

The Development of Education in Bedford, New York

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We've all heard the stories: our grandparents and great grandparents walking two miles uphill, in the snow, barefoot, just to get to school. Their stories always seemed a bit embellished to those of us growing up in more recent years. In the early days of Bedford, though, this was truly the case. One woman stated, "People have no idea how hard it was to get an education in those days. Bedford Village was nothing but farms. The children walked to school and they walked a long way – two and a half, maybe three miles in all kinds of weather."¹ In its later years, Bedford was a center of great education; it had been "for a long period been celebrated for its schools."²

There is very little mention of any form of education in Bedford before the 18th century. Bedford records are not very clear in regards to any schooling. In his "Travels Around New England," Dr. Dwight wrote about Westchester County. He stated, "Neither learning nor religion has flourished to any great extent among the inhabitants [of Westchester]."³ Bedford was the only exception to this, so it can be assumed that some education was going on. In 1741 reportedly sixteen out of twenty people could properly sign their name, a large percentage for the time.⁴

That there are few records of early Bedford education has baffled many of the town's historians. Bedford, founded in 1680 was part of Connecticut, a state that had compulsory education laws. Connecticut records stated, "They have a scholar to their minister in every town or village."⁵ According to this, and assuming Bedford followed

¹ Coopernail, Dr. G P. "Bedford Schools." The Villager 6 Feb. 1952: 9. Vault: Clark Collection Clippings.

² Bolton, Robert. History of Westchester County, Vol. I. Vol. 1. New York: Chas F Roper, 1881.

³ Wood, James. The History of the Town of Bedford to 1917. 1925. Pg. 629

⁴ Vincent, Roger. Dare to Be True : a History of the Rippowam Cisqua School., 1995. Bedford Free Library: Local History. Pg. 7

⁵ Barrett, Robertson T. The Town of Bedford, 1680-1955, a Commemorative History. The Town of Bedford Westchester County, 1955. Pg. 33

the requirements, it's likely that most children received their education in the home of a pastor or local church.¹

Bedford became part of New York in 1700. New York did not yet have a law that required education so it was not necessary for the children of town to attend school. Moreover, parents probably felt it more beneficial for their children to learn morals, religion, and vocational skills rather than things such as arithmetic. In the 1700's a school teacher from the Church of England came to teach in town for a brief four months. This was probably not accepted, though, considering that Bedford was largely Presbyterian. One historian recorded the first deed for a schoolhouse in the 1790's as being near Cross River.²

There are some records of a private school known as "Old Academy," which was held in someone's home and "The English and Classical Family School for Boys" held in the home of Albert Williamson. The first school for which there are sufficient records is the Bedford Academy. On January 19, 1807 the town of Bedford voted to build the Bedford Academy due to the fact that there was not a sufficient High School.³ It was, "one of the first institutions of its kind to be chartered by regents of the University of the State of New York."⁴ The Presbyterian Church donated the land for the Academy. Other funds came from Governor John Jay and Vice President Daniel D. Tompkins. Aside from tuition, selling stocks at \$5 per share provided for a large part of the schools funds.⁵

¹ Bedford Tricentennial 1680-1980. Bedford Historical Society: 1980. Pg. 53

² Bedford Tricentennial. Pg. 53

³ Wood, James. The History of the Town of Bedford to 1917. 1925. Pg. 629

⁴ Barrett, Robertson T. The Town of Bedford, 1680-1955, a Commemorative History. The Town of Bedford Westchester County, 1955. Pg. 33

⁵ Bedford Female Institute Stock Shares. Vault: Folder # 135.

The school was officially opened on June 6, 1809 and was headed by Reverend Ebenezer Grant. For nearly a century following, the Bedford Academy served as a leading college preparatory school.¹ Many attendees of the Academy came from prominent families such as Governor John Jay's son, William Jay and grandson, John Jay. They attended along with William H. Vanderbilt, Major General Phil Kearny, and the first United States Roman Catholic Cardinal, John McCloskey.²

A pamphlet put out by the school itself on June 28, 1877 entitled "History of Bedford Academy" shares with others that though a small school, it turned out a high number of successful men in every field of work including doctors, lawyers, military men, business men, and ministers of all religions.³

