

The District Schoolhouses of Middleton, Massachusetts

By LURA WOODSIDE WATKINS

MIDDLETON'S charter in 1728 required the newly formed town to build a meetinghouse and to procure a schoolmaster to teach reading and writing. The first school-teacher was Nathaniel Town, who retained the position until 1738, when Timothy Fuller succeeded him for a time. The records do not reveal whether the town provided a building this early. The money appropriated was to "support" a school: that is, to pay the teacher's stipend and the cost of firewood.¹

There is record of at least one schoolhouse, so called, before 1750. This occurs in a sale of fifty-eight acres with house and barn from Oliver Andrews to John Elliot on January 31, 1748/9, which stipulated that "the School House standing on the sd Farm is not sold by this Deed."² This was the old Nathaniel Carrell farm near Maple Street and the River Bridge that was settled in the early 1700's. Until 1728 the property was in Boxford. It is quite possible that the schoolhouse was a neighborhood affair for the children of a few families distant from the meetinghouse, and not under the control of the town.

Two other schoolhouses of later period

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mrs. Watkins is well known to readers of OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND through her studies of various facets of life in Middleton, Massachusetts, during the past two hundred and fifty years. These thoroughly documented Middleton Papers, while they deal with only one small corner of Essex County, Massachusetts, present a comprehensive view of the development of a typical New England farming community.

seem to have been of the same private character. One stood on the land of Samuel Wilkins at the time of his death in 1803. It is mentioned in the settlement of his estate as being on a twenty-five-acre tract west of his home on Liberty Street.³ A third building of undetermined date was on the farm now owned by Dr. Audrey Bill on Essex Street. After being used as a school, it was converted into a carriage house and then moved away to be made over as a dwelling house on Washington Street. In the 1880's it was occupied by A. E. Coleman.

The town records first mention a school building in 1758, and it, too, was privately owned. The fact that it was then called an *old* schoolhouse shows that it had been in use for some years—perhaps from the beginning. In 1758, Middleton, like some of the surrounding towns, was under the burden of supporting a French family brought here from Nova Scotia during the French and Indian wars. To do this cost the town twenty pounds a year—twice as much as they had been spending on their school. In consequence, a vote was taken in town meeting "to see if the town will fit up the old scoole house for the French family to dwel in." This measure did not go through, nor did the proposal to "Build a School hous in sum convenient place where it will serve the Town best."

¹ Quotations are from Middleton Town Meeting Records unless otherwise specified.

² Essex Deeds, XCV, 83.

³ Essex County Probate Records, No. 29925.

On June 15, 1762, the town voted "to repare the old schol hous which stands by our meeting house provided the proprietors of said hous give said hous to said town." In 1770 the town voted down the plan to have the "writing and Scifring Schools Stationed at the School hous by the meeting house," and also vetoed the proposal to have the building moved nearer the center of the town. In March of the following year they further disapproved of the idea of having two schoolhouses, one near Lieutenant Hobbses (East Street) and one near Lieutenant Samuel Berry's (School and Essex Streets), while moving the old schoolhouse down near Captain Archelaus Fuller's (South Main Street). This was the first move towards districting, which, however, was not accomplished until nearly forty years later.

According to the pattern of Middleton town meetings, the day of decision was always postponed. On January 10, 1775, they voted *not* to move the school. By this time, after suffering the misfortunes of war, they were not in a position to spend any money at all. In the year 1778, after voting three hundred dollars, which they were apparently unable to raise, Middleton got along without a school. Under date of June 29, 1779, the Inferior Court of Common Pleas to be held in Salem on July second, called on the town "to show cause why they refuse to keep a School as the law Directs." Ephraim Fuller was chosen "to go to court and prevent if possible the town's paying a fine for not keeping a school for the year 1778." This he was unable to do.

