



MUSEUM OF EARLY TRADES & CRAFTS

School Days

Lesson Plan

Introduction

Discuss with your students what life would have been like in about 1840, emphasizing:

- No electricity: Discuss what this would mean, including some major things that would therefore not exist (for example: electric lights, tv, toys with a battery, etc.)
- No indoor plumbing or running water
- No cars/buses. You would get around using a horse and wagon, or walking
- You probably lived on a farm
- No telephones. Discuss how you would communicate with someone who wasn't in the same room as you
 - You would have to travel to them, or write a letter. There was no instant communication.
- No plastic

Now discuss with your students some of the major differences between going to school around 1840 and going to school in 2020.

Images noted in **bold** are available at <https://www.metc.org/school-days/>

- One room schoolhouse for all ages: You would have 1st grade through 6th or maybe 8th grades altogether in one room. Most children didn't go to school past those grades.
 - **Take a look at the 3 images of schoolhouse buildings.**
 - Note the size of the schoolhouse buildings and compare them to your school building
 - Imagine having 1 classroom, maybe looking like this, for all the children in your town!
 - Note the bell in the tower of the Florham Park Schoolhouse: This could be used to call children in at the beginning of the day or at the end of recess, just like our modern bells. Most schoolhouses didn't have a built-in bell, so the teacher would ring a handheld bell **like the one in the picture.**
- One teacher for all grades.
 - **Take a look at the 4 images of schoolhouse interiors.**
 - Imagine sitting in hard wooden desks or benches like these all day long!
 - Notice that girls and boys are on separate sides of the classroom – this was typical
 - Students would have to be able to work independently while the teacher worked with other grade levels
 - Older children would reinforce their own learning by helping the younger children while the teacher was working with different groups

Part 1: Going to School

Assign each student one of the objects pictured in this section of the online lesson plan. A couple objects have multiple images to show different aspects. One student should get all images of the same number (for example, Objects #4A & 4B). Please note that objects #21 and higher are different versions of other (lower numbered) objects, so only assign these if your class size requires it. If your class has fewer than 20 students, you can eliminate objects #2, #5, #12, #15, #19, #18. Each child will be getting an object to focus on, but they should pull up the photo of each object as it is discussed as well.

Images of these objects are available at <https://www.metc.org/school-days/>

Have each child take a few minutes to look closely at their object. They should make some observations about the object, especially what they think it is and what it might have been used for in school in the 1800s.

Then, have the students imagine they are entering one of the schoolhouses pictured above, while their teacher rings a bell, and sitting down at a school bench or desk.

Go through each object in the order below (objects are in bold with their #). For each object, you can start by asking the student what they noticed about the object and anything they think this tells us about what it was like to go to school in the 1800s. Then add the associated content. These objects will help children discover what it would have been like to go to school in the 1800s, and how learning and school were different in some ways, but quite similar in others.

You may want to tell your students that most of these objects are “reproductions.” That means it looks similar to an object from the past, but that this physical object is not actually 200 years old. Books and other school supplies don’t tend to last too long so not many have survived and some of those that have are not in great shape.

You will be going through the objects in roughly the order in which students learn (similar today to the 1800s). Please ask students to be looking at the image of whatever object is being discussed, even if it isn’t their object.

Horn books (Objects #1, #2 & #21): These were a way to learn the ABCs, an important first building block for so many other things that we learn (then and now).

- ❖ **Object #2:** Horn book, probably from the early to mid-19th century
- ❖ **Objects #1 & #21:** Horn book reproduction, METC
 - Children would learn their alphabet and other information from their horn books
 - Hornbooks varied, but typically had capital and lower case alphabets, sometimes accompanied by the vowels and vowel sounds. They might also contain the Lord’s Prayer, as there was not yet separation of church and state.
 - The name comes from using a thin layer of horn (from a bull or something similar) to protect the paper, similar to laminating a piece of paper today



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New England Primer (Objects #3 & #22): This was one book that helped children put those letters together into words as they learned to read

- ❖ **Object #3A&B:** New England Primer, cover & inside page (reprint)
- ❖ **Object #22:** New England Primer Front cover, 1764 edition
- Have the student(s) with this object read the full title on the cover.
- This was a common book used to learn to read, especially in the 1700s and early 1800s
- It contained a lot of religious content (again, no separation of church & state yet)
- Not the most approachable book to learn to read from: Have students take a look at the inside page. Does it look like the books they learned to read with? Does it seem like a book they would want to learn to read with?

McGuffey's Readers (Objects #4, #5 & #23): *McGuffey's Readers* were first published in 1836 and were very popular throughout the 1800s as way to learn reading, spelling, grammar and so on.

