Continental Army and carved a farm for himself and his family at the foot of Eno Hill, about opposite from the new bridge crossing Sandy Brook. They have consistently been politically and civically involved in town activities throughout parts of four centuries. Bob's grandmother, Mrs. Homer P. Deming, was a long-time teacher at the Forge School, located about one quarter of a mile down the road from their farm.

Some time ago Bob donated record books and various papers concerning the operation of that school, which I have shared with you in these Colebrook articles. These papers filled in some large gaps that still exist in the records of the Colebrook school system. A short while ago I was pleasantly surprised when I received a call from Bob who announced that he had uncovered another trove of documents concerning the Forge School embracing the years 1849 through 1896, and had I become tired of reading all those musty documents. No, I hadn't, and this batch proved to contain an insight into rural school operations that had been missing from our records. Let me explain what we are talking about here.

From Colonial times until about the middle of the nineteenth century, schools occupied a position quite different from today. Each town was mandated by the colonial or state legislature to establish schools for the education of the town's youth until they reached the age of sixteen. The town had a school society consisting of the various school districts. These districts were established with the convenience and safety of the children who were to attend a particular school in mind. There was no such thing as public transportation in those days; the students walked on their own two feet, consequently the schoolhouses had to be strategically located geographically. In Colebrook's case, there were a total of eleven school districts. Each one of these districts had boundaries that were just as well defined as those defining a piece of private property. The residents of each district paid their town taxes based upon the needs of not only the town, but also the needs and requirements of the school as well. There are many instances of landowners petitioning the selectmen to have their property removed from

one school district to an adjacent one, Sometimes this had to do with the proximity of the schoolhouse; if they had children of school age, it might make a difference. However there are many instances where a property owner wanted to change because the district he was in had a higher tax rate than his neighbor, and the desire was strictly economic.

This last point has a bearing upon the contents of this latest batch of Forge School papers, and it also points out another reality: funding, or the lack thereof, for the school.

On October 9, 1850, a school district meeting was called for, and on the agenda was the appointment of a committee to decide upon a location for a new proposed schoolhouse. One year later, on Sept. 23, 1850, the voters were warned that they should take measures to build a new schoolhouse or repair the existing one. On Dec. 30, 1851, the residents of the Forge District were asked to authorize a tax to defray the expenses of repairing the schoolhouse. On March 13, 1852 there was a discussion concerning the location for a new school and the need to talk about building a new schoolhouse. On April 19, 1861, all voters within the Forge District were warned that they should act upon a proposition to erect a school building and also to see if they could agree upon a location for this building.

An interesting letter dated June 22 1861 from the Board of School Visitors states: "We met this day to examine the school building and hear what the proprietors of said district wished to report in the matter of proper accommodations for the school; the board, after hearing and examination as above, decided not to accept the school building and therefore deprive the district of public money received from the State, unless they furnish a proper place for the school."

On July 10 1863, a letter from the Office of Superintendent of Common Schools addressed to Wm H. Raidart, Esq., Clerk of Forge School District reads: "Dear Sir. The application of Mr. Hodge and others for an order for school money for the Forge District is just received.

The application states that the schoolhouse is not built after the modern style of architecture, but is rather old and not very convenient, also that the applicants "have seen the need of a new schoolhouse" and "for years back" have "held meetings for the purpose of building."

The letter goes on to ask, "Why is not a suitable building erected? No reason appears in the applications except that 'a vote to build' could not be obtained." Public monies were therefore denied, but the letter ended with this statement: "But the fact that there are forty children in the district, and that many of the parents are poor is an additional reason for providing abundantly for the education of all."

In October 1863, the building committee recommended that the new location be the same as the old building, with the district to purchase an additional one-half acre of land. Finally, late in 1866, the Forge District finally got the long-awaited new schoolhouse, replacing the 1834 building that had been erected for the princely sum of \$167.00.

Just for the record, this building served until 1904, when it burned to the ground and was immediately replaced with the structure that still stands, having served as the Forge Fire Department for the past fifty years before being replaced by the new firehouse.