

Early public schools varied

Most were started for a few families; state paid only for teacher's salary

In 1811 the state of South Carolina first set up free schools for children of the poor.

State financial support was limited to paying the teacher's salary. Supervision fell under the county commissioners.

Lancaster District records show that in the first year, 11 free schools were established.

In 10 of the schools, the teacher received \$50. In the Waxhaws community John Williamson received \$100, but he taught from January to October while the others taught fewer months.

By 1817 Lancaster Free Schools had increased to 19, including two that were in session for 12 months. There was a great variation in salaries. There is nothing to indicate that the legislature showed any interest in the teachers' qualifications.

Many of the pre-Civil War schools lasted only a short time. Often they were established by parents who wanted to ensure the education of their own but welcomed the support of other families.

Josiah Coltharp of upper Fort Mill township in his old age recollected his second year of schooling in a log cabin school in the Gold Hill section. The school was organized in 1845 by Stephen Pettus (a distant relation). Meredith Shurley was hired as the teacher.

The school (we don't know its name) was to run for 12 months. It opened on Jan. 23 and "was run seven days per week without any interruption until the 18th day of December following."

Shurley boarded at the Coltharp house. H.H. Coltharp, Josiah's older brother, aged 23, also attended the school. The brother had previously been to school only a few months and could barely write his name.

Under Shurley's tutelage, H.H. and the younger students worked through Pike's Arithmetic, Smy-

COMMENTARY

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lie's Arithmetic and part of Gough's Arithmetic. They also worked in the blueback speller, the Old and New Testament and Webster's dictionary.

Josiah remembered that he and his brother accompanied Shurley to school. They left for school at 5 a.m., carrying a pine torch for light. They got home near dark.

Josiah remembered the names of seven "older men," including George Patrick Henry Pettus, 17, son of the school founder. Pettus'

daughter Ann, 15, and niece Susan Burton also attended.

About Susan Burton, Josiah wrote that she lived in North Carolina at least three miles from the school, "and while her mother owned slaves and a fine farm, her daughter never rode to school."

Stephen Pettus was killed March 5, 1846, by two of his slaves, but the school continued.

Josiah wrote that in those days, it was customary for the teacher to treat both his patrons (paying parents) and his pupils on the closing day of school.

A few days before the Dec. 18 closing, the "young men of the school got around Shurley and asked him for a treat on the 18th but he refused, wouldn't listen to them, and they told him he had to treat or they would take him to the creek at once and duck him, and keep on ducking him until he promised them a treat. So he finally agreed to treat."

Recalling the day 64 years later, Josiah continued: "On the morning of the 18th my father went off early to Joab Orr's store, which was in the Mount Moriah neighborhood near where the town of Pineville now is, and came back carrying a jug and a peck of something in a sack. It was opened.

"Shurley had us all seated and went around and gave each of his pupils a handful of sugar; it was of the dark kind. He then put a handful in the water bucket, half full of water, and stirred it up with a gourd (we had no dippers then).

"Then he poured in a small quantity of the contents of the jug (corn whiskey), stirred it up with the gourd, tasted it, and then poured in some more from the jug, tasted it again, and then passed around with his bucket and gourd and gave each one a sup.

"I don't remember getting any more of the toddy, but we got all the sugar we wanted. I reckon that was the fullest mess of sugar we had ever had."

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