

# Characteristics of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Schools

Nineteenth century schools and teaching methods were very different than they are today.

A one room school building was the norm, usually a simple wood structure. Rural areas did not have enough students to support multi-room school buildings. The schoolhouses did not have central heat. Instead they utilized fireplaces or later a wood burning stove. The earliest buildings were eventually replaced with larger brick buildings as the number of students increased.

All ages were taught in one room with the youngest in front and the oldest in the back. The young students were called “Abecedarians” because they would learn their ABCs. Older students often helped teach the younger students. To keep order with a large group of students of different ages in one room, discipline was very strict. Students brought their lunch from home in a metal pail. Paper was expensive, so students wrote on slabs of slate. Textbooks were scarce. Most students brought books from home. As a result, a class did not have matching copies of books. The school year was 132 days (compared to 180 now) but most students only attended about 78 days. The attendance rate was about 59% due to illnesses more prevalent because of less advanced medicine. Also, children stayed home to help with farm chores, especially during harvests. Many students ended their education with the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

During the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most teachers were men because it was thought that women should be at home. However, the western migration in the mid and late 1800s caused a shortage of teachers and women filled the void. By the late 1800s, most teachers were unmarried women. The women teachers were only paid 40-60% of what men were paid. Most women were required to leave the profession when they married. Teachers often boarded with their students’ families, sometimes moving between families as often as once every week.