



# South Carolina's Story

## The making of a state

By Ron Chepesiuk and Louise Pettus  
of the Winthrop College faculty



Y. Chepesiuk - Illustration

26 MAY 1953

The first school in South Carolina was established in Charleston in 1710 by the Church of England. It was called a free school, not because all pupils attended free of charge, but because the schoolmaster was forbidden to turn away children whose parents could not pay.

Two years later, in 1712, the Assembly passed a law requiring that every teacher in the colony be able to teach Latin and Greek.

Before the Revolutionary War, many of the schools were established by religious denominations and classes were often held inside the meeting house or on the church grounds. Of all denominations, the Presbyterian Church was most likely to set up a school along with the church. Many of these, primitive in the beginning, evolved into excellent academies. The Baptists and Episcopalians also established a number of schools.

One of the most successful non-church related schools was established by the Winyah Indigo Society at Georgetown. In 1756, when great fortunes were being made on indigo, Georgetown planters met on the first Friday of each month to socialize, exchange news and compare notes on indigo production.

Dues to the society were paid in cakes of in-

digo. Using their surplus funds, the society set up a school for all the children, rich and poor. The school was well-managed and soon had earned the reputation of being the best between Charleston and the North Carolina line. The Winyah Indigo Society school lasted until the end of the Civil War when the postwar economic conditions forced it to end its 130-year existence as a private school. Fortunately, in 1886, the state assumed the property and reopened the Winyah school as a public institution.

Across the state a number of orphan societies operated schools whose funds came from public contributions. A few schools were funded by a combination of tuition money, public funds and private donations.

While the academies and boarding schools prepared a select few for the colleges or for study abroad, most South Carolinians attended school only three or four months of the year and then only to study the three "r's."

Early school buildings were usually crude log huts with dirt floors situated on abandoned fields, and therefore, called "old field schools." Often there was only one window, frequently without window panes, with a plank shutter. The chimney might be constructed of logs sealed

with clay. Buckets of water surrounded the fireplace in case the chimney caught fire, a not unusual event.

The teachers of the old field schools and the meeting house schools were usually male. Most often they were ministers and surveyors but the teaching ranks occasionally included young unmarried men who had learned a little Latin and Greek and while still "footloose" would spend a few months in one community before moving on to another.

The school day usually lasted from 8:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the afternoon with a two-hour break for lunch known as "long recess". There were shorter recesses in the morning and afternoon. Recess was not all play because the students had to gather firewood and fill the water buckets.

In the poorer schools the Bible might be the only text. In contrast, wealthy plantation owners and the more well-to-do schools often sent to Germany and France for teachers of languages and music.

In the two decades before the Civil War a number of girls' academies, or finishing schools, began to spring up. Many times the girls' school was located near the boys' academy so that brothers and sisters might be boarded together. Sometimes the faculties of the two

schools were shared.

The state passed the Act of 1811 to provide \$300 of state tax monies for each school with children of the poor to have preference. Many parents failed to take advantage of this either because of their own ignorance or inability to clothe their children and buy textbooks.

There was no compulsory school attendance law passed in South Carolina until after the Civil War. South Carolina's high illiteracy rate can partially be traced to the failure to provide free and compulsory education for all children.