A brochure dated 1878-1879 for the school marked its 70th academic year. Each school year had four terms that were 10 weeks each. Tuition was to be paid by term and prices were as follows:

English	\$7.50
Higher English	\$10
Classics	\$12
Piano	\$10. ⁴

There was a very small enrollment, approximately a dozen locals and only half a dozen boarders, most of who were from New York City. By 1885 the curriculum had expanded and prices had risen to:

¹ A Short Historical Tour of the Town of Bedford. Bedford Historical Society, 1965. Pg. 9

² Wood, Pg. 629

³ History of Bedford Academy. Mount Kisco: Press of the "Weekly", 1877. Record of Bedford Historical Society Vault: In Folder (Schools, Sunday Schools)

⁴ Bedford Academy 1809-1878. 1878. Record of Bedford Historical Society Vault: In Folder (Schools, Sunday Schools)

Classical and Higher English	\$40
Ordinary Duties of Life	\$28
Art	\$20
Primary Grades	\$20 ¹

Unfortunately, the school's success was never steady, due to a number of factors. The most significant problems were that the principals were always changing and attendance was low during the farming months. Bedford Academy began as a High School for boys with a curriculum heavily based on Latin and Greek. As you can see in the aforementioned pricing, the school opened its doors to younger boys, and later to girls as well in an attempt to make more of a profit. Further curriculum changes were made. Classes such as business, teaching, and religion were added. Unable to support itself any further, Bedford Academy officially closed in 1902.²

Another one of Bedford's well known private schools was the Bedford Female Institute. The Bedford Female Institute was an "incorporated institution under the control of a board of trustees, subject to the Regents of the University," funded by stockholders, just as Bedford Academy was.³ The school, located on the North Eastern side of Seminary Road, opened in 1856 with a capital of \$10,000 because the town wanted a female High School that was comparable to Bedford Academy.⁴ It would "provide a higher education that most other schools could not offer" at the time.⁵ The enrollment

¹ Bedford Tricentennial 1680-1980. Bedford Historical Society: 1980. Pg. 53

² Bedford Tricentennial Pg. 53

³ Wood, James. The History of the Town of Bedford to 1917. 1925. Pg. 629

⁴ Wood, Pg. 629

⁵ MacDonald, Charity. "Into Bedford's Past: Old School Houses and Early Academies." The Record-Review.

was a bit higher than that of Bedford Academy with approximately 40 students, 15 of whom boarded from New York City and a few other large cities.

Elizabeth H. Williamson of Pound Ridge recounted her education at the Bedford Female Institute for The Villager paper in February 1948. Ms. Williamson attended the school in 1873. The headmaster at the time was Reverend Oliver J. Cone. Mrs. Cone, his wife, taught math, Latin, German and art. Two other teachers of these subjects were Miss Eager and Miss Van Dyke; Miss Gamble was the music teacher.

The school day began at 9a.m. and finished at 3:30 p.m. The school consisted of one large classroom with two recitation rooms. Every Friday night, parents, friends, and locals were invited for entertainment given by the girls in the recitation rooms.¹

Like Bedford Academy, the school saw many different Principals pass through. The first was Miss Woosley, followed by Rev. and Mrs. James Bolton. Next was Mr. Phillips, and lastly Mr. And Mrs. Cone. There were other problems that contributed to the uneven success of the school. Although a few did, many students didn't last more than a year at the school. The Bedford Female Institute began accepting younger girls into its program hoping that it would bring much needed money. The school temporarily closed in 1880 for 10 years. It reopened in 1890 but was unable to keep itself alive and closed its doors officially in 1903.²

Bedford eventually did open public, or common, schools. New York Governor Morgan Lewis strongly encouraged education. In 1804 he said, "common schools under

¹ "Miss Williamson Recalls History of the Seminary." Bedford Villager 11 Feb. 1948: Vol. 2 No. 11. Record of Bedford Historical Society Vault: Clark Collection Clippings.

² "Miss Williamson Recalls History of the Seminary."

the guidance of respectful teachers should be established in every village and the indigent be educated at the public expense.”¹ Although schools were being built, education would not become compulsory in New York until 1901.² The highest level of education in common schools was elementary, which was sufficient in the early 19th century. It wasn’t until 1812 that the state formally took charge. It offered, “Aid to establish and maintain common schools”³ to any town “provided it would put up an equal amount with the state.”⁴ Bedford voted in 1813 to take advantage of the recently enacted law of the state.