- There was 1 for each year Primer through 6th
- ❖ **Object #4A&B:** *McGuffey's 1st Eclectic Reader*, cover & inside page
- ❖ **Object #5A&B:** *McGuffey's 2nd Eclectic Reader*, cover & inside page
- ❖ **Object #23A&B:** *McGuffey's 4th Eclectic Reader*, cover & inside page
- These books were more approachable than the *New England Primer* (with relatable stories, more pictures, etc.). Compare the stories in these to the *New England Primer*.
- There were other books available, but children might only have 1 or 2 books for the entire year. Compare this with all the books in our homes, our classrooms, our libraries. Discuss with students why this was
 - Because books were expensive/not that common
 - Because paper was expensive
 - Because the process of making a book was very time consuming as it had to be done on a printing press.
 - A printer would have trays filled with small stamp-like letters. To print this book, each letter on the page to be printed had to be laid out individually
 - The printer then put ink onto the letters, put a piece of paper on top and slid the entire thing into the **printing press**. Take a look at the **printing press image**. Pulling that lever pressed the stamps onto the paper. This had to be done for each page
 - So most families had few books
- Reading was the first of the '3 Rs' that were the core of education at this time

Slates (Objects # 6, #7, & #24). Starting with **#6: Slate Board:** This would have been the first tool used to learn to write. Why slate boards instead of writing on paper?

- Because you can erase, so you don't waste expensive paper
- Slates were double-sided, so you could write on both sides
- Because writing with ink is hard and you wouldn't want your first writing ever to be with ink.
- Ask students if they know what slate is. You can show the image of **raw slate**. It is a common type of rock and they probably have seen it (on a path, on a roof and so on) without realizing what it was. Point out how naturally smooth the rock is, making it a good candidate for turning into a board to write on



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- Moving to object **#7A: Slate Pencil**: Ask the student with this object what they think children wrote on slate boards with. They will probably guess chalk, but chalk was rare. So instead children would have used slate pencils (slate will write on slate).
- ❖ You can show them the image of a **boy writing on a slate**.
- ❖ Now **Object #7B: Slate Board with Slate Pencil Writing**: It is pretty faint, but you can see what slate pencil writing looks like on the slate board. It isn't as dark as chalk, but still leaves a mark and can be erased afterward.
- Even if no one has **Object #24** as their assigned object, you may want to have your students look at it to see how the slate board and pencil look together
 - Our slate pencil is a reproduction. To see what a real slate pencil looks like, [check out this link to the Henry Ford Museum](#)

Quill pen/inkwell (Object #8): Once a student mastered writing on the slate board, they moved on to learning to write with ink. For hundreds of years through the first couple decades of the 1800s, people wrote with quill pens, made from bird feathers, usually goose. And the inkwell holds ink, which the quill has to be dipped into.

- Discuss with your students what they think it would be like to write with a quill and ink. Some of the differences/things that make it harder to write with than a modern pencil include:
 - The ink is wet and has to dry. This also means it can smudge (it is more like painting than writing in some ways)
 - You are likely to make drops of ink and/or other mistakes: There is no such thing as perfection
 - You can't erase
- Take a look at the image of a **boy writing with the quill**.

Dip pen/inkwell (Object #9): There was a **technological innovation** in the world of writing utensils in the 1820s. We tend to think of technology as computers and similar devices, but technology is anything that makes our lives easier. The dip pen was a technological advancement in the 1820s that took off very quickly and made the quill old fashioned:

- Writing with it still had many of the same challenges, but it was more consistent, stronger and could be purchased ready-to-go after being machine made, rather than requiring the user to hand-cut the quill regularly
- This is a reproduction dip pen but the ink well is from the 1800s

Copy books (Objects #10 & #25): But where did students write with ink? Most students in the early 1800s probably used a homemade copybook, like this one, made by sewing paper together. This is similar to our notebooks today.

- These were usually used to practice penmanship, or handwriting.
- This copybook from the museum's collection was written in, and probably made by, Mary Borden. We don't know anything else about her unfortunately.
- ❖ **Object #10A&B**: Cover of the book & one inside page
 - Ask the student with this object to try to read the cover (everyone else should follow along). It says: "Mary Borden's Book, October1817." Point out to students that she seems to have changed her mind for the actual day in between, as there are several different



numbers, some written on top of each other, so it isn't 100% clear what date (or dates) she was going for.