The town tried valiantly to make amends. On August 23 they appropriated five hundred pounds for the support of a school and a week later they

voted to raise the one hundred and thirty pounds of their fine. The business of schoolhouses was approached seriously. It was decided to "have school keep in four parts of the town," and a committee of five was appointed to provide plans and a schoolmaster. Actually nothing came of all this. In 1782, the teacher, one Captain David Jenkins, was given six dollars more in "hard money" than he had received in 1778, but extra schoolhouses were not forthcoming. Every effort towards new building was dismissed or voted down. In 1785 a committee was again chosen to divide the town for schools, and in 1790 a vote was passed to build four schools. This measure was revised to read "Build two new schools and move the old School house to some proper place." There must have been a great deal of argument and opposition in the town meetings, which resulted in nothing more than getting through a motion to repair the old schoolhouse. At last, on May 10, 1796, they voted "to Seall the School house near the Meeting house," the purchaser to move the building away. At this point the meeting changed its mind and voted "Not Seall the School today." As a final retrogressive measure Middleton decided in 1801 not to divide the town into districts.

Such a division was not finally approved until May 7, 1807, many years after it was originally proposed. In 1808 the town clerk made a list of the houses and taxpayers in each district and the bounds of each division.

The north district contained thirty-two houses and, roughly speaking, included those who lived on Forest and Essex Streets, and on Liberty Street north of Pout Pond Brook.

The south district, or thirty-five taxpayers, took in South Main, River, and

Boston Streets, Lake, Maple, and King Streets, and Liberty south of Pout Pond Brook.

The east district, was made up of thirty-nine residents of Maple Street east of the Ipswich River, and those who lived on East, Locust, and Peabody Streets.

These divisions, with another added later, were kept until it was necessary in the 1850's to grade the school system. In May, 1826, in accordance with an act of the General Court, the whole system was placed in the hands of one committee of five instead of the district committees.

Now at long last the town moved away the old school by the meetinghouse. A note in the account book of Colonel Benjamin Peabody shows that it belonged to John Fuller.⁴ Peabody billed him for labor January 2, 1810: "to myself & oxen & chaise one Brock [broke?] a halling his School house to Danvers one day—\$1.50.0." This became the first public school in Danvers Plains. It was set up in 1816 by Ezra Batchelder, Sr., a blacksmith, and others, who had "bought a small building in Middleton and moved it to the plains for school purposes."⁵

The North School

Since at one time the town had chosen to divide itself into north and south districts and later, in 1804, into east and west, there is some doubt as to the dates when the first outlying schoolhouses were built. The North School was probably the first one erected, at the time when the old one by the meetinghouse was still doing duty as the south. No records of

⁴ Copies of this account book are in the Essex Institute and the Middleton Historical Society.

⁵ Major Frank C. Damon, "Ezra Batchelder, Clockmaker," *The Historical Collections of the Danvers Historical Society*, XXII, 34.

this north building have been found. Casual mention of it appears in a town record of 1832 referring to "the road from Widow Betty Wilkins to the County road near the Brick school house." This road was the present School Street, and the school stood just north of its juncture with Essex Street. That it was built of brick at a period when there was no other brick building in town is not a little astonishing. Whether its bricks were made locally is a question. Near Betty Wilkins' land was a tract known as "the clay pits," but no mention of brick-making has been found in local records.

This building must be considered a superior structure of its kind, perhaps unique among district schools in Essex County. It was used evenings for other public purposes. Caroline Fletcher in her diaries⁶ speaks of attending prayer meetings and choir meetings at the brick schoolhouse.

The old building was torn down in 1872 and a new wooden house put up in its stead. The cost of \$2,330.66 was somewhat reduced by the sale of the old bricks for eighty-one dollars. Milton J. Emerson, who ran a sawmill near Forest Street, drew up the plans and specifications and provided some of the labor. William A. and Horace D. Phelps, carpenters, received about \$1,800 of the total amount expended. Others were paid for lumber, masonry work, and labor. New school furniture was purchased of W. O. Haskell & Son at a cost of \$235. In the town's incidental expenses for the following year were lumber and labor for a fence and a privy, probably for this same school, and settees, so specified. A clock and bell purchased at the same time

⁶ Caroline A. (Stiles) Fletcher, *Diaries*, 1851-1914, Middleton Historical Society.

were possibly fittings for this North School.

