

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

The School Bell Rang

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Education has always been dear to the hearts of Orcas Islanders, and never more so than in 1873 when the first island school district was formed. School was in session in Eastsound, at the head of what was then called Buck Bay, in a cabin of hewn logs. The seats were rough, hand-cut planks locally famous for a high degree of discomfort at 28 “scholars” between the ages of 4 and 21 (!) sat attentively at studies that first year.

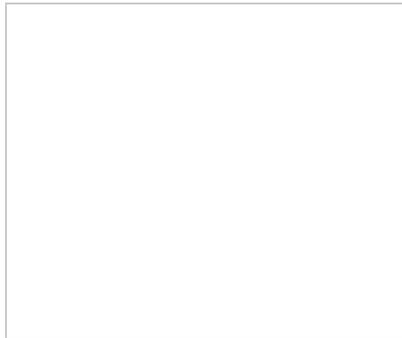
The first district (#5), in Eastsound, offered classes to all students on the island despite the common awareness that most students were too distant to attend the school. In some cases travel was simply too dangerous to attempt every day, and certainly not worth the risk in winter.

As settlement increased on Orcas Island, the corresponding increase in school-age children in the little population clusters scattered along the shores and harbors of the densely-forested island, nearly totally lacking in roads, stirred local movements to create schools for children.

The earliest island schools were “subscription” schools held in private homes. John Bowman taught a subscription school at Peter Morress’ property near Olga which continued operating after the “common” schools were formed, as did others, but they eventually faded with the increase in public school districts.

Since local taxes and levies provided the funds needed to operate the schools, and pay the teachers, downturns in the local economy dramatically affected the schools. (No school was in session in Olga in 1877 owing to a lack of funds, although by the next year, 1878, having the sum of \$43.25 on hand meant they could pay Thomas McKenna \$20 to teach for two months.)

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