

Back to School in Boylston

“A Look at Mid-Nineteenth Century Spelling Books”

By Inga Milbauer



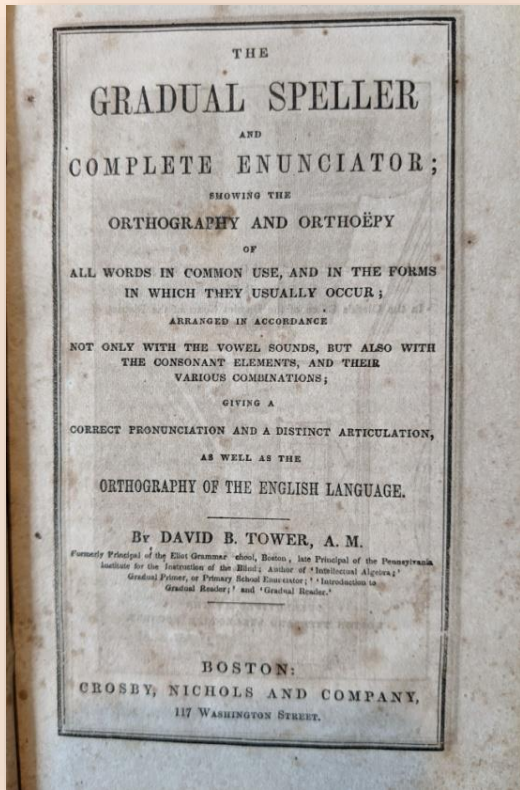
Illustration from *Tower's Gradual Speller* (1845 edition)

In the nineteenth century, unlike today, the school year was divided into three terms: spring, fall and winter. Each term was between ten and twelve weeks long, during the months of May - June, September - November, and December - February. The Selectmen of Boylston appointed a School Committee in 1803 to oversee the schools and report on each school. The earliest School Committee Reports in the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum date from 1839. A formal District System was voted on and passed by the Townspeople on April 1, 1850.¹ District I was The Centre School, District II was The North Centre School (located in Sawyer's Mills village), District III was The North East School (also known as Six Nations School), District IV was The South East school, District V was The South School, and District VI was the West School (located on the west side of the Nashua River). By 1894, the School Reports mention the schools only by their names, and just four schools were left: the Centre School, the Sawyer's Mills School, the North East School, and the South School. For more information about the School Committee Reports and Sawyer's Mills School in particular, see the Friday's Fascinating Finds article "Sawyer's Mills School" by Judy Haynes.

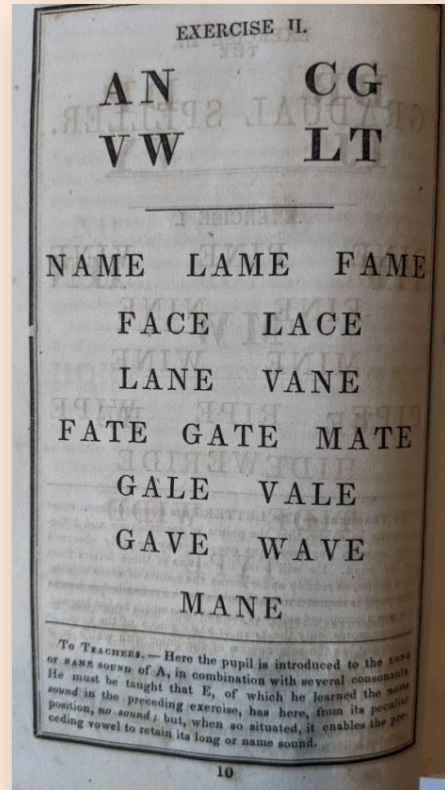


Cover
Tower's Gradual Speller
by David B. Tower
1845 Edition
BHSM Library Collection

This was the era of one room school houses where, typically, a single teacher would teach pupils between the ages of 6 to 15 years. Reading, Spelling, Grammar, Arithmetic, and Geography were subjects taught. The School Committee was aware of the legislation and recommendations, and would reference these in their reports. For instance, the 1885 report mentions that "The School Committee has complied with the provisions of Chapter 103, Acts of 1884, in furnishing free textbooks and supplies to the several schools."² In 1884, \$67.03 was paid to Wm. Ware and Co. for Franklin Readers and Worcester's Spellers. Joseph Emerson Worcester (August 24, 1784 - October 27, 1865) was an American lexicographer. In the mid-nineteenth century he was a rival to Noah Webster and his dictionary.³ Noah Webster's spelling book, known as "The American Spelling Book" first published in 1783 was called "the blue backed speller" due to its blue cover. It was one of the most popular spellings books.⁴ In the School Committee's Annual Report ending



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March 1, 1886 it is mentioned that “Nearly all the scholars have availed themselves of the opportunity to use the town’s books, and excellent care has been taken of them in many instances, far better than when the pupil was using his own property.”⁵

Four spelling books from the nineteenth century are part of The Boylston Historical Society & Museum’s vintage school books collection. The oldest one is *Tower’s Gradual Speller* by David B. Tower (1845 edition). Two books are printed in the 1870s: *Grammar School Spelling Book* by B.F. Tweed (1873 edition) and *An Introductory Spelling Book* by J.H. Gilbert (1878 edition); the fourth book in the collection, *A Graded Spelling-Book* by H.F. Harrington, dates from 1882.