The late Mrs. Walter S. Flint (Etta V. Terrio) of Beverly attended the North School when it was first built. She said that the chimney for the stove was not based on the floor, but was hung on the rafters, and that a platform for the teacher's desk stood at the end opposite the door. The only indication of the outer appearance of this building is a stereoscopic view showing separate entry doors for boys and girls and arched windows which are typical of the period. Arched windows were also built into the Centre School when it was enlarged in the same year.

The East School

In all probability the East School always stood on the location first proposed in 1770 near Lieutenant Joseph Hobbs's house: that is to say, on East Street just south of Locust. The Hobbses lived on Locust Street around the corner. The first building was perhaps erected as early as 1790 when the town voted to build two new schoolhouses and to move their old one.

An incomplete description of the East School dated January 6, 1837, was written by Elizabeth Daniels when she was nineteen years of age. She later became Mrs. Timothy Wilkins and was the great-grandmother of Roger Peabody, a resident of Middleton. It reads:

Jan. 6th, 1837

This house was bilt in the year 1820. It is pleasantly sciscuted on a large plain in the eastern part of Middleton. It is surrounded with a high stone wall. And there was formuly a large tree in front, which afforded an agreeable shade in the summer season. This house twenty-four feet in weath twenty-two feet in length nine feet and a half high and it contains eight windows with twenty squares of glass in each. There were thirty-two benches but four

of them are now entirely destroyed the remainder badly woundded. In the back part of the house is the remains of a desk for the acomodation of the teacher. In the center is a large hearth on which there —

This obviously describes a second building. Any record of its erection is lost along with the minutes of the east district meetings. The only memento of this 1820 schoolhouse is the long bench that went across one end of the room, now in the possession of the Middleton Historical Society. It is of plain unpainted pine.

The schoolhouse shown in Fig. 1 was built around or before 1860. It has since been rebuilt on a slightly different location for a dwelling house and is presently occupied by Benjamin Ogden. In 1854 the town expended one hundred dollars to purchase an additional piece of land for the schoolyard and for building a fence and setting out trees.

The South or Centre School

The complete records of the south district school meetings have fortunately been preserved and are in the custody of the town clerk. They show carefully conducted proceedings on the exact lines of a town meeting. The district chairman issued a warrant and all members of the district were eligible to attend and to vote on all questions.

The first meeting was held on April 6, 1808, "at the house of Mr. John Estey"—the old Estey Tavern in the square—at three o'clock in the afternoon. Three men—Daniel Fuller, Stephen Richardson, and Jeremiah Flint—were appointed as the committee for the south district. They were empowered to select a location for the schoolhouse "any ware between the Elewive brook Near Doct Merriams and Doct Fullers house that was formerly Jacob Fullers Decd." The Fuller house was the present home of the

Misses Lillian and Helen Richardson on South Main Street, and Dr. Merriam lived at the corner of Main and Maple Streets across from the tavern. In response to a report from the committee, it was voted "youanimously," April 12, "to Except of the spot of land in the south-

stove in the meetinghouse by eighteen years. A stove approved for the North School in 1827 may have been a replacement.

The meeting next voted to "underpin said schoolhouse with huwen and split stones." Lastly, they moved to raise four

