

# School Bell

By Inga Milbauer

This antique school bell from the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum was used at the Boylston Centre School which was in operation from the 1850's until 1904. The bell's manufacturer and date of origin has not been determined as there are no markings on it. However, hand bells were widely used during the late 1800s and early 1900s and this corresponds with the period the Boylston Centre School was in operation. During this time, teachers would acquire bells for their own use to alert students when school would begin and end. "Hand bells, desk or call bells, and larger bells found in belfries rung by the pull of a rope could all be ordered from teachers' catalogs".[1] The school bell added structure to the school day, marking the important times of starting, ending and those times when it was necessary during the day to get the students' attention.



**TEACHER SCHOOL BELL**  
*Boylston Centre School*  
*BHSM Collection*

Numerous catalogs offered bells of various shapes and materials. Specialized school furniture companies existed, but Montgomery Ward & Co. and Sears, Roebuck & Co. offered a variety of bells as well. As mentioned in a Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog from 1897:

"Last year [1896], in addition to the thousands of Farm Bells shipped to every State and Territory in the Union, we shipped large bells for public buildings such as schoolhouses, churches, court houses, town halls, fire stations, etc., from Maine to California, and from Minnesota to Florida."[2]

In the catalog, school bells or factory bells are listed by number (which indicated the diameter of the bell in inches), weight of the "bell only", weight of the "bell complete", and price. The weight of the complete bells included the wood sills and iron wheel. The description states that

"These bells are cast from an alloy of cast steel and crystal metal, and can be relied on under all circumstances and in all seasons."[3]



**TEACHER SCHOOL BELL**  
*Consolidated School*  
*Boylston, Massachusetts*  
*BHSM Collection*

Hand bells were listed by weight, diameter and price. This bell in the Boylston Museum is 12 inches tall, including the wooden handle, the bell itself measures 6 inches and 6 3/4 wide at the base. The second school bell in the museum's collection is also from the Centre School. It measures approximately 6 3/4 inches high, including the wooden handle, the bell itself measures 3 inches and 3 3/4 inches wide at the base. The earliest bells are believed to have been made of pottery in China and date from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. These were replaced by metal bells in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

The original Centre School building was built in 1850 and was located on Main Street, on the site where the Boylston Public Library now stands. At that time, Boylston had six School Districts: District I was The Centre School, District II was The North Centre School, 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. For more information about the District II school which was located in Sawyer's Mills village, see [www.boylstonhistory.org](http://www.boylstonhistory.org) *History section* for an interesting "Sawyer's Mills School" article by Judy Haynes.



**BOYLSTON CENTRE SCHOOL**  
1850-1904  
*BHSM Photograph Collection*

The Boylston School Committee had been established by the Boylston's Selectmen in 1803 to oversee all schools. It published a report annually with details about each school. The public reports included a detailed evaluation of the teacher's competency in teaching and managing the

students as well as their behavior, success in academic progress and their truancy rate. Much responsibility was placed on the teacher for overseeing the student's moral, behavioral, and academic education. After the individual evaluation of each teacher and school, the School Committee report of 1881 states:

“Excellent teachers have been employed. Not only abreast for the times in literary qualifications and adoption of approved methods, but their moral influence has been good. They were safe companions for your children, in or out of school.”[4]

The earliest School Committee Reports in the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum date from 1839 and are handwritten, since 1853 they are printed. From 1853 until 1893 schools were listed under the district numbers, in 1894 schools were listed by name. By that time, there were four schools: the Centre School, Sawyer's Mills School, North East School, and the South School. The Centre School had the largest enrollment for many years, until the Sawyer's Mills School took that place. The schools initially had two terms, summer and winter, since older boys were needed in the fields during the planting and harvesting seasons. In 1867, the pupil count at the Centre School for the summer term was 44, and the winter term 40. The pupil count at Sawyer's Mills Schools for that year was 43 and 27. According to the 1898 School Committee's report the pupil count at the Centre School for the spring, fall and winter term was 23, 18, 20 respectively, with the majority of students aged 8-14 years. The enrollment at Sawyer's Mills School for the spring, fall and winter term was 51, 48 and 51 respectively.

Did the teacher and his school bell help maintain order and structure at school? The School Committee report of 1898 states the importance of each teacher:

“Authority is and must be vested in the teacher; as soon as school children leave their homes in the mornings, until they return to the same at night, they are under the care and government of the teacher, and it is their highest and bounden duty to obey his commands and the bounden duty of the parents to see that their own school children render such obedience...[5]

The era of one-room school houses in Boylston came to an end when the two-story Consolidated School was built in 1904. It was located on School Street at site of the current basketball courts in the town's center, and served the town until 1957.



**END OF AN ERA OF THE ONE ROOM SCHOOL HOUSE**  
**CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL**  
Boylston, Massachusetts  
*BHSM Photograph Collections*

*Acknowledgements:*

1. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/-school-bells>
2. <https://www.prindlestation.com/category-s/150.htm>
3. <https://www.prindlestation.com/category-s/150.htm>
4. Annual Report of the Town Officers of the Town of Boylston for the Year ending March 1, 1881
5. Annual Report of the Town Officers of the Town of Boylston for the Year ending March 1, 1898

Boylston Historical Society & Museum Photograph Collection

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[https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Sawyer\\_s\\_Mills\\_School/c136](https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Sawyer_s_Mills_School/c136)

<https://www.motal.org/handheld-school-bell.html>

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