

Murray Independent School District – The Early History

by Katie Carpenter, Former Murray Middle School Teacher

The cornerstone of the Murray Middle School building carries the date 1922. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and has, in its long history, housed every grade in the Murray City Schools, K-12, in various configurations. Yet the Murray school district claims a history dating back to 1872, and a tradition of community support for education beginning in 1850, eight years after the town was founded. Historian Thomas C. Clark, in an overview of Kentucky education written for the *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, writes that “Kentucky common school education during 1865-1910 might well be classified as being shabby, backwoods, log-cabin-ear quality.” (1) In a speech delivered in connection with the school system’s 125th anniversary celebration, former history teacher and local historian Roy Weatherly referred to “a unique quality, a special spirit” in the town’s involvement in public education. “It was the offering of opportunity, the expanding of horizons, challenging—bettering—uplifting—enriching an environment.” (2) With due allowance for school and civic pride, Murray might be the exception that proves the rule.



As Hambleton Tapp and James C. Klotter point out in their study of early Kentucky education, “Kentucky’s first code in the eighteenth century contained a law dealing with horses but none with education.” (3) Education was a luxury on the frontier. Wealthy families in the bluegrass supported private academies, and the pioneering families who pushed west valued, as Thomas Clark notes, “physical, not intellectual, energies.” (4). According to Clark, “Kentucky made only a minimal response to the national movement for establishing and sustaining public school systems after the War of 1812.” (5) Nevertheless, an early law, patterned on the federal land reserve established with the Northwest Territory Land Ordinance of 1787, set aside 6,000 acres of land in each county for “the endowment and use of seminaries of learning throughout the commonwealth” (6) However, there was no provision for enforcement of the law, for the training and certification of teachers, or for the acquisition of instructional materials, including books and blackboards and chalk.

The Commonwealth’s first comprehensive effort to deal with public education came in 1838 with a law that created a system of universal “free” schools, and dealt with school taxes, teacher qualification, and ownership of school property. It provided for a state superintendent of instruction and a trustee system for local governance of school districts. However, funding the schools was left largely to the individual school districts, and the law was not enforced. About the same time, the U.S. government distributed surplus federal funds for education to the states; Kentucky’s share was \$1,433,757, and the General Assembly decided that most of it should be invested, with the interest to support the common schools. The money was mismanaged, and little of it went to the schools, despite a 1845 series of laws that reiterated the provisions of the earlier law and encouraged the organization of common schools in the counties. Finally, with the Kentucky Constitution of 1850, the drive for common schools had a constitutional basis. This coincided with the election of a strong superintendent of public instruction, the determined and energetic Robert Breckinridge, who systematically expanded the government's support of the schools. One important measure was granting counties the right to levy property taxes for school support. Not till 1908, however, did the laws of the state actually require, rather than enable, counties to establish schools and levy taxes for their maintenance.

The first school to appear in written records of Murray and Calloway County is the Murray Seminary. The first settlers in the county arrived in the 1820's, though the centers of population for the next two decades were not Murray, but Wadesboro (long since abandoned) and Concord (now New Concord).

Murray was founded deliberately, in 1842, because it was more centrally located to serve as the county seat. According to Brattle's *History of Kentucky*, the first jail in Murray was finished in 1847, the first "poor farm" in 1849, and the Murray Seminary in 1851. Battle claims the sale of the 6,000-acre seminary lands earlier in the decade were used for the school building. It was "a fine two-storey brick structure, and contained four schoolrooms." According to Roy Weatherly, it stood on a hill, at the west edge of town, now a vacant lot on Sixth Street between Main and Poplar. A booklet published in connection with the centennial celebration of the Murray's First Christian Church in 1968 contains a photograph of the Murray Seminary, circa 1868; in the photograph, it is a frame building.