At a town meeting to discuss education, Benjamin Isaacs, Aaron Read, and David Olmstead were elected as school commissioners. Their jobs were to divide the town of Bedford into districts, provide a schoolhouse for each district, and employ teachers. These men decided to divide the township into 11 districts. Parents were charged tuition for each day a child attended school. Although tuition was very low, approximately \$1 per child per term, school was still considered a luxury for most agrarian towns in New York, Bedford included. State funding was used to help pay the teachers’ wage, build and maintain a schoolhouse, and help pay tuition for more unprivileged families. At this time, attendance was not yet mandatory.⁵

The process by which teachers were hired was very loose; there was no formal certification process as there is today. The Teaching Certificate for Ms. Gertrude Lawrence, of Pound Ridge, for example was written on a piece of notebook paper. It

¹ Duncombe, Frances R. Katonah, the History of a New York Village and Its People. Katonah Village Improvement Society, 1961. pg. 84

² Duncombe, Pg. 50

³ This is Bedford. League of Women Voters, 1976. Pg. 50

⁴ Duncombe, Pg. 50

⁵ Minute Book of School District No. 2. 10 June 1826 – 13 Nov. 1830. Record of Bedford Historical Society Vault: In Folder (Schools, Sunday Schools)

reads, “I hereby certify that I have examined Miss Gertrude Lawrence and do believe that she is well qualified in respect to moral character, learning and ability to instruct a common school, in this town for one year from the date hereof.” It is dated April 6, 1833 and was signed by H. D. Robertson, the Town Superintendent of Pound Ridge Common Schools.¹

In 1882 teachers in District 1, the East Middle Patent School, were paid \$18 a month. In 1905 their wage had increased to \$35 a month. As years passed by, all of the expenses of the schoolhouses rose. In 1882 the only costs were teacher wages, fire, coal, and repairs. New expenditures included things such as a broom, a clock, chalk, and insurance. The average cost per student was \$1.52, a far cry from the thousands of dollars that are spent today.²

Bedford Village, which was classified as District 2, did not decide to build an official schoolhouse until 1826. Until the town became more organized, classes were held in the Court House. Any damages done to the courthouse were to be paid for by the children’s guardians. After the children had worn out their welcome at the Court House, classes were held in a house owned by Philip Smith and occupied by Jonathan Taylor. Smith agreed to continue renting out a room to be used as a school for \$5 a quarter until a suitable school was built.³

It took three years to plan and build the “Stone Jug School”; it wasn’t ready to be opened until 1829. The schoolhouse was made of stone quarried behind the Old

¹ Teaching Certificate of Gertrude Lawrence. 6 April. 1833. Records of Bedford Historical Vault: In Folder (Schools, Sunday Schools)

² Trustee's Book District No. 1. Bedford. 1882-1914. Records of Bedford Historical Vault: Folder #41

³ Minute Book of School District No. 2. 10 June 1826 – 13 Nov. 1830. Records of Bedford Historical Vault: In Folder (Schools, Sunday Schools)

Methodist Church, now Historical Hall.¹ A town meeting resolved the school to be “eighteen feet by twenty six in the clear and eight feet high, and it was unanimously resolved that said schoolhouse be located south of the Court House and seventy feet from and directly opposite the line between Benjamin Isaacs land and Aaron Reads barn.”²

A District School Journal from Albany stated that schoolhouses should be small and low with a lot of windows, and “so far removed from the street as not to be annoyed by the noise of the passer by, and yet so near as to be easily accessible to all.”³ Indeed the “Stone Jug” School preserved what Albany believed to most suitable for students.

