



The Red Bank School in Union County

Early Schooling in Union County

If a child living in Union County in the 1800's was lucky, he might learn to read and write, do sums, and learn a bit of history and science.

The earliest schools in Union County were found in Lewisburg in 1790 and in rural White Springs in 1792. In 1800 there were schools in Buffalo, West Buffalo and White Deer townships and New Berlin.

Classes were held for three months during winter and sometimes for two months in summer. Many children were not enrolled in school, others attended irregularly or only for a few terms. In general, young children went to school and adolescents worked at home or learned a trade through apprenticeship. Schoolmasters often boarded with families during school terms. Early schools were usually taught in English although there were German schools in Mifflinburg, Lewisburg, near Dreisbach Church and at Buffalo Cross Roads.

Pennsylvania School Laws

The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 and 1790 called for publicly funded schools in each county but funds were not allocated. Parents paid for their child's schooling, and many families could not afford the price of tuition. After 1809, counties paid the tuition of some poor children, however many parents chose not to send their children to school rather than declare themselves "paupers."

In 1833-34, the PA Legislature, with the support of Governor George Wolf, proposed a free, public, tax-funded, state education system, conditional on local support. In Union County, the law was approved in Lewisburg and White Deer Township. All other jurisdictions rejected the public education law. Sentiment was similar throughout the state and the law was repealed in the Senate and might have been repealed in the House as well but for the influence of Thaddeus Stevens (notable state and federal politician), Governor Wolf and others. Instead the House strengthened the law and the Senate then concurred. Union County locales continued to reject public schooling for several years until additional monetary incentives were provided by the state.

Some people objected to a public school system being tax-funded. German speaking families wanted instruction in German, not in English as the law required. Others felt that formal education was unnecessary, and especially that girls could be taught all they needed - cooking, housekeeping, needlework - at home.

School Buildings and Instruction

The first Union County school buildings were small log structures with dirt or wood floors and open fireplaces. Rough wood planks were set in the wall to serve as desks where students sat on primitive benches. Children practiced penmanship using quill pens and homemade ink, and used small slate boards and chalk for arithmetic. Lessons were memorized and recited.

By the mid-1800's, school buildings were much improved. Typical schools were one or two room brick structures with a central door flanked by two windows, several windows along both sides, and a bell tower. In some schools, the front room served as the classroom and the back room as living quarters for the teacher. Wood or coal stoves provided warmth. Students sat at double desks facing a blackboard that covered the back wall. Children walked to school, sometimes several miles.

In 1862 there were 75 schools in Union County, open for five months of the year. There were 3,888 students (2,151 boys and 1,737 girls) and 85 teachers (58 men and 27 women).

For some older male students, academies provided instruction in history, mathematics and sciences, bookkeeping, composition, literature, and the classics - such as Caesar's Commentaries, Cicero, Livy and Virgil in Latin, and the Odyssey and Xenophon in Greek. The Mifflinburg Academy began in 1829, the Randolph Academy in Lewisburg in 1839, the Academy at the College in Lewisburg in 1849, and Union Seminary in New Berlin in 1856. For older girls, there were schools in Mifflinburg and New Berlin, and the Female Institute of the University of Lewisburg (now Bucknell) founded in 1852.

In the late 1800's, grammar schools were opened in Lewisburg, Mifflinburg, Hartleton, Cowan, Mazeppa, and Lewis Township. Students could study algebra, geometry, bookkeeping, geography, civics, literature and Latin. Between 1886 and 1904, high schools opened in Lewisburg, Mifflinburg, Lewis and Hartley townships.

Most children only attended a few years of school in their local schoolhouse with few continuing to high school. Mifflinburg graduated three students in 1889; Lewisburg graduated nineteen students in 1916.

Learn More

Much more on early education in Union County is provided in *History of the Schools of Union County PA* by Mary Belle Lontz, and *Union County: A Celebration of History* by Charles M. Snyder. Both books are available for research and purchase from the Union County Historical Society.