

Legacy of Moors School: Groton District No. 2

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In its collection the Groton History Center has a booklet printed in 1911 that describes in extensive detail exactly what a history of a single school might at best present. Edward Adams Richardson, the father of the late Ayer historian and member of the Groton Historical Society Ralph H. Richardson, wrote this account, entitled *Moors School at Old District No. 2: The Story of a District School*. Moors had been his grammar school, where he attended as a pupil from 1870 to 1875 and served briefly in as a teacher.

His central purpose in writing this booklet was “to preserve the fugitive facts less easily obtainable as the years pass by.” Moors School was closed in 1919, which left only one other district school of what had been 14 in town in the 19th century. That last district school (No. 8, called Trowbridge or Rocky Hill School) closed in 1922, completing the consolidation of the student population into one central school. Thus, what Richardson’s tract gives us is a glimpse of a segment of community history, an institution now quite definitely part of our town’s and nation’s past. For about 130 years Moors School, named in 1874 after Major Joseph Moors, a veteran of two wars who had died by 1911, was devoted to the business of educating children from the ages of five to about 15.

“The good old fashioned district school has many friends and staunch supporters,” Richardson declared. Neighborhood schools offered certain positive benefits, he said. Younger students could benefit from immersion not only in what they were to learn but also what and how the older youths in the same room were engaged in learning. Older pupils could become good models of learning, thinking, and acting and could develop “friendliness and tenderness” toward those younger ones. In turn the youngsters might challenge the older, make them determined to be better, learn more. The teacher could exert “a kindly interest in the moral and intellectual welfare” of individuals enrolled in this one-room school. And because the teacher ordinarily boarded with parents of the children in the district, he or she could become “an intimate friend” of those families.

Richardson sketched some background of the setup and operation of such a district school. Each year young women (some as young as 16) who had attended or graduated from a local high school or academy taught school during summer term, starting the first Monday in June. A young man pursuing college level studies and perhaps seeking money to pay for his further tuition and board taught a winter term, starting the first Monday after Thanksgiving. Over time the district worked into hiring women as teachers for both terms, and the trend moved to hiring one individual for a number of years. Richardson did not cite numbers of students being taught at the school each year, but in 1790 he noted that No. 2 had 66 children enrolled.

Some form of neighborhood schooling existed well before district schools became required by state law in 1789 for towns with at least 50 families. Other changes in school law came in 1805, 1827, and 1837. The 1805 law included the requirement that passages from the Bible be read aloud two times a day.

By 1827 towns were expected to have school district parents name a clerk and a “prudential committee” to oversee goings on at their district school. The clerk was to check in on the school regularly and write an annual report. The committee was to hold an annual district meeting in addition to its own regular meetings. The town provided a fixed amount of money to help finance each district school and the

district was expected to cover expenses beyond that, including routine maintenance. Major repairs or changes could be paid for by the town as approved by townspeople at town meeting. In 1837 towns were required to organize a town-wide school committee, and the state also instituted a Board of Education. Over the years changes took place too in delineating the boundaries of each district. Especially after 1837 teachers were required to keep a register listing pupils and their daily attendance.

Richardson used several sources to help him tell the story of Moors School. He had the clerk's annual reports and teachers' registers; town meeting articles, state law records, and notes from Groton historian Samuel Abbott Green. He also received letters from several individuals associated with Moors School and, of course, drew on his own personal knowledge of the school and recollections of the families in the district and their homes.

Students Had Wide Influence

Richardson included a great deal of information about people associated with the school. Added to his 32 pages of small-type text are 27 pages of photographs and one line drawing. There are portraits of over a dozen people. Most photos, though, are of houses in and about the district. After he described the district's boundaries, he listed the homes and principal occupants of 57 places within the district from which the pupils came. Among the family names are many who contributed to the wellbeing of the town.

Referring to the town-wide school board, Richardson noted, "The town has been favored in having men and women on the school board who always had an intense interest in the advancement of learning." Well-known individuals on this board included Caleb Butler, Daniel Needham, and George S. Boutwell, who had been both Governor of the state and secretary of the State Board of Education.

Turning to the students, Richardson compiled a partial list of 112 pupils in the earlier years of the school. Relying heavily on his knowledge of families in the district and letters from many families, he gave details of individuals in a few of the families. Then drawing on consecutive school registers, he was able to list the names and attendance dates of students since 1851 – roughly eight tightly printed columns of names.

Richardson highlighted the further education and career accomplishments of a number of individual students. In later life, he found, many became city or town officials, business people, educators, or lawyers. A few entered a variety of other occupations: a physician, missionary or minister, dentist, writer or lecturer or college professor, railroader, an archaeologist, a chemist, and, just one, a farmer.

Educators Many and Varied

Richardson told in some detail of students at Moors School who ended up teaching school and noted where they taught. Of the 24 listed, six had returned to Moors and nine to other Groton public schools while 11 at some time taught at schools in other Massachusetts communities, and nine had taught in other states. Richardson named 58 teachers involved at Moors from 1802 to 1911. Among them Ellen Torrey Mason served 14 terms, but serving the most at 42 terms and still serving in 1911 was Sarah F. Longley. Sixteen of the teachers at the Moors School had been born in Groton while 35 could be traced as born elsewhere – many in other Massachusetts towns and cities but some from New Hampshire and Vermont.

In his section on individual teachers, Richardson used comments sent in about teachers, newspaper articles, and even obituaries to show what these educators had accomplished and how they were regarded. Richardson and all those commenting on teachers declared most of their instructors successful, although a couple of the men might have been pretty stern disciplinarians.

One letter about a teacher provided a glimpse of the look of the interior of Moors School. Seats were arranged on each side of a center aisle with boys sitting on one side, girls on the other. When asked to recite, a student went to stand in the center aisle. The stove to heat the room stood in the center of the room, and the teacher's desk stood in one corner in front of the students.

Clear from Richardson's descriptions is the sense that this school district was certainly not in a sleepy backwater town. People here were on the move. Groton children made their lives in any number of places besides Groton. Teachers at Moors School came from many different outside places and especially in the earlier years they remained in the district but a short time. Moors School pupils got exposure to a number of different people in their average nine years of schooling in the district before going on to high school or work.

Richardson pursued one other line of inquiry concerning people from Moors School. He reported that 22 students and four teachers went on to serve in the armed services in the Civil War and one had served in the Spanish American War of 1898. Six served in the Groton company of the 6th Massachusetts Regiment and four in the 26th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, organized at Camp Cameron in Cambridge. While none had served in the 53rd Volunteer Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, training so close by at Camp Stevens in Groton Junction, two had evidently served with the South's forces, one had served in the Union Navy, and another went to Annapolis.

Moors schoolhouse has long since disappeared. Only a few foundation blocks remain at the site, just off Smith Street, with a marker at the edge of the property. But we still have Richardson's history of the school. No other district school in Groton has its heritage captured in this way. Thanks to Richardson's painstaking care, we have much of the essence of Moors School still with us. ■