- If your students have learned any script or cursive, have them try reading the writing inside. It says (over and over and over): “Beware of the man who has no regard to his reputation.” And the book is filled with pages like this, with the same sentence repeated for a full page. Discuss with your student why she did this.
 - This was the way to perfect your handwriting
 - Why was handwriting so important? Have your students think back to the discussion of communication at the beginning and how writing a letter was the only way to communicate with someone else. Also note that official documents would be handwritten. These factors made it more important than it is today to have nice handwriting.
- **Object #25:** A different inside page
 - Even if no one has Object #25, take a look at that photo: See the brown string in the center? This is the middle of the book and shows how it was sewn together: That is where the thread was sewn through the paper to hold it together like a notebook
- Writing was the second of the ‘3 Rs’ that were the core of education at this time (of course writing doesn't begin with an ‘r’ when written, but it sounds like it does).

Students will probably be able to guess that the last main “lesson” children learned in the 1800s was math. However, in the 1800s children would have called it **arithmetic**. If you drop the first ‘a’ it becomes ‘rithmetic, giving you the “3 Rs”

- **Marmaduke Multiply's (sic) (Object #11):** This was one book available to learn the multiplication tables in the 1800s (1st published 1841).
- Ask the student who has this object to try reading the entire title (**Object #11A**): “Merry Method of Making Minor Mathematicians”
- Now have your students look at **Object #11B**, showing 2 inside pages, and ask someone to read one of those sentences. For example: “9 times 12 are 108. See what I've drawn upon my slate.” Point out how it is a little rhyme to help you remember that multiplication problem.
 - Discuss with your students how this compares to how you learn math today
- You can show them what the **original Marmaduke cover** looked like – not quite as colorful!

Reading, writing and math were the main lessons children did, with maybe a little history or geography as well. And as part of their lessons, children would have done a lot of **rote memorization**:

- Today, we have easy access to information and can focus more on using that information. But think about a world in which you have few books, no internet, not much paper for notes, etc. The information had to all be stored in your head, so you had to spend a lot of time memorizing.
- Students also probably spent a lot of time doing **Recitation**, which just means reading things out loud. They would probably have to recite their reading assignment, or a poem they had memorized, to the class or small group of students. Take a look at the **Recitation image**. The children in this image were probably assigned something to memorize and are now reciting it for the teacher.



Just like today, some of the supplies you need for school are not directly related to learning. To begin with, you need to carry your supplies somehow. Today, children use backpacks. In the 1800s, children might just carry their supplies, or they might have a **School bag** like **Object #12**. This would probably have been a homemade bag, just fabric sewn in a rectangle with a draw string.

Log (Object #13): Ask the student with this object why they think they have a log?

- A wood burning stove (refer your students back to the **Schoolhouse Interior images**) was the only source of heat in the school. Students had to bring in the logs that would keep the fire going all day.
- This object isn't related directly to learning, but is just as important for keeping the environment comfortable for learning.

Bucket (Objects #14): See if the student with this object can figure out that the bucket was for water. It was probably the chore of a student every morning to fetch water from a well or pump outside. Take a look at the **Well and Pump images**. These would pull up water from deep underground.

- Remind students that there would have been no indoor running water and discuss the implications of this:
 - You can't get water to drink or to wash your hands unless you get it from outside
 - There are no flushing toilets, so you would have to go outside and use the outhouse. This is a lot like a port-a-potty today. Check out the **Outhouse image**.
 - Any time you want water for anything, you have to go outside to get it.
- The schoolhouse would probably have 1 bucket for drinking and 1 for hand-washing.

Ladle (Object #15): This is how students would get a drink from the bucket. Probably just 1 for the entire class! You can discuss that they didn't have our conception of germs.

School Desk (Object #16): Remind students of the images from earlier of schoolhouse interiors. This is one style of desk found in one-room schoolhouses. There would be columns of these in the school room. The back (table-like) part is the desk for the person sitting behind whoever is sitting on this seat here. And so on. You wouldn't have been able to move your seat around as that would move the desk of the person behind you, and the whole thing was probably bolted to the floor.

Toys (Objects #17, #18 & #19): Just like today, children liked to play when they could, although they would have had less play time than most 21st century children. Also like today, children weren't supposed to bring toys to class. The next 3 objects are some toys and games that children might use at recess, or before and after school.

- ❖ **Object #17: Clay Marbles.** Most children didn't have glass marbles, but they could make their own marbles out of clay. Playing with marbles was very popular, and many of the games involved shooting one marble at other marbles and winning other children's marbles. See the [Marbles Handout](#) and the image of children **Playing Marbles**. You would probably carry your marbles in a cloth bag.
- ❖ **Object #18: Playing cards.** Notice how the cards do not have a number, just the images.
- ❖ **Object #19: Yo yo.** Just like modern yo-yos, but made of wood instead of plastic

Discuss with your students how these toys/games compare with how they play today during recess, or after school.



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Object #20: This is a teaching certificate. It is partially torn, but it certifies this person to teach in a Common School (equivalent to public schools today) in 1862.

