

Early Charlton Schools

By Cindy Cooper

At the second town meeting, just two months after the town was formed in 1755, the Charlton schools were instituted when the warrant article reading: "To make such a grant of money as the district may think necessary, for the schooling of the children." passed. With 8 pounds voted for that purpose, schools were started in two places. That quickly increased to three schools the following year. When the Gore was added to the town the next year, a school committee was formed. They voted to have each of the schools act independently to provide schooling as each chose.

The early schools had two terms, winter and summer, with a combined time of less than 6 months. In 1786 the state legislature allowed a change from committeemen for the whole town to Prudential Committees for each district's school. The money came from within the district, to go for building the school, determining the school year, hiring teachers, setting salaries, instructional materials, courses to teach, and expenditures. For many years each ward provided their own schoolhouse, and the tax money for schools was divided among the wards in proportion to the taxes paid by each, effectively meaning the residents of the wards paid for their own schools. That changed in 1854 when tax money meant for schools was equally divided among the wards. Fifteen years later, the superintendent's report shows his duties were "...more difficult than during any previous year. The substitution of the town for the district system, as fixed by the Legislature of last year, has made many changes, and added new duties to the Committee...the principal changes that this law necessitates are the transferring of school-houses, lands, and other property used for school purposes, from the districts to the towns, and placing the selection of teachers into the hands of the general committee."

Generally, men were hired for the winter term, and women for the summer. Townspeople believed a man maintained better discipline, but committee reports showed no difference. At that time, women always received less pay than men. In 1856, the School Committee reported: "The state of our schools the past winter has shown that well educated and experienced female teachers in ordinary cases, will be quite as successful in conducting and promoting the general interest of the school as the male teachers...they are as able to maintain good government in the school as young men of the same age wherever they have the co-operation of parents and guardians, and without this all teachers will fail..."

Teachers and students took care of the building. Residents arranged for open roads to the schools and enough firewood for the winter. The school committee was responsible for having each school visited by one member of the committee at the beginning and middle of each term, and having two members present at the closing examination. Schools included all grades and subjects, for children ages 8 to 14, and teachers worked out their own discipline method.

A report generated due to annual town meeting vote in March of 1819 determined and defined the districts in the town. The 1820 report described the location of each of the fourteen districts in the town at that time. This map shows the approximate location for each of the districts described. Approximate is the key word: when describing the boundaries. Landmarks such as "...the chestnut tree marked at the SE corner of Jonathan Fuller's land..." or the "...end

of the dwelling house of Abner Wheelock 2nd ...” make determining the exact location nearly impossible. The report resulted in some changes in the following few years, with many transfers of land for school purposes recorded at the Registry of Deeds.

One of the first changes was the dividing of District #1 on May 1, 1820. A detailed description explains that there were 160 scholars in the school, “...a number much too large to be accommodated in one school house, or taught by any one instructor...” and the students would make greater progress in a smaller class. They also were concerned they would first be asked to pay for a new schoolhouse to accommodate so many children, and then pay for one again after the inevitable break into a smaller district later. Petitioners requested that the South part of the District be separated from the North part, and that it be called “No. 1, South School District.” This separation resulted in fifteen districts, the highest amount recorded. As the population of districts changed, consolidations, reconfigurations, and renaming took place over the course of many years.