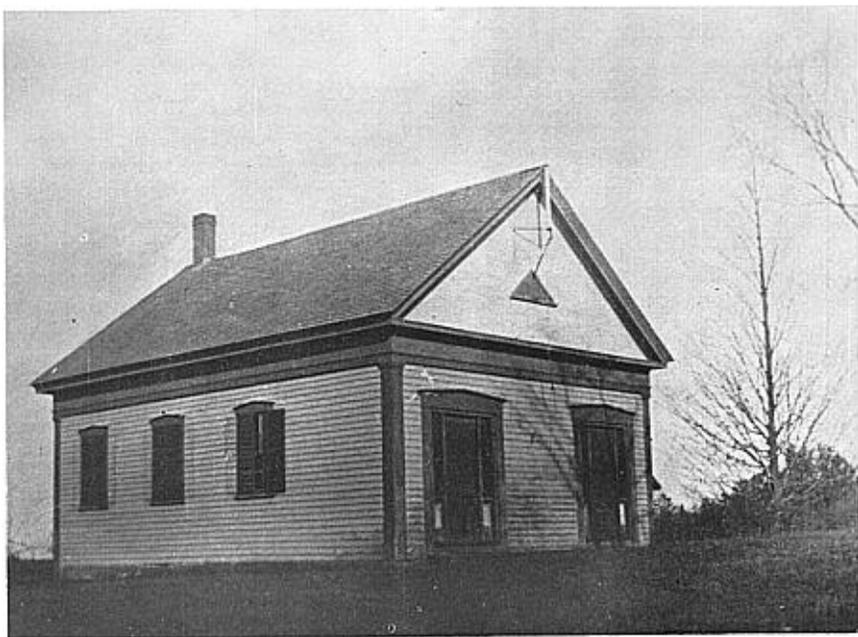


FIG. I. EAST SCHOOL, MIDDLETON, MASSACHUSETTS

From a photograph taken about 1900, Middleton Historical Society.

west corner of Doct Merriams paster." It was also agreed to buy this piece of land, four rods square, paying Dr. Merriam twenty-five dollars. The lot was opposite the entrance of Boston Street, where Memorial Hall stands today.

At this meeting the district proceeded immediately to business. They voted, thirdly, to have a "Scoolhouse 26 feet long & 24 feet wide hiped Roof with a Galery and porch agreeable to the plan presented by the Committee." Fourthly, it was voted "to have a Stove in said District schoolhouse." This antedated the

hundred dollars to pay for the building, the work to be let out to the lowest bidder.

On May 24, 1808, the entire meeting was devoted to the matter of painting the schoolhouse. After agreeing that it should be painted, they decided "to paint the Roof and the Back side with Spanish Brown," and "to have the Remainder part of the schoolhouse painted with green or a lite Collour or Straw Coller."

This vision of a school building with a hiped roof and a gallery painted reddish brown combined with green or straw color is not exactly what comes to mind

when we think of an old district school. It is unfortunate that it disappeared before the era of photography. Its cost proved to be somewhat higher than expected and a further \$120 had to be raised.

By 1837 this building had to be replaced. Its successor departed still more from the traditional type. The decision to build it was made at a meeting, January 4, 1837. A committee of three—Jeremiah Richardson, Daniel Fuller, Esq., and Solomon Wilkins—was chosen "to view and bring a plan for said house." The only other action taken was a vote to have a "squar ruff."

In a second meeting, January 21, twenty items were voted on and settled by those present. Since the original text is far more interesting than any comment could make it, it is here given in full:

- 1 Voted to have the entry way 5 feet
- 2 Voted to have 8 by 10 glass and have 20 square in a window
- 3 Voted to have 11 foot post
- 4 Voted to have the house arched over head as the committee direct
- 5 Voted to have spard ruff [i.e., of spars, or rafters]
- 6 Voted that the pitch of the ruff be a common pitch
- 7 Voted to have hemlock boards for the ruff
- 8 Voted to have the boards on the side and ends matched
- 9 Voted to have the house scalled as high as the windows
- 10 Voted to have two ourter doors
- 11 Voted to have boxes and leds
- 12 Voted to have the floor rise six inches on the back side where the seats sets.
- 13 Voted to have the west end of the house finished simerly to F. Jefferds house is
- 14 Voted to have a necessary bilt 5 feet by 6
- 15 Voted to have the house painted with two cots of paint one cot to be put on imediately after the house is done and the other to be put on in the fall
- 16 Voted to have the house finished by the tenth of may next except one cot of paint

17 Voted that the committee git the house insured

18 Voted to have the house painted light pea green and the trimmings wight the dors to be painted a fancy or modern collar

19 Voted to have the Inside finished with merchantable stuff

20 Voted to have a committee of three to receve proposals and contract for the house and see that it is don according to contract. (Daniel Fuller, Jeremiah Richardson, and Ephraim Fuller, Com.)