In the 1850s, money from the state was available to support education. However, it required no small organizational effort to qualify to receive funds. The law was specific:

As soon as the citizens of any school district shall raise by voluntary subscription, or otherwise, money or property sufficient to maintain a school and have the same taught for the term of three months by a competent teacher in any one year, having also elected their trustees and made their report to the School Commissioners of their county, according to the provisions of this act, such district shall be entitled to their just proportion of the money provided for the support of the common schools. Provides also, That all the children of the district of the proper age shall be privileged to attend said school, and no district tax shall be required. (8)

In a written report to the Kentucky legislature in 1852 decrying the condition of the schools, Superintendent Breckinridge cautioned that, regardless of the availability of state funding for the schools, Kentucky did not and could not offer a public education for its students:

Everyone who knows enough to have any opinion on such a subject as this (knows) that the school fund of the state, until within the two past years, could not paying for teaching all of the children of the State one week every year; and that, even in its present condition, it cannot pay for teaching them all six weeks in the year. (9)

Unfortunately, there is no public record of how the Murray Seminary was organized, what was taught, or the identities of the teachers. However, in the private collection of Dr. James Hart, a local amateur historian, there are several documents relating to the early schools in Murray. For example, a newspaper advertisement circa 1860 announces the opening of a school that "if sufficiently patronized by the community ... will continue 20 weeks." The tuition rate for "Orthography, Reading, Writing, Mental and Primary Arithmetic and Elementary Geography" was \$10. If parents wished their children to study "English Grammar, Arithmetic, Geography, Dictionary, and Analysis," the price jumped to \$1250, with an additional \$2.50 charged for natural philosophy, Chemistry, Physiology, Algebra, and elements of Geometry. It's a rather remarkable list for a time when most schools in rural Kentucky were run by "a teacher whose education may have only recently escaped the illiterate level." (10)

Perhaps the seminary building served to house the various schools offered by these self-employed teachers. Also in Dr. Hart's collection is a poster announcing that the "Murray Seminary Male and Female Departments" will be again open for the reception of Pupils by Dr. P. Boggs, on Monday, the 8th of Sept. 1862, assisted by his Daughter." The poster's text addresses Dr. Boggs's qualifications:

Having gained some little reputation for successful tuition in other places, anterior to his coming to Murray, he feels an honest but modest confidence of being able, in most cases, of training the modestly budding intellect how to heighten and develop its growing beauties into full-blow manly vigor, or enlarge its latent yet rich elementary principles into COMPLETE INTELLECTUAL MANHOOD.

The list of subjects Dr. Boggs plans to offer includes elementary astronomy, Latin, higher mathematics and music. In a disclaimer regarding his instructional practice, he conveys a rather radical approach, in stark contrast with the harsh disciplinary practices that prevailed during the nineteenth century:

Government will aim to be mild and parental, BUT FIRM AND DECIDED, sparing the rod, IN A WAY not to spoil the child.

Again, presaging current educational practice, he encourages parental involvement in the schools:

Patrons are earnestly entreated to cooperate with the teachers, in the government and advancement of their children. In so doing, the greatest possible benefit to accrue to all concerned.

In 1860, the population of Murray, a remote rural community, was about 218, with the county population at 3,194. Yet his school compares favorably with the curriculum of Male High School, the jewel of Louisville's public school system.

Dr. Boggs was Dr. James Hart's great-great-grandfather. According to Dr. Hart, Dr. Boggs moved his family to Murray in 1945, after his second marriage. He was a medical doctor, but decided that the new community was in equal need of a teacher and so began a 30-year career in education. Instrumental in the creation of the Murray Seminary, he had it built adjacent to his property; his wife and two of his daughters both taught there through the 1860s. Highly unusual for the time, the girls had attended college, probably at Nashville. Dr. Boggs enlisted in the Southern army during the Civil War and spent much of the war in a northern prison camp. In Dr. Hart's possession are numerous letters Dr. Boggs wrote to his wife with instructions for the management of the school. Returning to Murray after the war, he continued to teach, and then accepted the position of Calloway county's first county commissioner (or superintendent) of schools. The position was created by legislation in 1856; the commissioner's duties were as follows: "receives reports; visits the schools; grants teachers' certificates; holds Teacher's Institutes; disburses money, and decides all questions of difference, difficulty or doubt." (11) Across the state, there was great variation in the competency levels of the commissioners. As the carefully worded narratives and detailed financial reports in the 1872-1974 County Commissioner Ledger reveal, Dr. Boggs was conscientious to a fault, visiting each of the 52 school districts in Calloway County on a regular basis. He also organized Calloway County's first Teacher Institute, "July 28-31, 1873, for training teachers, and secured the services of Dr. J.B. Reynolds of Louisville as the instructor, paying the impressive amount of \$40. He was quite pleased with the investment:

Dr. Reynolds displayed splendid skill and ability in instilling in the minds of pupil teachers the most feasible and successful methods of teaching the various branches embraced in the public school curriculum.

