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Frontier Education

Education and schooling - what was it like in the early pioneer days in Wisconsin and particularly in Neenah and Menasha?

When a pioneer family moved into a new wilderness area there were no schools. Children stayed at home and were taught by their parents or a neighbor or not at all. There was always so much work getting settled - clearing the land for farming, building a log house, planting, weeding, harvesting the crops, caring for the farm animals, and a myriad of other chores that there was little or no time left for schooling. However, as soon as a number of families settled in the area the parents got together and made plans for teaching their children. They either built a new log or frame structure or occasionally adapted an existing building for school purposes.

Schools were usually only one room and were very sparsely furnished. There was a wood-burning stove for heat. The teacher had to build the fire and keep it burning while school was in session. Pupils sat on benches made of unpeeled oak slabs with rough wooden pegs for legs. Some schools had table-desks for the students. The teacher had a table and chair which sometimes sat on an elevated wooden platform. Near the door on a bench was a bucket of drinking water with a single dipper. Most early schools did not have a blackboard, maps, nor world globe. There was so little paper available that each child had a slate to write on. Textbooks were so scarce that the children brought to school whatever books they could find around the house. They might be a dictionary, history book, almanac, story book, or rarely a math book. Frequently the only book available was the family Bible. Since the class was made up of students of many different ages and abilities, the teacher had to individualize the instruction and older children were frequently enlisted to help the younger ones. The year was divided into two short sessions, one from April through June and the other from November through January.

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If money was available the McGuffey Readers could be purchased. These readers were widely used between 1836 and 1857 and 120 million were sold. The stories in these readers taught the value of honesty, piety, charity, patriotism, temperance, cleanliness, and the virtue of good hard work. William McGuffey was a minister, professor, and philosopher who was very interested in education. He and his brother, Alexander, wrote 6 levels of illustrated McGuffey Readers. Included was help with word usage and pronunciation. These books are credited with shaping the minds and morals of the young readers for the rest of their lives.

Classrooms were loosely divided into grades with many subjects to teach to a wide range of ages. The teacher had to hear many recitations. Because all students were together in one room, there had to be very strict discipline and those not reciting were not allowed to talk. Failure to obey the rules could result in a student standing in the corner, wearing a "dunce cap", balancing on blocks of wood, or wearing a sign around his neck. The students, especially the older unruly boys, were often whipped when they disobeyed the rules. Men were hired as teachers in the winter session because the older boys usually attended school during the winter term when there were fewer farm chores to be done at home. Therefore the whippings usually fell to the lot of the men teachers.

The "3 R's", reading, writing and arithmetic were emphasized. For older students American history, geography, and grammar were given special attention. Much stress was put on memorization of Bible verses, rules of grammar, spelling, history dates, and arithmetic tables. Reading aloud and spelling bees were frequent activities. At the end of the term a special program was put on for the benefit of the parents and neighbors. The students recited poems, rules of grammar, and math tables, sang or played musical instruments, read aloud and had a spell-down. It was actually quite a festive affair.

During recess the open fields offered many opportunities for curious children to study insects, spiders, butterflies, birds and small animals. Tree climbing, ball games, tag, and other chasing games were popular. If, by chance, the school was near a stream, pond, or lake there were endless chances to catch tadpoles, frogs, or crayfish. In summer the students could go wading and in the winter they could skate or slide on the ice. The teacher rang a bell to end the recess.

