

School Report for Colebrook – 1886

I find it interesting every so often to take a glance back at where we came from, and with the start of the new school year just beginning, it seems a proper topic to pursue.

This past summer Bob Seymour, the owner of Colebrook's "Book Barn", presented the Historical Society with a box of documents that he had procured via an auction in the Boston area that originated in Colebrook. Bob does this sort of thing on a regular basis, and over the years has been of inestimable value to not just the Society, but also the entire community. The very presence of the Book Barn itself is of considerable importance to not only the town, but the region as well. If you travel north of Colebrook Center on Conn. Route 183 and haven't stopped in when the "OPEN" flag is flying, do so; you will be pleasantly surprised at what you find there.

In the aforementioned box there were two Colebrook Town Reports, one from 1886, the other from 1916. The 1886 report contains 12 pages, 4 of which are devoted to schooling, 1916 contains 14 pages, also with 4 devoted to the expenses of the school system.

The 1886 report contains the annual Visitor's Report. School visitors were elected officials who were charged with seeing that the schools were being operated the way the school board expected it to be, and also to observe the physical condition of the buildings as well as the books and other necessary teaching aids. That year the Town of Colebrook had 10 schoolhouses that were covered by 9 school visitors.

At the annual meeting, held on October 15, 1885 it was voted to appropriate the same amount for the support of the schools as had been appropriated the previous year, the breakdown being the River District \$550, Sandy Brook \$160, and the other eight districts \$190 each. It was reported that the entire number of Colebrook students at that time was 273.

The report goes on to state: "The Acting Visitors take the liberty to offer two or three suggestions, with their report, on the condition of the several schools in town during the past year."

"We find that, while on the whole our schools have been successful, some of our teachers have failed in that they have not succeeded in making the scholars think for themselves. Too much of the work has been mechanical. We have visited schools within the past year where the order was good and the scholars recited perfect lessons, so far as the words of the text were concerned, but when examined as to how well they understood what they were talking about they failed utterly. We would suggest that, when a teacher is found who does her duty in a careful, painstaking manner, who not only teaches her pupils words and sentences, but also to think for themselves, that an effort be made to continue her in the school."

"Another thing we notice is the lack of school libraries, apparatus, etc. Few of our schools have more than a dictionary and a set of outline maps, while some of them have not even a dictionary. Such a state of things is inexcusable, while the state makes the liberal offer that it does. By a little effort, from year to year, each school might have not only a dictionary and a set of maps, but a good set of encyclopedias and other books of reference. We would also like to say a word in regard to teacher's wages. We think district committees make a mistake in some cases by continuing their school as long as possible with a cheap teacher, when much more good would be done for the district by an

experienced teacher in much less time. Any person with ability enough to teach school successfully can do better than to teach for five dollars per week and pay his board out of it.”

[Each school district set the number of days that school would be in session. Generally, there were two sessions; winter and summer, with the teachers being hired for one, but not both. As to the pay, five dollars per week seems to have been the norm around here for much of the nineteenth century, with room and board set at three dollars per week. For many of the young single women who turned to teaching as a profession, the chance of finding “their life’s companion” within the community was a greater inducement than the two dollars they could tuck into the bottom of their threadbare purses.]

Then came the report on the condition of the several schools.

“Forge District has a good schoolhouse and a fair supply of apparatus.

The South School is very poor on the inside, but we believe that it is to be repaired this fall. They have a dictionary and a set of outline maps.

The Beech Hill School has a fair schoolhouse, but no apparatus.

The North School is a fair schoolhouse, but nothing in the shape of a library.

The school in the West District has one of the best school buildings in town and a good dictionary and outline maps.

The school building in the Center District is a first class schoolhouse and is supplied with dictionary and wall maps.

The River District maintains a graded school of two departments and has three terms of twelve weeks each. This district has a first class schoolhouse, well furnished.

The Sandy Brook School has no advanced scholars and no apparatus.

The Southwest School District has a fair schoolhouse, fairly furnished.

The Rock School was taught, in the winter, by Miss E.A. Hemingway, of Terryville, and in the summer by Miss Jennie E. Barker, of Harwinton; both had had some experience and were fairly successful. This district has a fair schoolhouse, but the sitting accommodations are poor and behind the times. It is furnished with dictionary and wall maps.”

The Colebrook School Districts map that accompanies this article will enable you to better understand this report as well as the one next week, which will be based upon the 1916 report of the Town School Committee. I think you will find it interesting to compare and contrast these two reports, made 30 years apart, with the situation today.

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg