

Education and Community: THE HARLEMVILLE SCHOOLHOUSE

BY KATHRYN KOSTO

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At the intersection of Harlemville Road and County Route 21 C, a 19th century schoolhouse continues to educate and serve our community.¹ Painted a bright verdigris color, this historic building houses the Art School of Columbia County, which presents art classes, art lectures, and exhibits as a nonprofit community organization serving over 1300 Columbia County residents each year with free and low-cost art programming.



Art School of Columbia County, 2014. Photo ASCC.

The schoolhouse retains aspects of its historic character. On its original foundation, the structure was practically situated at a three-way intersection, drawing children from all directions. The land, a short distance from Harlemville, was sold to Thomas Evans, the sole trustee of Hillsdale School District No. 12, for \$200 by a farming couple, George and Eugenie Sornborgeron, March 2, 1880.² The massive

rock outcropping surrounding the site, while picturesque, lessened the utility of this land as farmland. As was common in the 1800s, the schoolhouse plot borders a cemetery, which was established in 1871, although earlier graves exist there.³ Both schools and cemeteries were public spaces; land for both was usually a short distance from village centers and was often donated or sold at a reduced cost in nineteenth-century America. The original well and property line, delineated by a wood and wire fence, survive; a bell tower (now gone) was added around 1920.^{4,5} Inside, the chimney site and glimpses of the post-and-beam construction are visible. A historic photograph from the late 1800s shows the structure was a classic example of vernacular schoolhouse architecture, with a front trap door for the interior wood bin, large shuttered windows, and a flagpole. As was typical, the front door opened into a cloak room which then opened into the classroom. When the structure was renovated in the early twenty-first century, a map embedded into plaster was found near the north-east corner of the building.⁶

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The upper Hudson Valley had particularly complex and dense educational choices from the 18th century onward. Like the diverse, layered politics which shaped the region, there was no single shared idea of education. Documented in the region’s prolific newspapers and political records, Columbia County society debated quality, inclusivity, private and public education, cost-effectiveness, and the use of public funds, and attempted to quantify achievement through assessment – concerns not so unfamiliar to us today.⁷ Clermont had the first public school in the state in 1791, and Emma Willard founded a Female Seminary in nearby Troy in 1821.⁸ Hudson opened a charity school to educate African Americans in 1828, and briefly operated a “young Ladies School” as a branch of the Hudson Academy.⁹ Kinderhook, with the highest percentage of African-Americans in the county, opened a “Sunday School” (so named because the attending children and adults were expected to be working on all other days) for African Americans in 1828, the year after slavery was finally abolished in the state. Class divisions prevailed; options for wealthy families included private tutors and twenty-one private schools by 1877.¹⁰

Yet the Harlemville Schoolhouse was free - a public school, run by a local school board. Around the time it was built c.1880, Harlemville numbered 100 people and had two stores and a hotel.¹¹ Like many aspects of early rural life, schoolhouses often have scarce documentary evidence, but a first-person recollection of attending the Harlemville School by Arthur Jordan survives. He started school there at age 6 in 1924. The school had double desks, and boys and girls sat on opposite sides; outside were separate, poorly maintained outhouses. The community gathered there daily - about 30 mailboxes were mounted on posts in front of the school for rural delivery.¹² Thanksgiving, Christmas, and May Day celebrations drew parents and community members. Yet, resources were scarce; the school lacked drinking water for two years and cracked clapboards leaked. Jordan tried to patch a spot near his desk with newspaper and mud, only to have his efforts dissolve in the next rain. Without lamps, students could barely see on overcast days. Crayons were worn to nubs, and a rumor was afloat the School Board would fire the teacher for using too much wood to heat the school; an anonymous donation of firewood was left the next Monday. Farmers gave students rides in bad weather and nearby farmhouses took in students stranded in the snow. Free education, while very much woven into the fabric of Columbia County life, was fragile. Despite these challenges, Jordan loved his first teacher, and learned much in this collaborative, multi-generational environment, reflecting "I cannot separate what I learned in school from what I learned from the community."¹³

Late nineteenth-century class photographs from Ghent and the Kline Kill Schoolhouse (on Route 203 between Valatie and Chatham) include African-American students, who represent up to 20% of the class. Records for African American education are scarce - even more so for rural areas. These photographs reflect a time of transition, as Columbia County residents reconsidered their response to local slavery in a not-so-distant past. Although New York State mandated in 1873 that no child could be kept from school because of



Harlemville Schoolhouse, District No 12, undated (c. 1880-90). Photo ASCC.

race, separate schools were maintained in Kinderhook for African American children until the 1880s. Photographs reveal that some Columbia County schools were integrated by the 1890s; in other rural areas of the state some schools remained segregated until a 1938 state law definitively banned the practice.¹⁴



The Kline Kill One-Room School, c. 1898. CCHS Collection.

