



## School Recollections

Excerpts from *The District School As It Was*, by Warren Burton (1833)

The Old School-house in District No. 5, stood on the top of a very high hill, on the north side of what was called the County road ... Here was the centre of the district, as near as the surveyor's chain could designate. The people east would not permit the building to be carried one rod further west, and those of the opposite quarter were as obstinate on their side. So here it was placed; and this continued to be literally the "hill of science" to generation after generation of learners for fifty years ...

We will now go inside. First, there is an entry which the district were sometimes provident enough to store with dry pine-wood, as an antagonist to the greenness and wetness of the other fuel. A door on the left admits us to the school-room. Here is a space about twenty feet long and ten wide, the reading and spelling parade. At the south end of it, at the left as you enter, was one seat and writing bench, making a right angle with the rest of the seats. This was occupied in the winter by two of the oldest males in the school. At the opposite end was the magisterial desk, raised upon a platform a foot from the floor. The fire-place was on the right, half way between the door of entrance and another leading into a dark closet, where the girls put their outside garments and their dinner baskets. This also served as a fearful dungeon for the immuring of offenders. Directly opposite the fire-place was an aisle, two feet and a half wide, running up an inclined floor to the opposite side of the room. On each side of this were five or six long seats and writing benches, for the accommodation of the school at their studies. In front of these, next to the spelling floor, were low narrow seats for abecedarians and others near that rank. In general, the older the scholar, the further from the front his location. The windows behind the back seat were so low that the traveller could generally catch the stealthy glance of curiosity as he passed. Such was the Old School-house at the time I first entered it..

The severest duty I was ever called to perform was sitting on that little front seat, at my first winter school. My lesson in the Abs<sup>1</sup> conveyed no ideas, excited no interest, and, of course, occupied but very little of my time. There was nothing before me on which to lean my head, or lay my arms, but my own knees. I could not lie down to drowse, as in summer, for want of room on the crowded seat. How my limbs ached for the freedom and activity of play!

This summer [the third summer], a person named Mehitabel Holt was our teacher ... She kept order; for her punishments were horrible, especially to us little ones. She dungeoned us in that windowless closet just for a whisper. She tied us to her chair-post for an hour .. If we were restless on our seats, wearied of our posture, fretted by the heat, or sick of the unintelligible lesson, a twist of the ear, or a snap on the bead from her thimbled finger, reminded us that sitting perfectly still was the most important virtue of a little boy in school. Our forenoon and afternoon recess was allowed to be five

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<sup>1</sup> Arithmetic

minutes only; and, even during that time, our voices must not rise above the tone of quiet conversation...

The principal allurements and prime happiness of going to school, as it used to be conducted, was the opportunity it afforded for social amusement. Our rural abodes were scattered generally a half or a quarter of a mile apart, and the young could not see each other every day as conveniently as they can in a city or a village. The schooling season was therefore looked forward to as one long series of holidays...

Excerpted by OSV Museum Education from *The District School As It Was*, by Warren Burton (1833)