

SCHOOL HISTORY OF COLUMBIA COUNTY

Part One

Editor's Note: William H. Snyder, Columbia County Superintendent of Schools from 1872 to 1881, wrote the following article, "School History of Columbia County," that appeared in a Bloomsburg newspaper, *The Columbian*, on February 15, 1878. It was the first of a two part series providing a brief overview of the early schools throughout the county. The first article focused on Beaver Township, Benton, Berwick, Bloomsburg, Briar Creek Township, Center Township, Conyngham Township, and Fishingcreek Township.

He noted that the early schools, before the advent of a public education system, were mainly subscription schools, basically, private schools. Rather than the community establishing schools, the teacher announced he or she would open a school. The parents would pay the teacher a fee for their children to attend. Classes were often held in a home or sometimes a barn, church, or a building used as a shop. Snyder's article is a very worthwhile account in describing these early schools and their location in the different towns and townships.

The article is reprinted as it appeared in the newspaper

March *Newsletter* will have the second part of the article.

One of the most interesting and important contributions to our local and current history is the following compilation of our statistics by W. H. Snyder, our County Superintendent. For want of space we reserve remarks:

Being only allowed a certain amount of space in this report, it will be necessary to be as brief as possible in giving the sketches of the earliest elementary schools in the county.

These schools, with but one exception were supported by subscription, and houses were generally built in the same manner up to 1834, when the public schools were established. The branches usually taught in them were reading, writing and written arithmetic. A pupil's outfit was a very modest affair. A Webster's spelling book, an English reader, or a Testament, a Daboll's arithmetic, a slate, a goose-quill, and few sheets of paper, covered the entire range of known material for winter after winter as long as he might go to school.

After public schools were established, Malte Brun's geography, Smith's grammar, on the productive system were soon adopted. Seeing the numerous algebras, geometries, histories, rhetories, philosophies, physiologies, copy books, drawing books, language books, etc, in the schools at the present day, one can scarcely realize the vast improvement.

How much higher and broader the schools shall be elevated, is only a question of time.

Beaver - The first school in Beaver, was taught in Mr. Kostenbader's grist-mill, by Isaac Davis in 1821. Four years later, Mr. Davis opened another in his *private* dwelling, or residence, we shall omit the word "private," hereafter.

In 1825, Henry Schell taught in a dwelling which stood near where the church now stands, by the road leading from Beaver to Mainville, and Adam Holoher, in a similar building which was located on the land now owned by Charles Michael.

After teaching several terms which were usually taught during winter, Mr. Schell permanently closed his school, when another was opened in a dwelling which was situated on the land owned by Joseph Lehr. The instruction in these schools was principally in German

Benton - During the year 1799, there were but two families living in the vicinity where the village of Benton now stands. Here Isaac Young opened the first school in a private dwelling. After it permanently closed, another was opened in a similar building, which stood where Eli Mendenhall's barn stands above the village. As the pine forest fell before the sturdy axman, a small log house was built on West creek, above, and another below Benton, where Stephen Lazarus now lives.

Hon. Alexander Colley, aged ninety-one years, is the only surviving member of the first public school board. It was chiefly through his influence that the school law met with approbation in this section of the country.

Berwick - A mist enshrouds the early school history of Berwick. Before 1800 Berwick had its schools, but under what teacher and what characters nothing is known.

From 1800 to 1837, it was customary to hold school for a few months in each year. Prominent among the teachers of this period were Mr. Holloway, David E. Owen, son of the founder of the town; Doctor Dulton, David Jones, Doctor Roe and James Dilvan. These men taught between the years 1800 and 1818, and were, without exception, men of education. The prominent teachers from 1800 to 1837, were Messrs, Comstock, Hoyt, Richards, Crosby, and Simon Haiks.

The Market-house and Quaker church, were the only school-buildings during this time. In 1837, on the site of the market-house, the academy was erected.

This was a prominent step for Berwick. Among the distinguished teachers who taught in it were, Reverend Rittenhouse, George Waller, Joel E. Bradley and Mr. Runk. The school flourished for several years, but finally, the building was sold for public school purposes, which has since been torn down.

In 1872 a splendid brick structure was erected, which cost, including all necessary equipments, \$15,000.

Bloom. - Bloomsburg had her early schools but as to their whereabouts, and by whom taught nothing is definitely known. The first school of which there is any recollection was taught about the year 1802, by George Vance in a small log-building, which was located where the Episcopal church now stands. Finally this house was torn down, and a frame one erected in its place, in which William Love taught for some time. The highest branches taught in this school, were, reading writing, and arithmetic. The advanced reading class read in the Bible, and the second class in the New Testament.

The next school was established at the lower end of town, in a building which was located near where Mr. Joseph Barkley's cabinet shop now stands; Robert Fields was its first teacher. Messrs. Love and Fields were succeeded by William Ferguson, Murray Manvill, and Joseph Warden.

About the year 1830, Hiram W. Thornton opened one in a chair or wagon-shop, which was located where William Neal's residence now stands.