Bedford Village raised \$300 by taxes in order to build the schoolhouse. John Jay donated \$50, \$8.30 was donated by Samuel Holmes, and \$3 was received by selling articles. This totaled to \$361.30. The total construction of the school ended up being \$427.24, which left a debt of \$85.94. Another \$105 was raised by taxes to pay the balance, build a back house, and paint.⁴ The parents of the students were responsible for upkeep of the school. This included supplying water and wood, a place for the teacher to live, and keeping the room clean.⁵

Students in Bedford’s public schools learned spelling, grammar, arithmetic, history, geography, Bible and occasionally Latin or philosophy.⁶ All of the one room schoolhouses in Bedford were ungraded. Report cards did not become common practice in New York until the end of the 1800’s. Although there were no report cards, there were

¹ "Relics of the Old Days in Bedford." The North Westchester Times 12 Sept. 1913, sec. Vol. 25 No. 14. Records of Bedford Historical Vault: Folder #13

²"Relics of the Old Days in Bedford."

³ District School Journal for the State of New York. Vol. 2, Issue 1-10 (1841-1842). Records of Bedford Historical Vault: Folder # 173.

⁴ Minute Book of School District No. 2. 10 June 1826 – 13 Nov. 1830. Records of Bedford Historical Vault: In Folder (Schools, Sunday Schools)

⁵ MacDonald, Charity. "Into Bedford's Past: Old School Houses and Early Academies." The Record-Review.

⁶ Bedford School House - 1829. Bedford: Bedford Historical Society.

“Reward Merits” for good behavior.¹ To determine what level a child was performing at, one need only look at the level “reader” or “primer” the student was using. Reader 2 for example, was more elementary than Reader 3. “Memorization and recitation were widespread. Some texts were even in catechetical form of questions and answers.”²

In 1841 Albany recommended primers, spelling books, and readers printed by the Stander’s Series of School Books. It was said that these books had “several important and decided improvements above other . . . books now in use,” that would “produce a moral influence in the hearts of youth.”³

Though the school was opened year round, student attendance fluctuated greatly by season. Farming was still a major business in Bedford. Children were needed at home working on the farms rather than sitting in the classrooms. In 1842, a recorded 62 children were taught at the Stone Jug School. Only 9 of those children attended school for all 12 months. Similarly, 27 students spent only 4 or 5 months in school.⁴

As the years passed, the population of Bedford grew and larger schools were needed to accommodate this growth. In 1863 the Mount Kisco School added a second room and employed a second teacher for their school.⁵ In 1894 Mount Kisco built itself a 6 room school with other additions such as an auditorium, library, and reception room. In 1928 the school moved again to its final location.⁶ Other districts soon followed suit, turning their one room schoolhouses into two room schoolhouses. When Bedford Hills

¹ "Reward of Merit." 1840-50 Banks, William. Personal interview. 29 Mar. 2002.
Vault: In Folder (Schools, Sunday Schools)

² District School Journal for the State of New York. Vol. 2, Issue 1-10 (1841-1842). Vault: Folder # 173.

³ District School Journal for the State of New York.

⁴ Bedford School House - 1829. Bedford: Bedford Historical Society.

⁵ Mount Kisco, NY Centennial 1875-1975. Mount Kisco: DeSalvo-Wayne Inc., 1975. pg. 68

⁶ Mount Kisco, NY Centennial 1875-1975. Pg. 68

decided that a High School was in need in 1924, one was built on Babbitt Road.¹ This is now used for Bedford Hills Elementary School.

In 1912 the Stone Jug School had grown too small for its population and thus closed, “vacated by scholars for a newer, more hygienic . . . building.”² A new schoolhouse with two rooms was built on the corner of Court Road and Seminary Road. One room held grades 1-4 and the other room held grades 5-8. This schoolhouse was demolished when Bedford Village Elementary School was built.

The rooms were separated simply with sliding boards. In the morning the boards would be turned up so everyone could sing together. When lessons began they were turned back down. In an interview, Eileen Powell talked about her years in the Bedford Village School. She said, “If you were in the 5th grade in Mrs. Wood’s room, you heard every class’ assignments. So by the time you got to 8th grade you had heard it all before every year. So you were pretty smart. And you knew things pretty well by the time it came your time to hear the same story. It was the same literature, the same history. We really learned the same things for 4 years.”³

The curriculum was largely the same as it had always been, the “three R’s”, history, morals, penmanship, and so on. Penmanship was taught with a penny placed on the wrist while writing. Former students tell how no one wrote with their left hand. If they did, they would surely be slapped with a ruler.⁴ In terms of punishment, if a student was caught doing something wrong they had to write out 500 times, “I must not . . .”⁵