Feb. 4, 1837—Voted contract to Hall & Briggs (Salem)—("Joseph E. Hawl and Mr Birgs")—\$632.75.

Feb. 18th 1837—Voted to Raise \$700 to bild a school house in the south District so called.

Until 1860 the old-time district school system prevailed: that is, every teacher was obliged to instruct children of all ages and grades in her one school or room. The South or Centre School was still running on this plan in March, 1855, when an unusually diligent school committee reported not only on its scholastic record, but on its physical condition as well. In the preceding year \$1,300 had been expended to buy more land, to add to and completely repair the building, at the same time removing part of it, and to provide new furniture. In the words of the report: "The District has now a yard containing more than a quarter of an acre, beside what the house now stands upon, enclosed by a tight board fence." It goes on to say:

An addition to the house, giving two separate entries, one for each sex, of six feet in width, and supplied with clothes hooks; a room of fifteen by twenty feet, nearly, used for a recitation and play room, in which all the scholars may assemble at intermission between school hours, the main schoolroom being kept locked, except in school hours; and an addition to the original schoolroom of five feet in length, which, by taking in the room formerly occupied by the entries, gives a schoolroom thirty-four by twenty-four feet, nearly. This

has been furnished with new windows hung with weights, new hard pine floor, and plat-forms, and new plastering; new seats and desks, grained and varnished and supplied with ink-stands; a teacher's table, clock, a ventilating stove, and more than fifty square feet of black-board. A chimney, with its foundation resting on the ground, between the two rooms, is supplied with two ventilating apertures for the main room—one near the floor, and the other, which is supplied with an air register, near the top of the room. One of Emerson's Patent Ventilators also surmounts the roof, over this room, which communicates with it by means of a trap that is controlled by a cord, at the teacher's platform.

There is also a basement that answers for a wood room. Two privies have also been provided, and located about eight feet apart in the fence on the northerly end of the schoolhouse, about twenty feet from it. These are isolated by a tight board fence that separates the yard in that quarter. The house has been well painted, and furnished with blinds, except the windows on the Northerly end.

In this school the vitally important object of Ventilation has been fully attained. This fact can be attested by the large number of visitors present at the closing examination, by whom, and the scholars, the room was fully packed, but yet who, by no sign, expressed any of that oppression, uneasiness, and restlessness, that are the sure accompaniment of crowded ill ventilated rooms. In both the other school houses, the committee and visitors at the closing examination, were most uncomfortably reminded of a different state of things in this respect. In both of them the ceiling is low and no provision is made for ventilation, except by the windows, which let down from the top. Although this mode is an improvement on that of *raising* the lower sash, yet at times it is liable to the same objection, viz:—that of admitting currents of air upon the perspiring bodies within, to their great discomfort and danger. But this great evil can be easily and cheaply remedied, by means of surmounting each of these houses by one of "Emerson's Ventilators," at a trifling cost, not exceeding twenty-five dollars. It is to be hoped that for the sake of those little ones who suffer without knowing why, and who are dependent upon parents and guardians to protect them from danger and death, that another school term may not pass until this evil is remedied.

In spite of the improvements described in this report, the old building was soon found inadequate. At a meeting on March 13, 1860, with little preliminary discussion, the district voted to build a new schoolhouse which should be two stories high and accommodate one hundred and fifty scholars. James N. Merriam was appointed a committee of one. In April \$2,500 was appropriated for the purpose and a decision was made to sell the old building at auction before the new one was begun. The furnishings were also to be disposed of, except for whatever the committee might think could still be used. Merriam was given discretionary power over the whole project.

The schoolhouse was completed during the summer of 1860 and dedicated on September 7 with prayer and singing and addresses by J. D. Philbrick, Esq., and others. It was an occasion for rejoicing. In the words of a chorus chanted by the children:

"Our hearts are light and free as air!

