

Section 3: School Days

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, education was considered mainly a family or local responsibility, not a responsibility of the state. Schooling was conducted in the home or in small, one-room school houses. The curriculum centered on reading, writing, and arithmetic along with moral and religious training. One purpose of learning to read was to be able to read the Bible for oneself. Most teachers at this time were men. They were paid little, often had only a rudimentary education and would live in a home in the community. There was no formal education in most communities. Boys were taught the skills of farming or apprenticed to learn a trade. For the girls, homemaking was considered the main priority. However, children of professionals received a wider education. Elizabeth Ann was taught French, music, and painting.

In 1805, a widowed Elizabeth Ann Seton opened a school for girls in New York City because of the need to support herself and her children. Sadly, during the most vulnerable time in her life, many of her friends did not agree with her decision to become a Catholic and would not send their children to her school. This could not have been an easy time for her. It must have been reassuring to her then when Father Dubourg requested she move to Baltimore, Maryland and begin a school in that state where a population of Catholics had already settled. She did just that; and later, in 1809, she traveled to Emmitsburg, MD, where she would establish the first free school for girls staffed by religious sisters. This was significant in several ways: it was a free school; and because “as late as 1815...not a single state had a comprehensive public school system. Instead, schooling became primarily the responsibility of private institutions, most of which were open only to those who could afford to pay for them.”¹ Her school would educate girls, though not just any girls but poor Catholic girls, and it was the first of its kind in the United States.

Mother Seton has been called a pioneer in Catholic education. This “free school” in Emmitsburg, which began on February 22, 1810, was a prototype for the Catholic parochial school system. Before her death in 1821, her Sisters had gone out from the Emmitsburg valley to staff five schools in Philadelphia and New York.

Carefully read the following accounts, in which Mother Seton talks about different aspects of school life in her time. Then try the activities listed there.

¹ Quote from American History 7th edition, vol. 1: to 1877. Copyright 1987, Knopf, New York.

LETTER 5 to Father Simon Bruté 1816



“...I will tell you in what I know Americans parents to be most difficult-in hearing the faults of their children. In most instances, when you see the faults are not to be immediately corrected by the parents but rather by good advice and education, it is best not to speak of them to papa and mama, who feel as if you reflected on their very selves. While to you it will be, ‘Yes sir, I know...’ in the heart they think it is not so much and will soften and excuse the child [of] what they condemn to us, and our efforts afterwards avail very little.”

ACTIVITY

Does this remind you of your parents? Do you think parents of colonial times were much like the parents of today? Would you think this way if you were a parent?

LETTER 6 from Sister Rose White’s journal: teaching schedule and regulations for the school week at St. Joseph’s 1812



“[Morning]-first class of grammar, Monday and Thursday, begins at 8:30 to 9:30; second class every day- Tuesday and Friday from 8:30-9:30, half of them sent alternately to writing; second class of spelling from 9:30-10:30 during which the third class will alternately go to figures and writing; third class of spelling from 10:30-11:30 during which the second will go alternately to figures and writing; from 11:30-12:30 the second and third classes will read alternately English... and French... Any of either class not learning French will read to [Sister Jane]... if necessary. Afternoon-second class of geography, during which French read alternately to Sr. Elizabeth; third class of geography, [Sister Jane]...; second class of reading, Sr. Margaret... Monday and Thursday; third class of reading [Sr. Jane]... Monday and Thursday, first class parsing; Thursday and Friday, second and third class[es] parsing, while second class parse, third class read French or repeat.”

“...third class of grammar everyday, heard while first class writes; Monday and Thursday second class of grammar, half sent alternately to writing; first class of reading from 10:15 to 11:15; first class or spelling from 11:15 to 12:15; first class of geography (repetition) on Tuesday and Friday, four may read French alternately during the repetition; class of bookkeeping on Monday and Thursday succeeds the hour of writing, three quarters of an hour... first class of reading (six), each one five minutes, each to correct the other while the first class are writing; heathen mythology and French vocabulary 12:30. Afternoon- Monday, Tuesday, and Friday, a given quantity of French translation; Tuesday and Friday, practical geography; Monday and Thursday, Sister Fanny’s second class of reading assist [Sister] Cecilia with work.”

“The mode of teaching [is] not uniform. Can a child leave fine sewing occasionally? ... Ought the angel [Sister in charge of the children] to be in the class room? Confusion on change of class... Children leaving school for drink, etc. Abuse going to clothes room... Silence in dormitory. Fruit withheld as punishment... Children sent out during class. Postures to be mended.”

LETTER 7 Elizabeth Ann Seton to Mr. Basil S. Elder 1813



January 18- "Among our fifty odd children we have very few as good as Eleanor... When you write her, you will speak to her of the necessity of silence in her class, diligence at her needle, and condescension to her playmates; these three points she is most deficient in, though really not materially faulty... If you really wish her to learn music... she must... sacrifice a part of the time allotted to needlework as... she could not be spared at any other time without too great a sacrifice of reading, grammar, spelling, or arithmetic so essential at her age. Additional charge for music is \$8 a quarter."

ACTIVITIES

1. How many subjects that the children studied can you pick out in the letter? Do you have these same subjects today? Compare and contrast the curriculum of Mother Seton's time with that of today.
2. In what ways was a colonial child's school life much different than your own?
3. Create an advertisement to be used in the colony to persuade someone to send their daughters to Mother Seton's school.