

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Blackboards in the Classroom

Hornbooks and slates were common educational tools in the early days of this country's existence. In the colonial era (late 17th century), children memorized syllables on a hornbook and were taught Bible verses. The emphasis of education was reading Scripture. Writing and mathematics were not as important, and local schools provided little exposure to either subject. Not until the post- Revolutionary War period were blackboards introduced.

In the 18th century, people began to take a broader view of education. Students used individual slates made of actual slate or pieces of wood coated with paint and grit. In the original 13 states, paper and ink were expensive, but slate and wood were plentiful and cheap. But teachers had to tailor instruction to each child, which had drawbacks and was inefficient. A Scotsman invented the first modern blackboard in Edinburgh in 1800 when he hung a large piece of slate on his classroom wall. Soon thereafter a West Point mathematics teacher used a board of connected slates to illustrate complex formulas to his class.

This innovation – the blackboard – permitted a teacher to work with a large group all at once. Instructors could demonstrate writing or math problems to a whole class. Blackboards were versatile visual aids and could be used to clarify material in textbooks. They also reduced the need to buy books, paper, and ink. Students looked up from their desks and focused on the blackboard. They watched the teacher illuminate aspects of daily lessons. Sentences could be diagramed; the solar system could be drawn; and long division problems could be solved. Another advantage was that the blackboard could be erased, which allowed various parts of the curriculum to be visualized during the course of one day. Boys and girls were called upon to “show their work” or demonstrate their abilities at the blackboard.

By the middle of the 19th century, almost every classroom in America had some type of blackboard. Slate was shipped from quarries in Vermont, Maine, Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, and Virginia. It was expensive to ship this product long distance. So other blackboards were constructed by nailing together rough pine boards and covering them with a mixture of egg whites and the leavings from charred potatoes. Other creative methods of making chalkboards included painting boards black or coating them with black oil cloth. Recipes for blackboard paint were shared amongst school districts.

In the 20th century, greenboards (made of steel plates and coated with porcelain-based enamel) were introduced. Some people thought the green color was easier on the eye. Later, the whiteboard or dry erase board became popular. They eliminated chalk dust in the classroom. Even now in the 21st century, many American classrooms have some version of a blackboard.

When the Little Red Schoolhouse at 8100 Given Road was renovated by the Indian Hill Historical Society in 1974, contractors transformed the building, changing it from the offices of the Indian Hill Board of Education to the current landmark it is today. False ceilings were removed, partitions were demolished, and individual offices were eliminated. When the plasterboard was taken off the north wall, the original blackboard of the 1873 structure was discovered. It covered the entire wall, a length of 50 feet. That blackboard remains a testament to the original historic function of the schoolhouse and a symbol of one of the most revolutionary educational tools ever invented.



**Individual Student Slate,
10.5" x 7.5"**



**Wall of blackboards at the
Little Red Schoolhouse**