The old academy, which was erected on the site of Dr. Evan's residence, and opened for school purposes in the spring of 1839, "was a monument of zeal in the cause of education, at a time anterior to the introduction of the public school system. The standard of instruction was elevated, if judged by the advertisement of the first teacher to give instruction in the Hebrew language, which was not extensively pursued at that early day in Bloomsburg. But the teacher's literary reputation dwindled when, on perusing a copy of Shakespeare, he inquired whether that was the celebrated author of that name, and what were his principal works; and evinced his astonishment in the question "'what! These dialogues?'" The building contained four school rooms, and was occupied for public school purposes until 1875.

Between 1850 and 1860, Joel E. Bradley taught a high school in the room now occupied by the *Democratic Sentinel*, and Miss Nancy Drake a primary one in an adjoining room. About the same time Miss Mattie Wells, was also teaching a select school in a small building which was located where William Gillmore's establishment now stands; and Miss Susan Painter another in the back part of her father's justice office, on Market street.

The township at one time comprised a large territory, but space will not permit to give boundaries, divisions, and sub-divisions of townships.

Briar Creek - In the year 1800, the first school was opened in the stone church, still standing near Samuel Kelchner's residence. Ten years later a school house was built at Foundryville, when the former school closed and all the pupils in the vicinity attended the Foundryville school. The next house was erected below Berwick, on the land now owned by Daniel Romback. The third school was taught in a dwelling which stood on the land now owned by William Stout. The names of the teachers who taught these schools were Cordelia A. Preston, Daniel Goodwin, Morris Hower and John Arney.

Catawissa - The first school in this township was established in Conrad Geiger's dwelling, which was located on what is called the McIntyre place, now owned by E. M. Tewksbury, and taught by Martin Stuck.

About the year 1804, Mrs. Mary Paxton opened a school in her residence, and, which was located near the Friend's meeting house, and in addition to the usual branches, taught sewing and knitting. Those who could not remain at school were permitted to retire after recitation. After this school was kept in successful operation for some time, a small frame house was built near where Frederick Pfahler's residence now stands in which Elijah Barger, of Chester county, taught, followed by Ellis Hughes. Finally, Joseph Paxton, (son of the former teacher,) built an addition to the house for his daughter Ruthan. In 1815, a Mr. Kent, of New York, (whose son is a popular-dry goods merchant-in Philadelphia,) opened a high school in the residence now occupied by Mrs. Keiler. He was succeeded by a Mr. Ely, also of New York.

The next school was opened in 1818, up stairs in a spring-house, which stood on the land now owned by John Keifer. Mr. Barger was succeeded by John Stokes, Joseph Gitling, and Thomas Ellis. The school was principally supported by pupils from Main township.

Ezra S. Hayhurst, to whom Catawissa is much indebted for his school labors, not only assisted in establishing schools, but also taught successfully for some time. Next came Joel E. Bradley, from the land of "steady habits," and opened a school in the academy, which was founded in 1838, and is still occupied for school purposes.

Centralia - This borough was taken from Conyngham township in 1867. The first school building within its present limits was erected in 1858, in which school was continued until 1868, when it was engulfed by the breaking down of the mines.

In the following year, a frame building, with two rooms in it, was erected to fill its place. Here Mr. Bowers was employed to teach a term of eight months, at a salary of fifty dollars per month. The number of pupils increased so rapidly, that it was necessary, in 1872, to erect another building. This is a first-class building, well furnished and properly ventilated.

There are now four good schools in the borough, under the able supervision of Mr. J. W. Burke, late principal of the Ashland high school.

Centre - The earliest schools in this township were taught in dwellings, which were located as follows: One near the ferry, taught by Solomon Friedeci; another near Lime Ridge, where Joseph Geiger now lives, and the third on the land now owned by Hiram Schweppenheiser, which was taught by John Dietterich.

The first house for school purposes was located at Centreville in 1810. Being destroyed by fire after a few years service, another was erected at the lower end of the village, where the public school buildings now stand.

Solomon Neyhard, aged seventy-eight years, is the only surviving member of the first public school board.

Grange School - In 1875, the 'Patrons of Husbandry in this township erected a beautiful hall, furnished it with improved school furniture, and employed Professor Lockard to take charge of the school which is still in a prosperous condition.

Conyngham - This township was formed from the southern part of Locust in 1856. It and the borough of Centralia had no schools before the public school law was in force. Its school history only dates back to 1857, when through the exertion of Mr. A. W. Rea, a school building was erected at Germantown. The rich mineral product of this region which was developed in 1860, attracted a large population. Consequently, we find, in 1865, four new school buildings, which were all supplied with school apparatus, and in character far superior to the earlier.

Fishingcreek-The first school in this township was taught by Christopher Pealer, in a weave shop, which stood where John Zaner's residence now stands.

About the year 1794, Henry Heiss came from Philadelphia to Stillwater, to oversee and tract of land, which belonged to his father. Being a young man of more than ordinary ability, he was persuaded to open a school there in a residence.

The first school house was built at Pealertown, in which Jonathan Colley taught.

The next was erected near where Zion Church now stands. The Pealertown school finally closed, and the pupils attended this school.