Many children had long distances to walk to school. A few lucky ones had a horse to ride. Students all carried their lunch, usually in a lard or tobacco pail. Lunches were plain. Some dogs followed their masters to school and waited outside until school was over. Students attended only when the weather and

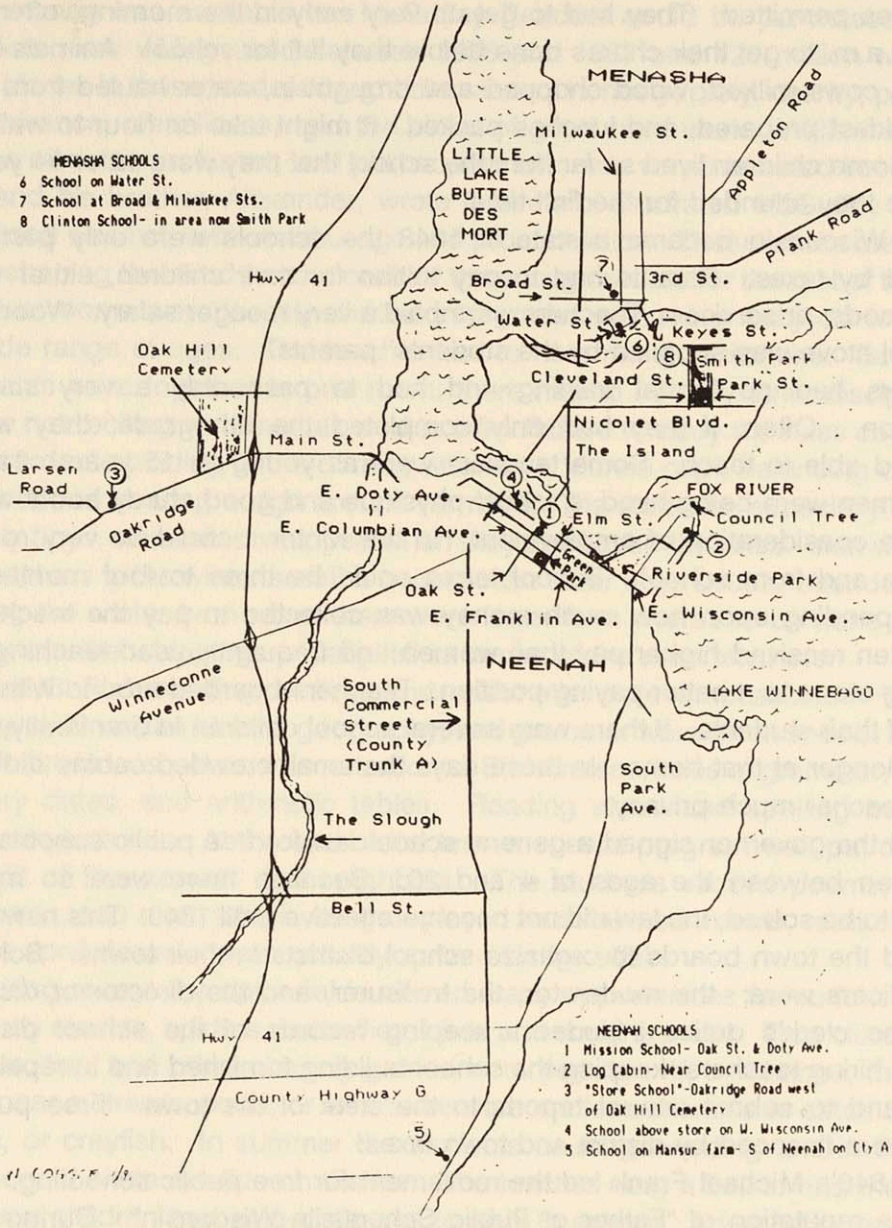
farm chores permitted. They had to get up very early in the morning, often as early as 4 a.m. to get their chores done before they left for school. Animals had to be fed, cows milked, wood chopped and brought in, water hauled from the well, breakfast prepared, and lunches packed. It might take an hour to walk to school. Some children lived so far from the school that they were 12 or 14 years old before they attended for the first time.

Before Wisconsin became a state in 1848 the schools were only partially supported by taxes. Parents had to pay tuition for their children, either with money, goods, or services. Teachers were paid a very meager salary. Wood for the school stove was supplied by the students' parents.

