

Rethinking of Old Orleans

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SCHOOL REPORT - 1845

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First, my sincere thanks to Don McHale of Cobblestone Antiques who recently donated to the Cobblestone Society Resource Center, a copy of the Annual Report of Common Schools made to the N.Y.S. Legislature in January 1845. Without this 483 page volume which includes a report for each county in New York State, this article would not have been possible.

Samuel Young, the Superintendent of Common Schools of the State of New York states the following in his report: "The entire territory of the State, comprising, exclusively of the waters of the great lakes, an area of 45,658 square miles, has been subdivided into 10,990 school districts, averaging somewhat more than four square miles each, --- seldom, especially in rural districts, varying essentially from this average, --- and bringing the remotest inhabitants of the respective districts within a little more than one mile of the school house."

The statement surely debunks the old tales we've all heard of how many miles former generations walked to school. To prove it out for Orleans County I've checked the old maps which indicate that our local schoolhouses were placed in a district so students who lived the farthest did not have to walk much over a mile. The Superintendent of the Orleans County Schools for the year 1844 was Jonathan O. Willsea. In his report to Samuel Young he notes: "There are in Orleans County nine towns. The annual reports have been received from the several town superintendents. There are one hundred and thirty-two

judgement dictates they ought to do. The exposure of the sexes, the indecency, this engendered is so manifest, and may be so easily prevented, that no district is excusable for the neglect of so plain a duty."

Mr. Willsea also critiques teachers, what they are teaching and gives a report on the various subjects taught. Here is a comment from that section: "The method of teaching English grammar in some schools is good, while in others it is a mere waste of time. The nature and power of letters, the rules of spelling, the proper use of capital letters, and the correcting of false syntax, is wholly neglected, the writing of sentences on the blackboard is a very good practice for the purpose of making the above named corrections."

And finally he states: "Moral culture in some of our schools receives some attention. In most schools, however, morals receive little or no attention. In this respect many of our teachers are deficient. They do not exert that healthful influence over the minds of those committed to their care that they otherwise would, had they the desire and ability to impart sound, moral instruction."

J.O. Willsea was an educator who was assistant principal of the Albion Academy in 1846 and associate principal there in 1847. In 1850 he became associated with Calvin Beach and was Editor of the Orleans Republican. His name also appears as a pastor who at different times served the East Shelby and Eagle Harbor Methodist Churches.

one hundred and ten names enrolled on teachers' list; the scholars all seemed interested in their studies, teacher well qualified, the school well governed --- all of which convinced me that the inhabitants of Gaines are reaping a rich reward for having erected their new school house.

"At Shelby Center, they have recently completed a new house 30 by 50. This building is erected in modern style, and is one of the evidences of the increased interest manifested on the part of the people of this county in the cause of common school education.

"It will also appear by examining the above table, that the majority of the houses are not furnished with the necessary appendages convenient for school purposes. There is no good reason why every district school house should not be furnished at least with one privy. It is not because the people are not convinced of the necessity of these but because they neglect to do what their better