

Don't Write on that Desk!

Boylston School Desks of the 19th and 20th Centuries

By Carrie Crane

Once upon a time in colonial America, going back to school meant starting another summer (likely, if you were a girl) or winter (likely, if you were a boy) sitting on a wooden bench, slate tablet in hand, in a small one room building with a few small windows and a wood stove. Often the teacher was a young woman, sometimes only a few years older than her students.

Both boys and girls were needed at home in the agrarian world of Early America so the days spent in school were long, sometimes up to 8 hours, but the child might only attend for 9 to 13 weeks a year. The boys would learn writing and arithmetic and the girls reading and needlework. While education was not mandatory during this time, it was considered a social obligation and was paid for by the parents of the children or if orphaned, through indenture.

Later, with America's independence, there was a growing sense of nationalism, along with the need for an educated workforce for the increasingly industrial country. Education outside the home became a greater priority. In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to enact compulsory education legislation.

“The act required that children ages 8 through 14 attend school for a minimum of three months out of the year, and of those three months, six weeks were required to be consecutive. Violation of this act was punishable by fine.”¹

In towns like Boylston, the idea of the district school system became popular in the mid 1800s. Judy Haynes writes in her FFF article [Sawyers Mill School](#)

“The school reports referred to the schools as “district” schools with a small “d,” but the more formal District System was voted on and passed by the Townspeople of Boylston on 1 April 1850. District I was The Center (also spelled Centre) School, District II was The North Centre School (located in Sawyer's Mills village), District III was The North East School which was also known as Six Nations School, and was said to be the first school in Boylston. District IV was The South East School, District V was The South School, and District VI was The West School, situated to the west side of the Nashua River and the closest to the Sawyers Mills Village School”

¹ History of Public Education in the U.S, Diorio, Gina L.

Along with compulsory education came school books, paper to write on and pens to write with. The furnishings for the new school houses needed to adjust. The days of the hard wooden bench and the slate tablet were gradually becoming a thing of the past. The new desks needed storage for students' books. An inkwell and pen holder were almost always included in the design. The furniture needed to be sturdy and easy to walk around. During the late 19th and early 20th century, the frames for the desks were often made from cast iron, a new technology of the time, and they usually incorporated a folding seat.



SCHOOL DESK, C. 1890

Boylston Center School

A gift of the French Family

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc. Collections

If you visit the Boylston Historical Museum, you will see three such school desks, each incorporating some of this technology in their design. The earliest desk from the Boylston Center School which operated as a school from 1841- 1904, is one where the seat for the student is mounted on the front of the desk of the student behind. This arrangement allowed the teacher to set up the classroom in an organized and compact way. The supports and folding mechanism are wrought iron with a maple wood seat, seat back and desk. This seat has an interesting way of folding with the seat itself sliding up behind the seat back. The desktop has a hole for an inkwell and a groove for a pen. There is no area for storage of books or papers. The feet of the desk have holes to allow for it to be bolted to the floor. This chair and desk combination has the letters VSS cast into the frame but the maker has not been identified.

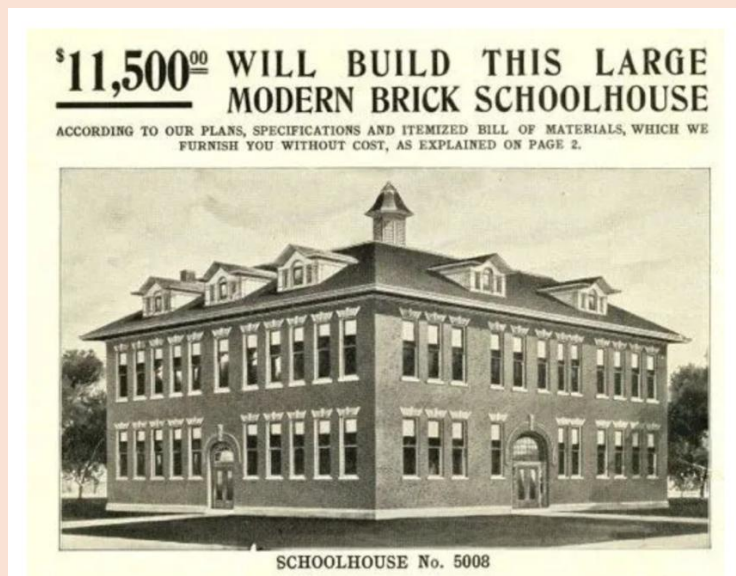


VINTAGE 20TH CENTURY SCHOOL DESK, C. 1920

Sears and Roebuck Co., Chicago

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc. Collections

A second desk of similar design was made by Sears and Roebuck Co. in the early part of the 1900s. This desk also made from cast iron and maple wood, has the words 20th Century, Sears Roebuck & Co Chicago cast into the iron scroll work. The desk top has an inkwell holder and slot for holding a pen. There is space under the desktop for books and papers. The seat folds up to allow the students to move in and out. Starting in 1909, Sears Roebuck Co issued a catalogue specifically for school house supplies and furnishings. In fact, if your municipality was so inclined, you could buy the design for an entire large two-story brick school house from Sears, built and furnished for just \$11,500! That would be around \$450,000 in today's dollars, still a deal.



Schoolhouse Catalogue Image

1908 Sears and Roebuck Co. Modern Homes

<https://thecraftsmanblog.com/the-history-of-sears-kit-homes/>



EARLY 1900S STUDENT DESK

Boylston Consolidated School

Gift of Mark and Janice Fuller

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc. Collections

The third seat-desk piece has the seat facing the desk. The chair swivels and the desk top lifts to show a large storage space for books, papers and writing implements. It also has an inkwell holder and groove for pens. This desk is a later model and is made from steel tubing and maple wood. The desk was likely made by the American Seating Company sometime between 1930 and 1950. The top of the desk is at a slant, but inside the desk are two posts that hold the desk top level with the floor if desired by the student. The switch to having the students seat attached to that student's desk might reflect a need for more flexibility in the class room. With this model, the teacher could choose to spread the desks out or to place the desks in a circle. It no longer has bolt holes to fix it to the floor like earlier designs. This desk was a gift from Mark and Janice Fuller and was believed to have been used in the Boylston Consolidated school. The Consolidated School opened its doors in 1904 and closed in 1954. For its history and class photographs see ([Then and Now](#)) . Again, from her article, [Sawyers Mills School](#), Judy Haynes writes this about how the new Consolidated School in Boylston came to be:

“For several years before 1903, It had become obvious that a new centralized school was desired to make the grades and education more efficient. The School Committee and School Superintendent began recommending a consolidated school in their reports until the

town agreed and finally voted and approved a building at the March 1903 town meeting. A lot of land was then purchased from James A. Bigelow opposite the old cemetery. The new school was opened December 21, 1904.”

Time went on and the Consolidated School was eventually replaced by the Boylston Elementary School in 1955. BES was then rebuilt and the current building opened in 1998.

The design of the school building as well as the school desks inside it have, over time, responded to the needs of the teachers, the students, and the development of technology. This continues today, in fact desks are harder to find in the elementary school. Most classrooms now use tables, often arranged in clusters, to allow for more communication and collaboration between students. Students keep their books, pens, and materials in their lockers or backpacks and need room on the table top for tablets or computers. Along with changing technology, educational philosophy is constantly evolving and therefore so is the classroom and its furnishings.

Acknowledgements:

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc. Then and Now 01272023 consolidated School.pdf

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc. https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Sawyers_Mills_School/c136

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Object Collections, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc, Boylston, Massachusetts

Sears School House image: <https://thecraftsmanblog.com/the-history-of-sears-kit-homes/>

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