Tower’s Gradual Speller, published by Crosby, Nichols and Co., Boston, contains 160 pages. It was donated by Clara E. Ball Thompson. The book is believed to have belonged to her father George W. Ball as his name is written in pencil on the inside cover. Clara Elizabeth Ball (May 10, 1897 – December 11, 1986) married Stanley Theodore Thompson on June 24, 1931. The marriage record shows that she was a teacher at the time. Her parents were George William Ball and May Dora Reed Ball.

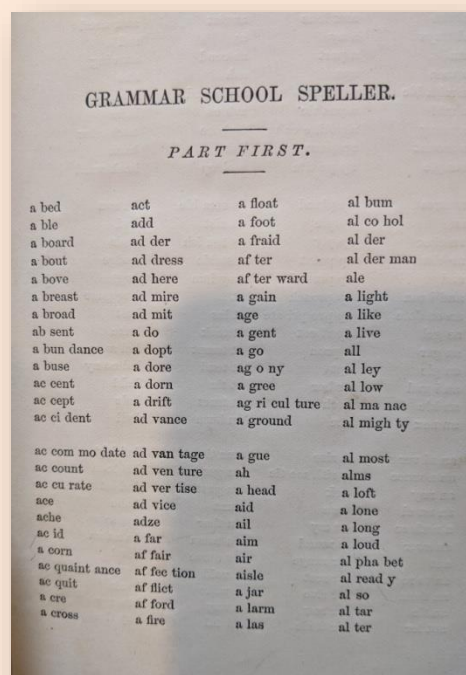
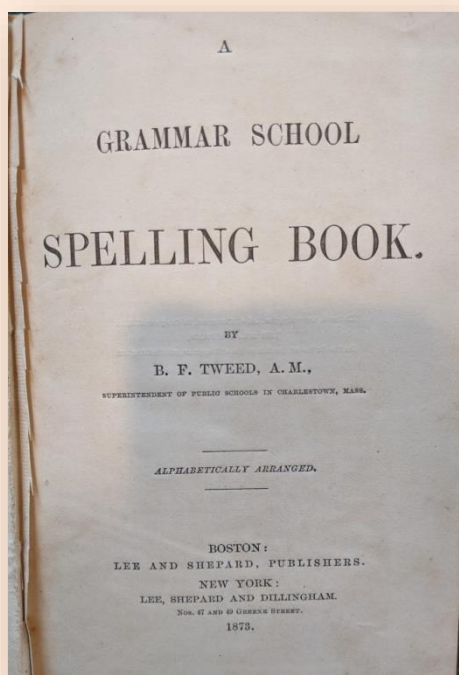
George William Ball, born on August 23, 1846 in Boylston, was the son of Dunsmore Ball (December 21, 1809 - 29 March 1871) and Elmina Shepard Ball (February 19, 1811 - November 20, 1881) Dunsmore Ball was a farmer; according to George L. Wright “the house and barn stood opposite of where the present Warren Street leads from the East woods toward Rocky Pond.”⁶ If George Ball used this spelling book and attended school, we can assume that he would have attended the second East School (District IV). The first East School house was located on Stiles Road, until a second, brick school house was built in 1851, located on Central Street, in the Straw Hollow section of Boylston. For more information about the East School District see the *Then and Now* by Nancy Filgate:

<https://www.boylstonhistory.org/images/2023%20Feb%20FFF/Then%20and%20Now%2002232023%20The%20First%20East%20School%20House2.pdf>

The 1860 U.S. Federal Census shows that George at age 13 did not attend school “within the year” (meaning between June 1, 1859 and May 31, 1860).