Seven prospective teachers attended; only five were granted certificates, however. This Teacher Institute it is the forerunner to Murray State University, although it goes without mention in the University's published history.

In 1872, when Dr. Boggs took the state position, the community, no doubt with his urging, considered a new school. Kirby and Dorothy Jennings, who co-wrote a history of Calloway County, remark that the seminary building “served its noble purpose until 1870.” (12) They explain that building and the land were sold that year, although a special act of the state legislature was necessary before that could happen. The profit amounted to \$6,000, and, with that money, a group of “far-seeing and public minded citizens,” the elected trustees of the school district set out to establish Murray as a “seat of learning.”(13) The names of those citizens exist today in Murray’s street names, businesses and family heritage: W.J. Stubblefield, R.L. Ellison, R.C. Beckham, Thomas R. Jones, William Holland, William Ryan, and John McElrath.

Their first step was to organize stock company and issue bonds, which were sold to private individuals. With \$17,500—a small fortune in those days—the trustees found the best builder in the Purchase and staked out a site on the edge of town, on the corner of Eighth and Main Streets. They called their new school “The Murray Male and Female institute.” A contemporary historian, considered it, “the handsomest school structure west of the Tennessee River...an ornament to the town of Murray.” (14) A 1904 etching shows an imposing brick building, faced with stone, with a peaked roof and a cupola. Three sets of narrow rectangular windows grace the front; the windows are rounded at the top, and each is trimmed with decorative brick. The doors in the entryway are oddly similar to the doors on the Murray Middle School building today. The stonework on the 1922 building was salvaged from an earlier building; there is, therefore, a possibility that it is the same.

A memoir by Hugh McElrath, written in 1955, describes the school in detail.

It was a good house, well designed and built—the plan of someone who had a good appreciation for balance and proportion. It was said to have been the best school building in western Kentucky, and was indeed a monumental effort toward public education for a small inland community of less than 300 people. (15)

McElrath’s father was one of the trustees; his grandfather, Henry Nold, was the Institute’s first principal, and his mother was its first clerk. On the building’s first floor were four classrooms for the younger students, he explains, and there were two classrooms upstairs for the more advanced ones, as well as a large chapel, or auditorium:

A small rostrum was placed between the two doors leading from the hall. Here the principal had his desk. The bell rope hung down in easy reach. The piano and bookcase were on the north ... two large pot-bellied stoves in the chap and one in each of the other rooms furnished ample heat. In the southwest upstairs classroom there was a stairway, and in a closet under this stairs, the skeleton used in teaching physiology. Yes, a real human skeleton that cost one hundred dollars—and that was real money in those days. (16)

Contrast this with the description of a typical Kentucky schoolhouse written by Governor Preston Leslie in 1871:

A little square, squatty, unhewed log building, blazing in the sun, standing upon the dusty highway or some bleak and barren spot that has been robbed of every tree and blossoming shrug, without yard, fence, or other surroundings suggestive of comfort to abate its bare, cold, hard, and hateful look, is the fit representative of the distract schoolhouses of the

commonwealth ... it seems to have been built simply for a pen for prisoners, at the smallest outlay of money, labor or skill; to call it economy would be making fun of the language. It stands an offense to justice, kindness, taste, without an apology for its hideous blot upon the site. It invites no one to its interior, and sends a shudder through the frame of the pupil, daily, who approaches it. (17)