- Can't discuss school without talking about the teacher!
- For a woman, teaching was a job they could only do before they got married. Generally, women were not allowed to keep teaching after marriage. Male teachers could be married
- In the 1800s, often the families in a community came together to hire a teacher and a major part of the teacher's pay was room (a place to stay) and board (food) from the families. They would rotate between the families during the year.
 - This started changing during the 19th century as taxes started covering teacher salaries and other expenses

Some additional points of comparison between school life then and now

- **School Year:** Today, most students start their school year in September, running through June. However, remember that in the 1800s most people were farmers. In the fall, farmers need to be harvesting, or picking, the crops they grew all summer. If they do not get all those crops picked and stored, they have no food for the winter. This is not vacation for kids – they are home, working on the farm.
 - Similarly, in the spring, children are needed to help with planting
 - School followed an agricultural calendar/need: Winter was the main term. Many children, especially younger ones, also attended school in the summer.
- Most students had to walk to school, after completing their morning chores on the farm (such as feeding animals, milking the cow, etc.)
- The day likely started with a reading from the Bible: There was not the same separation of church and state and the Pledge of Allegiance had not yet been written.
- **Punishments:** Different standards than today. People typically think of the fact that teachers are no longer allowed to hit children. However, the biggest change is something more conceptual: It is no longer considered acceptable to humiliate/embarrass kids. In the 1800s, humiliation was the underlying basis of most punishments (even hitting students).
- There was little understanding that different people learn in different ways. Students not able to learn the material in the prescribed way were likely to be punished as if they were deliberately trying not to learn.

Part 2: Writing

Part 2A: Practice Penmanship

This activity can be done with ink if students have it (see the recipe for “**walnut shell ink**”), or just with a regular pen or pencil.

Give your students the “**Writing Packet.**” The first page lists two famous documents written with quill and ink. You can discuss these in depth with your students if you would like. Either way, emphasize that

- 1) These are very important documents to the United States
- 2) Both were written with a quill and ink
- 3) They were written by people like Thomas Jefferson who were very well educated and who had been practicing both their penmanship and writing with ink for many years
- 4) There are still mistakes and ink blobs on these documents

Take a look at the image of part of the U.S. Constitution, paying attention to the ink blobs!

The second page has a script alphabet. If you would like your students to try writing in script, you can have them use this as a guide.

The third & fourth pages have some quotes from famous Americans throughout history. Feel free to spend some time reading and discussing these.

The fifth & sixth pages are blank. This is where your students will be practicing their penmanship if they are able to print them out. If they are not able to print, they can do this on any piece of paper. They may write in script or in their normal handwriting, whichever you (or they) prefer. You may have them write whatever you would like, but we suggest including the following:

- 1) Their name
- 2) The date
- 3) One of the sentences from the previous two pages. They should write the sentence they pick at least 5 times, trying each time to make it look even better
- 4) One or two of the script letters. Again, they should write each letter at least 5 times to perfect it.

Part 2B: Writing a Letter

In a time before phones, email and texting, letter writing was a crucial skill and the primary means of communication. Ask each student to write a letter by hand to someone they do not live with, preferably someone who lives in another state or even another country. They should write as if they have no other way of communicating with this person, explaining everything that is going on in their lives.

Once the letters are written, help the children write an address and return address on an envelope and show them where the stamp goes. Then have them mail their letters.



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Ask the family to request that the recipient of the letter let them know when the letter arrives.

Have a chart, noting where each letter was going and the amount of time it took. See if any of the recipients send a letter back. Once all the letters are in, discuss how writing and mailing a letter was different from other forms of communication more commonly used today.

Some other facts on education and schooling in the 1800s

- The 19th century witnessed a dramatic shift in education and schools across the country
- Prior to the 1820s, few schools didn't require some kind of tuition. Accordingly, few students attended school
 - In the 1820s & 1830s, the concept of the "Common School" started to emerge – a precursor to public schools today.
- In 1828, a New Jersey state survey found that 1 in 5 voters couldn't read or write (meaning that an even larger percentage of the overall population probably was illiterate as the voting population was limited)
- Public Schools in New Jersey gradually developed between 1828 & 1875, at which point a constitutional amendment required free public schools for all students age 5 to 18
- Quill pens had been around since the 6th century
 - Dip pens also had existed for a long time, but were low quality and not widely available until mass production started in 1822
- Ink had many different recipes/sources:
 - carbon ink (charcoal mixed with a gum from certain tree saps)
 - metal-gall ink (tannic acid with iron sulphate): Eventually made by pouring tannic acid over old nails
 - Crushed walnuts
 - Commercially produced ink starts to become available in the 19th century