For this long hoped-for day has come,
When with our teachers we repair
To this our new, our stately home."

Successive enlargements have brought this building, now Memorial Hall, to its present appearance and its use for town offices. The photograph in Fig. 2 shows it as it looked after changes and repairs in 1872.

As in modern times, more and more children came to the school each year, although there were almost none over fifteen years of age. This growth led to a division into primary and grammar grades. At one time the primary children of the center district were taught in the town hall, where seats were placed for them. After 1860 the north and east schools were used only for the primary

classes, while children from all over town went to the center for the higher grades.

The South ("Paper Mill") District

Meantime, as early as 1834, certain residents of the southwest part of the

begged permission to organize a new district and to build a schoolhouse. The school committee responded favorably on the petition on condition that the people of the paper-mill district "and those who may join them do build an house

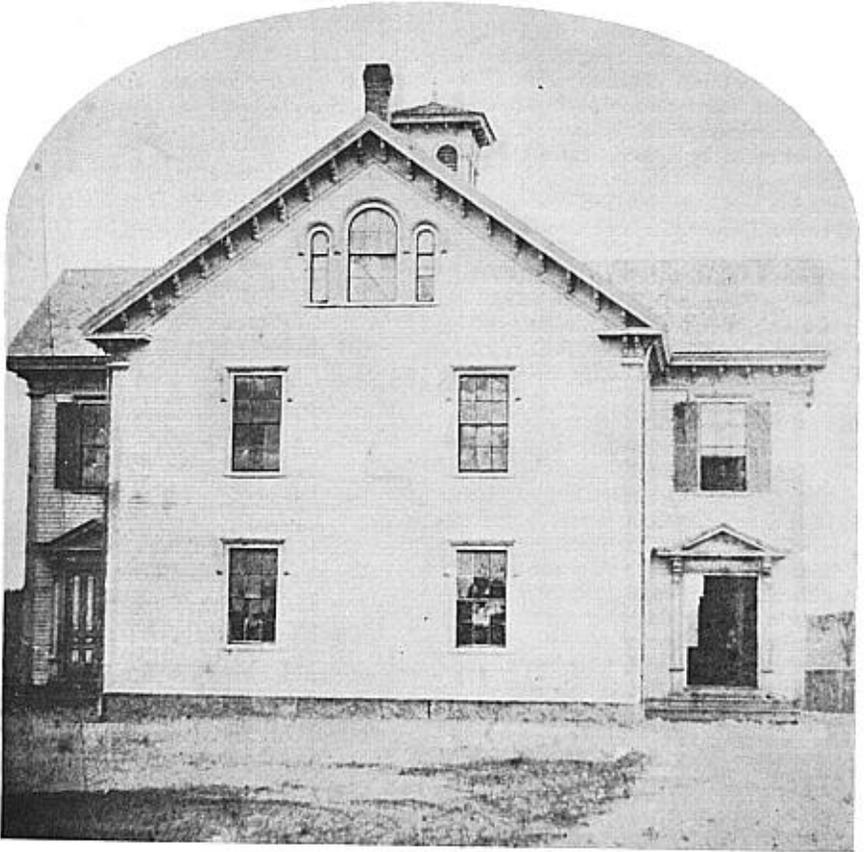


FIG. 2. CENTRE SCHOOL, MIDDLETON, MASSACHUSETTS,
AFTER ENLARGEMENT IN 1872

From a stereographic view, Middleton Historical Society.

town petitioned for a school nearer their homes. Headed by Jeremiah Flint, the petition represented that with some children from the neighborhood who lived in Danvers and North Reading, there would be at least thirty pupils. They

suitable for a school-house within the present year, and that the sum of forty dollars be allowed them for the support of a school." The town then voted this appropriation for a teacher in Flint's district. A small building was erected on

Flint's land where the gates of the present Flint cemetery on Boston Street now stand.