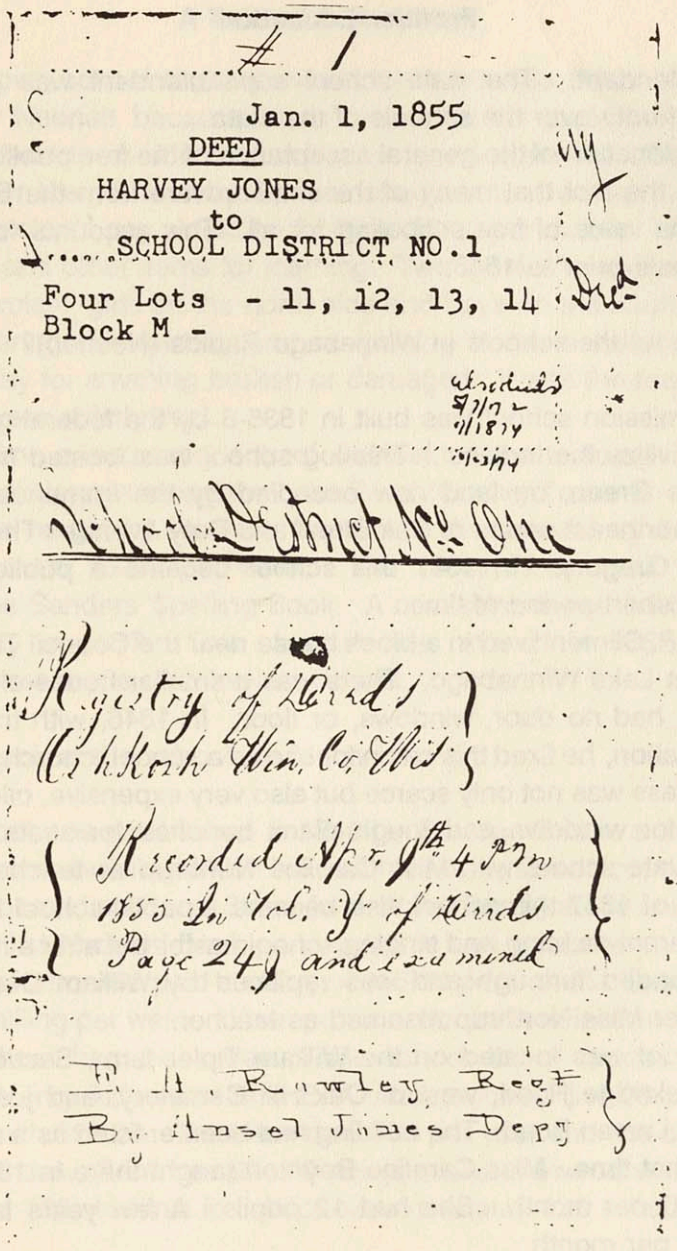
Teachers had no formal training and had to pass only a very simple examination. Often, if they had only completed the 8th grade, they were considered able to teach. Some teachers were as young as 15 years of age. When women were being hired, a robust physique and good sturdy boots were part of the consideration of employment. In the winter it could be very rough walking to and from school. School terms could be three to four months in length depending upon how much money was collected to pay the teacher's salary. Men received higher pay than women and frequently used teaching as a stepping-stone to a better-paying position. Teachers boarded around with the families of their students. If there were several school children in one family, the stay was longer at that home. In those days the small crowded cabins did not give the teacher much privacy.

In 1848 the governor signed a general school law for free public schools for the children between the ages of 4 and 20. Because there were so many problems to be solved, the law did not become effective until 1849. This new law authorized the town boards to organize school districts in their towns. School district officers were: the moderator, the treasurer, and the director or district clerk. The clerk's duties included: keeping records of the school district meetings, hiring teachers, keeping the school building furnished and in repair as needed, and to submit annual reports to the clerk of the town. Free public schools were financed by district and town taxes.

