

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Back to School in 1920"

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by Jay A. Graybeal

Three-quarters of a century ago, local children and teachers prepared to go back to school. The 1920 annual report of the State Board of Education reveals that the educational experience of this generation was quite different from that of today.

Among the major differences were the predominance of the one-room school, segregation and the small number of students who attended high school. Most local students went to the one-room school house, many of which still dot the Carroll County landscape. In 1920 Carroll County owned 125 school buildings and rented fourteen more. Of the 139 school buildings operated by the county, 107 had only a single teacher. There were 13 schools where two teachers taught and only nine schools had three or more teachers.

The Bruceville school, whose class was photographed in 1921, was typical of the one-room school house experience. In this photo twenty-five students posed with their teacher Miss Cora Sappington. In Carroll's one-room school houses, nearly half had an average class size of twenty-one to thirty students. Although a class size of twenty-five students was average, in one school a teacher had eight or less students while in another a teacher had to contend with more than forty students.

Maryland schools were also segregated. Carroll's 1920 student population included 6,852 elementary students of which 456 were black. Six local high schools taught 571 students all of whom were white. Teaching at these six high schools were thirteen teachers at Westminster, six at Mt. Airy, three at Taneytown, four at Union Bridge, three at Sykesville, four at Hampstead and one at Manchester.

Teaching the nearly 7500 students was a faculty of 208; 181 taught elementary school and 27 were high school teachers. The teaching profession in 1920 was by far an occupation for single women. Of the 158 female teachers working in the county, only nine were married. The School Board's strong preference for unmarried female teachers is reflected in a resolution adopted during the 1928-1929 school year that barred married women from teaching, except in special cases.

The best paying jobs were in the county's six high schools. These teachers earned an average of \$903.70 while elementary teachers in white and black schools had average salaries of \$537.85 and \$431.87 respectively. Retired teachers were not entirely forgotten by the state which appropriated \$36,000 annually for a retirement fund. Teachers who had served twenty-five years, reached the age of sixty, were no longer able to continue their duties in the school room, and had no other means of comfortable support received \$200 per annum.

Administering the local school system in 1920 was Superintendent Maurice S. H. Unger who served in this capacity from 1916 to 1935. Mr. Unger was assisted by a staff consisting of Miss L. Jewell Simpson, Supervisor; G. C. Taylor, Attendance Officer and Charles Reed, Clerk.

The county spent nearly \$204,000 to educate students in 1920. This figure represented an expenditure of \$36.66 per pupil in average daily attendance. Carroll County ranked sixteenth in the state well behind Baltimore County, which spent \$69.88, but well ahead of Calvert County which spent only \$18.83. Not surprisingly, there was a large disparity among expenses between elementary and high schools. While it

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cost \$63.40 for each high school student, white and black elementary students could be taught for \$18.57 and \$18.85 respectively.

Local elementary students received an education of arithmetic, reading, spelling, English and other subjects and were tested annually. In 1914 third graders were expected to be able divide 9876543 by 324 and to answer, "If 12 horses cost \$1560, what will 5 horses cost at the same rate?" They were also asked to spell words such as "peddler, naughty, depot." The final test question required them to draw the outline of an envelope and write their address on it.

Sixth graders had a somewhat more difficult test. They were required to spell "chiffonier, laudanum and lambrequin." Although the dictionary on my computer failed to recognize the last word, the sixth graders presumably knew what these words meant. The little scholars were also asked ten arithmetic questions including, "What will be the cost of 3 bushels, 2 pecks, 5 quarts of berries at \$1.60 per bushel?" and "A man weighs 144 pounds avoirdupois weight; what is his weight expressed in Troy pounds?" The history section included questions such as, "What was the cause of the Revolutionary War?" and "What seven states seceded from the Union because Lincoln was elected?" In geography students were asked, to name the countries of North and South America and to "Bound Carroll County."

In summing up the accomplishments of the State Board of Education in 1920, the State Superintendent noted the great growth of his department. Prior to the passage of a new school law in 1916, his department consisted of himself, and assistant superintendent and a clerk. By 1920 the staff had grown to include supervisors of high schools, rural schools, "colored" schools, vocational education and public school music. The state office also had a credential clerk, certificate clerk, bookkeeper and a stenographer. The growing complexity of public school education brought many changes. By the 1930s the era of the one-room school had become part of the county's history.

Photo Caption: Mrs. Cora Sappington and her students at the stone Bruceville School, May 20, 1921. Seventy-five years ago most local elementary school students attended the one-room school house. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.