

Indiana's Rural Schoolhouses

An Archaeological Perspective

Pink erasers, freshly sharpened pencils, a new box of crayons (can you just smell it?). These are just a few of the images that come to mind when we think of back to school.

What did back-to-school look like nearly 200 years ago? What sorts of things could be found at Indiana's first schoolhouses?

Archaeological investigations at these rarely studied sites can not only give us insight into the types of materials that were used by the schoolchildren of the mid-19th century, but they can also tell us about a community's shifting attitudes and focus on education.

Early Education in Indiana

Indiana became a state in 1816, and while its first Constitution encouraged a public education system, it gave no means or timeline for implementation. In the 1840 census, it was found that one in seven Hoosiers was illiterate, and less than 18% of school-aged children regularly attended school (Diebold 1998).

For the early settlers of Indiana, education was primarily a luxury and often wasn't a priority. Children were needed at home for planting and harvesting and only attended school during the winter, if at all. Schools could be miles from their rural homes, and travel during the cold months would have been hard and treacherous because roads were not well developed (Beisaw 2009).

Even when students did attend school, the conditions were so poor that many did not make it a priority to attend regularly. Students endured hard benches without backs,

small windows with inadequate lighting, outdated books, and a chaotic atmosphere. The ages of schoolchildren varied dramatically, from only a few years old to the same age as the teacher. All students learned in the same space, and the teacher had to spend time with the pupils in groups based on ability. Children who were not actively working with the teacher were expected to remain silent and work on memorization, or might face punishment.

The Indiana State Constitution of 1851 established the basis for a common, public, education system. The newly adopted Constitution, along with the contested School Law of 1852, made public education a compulsory part of society. Unfortunately, the Civil War interrupted education reform within the United States. It was not until after the war that Indiana had a uniform, free, rural school system in place (Diebold 1998). By 1879, 72% of school-aged children were enrolled in rural township schools (Natali 2007). Communities took pride in their schoolhouses and made efforts to update the buildings to include better lighting and heating features, and to construct the buildings themselves out of better materials. In some places, it was even a source of pride to have the trustee's name on the schoolhouse. The new public system led to the construction of 600 new schools in Indiana in 1862 (Diebold 1998). By the late 1890s, however, the trend was to consolidate schools into multi-room buildings that housed a wider community and several grades of students. By the mid-20th century, few one-room schoolhouses still functioned as places of education. They often found new lives as residences, churches, or barns, or were abandoned and later demolished (Diebold 1998).



Example of a typical late 1800s style schoolhouse, exterior (left) and interior (right). Note the gabled roof, center chimney, and many windows to allow for light. Photos courtesy of the Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology.

Handbell. Photo courtesy of Amy Johnson, Indiana State Archaeologist.

What would you expect to find?

Extant schoolhouses, in various states of disrepair, dot the landscape of rural Indiana. Often, because of the remaining above-ground components, these sites are ignored archaeologically and assessed for their value as historic structures only. While this perspective is valuable, it may not always paint the whole picture of a schoolhouse site.

The typical rural schoolhouse was a one-room structure with gabled roof, typically made of clapboard, and later, brick. By the late 1870s/early 1880s, the term “one-room” was a misnomer, as the footprint of the schoolhouses often included small vestibules for coat racks at the front of the school (Diebold 1998). The interior of the schoolhouse would have been open, with desks or benches organized to face the teacher and blackboard. There was often a stove or other heating element in the center of the room.

If you look beyond the schoolhouse structure, what would you find? Archaeologists who specialize in the study of schoolhouse sites have divided the artifacts you can find into several classes (after Gibb and Beisaw 2005):

Architectural – these are artifacts that relate to the construction of the schoolhouse and include things such as bricks, nails, and window glass. These are the most common types of artifacts found at schoolhouse sites.

Furnishings – these are artifacts necessary for the health, safety, and comfort of the users. They can include items such as lighting and heating fixtures, desks and seats, and water buckets or urns.

Equipment – this class of artifacts includes writing and other pedagogical implements and is probably what you think of when you picture schoolhouse artifacts. These can give insights into what types of classes were offered, and if a school had access to paper and ink, or relied on chalk and slate, as evidenced by slate pencils.