In the 1840's Michael Frank led the movement for free public schooling. He gained the reputation of "Father of Public Schools in Wisconsin". During the territorial period before Wisconsin became a state, the supervisory authority was assigned to the school commissioners of the town boards. Under the new state law, as passed in 1848, this authority was centralized in a single official, the town



Locations of early Menasha and Neenah schools.



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Jan. 1, 1855

DEED

HARVEY JONES

to

SCHOOL DISTRICT NO.1

Four Lots - 11, 12, 13, 14
Block M -

Deed

School District No. One

Registry of Deeds
Winnebago Co. Wis.

Recorded Apr. 9th 4 P.M.
1855 in Vol. Y of Deeds
Page 249 and examined

E. H. Rowley Reg.
By Hosea Jones Dep.

Cover of deed to property donated by Harvey Jones to the Neenah School District.

school superintendent. The state school superintendent was given general supervisory authority over the schools of the state.

The main explanation of the general acceptance of the free public schools idea in Wisconsin is the fact that many of the settlers were from the East and were convinced of the value of free schooling for all. This accounts for there being some free schools prior to 1848.

Now what about the schools in Winnebago Rapids (Neenah)?

The old log mission school was built in 1835-6 by the federal government in its project to "civilize the Indians". This log school was located near Neenah's oldest park, the Green, on land now occupied by the Immanuel Evangelical Church on the northeast corner of Oak Street and Doty Avenue. The teacher was a man named Gregory. In 1847 this school became a public school and continued for a short period of time.

Reverend O. P. Clinton lived in a block house near the Council Tree where the Fox River leaves Lake Winnebago. There was a smaller house close-by which was empty and had no door, windows, or floor. In 1846, with the help of his church congregation, he fixed this cabin for use as a school, church, and meeting house. Since glass was not only scarce but also very expensive, oiled paper was probably used for windows and rough plank benches for seats. This cabin served as a private school with Miss Caroline Northrup as teacher for the first term. In the fall of 1847 this school also became a public school taught by Mr. Lambert, an itinerant dancing and singing schoolmaster but after a month he was granted an extended furlough and was replaced by William Dennison. The following summer Miss Northrup resumed as teacher.

The next school was located on the William Tipler farm, Section 20 on the north side of Oakridge Road, west of Oak Hill Cemetery, and just east of the intersection with Larsen Road. The building had been erected as a store but was unoccupied at that time. Miss Caroline Boynton taught there in 1848 and 1849 being paid $6.00 per month. She had 12 pupils. A few years later teachers received $18.00 per month.

There is evidence of a school in 1851 on Wisconsin Avenue "two doors west of the Post Office" which was then in the Kimberly store. It probably would have been in a room on the second floor.