In 1855 the school committee reported that "The sum of thirty dollars was appropriated to this district, but the number of scholars was so small that it was not thought advisable to set up a school therein." There were only twelve pupils at that time. The school, however, continued for a number of years thereafter.

There has been much romancing about old district schools, but actually they offered few attractions. There was no water whatever in any of these buildings. Water had to be carried from nearby wells, and there is a long list of home owners who were paid various sums from one dollar and a half to eight dollars a year for the use of their water supply. The North School got its water from Farnham Stiles, the next house north, from William Lever to the south, or from William Q. Richardson on School Street. The East School pupils went across the street for many years to the home of Samuel Nichols, but at one time had to travel up the long lane to George P. Wilkins (the Illingworth house). The Centre School obtained water at first from George A. Currier, whose land abutted the school yard on the south, but later the children went across Main Street to a spring owned in succession by a number of persons. Although so much money was expended on improving the center building in 1872, it did not have the luxury of running water or the still greater convenience of water closets until 1902.

In the early days an occasional school committee would protest against the discomforts and inconveniences to which the children were subjected. Reporting for the school year 1849-1850, E. P. Hutch-

inson and Daniel Peabody expressed their indignation in no uncertain terms:

In order to secure the health and comfort of our children at school seats should be furnished adapted to their size, and in Winter mild and equal warmth and good ventilation; and also an appendage where the calls of nature may be answered without observation and interruption. In this view our school-houses are far from being what they should be. In the North school-house the seats are so high that a large proportion of the scholars cannot reach the floor with their feet. In the East, the seats are on the same plan, and, although at the Centre, the seats have been made somewhat more comfortable by sloping the backs, they are still too high for many of the scholars, and the room is altogether too small to contain conveniently the number of children belonging to the district. The plan of warming these houses is also deficient. Some of the scholars are obliged to sit very near the stove when of a scorching heat, and without the choice of moving away, until nature is obliged to give out, and the victim compelled by sickness to leave the house, while others in the parts of the house farthest off, are suffering and shivering with the cold. — No method of ventilation is provided but doors and windows. But as for the appendage of which mention has been made, a shameful deficiency exists. In the North district *no* provision has been made, and decency is startled when the fact is stated. While in neither of the other districts is there, as there ought to be, a separate convenience in an unexposed situation.

E. P. HUTCHINSON } School Committee
DANIEL PEABODY } of Middleton
March 20, 1850

It may be added that a previous report had commented on the lack of furnishings and had recommended the purchase of a globe and a set of maps.

In 1856 the schoolhouses were said to be in good repair, well "sealed" and comfortable, "with convenient yards around them except for the north district, which we hope will not long be an exception."

In conclusion it may be of interest to add the rules and regulations for the Centre School that were adopted by the

inhabitants of the district at a legal school meeting.

The School room shall be kept locked except in School hours. No scholars but those who sweep or make the fires shall be permitted to go in except by consent of the teacher.

The scholars shall not run over, nor stand on the seats or desks in either room—They shall not throw balls, sticks, stones, snowballs, nor anything, against the School house or out houses. They shall not cut, scratch, mark, drive nails, or in any way injure or deface the seats, desks, walls or any other part of the school House or any part of the premises. They are forbidden to touch the clock.

No smoking shall be allowed in the School house. Any damage to the School house, its furniture or appurtenances caused by a Scholar,

shall be repaired and the expense thereof shall be paid by the offender, his Parent or Guardian—It shall be the duty of the Teacher to see that these rules are observed, or to give the information of their violation to the Prudential Committee. Also to see that the air in the School room be kept at a comfortable and healthy temperature, and that the fires in the house be carefully attended to and regulated—

The Teacher or some person by his or her direction shall wind up the Clock, and the school hours shall be regulated by it.

The Teacher at the close of the day shall see that the doors, windows, and blinds are closed and fastened and take all necessary care for the preservation and security of the School House and all its appurtenances.⁷

⁷ Martha J. Averill, *Manuscripts*, II, 78, The Essex Institute.