Horticulture – it is rare to find artifacts related to horticulture or agriculture at schoolhouse sites, but given the rural setting of most schools, it does not seem out of the realm of possibility. Some schools may have focused on rural activities in order to prepare students for their roles as adults and to make education relevant to country life.



Some of the personal items that have been found at archaeological sites in Indiana. Wire glasses, glass marbles (images courtesy of the Material Culture Lab, Department of Anthropology, University of Indianapolis), glass inkwell (courtesy of Civil & Environmental Consultants) and slate pencil fragments.

Personal belongings – this is a highly varied class of artifacts that represents items of individuality that students and teachers would have brought to the schoolhouse. This class can include items such as clothing, jewelry, lunch pails, tobacco pipes, toys, and medicinal containers.

Archaeological Case Study

The Wea View Schoolhouse Site (12-T-1101), in Wabash Township, Tippecanoe County is a wonderful example of what can be learned about a schoolhouse site when it is archaeologically investigated. This site was studied by Purdue University in 2003 and 2004 as a part of their summer field school and a means of community involvement (Rotman 2004, 2005). The Wea View Schoolhouse No. 8, which was no longer standing at the time of the investigation, was one of the first built in the county (c.1860s) and was used until its closure in 1916. This span gave it the unique situation of lasting through the educational reforms of the late 19th century. Researchers wanted to be able to assess if they could see the impact of these reforms in the archaeological record at the site.

Preliminary archaeological shovel testing across the site identified artifacts from several classes. The artifacts primarily included architectural debris (glass and nails), domestic objects (bottle glass, ironware, and yellowware), and a personal object (buckle) (Rotman 2004, 2005). Researchers determined that the site had potential for intact features related to the schoolhouse and so it was decided that additional archaeological testing would be valuable (Rotman 2004). The site was geophysically surveyed, and the results guided placement of more than 50 1 meter x 1 meter units at the site. Portions of the schoolhouse foundation were identified, as were the privies (one for each gender, with an additional “male” privy), and more than 25,000 artifacts were recovered (Rotman 2005). Of these artifacts, nearly 17,000 fell into the architectural classification, which is not surprising, given the structure had been demolished in the 1950s.

Researchers were able to better tell the story of the Wea View Schoolhouse after analysis of the information recovered during archaeological fieldwork. For instance, they were able to identify that the northwest corner of the building, where the stove was located, caught fire at some point in the



1870s or 1880s. Before this, the building was constructed of white-painted clapboard. After the fire, it seems that the building was rebuilt using brick, which was a more common construction material for schoolhouse structures at the time. Members of the community reported the building that was demolished in the 1950s was one of brick, thus supporting the archaeologists' interpretation of the site. Rotman suggests that schoolhouses were more than places of learning – they were also used for community events. A punch cup, cake knife, and serving spoons were among the domestic artifacts found at the site, and could characterize the schoolhouse as a host to various non-educational community functions (Rotman 2009).

Importance

Rural schoolhouses are an endangered archaeological resource that can offer a wealth of information about the history of and community involvement in early education in Indiana. Even if no structure remains, the items left behind can tell us about what sorts of materials the pupils of the school had access to, and what types of activities took place at the school. Was it a place of learning only, or were community functions held there as well? The presence of domestic artifacts at schoolhouse sites suggests non-educational functions took place there in addition to daily lesson plans. Studying the construction methods at these sites shows how invested a community was in their school system – were they willing to reconstruct the school out of better materials after it burned, as we saw with the Wea View Schoolhouse? While the significance of the rural school was forgotten in the era of consolidation during the early 20th century, archaeological studies show us that these sites are still valuable and meaningful in telling the story of our past.

Written by Rachel Sharkey, Research Archaeologist, August 2020

For more information contact:

Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology
402 W. Washington St., Rm. W274
Indianapolis, IN 46204-2739

PHONE: 317-232-1646

EMAIL: dhpa@dnr.in.gov

WEB: on.IN.gov/dhpa

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/INdhpa



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