A Tale of Twin Cities

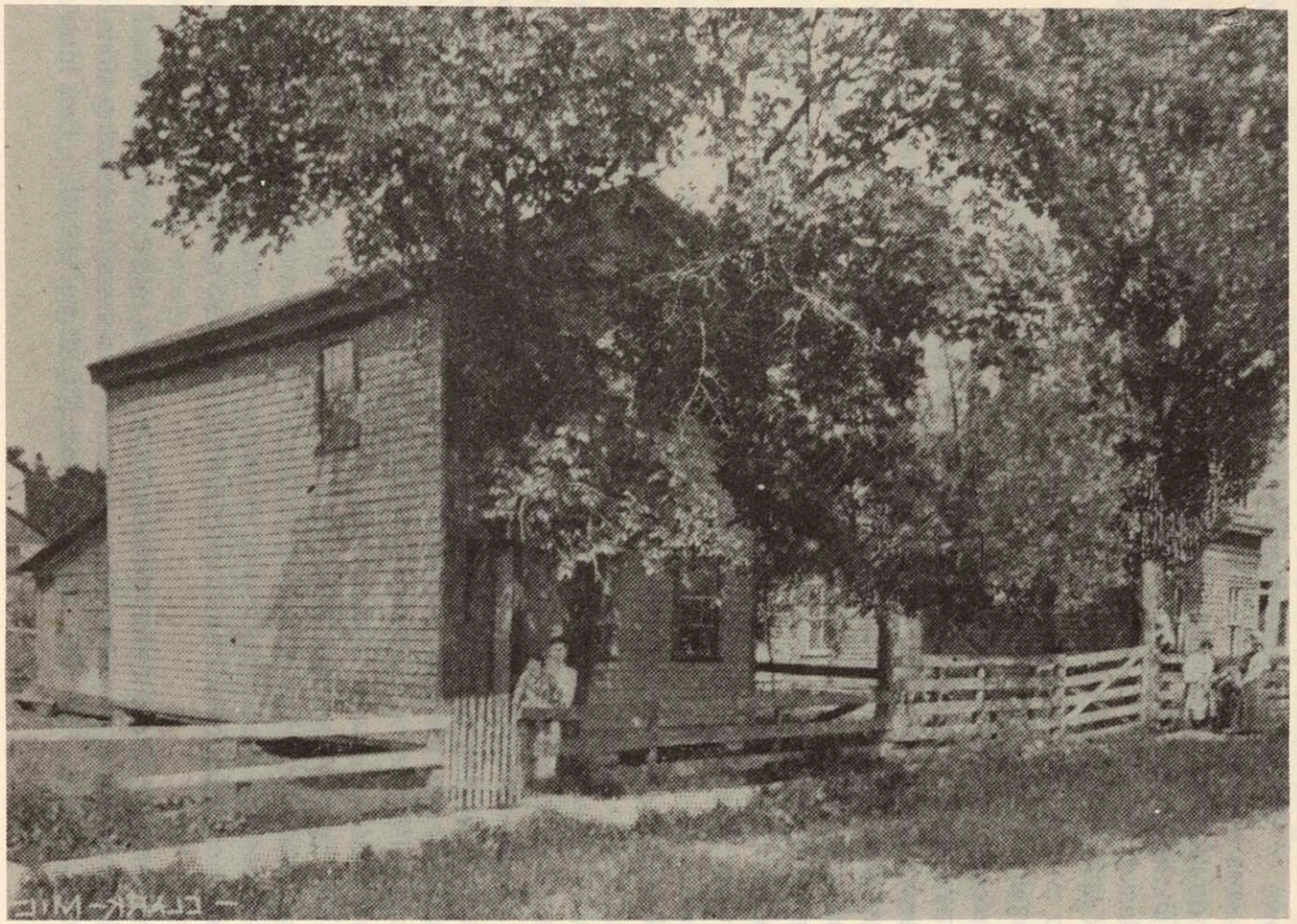
In 1856 the town school superintendent formed a new School District No. 3 of the Town of Neenah because there were then 43 students in the district. Meetings were held to decide the criteria for the new school. Taxes would be raised to pay for the 18 foot by 24 foot structure that would also house the teacher. The teacher's pay would be $7.00 or $8.00 per month. There would be a stove, desks, and other items for learning. Two "privies" (outdoor toilets) were to be built with rules: girls on the north side and boys on the south. Other rules were: no swearing or profanity and no playing in the school building. The children must pay for anything broken or damaged. It was the teacher's duty to see that rules were strictly kept.

In the meantime a temporary school was set up in a building on the Mansur property south of Neenah along the Lake Road (County Trunk A). The first 3 1/2 month-term was taught by Lucinda Coats and the second by Kathie Mansur. They each received $3.50 per week. The 13 students used the McGuffey Readers and the Sanders Spelling Book. A new school was finally built on the Mansur property in 1857. This structure was moved in 1862 to the Pope property, the present site of Lakeview School.

Now take a look at the schools in Menasha.

