

School Days, circa 1900

From an article in a 2000 Orange County Historical Society Newsletter:

“Schools and schooling have changed greatly in Virginia in the last one hundred-plus years. The mandated course content, compulsory attendance laws, and large, well appointed schools seen today in Orange County and elsewhere in Virginia are in stark contrast to the education procedure and types of school buildings that were common during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“For much of Virginia’s history, private education was the rule. Children were instructed at home by family members (in some wealthier families, by tutors), or at private schools. In some cases, parents in a neighborhood would band together to employ a schoolmaster. Public education, where it existed at all (such as that supported by the Monroe Fund in Orange and Greene counties) was often paid for by a fund set up for the education of poor children. For this reason, public education often was equated with charity, and was shunned by some eligible families for that reason. Virtually all school buildings of the time were extremely small by our standards, and were built of log or frame construction.

“Public education in Virginia changed forever in 1869 when the Underwood Constitution mandated the establishment of free public schools beginning in 1870. In the first school year (1870-71), most Virginia counties averaged about thirty public schools, with virtually all schools outside of urban areas being one-room schools. By the early 20th century, the average Virginia county contained about seventy to eighty schools. Segregated by race, about two thirds of these schools were for white students, with the remainder for blacks. Well into the 20th century, many country schools were simple affairs of one or two rooms, heated by wood stoves, and often without adequate desks, books or other teaching aids.

“Few counties had enough school space to serve all students of school age. However, in rural areas without all-weather roads or means of transporting students, and where farm families were dependent on the labor of their children to get all the needed work done, few students attended the full school year. In an era before compulsory attendance laws, many students also ‘played hooky.’ In the late 19th century, one teacher plagued with chronic truancy noted that only about two-thirds of the students attended with any regularity, and that even the students who came to school regularly might only appear one or two days a week. Some absent students, the teacher wrote, were actually ill, and ‘some feign sickness’, a few are helping their parents, some are hunting the rabbit, some have become disgruntled at the teacher, some have stumped a toe, and sometimes the flying squirrel appears from his den, menacing home and friends, and must be dispatched.’

“Although log schoolhouses were by far the most numerous type of schools in Virginia during the last quarter of the 19th century, by the 1890s and early 1900s, more frame schoolhouses were being built as part of a statewide push to upgrade school buildings and equipment. In the

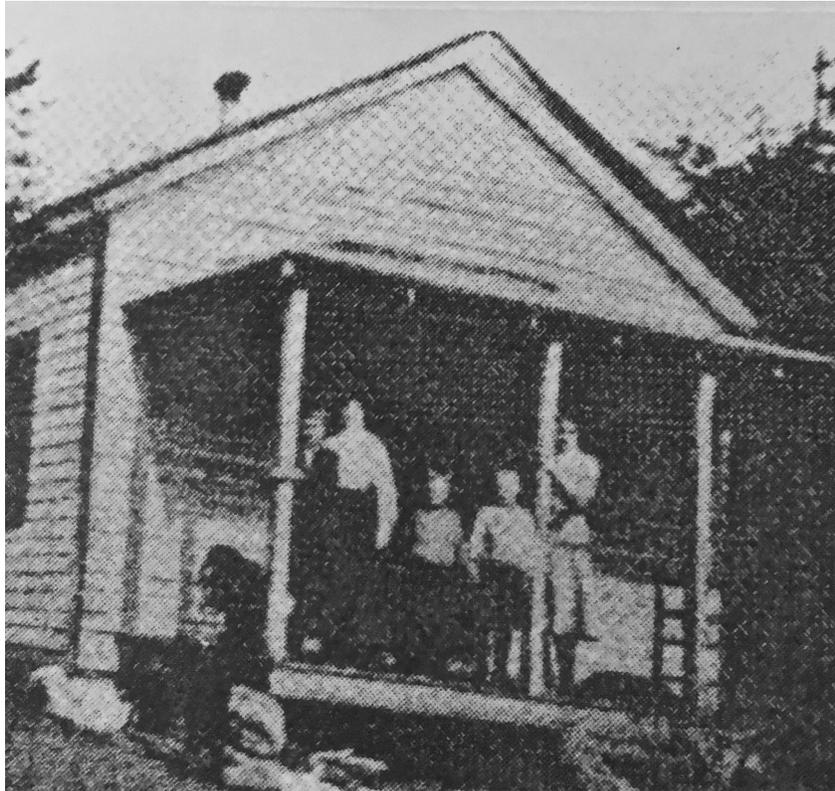
mid-1890s, the Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction noted that “During the past few years there has been decided improvement in schoolhouses and equipment, but the log schoolhouse has not entirely disappeared. I recommend that the Board of Education be authorized to furnish the counties suitable design and specifications for Virginia after the passage of the Williams Building Act in 1906. This legislation, along with subsequent acts passed in 1906 and 1916, appropriated loan funds for the repair, enlargement and construction of school buildings. The State Board of Education made available sixteen different schoolhouse plans and specifications free of charge. These included two, three, four, six and eight room plans.

“Accompanying this article are images of some Orange County schools ca. 1900.”¹



--Photo courtesy of the Orange County Historical Society

¹ Author unknown, “School Days, circa 1900,” *Orange County Historical Society, Inc. Newsletter*, Volume 31, Number 2 (March/April 2000), 2 and 4.



--Photos courtesy of the Orange County Historical Society