George William Ball married Dora Frances Reed on June 18, 1879 in Sterling, MA. Dora Frances, was born May Dora Reed in 1857 in Sterling to Jonathan Reed (1821-1881) and Mary Elizabeth Belcher (1823-1894). May Dora was George's second wife, and the marriage record shows that his occupation was a farmer.⁷ At the time of the birth of their daughter Clara, George's occupation was a wheelwright. George Ball died a widower on August 25, 1925 in Sterling as his wife May Dora had died on October 25, 1924. She is buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery, Sterling, MA, as are her daughter Clara and son-in-law Stanley Thompson.⁸

The second oldest spelling book *A Grammar School Spelling Book* by B.F. Tweed, published by Lee and Shepard, Boston dates from 1873. It was donated by Norman French, and the inscription on the inside cover reads "From grandma French, April 11, 1942". Grandma French would be

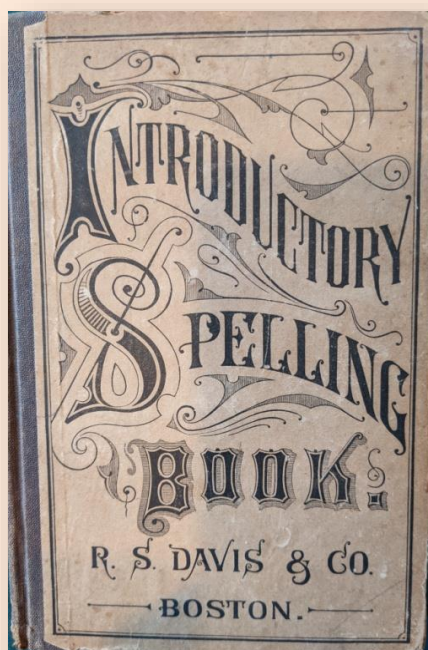


TITLE PAGE
Grammar Spelling Book
 By B.F. Tweed, A.M.
 1873 Edition
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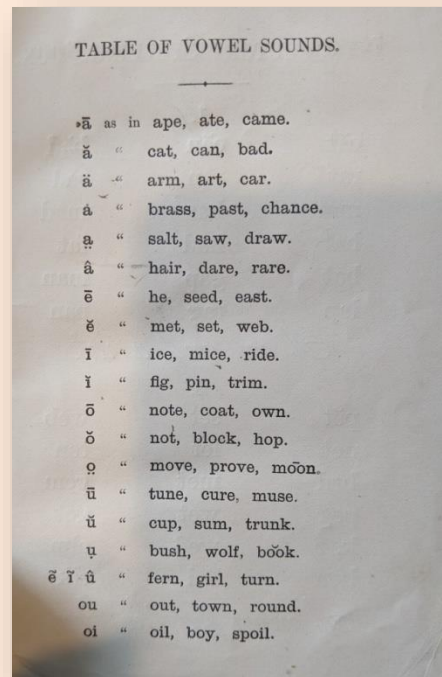
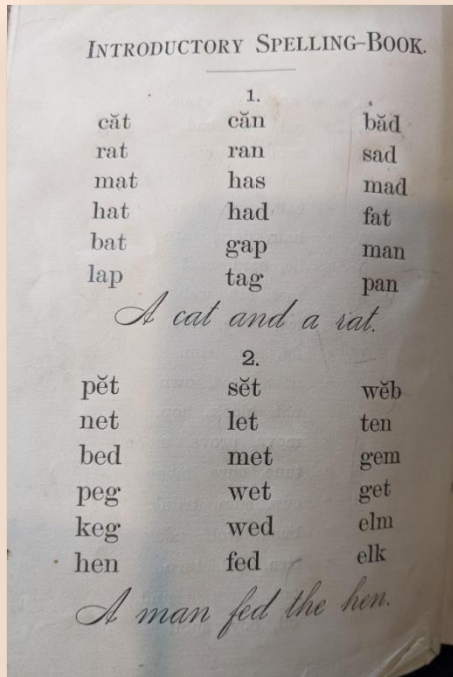
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Mary Elizabeth Andrews French (July 22, 1863 Boylston, MA – March 24, 1949 Holden, MA). She was the daughter of John T. Andrews and Henrietta M. Brigham, both from Boylston. She married Herbert H. French, born in Templeton, on November 25, 1891 in Boylston.⁹ This spelling book is a collection of words alphabetically arranged, it contains 74 pages.

The third spelling book in our collection has no inscription. *An Introductory Spelling-Book* by J.H. Gilbert, published by R.S. Davis & Co., Boston in 1878, contains 112 pages. The author mentions in the preface that this book was issued for the lower grades of grammar school. "Instead of the usual classification of familiar names, the compiler has placed in the first column of each page, nouns; in the second, verbs; in the third, adjectives, adverbs and miscellaneous words."¹⁰ In addition to the spelling words sample sentences are printed in cursive; and the book includes a list of abbreviations, and the names of the States and Territories.