The first school was established in 1848 by Elbridge Smith, a lawyer from the East. It was a frame building which housed his home, law office, dance hall, and school. It was located on Canal Street (now Water Street) at the southeast corner of the present First National Bank parking lot. It was a private school taught by Miss Hettie Frost who was paid a salary of $16.00 per month. Each student paid tuition of one shilling per week. When public schools were instituted by the state, Mr. Smith's school became a free public school for all grades. The female teachers, Mrs. Henry Alden and Mrs. E. A. Alan received $16.00 per month and Mr. Elbridge Smith $20.00. The town paid $73 per year and the district $200.00 for school expenses. Rent was $24.00 per year and firewood was 88 cents. In 1850 there were 100 students in school out of a total of 120 school age children in Menasha.

The turnover of teachers in the early schools was a major problem. Most stayed only a term or two since teaching was considered merely a stepping-stone to better employment. By 1851 men received $30.00 per month. Two men



Elbridge Smith home on Water Street in Menasha which was used as the first school.

teachers were Mr. Leonard King and Mr. John Potter. The new female teacher, Miss Amanda McMillen, however, still only received $16.00.

In 1851 the first real school building was constructed. It was located on the northwest corner of Broad and Milwaukee Streets, across from the present Evangel Community Church. In 1857 this structure was replaced by a brick two-story building that served for both grade and high school on the northwest corner of First and Racine. Mr. A. J. Richardson was the first principal of this school. He later left to become a partner in the Webster and Lawson Company.

There were no high school graduation exercises until 1876 so when students completed school they just left without any ceremony.

The first school on Doty Island was established after a petition was submitted late in 1851 by Reverend O.P. Clinton, Mr. H.A. Burts, and Mr. O.R. Jaycox. The Island District erected a red brick school building in the area that is now Smith Park. It was commonly known as "Clinton School". Mrs. Alden was the teacher and had a class of 11 children. This original structure was eventually moved to 508 Nicolet Boulevard. The bricks were removed and used to make a new foundation for a house. The original log beams can be seen in the basement.

Both communities have realized the importance of education for true progress and have continued to live up to and have surpassed the goals set by our pioneer forefathers.

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Helen Cogger

BRIDGE AT NEENAH.

☞ A petition is in circulation for a charter for a bridge across the southern outlet of the lake at Neenah, to bring Menasha in travelling connection with this part of the country, the northern outlet we understand being already bridged by Reed's dam so as to afford facilities for passing.

About the location of the bridge we have nothing to say. The wants of the whole people in that vicinity should be regarded in this thing, and wherever the bridge will do the most good and the least harm there it ought to be made.

But we think that there ought to be a bridge across there somewhere. The connection of this vicinity with Green Bay is certainly very wretched. We are told that a direct road from Menasha to the Kaukauna shortens the distance very much, and that the route is eligible.

All this section of country is interested in having a direct passable road to Green Bay. With so many large, thriving villages all along the way, it is a shame that all the southern travel should go from Fond du Lac down on the east side of the lake, and so shun this place, Neenah, Menasha, Grand Chute, Kaukana, &c., and all because we have no road.

If a bridge across the outlet will better the evil any, let them have a bridge we say, and let the bridge be located according to the best interests of those immediately concerned.

Editorial comment regarding building of bridge between Menasha and Neenah.

DAVIS'

One Price Cash Store.

ON hand and for sale at all times, any quantity of

Dry Goods,

Groceries, Hard Ware, Stone Ware, Boots and Shoes,

PORK, HAMS, LARD,

And all kinds of Goods usually kept in a Country Store. The above Goods will be sold for ready pay only, and very cheap.

J. DAVIS.

Winnebago Rapids, Feb. 1, 1849. 11f

Winter Arrangement.

DAILY LINE

From Fon du Lac, by Oshkosh, to Winnebago Rapids.

To GREEN BAY every Friday morning, by the way of Oshkosh, Winnebago Rapids, and the Grand Chute. Arrives at Green Bay on Saturday at noon.

☞ Office at the Badger Hotel, Fond du Lac.

JAMES HARRIS, Proprietor.

Advertisements from the Oshkosh True Democrat in 1849.