

## The Stone Jug Schoolhouse

By Christina Rae, Assistant to the Bedford Town Historian

The one-room “Stone Jug” schoolhouse on the Bedford green was built in 1829 and served the children of the district for eighty-three years. Its origins can be traced to an 1826 meeting of the inhabitants of Bedford School District Number Two who voted, according to the minutes of the meeting, to “build a school house ...of stone, size twenty six feet long by sixteen feet in the clear and the school room to be eight feet high in the clear.” At that same meeting, the residents had voted that the newly established common school be held in the Court House until the building was completed.

The three years between the first vote and the completion of the school house seem to have been occupied with deciding on the site (which was voted to be “south of the Court House ... and directly opposite the line between Benjamin Isaac’s land and Aaron Reed’s barn”) and planning the building (the dimensions were eventually set at eighteen feet by twenty, and eight feet high). The delay may also reflect difficulty in raising money-- two hundred and fifty dollars were to be raised by tax, an amount that was soon increased to three hundred. John Jay, as one of the most affluent neighbors, donated \$50. However, the records show that in 1830, one year after the schoolhouse was finally built, it was \$ 85 in debt.

This was the era when New York State was starting to provide for the public financing of common schools, as they were then known. As early as 1795, the State Legislature had encouraged towns to elect school commissioners, build common schools and tax residents for this purpose; however, it was not until the nineteenth century that the state established its own fund earmarked for education. In 1801, the Legislature directed that money be raised by lottery and distributed to both common schools and academies (roughly the equivalent of private schools). The Bedford Academy, across the street from the Stone Jug, had begun in 1807 at the initiative of leading citizens and ended in 1901 as a “select school”. Meanwhile, in 1805 the Legislature directed that money for common schools be raised through the sale of public land.

1812 was something of a watershed for public education in New York State. The law passed by the Legislature in this year drew school districts in each town, and mandated that each district provide a schoolhouse, keep it in repair, furnish the necessary equipment and fuel, and employ a teacher. A property tax was established for this purpose. Each district was to be administered by three trustees, a collector and a clerk. Note that this law did not mandate school attendance, merely the establishment of schools open to all without regard to ability to pay. When two years later “rate bills” were assessed on parents of children attending common schools, the indigent were excepted.

Thus it was that in 1813 Bedford appointed three School Commissioners to draw up districts. The resulting map had eleven districts of which District Number 2 encompassed Bedford village and the eastern portion of town. Three trustees and a district clerk were elected at the first meeting of residents in Bedford’s District 2 in 1826 and this practice continued annually, with minor adjustments in terms, throughout the years of the school house’s use. By 1830 the post of Collector had been added to the annual elected positions, and by 1839 a fourth position came

into being when “Smith Reynolds ...[is] hereby appointed Librarian and to have charge of the School District Library for the following year.” In 1845, six years after the post of Librarian was instituted, there were 183 books in the District Library including *Sayings of Goldsmith*, *American Husbandry* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*.

According to the Trustees’ records, the schoolbooks used that year included “Testament [that is, the Old and New Testaments], Hales History, Porter’s Rhetorical Reader, Early Reader” and books of geography, arithmetic, spelling and grammar. One can infer that in addition to the three R’s that were the common curriculum of the time, Stone Jug students (perhaps mainly the older students in an age range that extended from five to sixteen) also studied History, Rhetoric and Geography. The trustees gave the students further tools to pursue this last discipline in 1846 when they budgeted for “purchase of Michell’s outline maps and globe.” In 1870 the curriculum seems to have been much the same, to judge from the schoolbooks used.