Four teachers and “Professor” Nold comprised the faculty of the Institute, none of the teachers came from the Murray area, because the trustees thought their students would have a better perspective on the world if they were taught by people who had seen a little of it. There was a free term of five months for the children of Murray, and a “subscription” (tuition) term of five months that drew students from the surrounding area who boarded with local families while they attended school. School exhibitions, where the students stood in front of visiting parents to solve arithmetic problems and recite poetry, took the place of report cards. Art, music, drama, and literature were emphasized, and Murray took pride in its reputation as a cultural center. (18) Traveling entertainers performed on the Institute’s stage, and lyceums and chatauquas took place within its walls. (19)

In another article, Hugh McElrath expresses his pride in the community’s ten-year involvement with the “Redpath Chautauqua.” Financed by the Murray businesses, the Chautauqua presented speakers, singers of national reputation, scientific programs—a wide range of unusual performances. But perhaps more to be remembered, there were Broadway hits, Gilbert and Sullivan operas—yes, an many in the community first heard grand opera singers, Shakespearean plays, and symphonic bands conducted by world famous conductors. (20)

Not only did this enrich the lives of the community’s adults, but it affected the young people as well, a “lasting link in our cultural heritage.” (21)

Twelve years after the founding of the Murray Male and Female Institute, in 1884, the Legislature enacted the Common School Law, the most comprehensive set of reforms affecting education yet passed by the state. It set up a general plan of school organization on the state, county, and district levels; defined the length of the school year (from three to five months); and defined the duties of Boards of Education and duties of the trustees. It also regulated the course of study and provided free textbooks for indigent children. A law making school compulsory for children was not passed until 1896—without the governor’s signature. It required all children between the ages of 8 and 14 to spend at least eight weeks a year in school.



In 1904, the Murray Male and Female Institute caught fire (“in some unaccountable way,” reports a contemporary source (22)) and was burned to the ground. All records were lost. For the next two years, classes met in an abandoned clothing factory at the end of Poplar Street while the people of Murray build a new school on the sales of the old. According to the 1915 Murray High School yearbook, students who graduated in those years always liked to say they’d attended the “Murray Male and Female Pants Factory.” (23).

Construction of the new building was paid for primarily with state funds, an indication that education in Murray was about to change. The Class of 1906, to first to graduate from the new building, was also the

first to experience the new four-year curriculum set by the state, rather than the three-year high school course of study the Institute had established in 1872.

In 1908, the Kentucky legislature enacted legislation requiring public high schools to be established in each county, setting a minimum school tax, and making the county the administrative unit for the state plan for education. Murray, however, already possessed its high school, and although the other districts in the county were consolidated as the Calloway County School district, the city remained the Murray Independent School District.

The new "Murray Graded School Building" was itself destroyed by fire, in 1919, and the new structure, again built on the ashes of the old, now houses Murray Middle School.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Thomas D. Clark, *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1997), p. 746)

(2) Roy Weatherly, September 6, 1997, Murray High School assembly

(3) Hambleton Tapp and James C. Klotter, "Educating the People in Kentucky," IN *From the Fort to the Future*, edited by Edwina A. Doyle, Ruby Layson, and Anne Armstrong Thompson, (Lexington, KY: Kentucky Images, 1987), p. 105.

(4) *Ibid*, p. 744

(5) *Ibid*

(6) J.H. Battle, W.H. Perrin, and G.C. Kniffin. *Kentucky: A History of the State*, (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press), Volume II, p. 32

(7) *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.

(8) Barksdale Hamlet, *History of Education in Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Department of Education, 1914), p. 39

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 61

(10) Tapp and Klotter, p. 105.

(11) Hamlet, p. 74.

(12) Jennings, Dorothy, and Jennings, Kirby, *A History of Calloway County* (Murray, Kentucky, self-published, 1978), p. 46

(13) Hugh McElrath, *Dr. McElrath's Murray* (Unpublished manuscript, 1964), p. 13.

(14) Battle, p. 320.

(15) McElrath, p. 15.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 19.

(17) Quoted by Tapp, p. 108.

(18) The Murray High School *Pennant*, (yearbook) 1915, p. 24.

(19) McElrath, p. 17.

(20) *Ibid.*

(21) *Ibid.*

(22) quoted in the 1915 Murray High School *Pennant*.

(23) *Ibid.*

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