In a countryside still very rural, ASCC is in its sixth year, continuing a commitment to education and service to the needs of the community. The majority of ASCC's programming is off-site rural outreach in school districts, community libraries, and senior residences, bringing the renewal of art to the entire county.

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Fourth Grade School Trips

BY KELLI SMITH

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Did you know, local history is a required learning component for every fourth grader in New York State? For students in Columbia County, it means a field trip to the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site and the historic, rural properties at Columbia County Historical Society: our c.1737 Dutch Colonial Luykas Van Alen House and our circa 1850s single-room, Ichabod Crane Schoolhouse. Using these structures as a backdrop, the story of Columbia County is told through archaeology, architecture, and documentary evidence. Students learn what it was like to grow up on a Dutch Farm in the 18th century. How did the family make their food with no grocery stores? What did they use for light? How did they keep warm? And what is a chamber pot for? An archaeology exhibit discusses the

different kinds of people who lived and worked on the land, such as the Mohican Native Americans and the enslaved persons belonging to the Van Alens.

At the one room school house, kids learn what it was like to go to school in the early 20th century. The schoolhouse, which was moved from its original location in 1974, has been restored to its 1930s appearance. After the bell is rung, students line up and enter the building, choosing a seat from among the rows of period-appropriate maple desks. The “teacher” reads them their lessons from real textbooks and calls students up to the front of the room to recite spelling, do math, and practice their penmanship. Everyone is on their best behavior, for they learn that if it really was the 1930s they would receive a sharp “thwack” with the hickory stick for misbehaving!

No field trip would be complete without a visit to our neighbor, the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site (MAVA), home of Martin Van Buren and his family. For many years, CCHS has collaborated with MAVA to bring local history to the students. Together, the two sites illustrate this area’s origins as an agricultural community, worked by Dutch families such as the Van Alens, to its growing importance on the political and economic landscape during Van Buren’s lifetime. At the end of the day, students leave with a greater appreciation of their region and their place within it.



FOOTNOTES from page 27

- 1 With special thanks to CCHS Curator Anna Thompson for her assistance.
- 2 Deed Books, Liber 67, p. 212, Columbia County Clerk’s Office, Hudson NY.
- 3 *Ibid.*, Liber 42, p. 639.
- 4 Arthur Jordan to Sharon Palmer, Letter, c. 1990, CCHS.
- 5 Deed Books, Liber 338, p. 491. Liber 819, p. 135, Columbia County Clerk’s Office, Hudson NY.
- 6 Oral history, current building owner.
- 7 John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 229-30, 352-3, 423-4. John D. Pullam and James J. Van Patten, *History of Education in America*, 9th Edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 119-20.

- 8 Ruth Piwonka and Roderic H. Blackburn, *A Visible Heritage: Columbia County, New York* (Kinderhook: Columbia County Historical Society, 1996), 104-6. Paul Rocheleau, *The One-Room Schoolhouse: A Tribute to a Beloved National Icon* (New York: Universe, 2003), 33.
- 9 Brooke, *Columbia Rising*, 358-61. Carleton Mabee, *Black Education in New York State from Colonial to Modern Times* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1979), 287.
- 10 There were more school age children in 1877 (16,013) than there are in Columbia County today. Franklin Ellis, *History of Columbia County, New York* (Philadelphia: Everts & Ensign, 1878), 122.
- 11 Jerry Apps, *One-Room Country Schools: History and Recollections* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1996), x. Map of Harlemville, 1873, CCHS.
- 12 Clustered mailboxes at intersections are still a hallmark of many nearby rural roads in Harlemville.
- 13 Jordan, Letter, CCHS. Rocheleau, *One-Room Schoolhouse*, 53, 163-1.
- 14 Mabee, *Black Education*, xii, 36, 201, 275, 287, 290-1.