A good picture of what life in the old school building was like can be deduced from examining the trustee’s accounts. The frequent purchases of lime indicate that the stone walls were plastered inside. In addition to providing moderate insulation, white plaster would have brightened a building when illuminated by sunlight. Nine windows let the sun shine in, and they were provided with shutters, as we know from an 1839 purchase order. Bedford resident and former Stone Jug pupil Anne O’Brien recollected in a 1970 interview: “I do not remember that we had any kind of light in the school except what came in the windows...they did have small panes of glass. I think there were white curtains”. These small panes of glass were a source of trouble as well as light from early days; in 1835 the trustees authorized payment for “75 cents for 16 lights glass broken out by some person or persons”. Even with unbroken windows the stone building needed a stove and ample supply of fuel in winter. An 1847 expenditure dealt with repair of the chimney, followed by an 1853 request for “a stove and pipe for the stone school house,” presumably a replacement. In 1872 we see a notation for “fires and kindle wood” as well as “coals, carting and carrying in.” Ms. O’Brien recalls, “There was a large iron stove in the front left corner as you entered the room. It was... pot bellied, round, fluted... had short legs. The stove pipe went out through a side wall... we burned coal in the stove...In real cold weather a few desks would be put near the stove so the students could work.”

As to desks, Ms. O’Brien recalled, “there were three rows of double desks—five or perhaps six deep. The seats were benches that turned up on hinge-like affairs... two students to a bench.” These benches may have dated to the 1873 request by the trustees for “new and improved seats.” Anne O’Brien recalls that the teacher’s desk and chair sat on a raised platform in the front of the room. “It was in the right hand corner as you faced the front of the room, across from the stove...Behind the teachers desk was a blackboard... she had one of those bells that you tap to get attention on her desk.” In 1891 “Mr. Hockley presented the district with a bell and empowered the trustees to have it hung,” from which we can infer that this was not the bell Ms. O’Brien refers to. There was a blackboard on the back as well as the front wall and in 1875 the school acquired a clock and dictionary. In 1894 the present flagpole was erected for the school on the village green and by Anne O’Brien’s time there was a flag indoors “near the teacher’s desk.” Up through 1912 the students drew water from a nearby well and in 1847 the trustees allocated 70 dollars to build two outdoor privies.

The building as described could have accommodated about thirty-six students in Anne O'Brien's time but we know from the records that the actual number of children attending school fluctuated significantly over the years, and indeed during the year. In 1833 the trustees seem to have fixed on 30 as the preferred number, voting that if the district could not provide thirty schoolchildren then the "teacher is to receive [students] from other districts till that number is obtained." By 1845 we have the notation "the number of children taught in this district this year is 61." However, the stone schoolhouse was not quite as crowded as this number might suggest. While school was kept open eleven months of the year, attendance was not mandatory and those children who did attend school did so only as long as they could be spared from other tasks in what was still a heavily agricultural community. Thus in 1845, twenty-one children attended for less than four months, and fourteen for less than six months; the numbers who attended over six months are in the single digits. Twenty-two children who were eligible to attend school in 1845 were not enrolled at all. The following year attendance seems to have dropped further with fifteen students attending for less than two months.

Regardless of how many students were in attendance at any given time, the school house would not have been a very quiet place for most of its history, given the emphasis on learning by rote during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to accommodate the different ages of the students, the common practice was to have different students working on different subjects simultaneously, so that while a five year old was poring over his spelling, perhaps mumbling aloud, a fourteen year old would have been reciting a poem. After the 1890's the bell provided by Mr. Hockley would have been rung regularly, perhaps at the beginning of lessons; by Ms. O'Brien's time the sound of the teacher tapping her bell would have interspersed lessons throughout the day. The stove would have needed continual feeding, and every so often pupils would be dispatched to draw water from the well, a job that fell, according to Anne O'Brien, to two boys at a time. In the early days the occasional sounds of horses, wagons and coaches from the nearby road would have been audible to students as they worked. By the early twentieth century this sound would have been increasingly replaced by that of automobiles.

In fact it was the building's closeness to the road, combined with its size, which led the trustees in 1911 to conclude that while "the present building is in good repair... the seating capacity, the floor and air space are entirely inadequate and far below the requirements of state law... Also under the present condition of highway traffic, the school building is entirely too close to the road for the safety of the children." It was for these reasons that the trustees budgeted \$6000 to be raised by property tax to find a new site and erect a new school building. 1912 was the last year that the Stone Jug schoolhouse served as a school; by 1913 it had become a museum of local history founded by the Bedford Agassiz Society. Five years later it passed into the hands of the Bedford Historical Society which now administers it. In 1970, the Historical Society moved its exhibits to the Court House and set up the Stone Jug as the one room schoolhouse showcase which it is today.

### Sources

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