¹ Ketting, Jaap. Bedford Hills, a Brief History of Bedford Hills, Book 1. Bedford Hills: M. Furman Printing, 1998. pg. 171

² “Relics of the Old Days in Bedford.” The North Westchester Times 12 Sept. 1913, sec. Vol. 25 No. 14. Records of Bedford Historical Vault: Folder #13

³ Powell, Eileen. Personal Interview. 29 May. 2002. Bedford Historical Society Records “Oral Histories”

⁴ Henker, Erwin and Helen. Personal interview. 1 Apr. 2004.)

⁵ Progreske, Joe. Personal Interview. 29 May. 2002. Bedford Historical Society Records “Oral Histories”

Recess itself was a significant part of the school day. Much like today, this is when all socialization took place. William Banks told the Bedford Historical Society about the game “Caddy Over” that he and the other students would play at Bedford Village School. He said it was usually only played by the older four grades who had been separated into two groups: boys and girls. The boys would be on one side of the schoolhouse and the girls on the other. He remembers the rules as this: “Throw the ball over the roof of the school. And if somebody caught the ball on the other side, then that team ran around and tagged as many people as they could before the other team came around to the reverse side . . . the one with the most people left won the session . . . I’ve never seen it played anywhere else.”¹

1925 to 1954 “were years of development, marked by progress in the formation of a more varied curriculum and greater extra-curricular offerings. Excellent commercial, industrial arts, fine arts, and music courses enriched the traditional college preparatory programs.” Like schools all across the country, High Schools were opening with much to offer their students.² New curriculums and extracurricular activities changed the face of education.

When it was time to attend Bedford Hills High School after 8th grade, students from all 11 of Bedford’s school districts attended together. Interestingly, the Bedford Village School was seen as a lesser school. When the students got to High School, teachers thought they had to be “re-taught.” Bill Banks remembers, “there was always a feeling going off to High School, what is this going to be like? These big classes. Here I come from a class with 6 or 7 people in it. And that was a big class for Bedford Village.

¹ Banks, William. Personal interview. 29 Mar. 2002. Bedford Historical Society Records “Oral Histories”

² Mount Kisco, NY Centennial 1875-1975. Mount Kisco: DeSalvo-Wayne Inc., 1975. pg. 69

And we got in a school with 32 to 35 kids in a class. But I found out after about a half of a year that we knew just about as much as they did. So it was alright.”¹

Millie Mullaney recalls High School during WWII. She remembers that if a boy wanted to enlist and was a junior, the High School would offer him his diploma early so he could join the war effort. When Millie graduated there were only 4 boys in her class because the rest of them had all gone off to war. During the last week of school, the four remaining students joined the Navy.²

After WWII, enrollment skyrocketed in a large part thanks to the baby boom. In 1938 there were 363 children enrolled in the public schools of Bedford. By 1951 that number jumped to 618 and continued to climb. By 1940 there was a movement supported by the State Department of Education for schools themselves to consolidate “in order to enlarge their educational facilities and opportunities.”³ Consolidation seemed to be a logical solution to educating that many children.⁴ In 1954 Bedford Public Schools were consolidated and centralized. Fox Lane High School was opened in 1957 and later the middle school was included.⁵

Today the Bedford School Central District has 5 elementary schools: Bedford Hills, Bedford Village, Mount Kisco, Pound Ridge, and West Patent. Fox Lane High School is still used as well as the Fox Lane Middle School. From the 17th century to the 21st century, Bedford’s schooling and education has come a long way.

¹ Banks, William. Personal interview. 29 Mar. 2002. Bedford Historical Society Records “Oral Histories”

² Mullaney, Mildred. Personal Interview. 29 May 2002. Bedford Historical Society Records “Oral Histories”

³ This is Bedford. League of Women Voters, 1976.

⁴ Duncombe, Frances R. Katonah, the History of a New York Village and Its People. Katonah Village Improvement Society, 1961. pg. 356

⁵ Mount Kisco, NY Centennial 1875-1975. Mount Kisco: DeSalvo-Wayne Inc., 1975. pg. 69

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