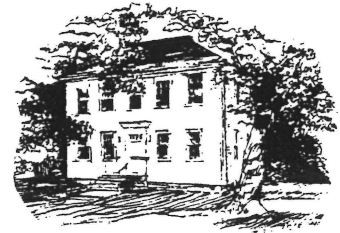


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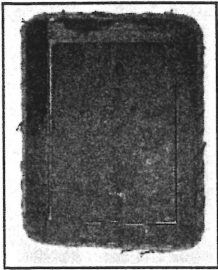
. . . *then and now*

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Blackboards in the Classrooms of Yesteryear



Blackboards were not common in American schools until the 1800's. In colonial times most children were educated at home or by clergy, and were taught reading, writing, and religion. But by the Jeffersonian Era, Congress mandated schools. Local communities educated their youths as they saw fit – with vast differences in the quality of the education. Materials were difficult to obtain, and rote memorization occurred regularly. Children were told to provide their own slates, and textbooks were often shared. Early schools were log cabins or shacks, and were regulated by local residents. By the mid-1800's free public education became a national priority, with greater standardization of curriculum and classroom equipment.

In 1823 Samuel Read Hall of Vermont founded the first teacher training school in the country and experimented with blackboards. His patented blackboard was of pine boards, planed and painted black. Another technique for making a blackboard employed a mixture of cement plaster and black and green color applied to metal lath fastened to lumber. An 1870's teacher guidebook gave a recipe for blackboards as: "Take equal parts of lamp black and flour of emery, and thin with a equal parts of benzine and Japan varnish. Apply two coats to any smooth plastered wall." This guidebook also addressed the issue of parsimonious school boards, stating, "Where Boards of Education will not furnish...a blackboard, ...make them ashamed of themselves for half a dollar."

The hyloplate blackboard of 1900 had layers of special paper pressed together to make a solid board, easily cut to suit the size of any schoolroom. For some time British schools used glass blackboards, ground slightly on one side to take chalk and painted a dull black/dark green on the unground side. Additionally there were some patented composition boards made of paper or pulp, compressed, and coated with liquid slating. Slate blackboards were more expensive but gradually became favored. It was difficult to get sufficiently large tablets and to mount them properly, and shipping large pieces of slate from Eastern quarries contributed to the cost.

The wooden, paper, and composite boards were easy and cheap to construct, but they absorbed moisture, got oily from the children's hands, and had a tendency to crack, warp, and chip. They also lost their color after repeated use and washings and had to be replaced frequently. The expensive glass blackboards maintained permanent color and gave forth very little noise or chalk dust, but the joints between panels collected dirt, and it was difficult for students to maintain a point on their chalks. Slate boards lasted indefinitely, took chalk easily, were not noisy, and did not wear out after repeated washings. Again, if several panels were used, dirt accumulated at joints, and large pieces were hard to mount in school buildings that might settle or heave. Yet educational experts in 1911 declared slate to be "the best material generally now available... for in the long run it will prove least expensive and most satisfactory."

Teachers and students alike utilized the blackboard. Schoolroom chores were delegated and listed on the board. Some teachers wrote maxims - e.g. "Go to bed with the lamb and rise with the lark" – to guide young minds and shape good habits. Numerous concepts and subjects were presented on the board. Students, both individually and in groups, worked on drills and tests daily at the board. Children working in front of the whole class acquired self-dependence and the ability to accept criticism in front of others. Educational theorists of the early 1900's asserted, "Blackboards have become so much of a factor in our methods of work that we really wonder how old time teachers did without them."

Blackboard use has declined. For a few decades it was believed that green boards were superior, and today schoolrooms are being equipped with whiteboards, screens for presentations, and new technological classroom appliances. Still, the blackboard of yesteryear was a necessity for generations of American youths who benefited from its presence and use.

