

One-Room Wonders: The Common Schools of Peacham

Peacham is unusual in having so many of its one-room schools—8 from 14 districts—still standing. Some are private homes now, one is incorporated into the Fire Department, one stands empty and ready for adoption. These buildings inspired us to investigate this part of our history more carefully. We are fortunate to have records from three districts, plus town records concerning school attendance and financial support. The information presented below was compiled by Susan Chandler, PHA Board Vice-President, from these records, and presents a fuller picture than we have had before. It is, as is all history, an incomplete and evolving story, and we encourage visitors to help us add and correct our information!

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Vermonters in general and Peacham villagers in particular have historically placed a great value on education; both the Vermont constitution and the town charter provided for schools. Peacham was not only the site of a robust set of common schools—schools for every child to attend from a very young age through teenage years—but also the site of the county grammar school, an upper level school for children from anywhere in Caledonia County.

Common schools started as very informal gatherings in private homes. These slowly developed into a more formal network of centrally administered and supervised schools, the one-room schools as we think of them today: children of all ages taught together by one person in one room. During its nearly 200-year history in Peacham, however, the nature of these one-room schools changed significantly. Early schools were governed by independent district boards. They were ungraded and no special training was required to be a teacher. Attendance was erratic, following the agricultural calendar and the needs of families to have children helping on the farms. The only texts were books children brought from home, often Bibles. Over the years, concerns about quality and consistency increased, and common standards were set across all schools for teacher preparation and evaluation, attendance, curriculum, the school calendar, and buildings and materials.

In 1787, Vermont authorized towns to establish school districts. The earliest mention of schools in Peacham's Town Meeting occurred the same year; they recorded a tax of 30 bushels of wheat "to hire a school." We know there was an actual physical school by 1794, because the Town Meeting was recorded as having been held in the "Centre School House." Townspeople could apply to selectmen to form a district, and the number and location of these districts tracked the ebb and flow of the town's population. The 1800 Town Meeting established 5 districts, spaced so no child had too far to walk to school; by 1847, there were 14, extending far up to the hill farms. After this date, as the population declined, schools were merged and closed. It is important to note that the point of highest numbers was not necessarily the highpoint educationally speaking. During the next 120 year there were many improvements in teacher preparation and support, curriculum, and facilities. When the last one-room schoolhouse closed after the 1968 school year, there was excitement about the new consolidated Peacham School, but regret for the end of the intimate, careful education provided by these "one-room wonders."

PEACHAM SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Each year, the school districts were individually listed and recorded, including a census of the number of students. Students included were between the ages of 4 and 18. There are totals provided for the number of Peacham school students, as well as the number of students who attend schools outside of Peacham. These records do not include the names of students. In 1861, student numbers were fractionalized (e.g. 10 ³/₄) and the following year, in 1862, the yearly census numbers were discontinued.

The school appropriations for each year vary considerably, and are not proportional to the number of students. The lowest amount allocated was in 1821 with just \$142 for 501 students, down from the 1811 first recorded budget of \$180 for 487 students. By 1825 the budget was up to \$262 (477 students) and by 1832 the budget was \$409 (506 students).

Many school districts are shown on the 1875 Beers map (available on peachamhistorical.org). Earlier districts were larger, then split and fractionalized into smaller units when there was a need for additional schools. In some cases, separate districts were joined together when the student population decreased. Of note, is that the fractional districts shown on the 1875 Beers map do not appear to represent districts that are fractions linked with neighboring towns; rather they reflect the adding and subtracting of land from earlier Peacham districts.

District descriptions are from the District School Records archived with PHA.

District 1 Peacham Corner (c.1794-1933)

This building still exists and is the west part of the current Fire Department.

District 2 South Part (c. 1794-1937)

The building is currently used as a private residence.

District 3 South Peacham (By 1800-1968)

This school burned in 1968 and was demolished.

District 4 East Hill (By 1800-1940)

After closing this building was moved to Ticklenaked Pond, Ryegate.

District 5 Penny Street (By 1800-1937)

It is currently a summer residence.

District 6 Mack's Mountain (Dates uncertain)

We do not have a description, verified location or photograph of this school.

District 7 North Part near West Danville (1812-1931)

It serves as a private residence today.

District 8 Green Bay (1814-1952)

The schoolhouse serves as a private residence today.

District 9 East Peacham (1828-1968)

It was converted into a private residence and stands vacant today.

District 10 Cow Hill Area (1835-1860)

No descriptions or photographs have been found for this school.

District 11 Peacham Pond and Separately, Rake Factory Area (1836-1860)

This district comprises two separated areas; we do not have a descriptions or photographs of school buildings from them.

District 12 Ewells Hollow Area (1838-1963)

It serves as a private residence today.

District 13 New Discovery Park in Groton State Forest (1847-1856)

We do not have a description, verified location or photograph of this school.

District 14 Goss District (1847-1863)

We do not have a description, verified location or photograph of this school.

Please visit peachamhistorical.org for extensive additional information about Peacham's school districts and research resources. We also have printed copies available; please contact us!