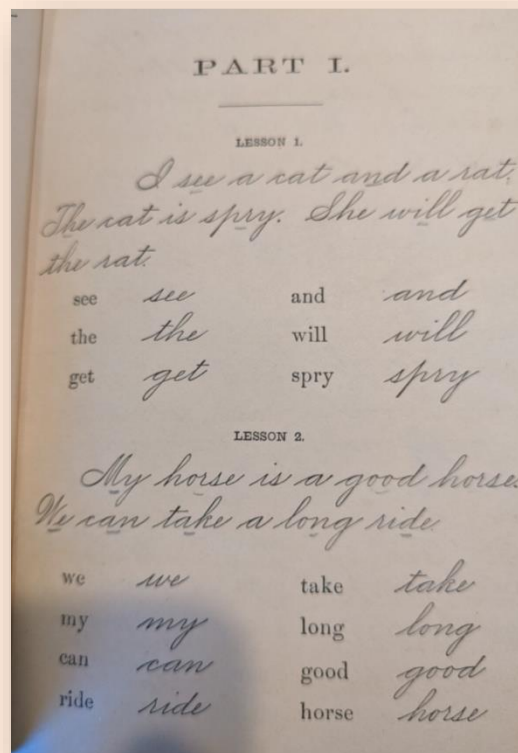
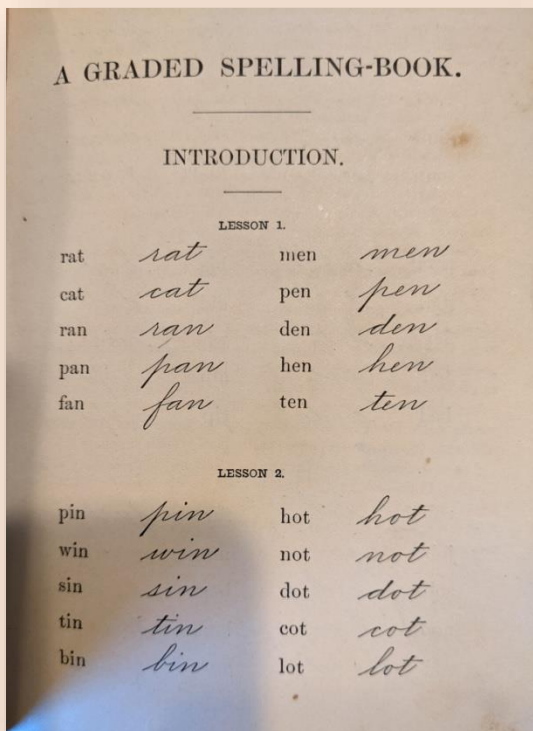
COVER
Introductory Spelling Book
 By J.H. Gilbert
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The final spelling book is *A Graded Spelling-Book, Being a Complete Course in Spelling for Primary and Grammar Schools* by H.F. Harrington, published by Harper & Brothers, New York in 1882. It was donated by Fred Brown to the Boylston Historical Society and Museum. On the inside cover is written no.7 and the name Cora B. Robbins. We do not know yet who Cora B. Robbins was, if she lived in Boylston, and if this book was used in any of the Boylston schools.



SAMPLE PAGE
A Graded Spelling-Book
 By H.F. Harrington
 1882 Edition
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The book contains 92 pages, and includes cursive texts. The author writes in the preface that “The old-style spelling-books have fallen into merited disrepute. It is felt to be irrational and wasteful of time to drill children on words of whose meaning they have no idea, and a large number of which they will never have occasion to use.”¹¹

Mr. Harrington, who was the Superintendent of Public Schools in New Bedford, Massachusetts, ends his preface as follows.

“It is believed that the exercises will be found interesting and constructive, as well as varied and progressive, and that they cannot fail, if faithfully practised, to give the pupil an unusual and correct *command of language*, both in speaking and writing, and put him in possession of a vocabulary that will enable him to read intelligently the newspaper, the magazine, and the best of other current literature.”¹²

Acknowledgements:

¹ https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Sawyers_Mills_School/c136

² Report of the School Committee of the Town of Boylston, February 20, 1885

³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Emerson-Worcester>

⁴ <https://connecticuthistory.org/noah-webster-and-the-dream-of-a-common-language>

⁵ Report of the School Committee of the town of Boylston for the Year Ending March 1, 1886

⁶ *Boylston Historical Series* by Bruce Filgate, 2012, p.204

⁷ Marriage Records

⁸ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/140552018/dora-frances-ball>

⁹ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/67122231/mary-elizabeth-french>

¹⁰ *An Introductory Spelling-Book* by J.H. Gilbert, 1878, preface

¹¹ *A Graded Spelling-Book* by H.F. Harrington, 1882, preface

¹² *Ibid*

Boylston Historical Series by Bruce Filgate, 2012, Vol. VI, Boylston Historical Society, Boylston, MA

Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, MA

<https://americanhistory.si.edu>

<https://ancestry.com>

<https://www.findagrave.com>