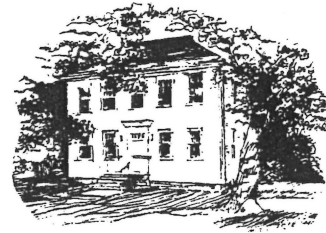


IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

'Riting in the Late 19th Century

Students at one room schoolhouses in the late 19th century were taught the 3 R's, the second being 'riting, or penmanship. When children learned to write, they began with cursive. Although writing style changed over the years, the first widely adopted method was Spencerian.

Developed by Platt R. Spencer, it was an adaptation of English cursive script. Born in 1800 in New York, Spencer was the twelfth child in the family. When his father died, the Platts moved to northern Ohio where the boy practiced writing with a stick on the sandy beaches in Ashtabula. Reputedly, he could write connectedly for a 1/2 mile. Employed as a clerk, bookkeeper, and accountant, he was recognized for rare social talent and attractive correspondence. He became a teacher and from 1824-1830 taught in common schools and special writing schools. After his marriage, he moved to Geneva, Ohio, where he farmed in spring and summer and taught penmanship in the cities of northern Ohio, western Pennsylvania and New York. Developing his method of penmanship, Spencer began to publish writing technique books. His copybooks and compendium became the dominant textbook series in classrooms throughout 42 states.

Spencer used Nature as his model for handwriting. A pebble on the beach was a perfect oval; leaves with corrugated edges were M's and N's to him; and he joined his letters with curves reminiscent of grape tendrils. He saw straight lines in sunbeams, and curves in waves and clouds. Spencerian script was precise, beautiful, and meticulous—with dramatic flourishes and perfect symmetry. Spencerian method students contemplated the ideal forms of Nature; thus the study of penmanship was viewed as elevating and ennobling.

Students using Spencerian copybooks practiced daily drills that taught four basic strokes that produced the letters of the alphabet. Musculature was emphasized, and the student's posture needed to be erect, with the feet parallel to the slant of the letters. Holding the pen properly "across the root of the nail of the second finger," as well as the position of each digit and both arms were keys to mastering the art of writing. The sweep of the forearm and proper movement of the hand were rhythmic components of each penmanship assignment. A schooled penman could write for hours without tiring.

Good penmanship became a coveted skill. Elementary students worked their way through five copybooks. Book 1 introduced the short letters of the alphabet; Book 2, tall letters and numbers; Book 3, capital letters; Book 4, word practice; and Book 5, sentences and sayings. Daily work in class was led by the teacher who either counted, used a metronome, or recited rhythmic poetry while students practiced their writing. Many old copy books are filled with repetitions of sayings written by dutiful students in a sort of military drill – all of them executing the same letter simultaneously. A few surviving copy books show that restive students sometimes subverted the penmanship routine—one young female mused about different versions of her future name as a married woman, and one boy wrote poems about a drunken farmer. Probably these rebels were rural school students, as rural teachers had their hands full mending pens and mixing ink. Teachers in urban schools were provided steel pens

and bottled ink and enforced rigid discipline during handwriting class. A student's penmanship was evaluated on form, slant, spacing, alignment, and general appearance. Conformity to the ideal and mastery of one's musculature to produce an even hand were praiseworthy accomplishments.

Largely due to Spencer, the "Father of Penmanship", nineteenth century Americans learned uniform legible handwriting. In the twentieth century, writing styles changed as society and commerce evolved. The Palmer method's simple lines replaced Spencerian script about 1910, and D'Nealian handwriting became popular after 1970. Today's elementary schools devote far less time to handwriting than in the past. Word processing skills are taught in lower schools, and some educators debate the merits of teaching penmanship at all. Yet the recent revival of interest in calligraphy may signify the return of the glorious flourishes of the penmanship of yore.

