

# History of Cumberland County

## Public Education

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The North Carolina and Virginia settlers who first came to Cumberland County brought their education with them. The isolation of the homesteads, however, made it very difficult for children to receive an education similar to their parents; thus, the level of the population's education declined on the Plateau.

By the time of the Civil War, enough people lived in the many small communities scattered across Cumberland County to start subscription schools. A teacher or preacher would board with one of the families in a settlement and hold classes in the home for a two to three-month school year. Other families in the settlement would pay \$1 monthly tuition per child to provide an \$8 to \$10 monthly salary for the teacher. Even this \$1 tuition was often too much a burden for families with many children. Some families had to let their children take turns going to school. Eventually, little school buildings were built by the families in many of these small but growing communities. The 1860 Census set the total free population of the county at 3,352: 321 of this population had attended school within the past year, and eight were teachers.

### 19TH CENTURY EDUCATION

**Education Act of 1873:** The State of Tennessee in its 1834 Constitution recognized the need and value of public education, making it a responsibility of the state and local communities. It was not until 1873, however, that the state required local support of schools. In that year the state legislature made it obligatory upon county courts to supplement state aid by such an amount as would sustain schools for five months a year. County courts were required to lay out school districts and provide for district directors. The directors were to employ teachers and pay them until the district money ran out. To provide funds for education, however, the Act only recommended that taxes be levied and divided among districts, a recommendation that did not receive a generous response by many county courts. In 1873, 1,285 school-aged children lived in the County. The town of Crossville had two stores and 75 people.

**1886 Education County Report:** In 1886, the County and state funding of public education amounted to \$1 per student. There were 46 school districts in the County but only 35 schools, one serving the African-Americans living in Tate Town. Several school districts were in debt and had no schools. The total school population was 1881: 1,065 Euro-American boys, 800 Euro-American girls, 9 Afri-American boys, and 7 Afri-American girls. The total school budget was \$2,435 which included salaries of the 40 teachers and a superintendent. Teachers received an average monthly salary of \$24. The school year lasted 55 days. In 1888, the estimated value of district school property was \$3,025. During the 1880s, the state began requiring the county to have what were called Teacher Institutes to help upgrade the teaching skills of the teachers who by and large had little formal education.

**Church and Private High Schools:** The 1880s saw the beginning of our County's secondary education through private and church efforts. The State in 1856 provided funds to establish academies, the term then used for advanced elementary schools, but the county did not act to

provide a public high school until 1908. In 1886, Webster Academy in Crossville opened, a joint venture between a private entrepreneur and the Masons.

Pleasant Hill Academy, established in 1884, was the first school in the county and region to offer advanced elementary and early high school courses. It continued to serve the educational needs of the community until 1947. This self-sufficient boarding school was supported by the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church. Another school started by this church in 1888 was in the Congregational Church of Crossville. The City of Crossville paid for half of the construction costs. The church provided two college graduates as teachers and kept the school open nine months a year. Many students graduating from this school became teachers in the local elementary schools. Other private academies started in Grassy Cove, Pomona, and Hebbertsburg.

**1890s Education:** In the 1890s, the local school superintendent was able to report that the school year had increased to 70 days. Per pupil expenditure had risen to \$3, and nearly all of the 42 schools (38 log, 4 frame) had blackboards. Supt. J.W. Dorton asked the county court to provide funds for more school houses, wood stoves, charts, maps, and teacher pay. 63% of school age children were enrolled. A teacher's monthly pay held steady at \$24. Total educational expenditures had risen to \$3,348.

## 20TH CENTURY EDUCATION

**Education Reform Act of 1907:** The early 1900s saw this century's first wave of educational reform. At this time in Tennessee, the five-month school year prescribed by law was not enforced. There were no public high schools. Less than 50% of eligible students attended. There were no state colleges for teacher training. To meet these challenges, and with the encouragement of the state superintendent of schools, a school improvement league called the Cooperative Education Association formed and brought together professionals, business and civic leaders under one banner. Its platform called for increased state and local funding, school consolidation, better teacher training, high schools, elimination of politics and nepotism from schools, and intelligent use of school funds. Reform rallies were held in every county across the state, and candidates were induced to support the reform platform. In 1907, the TN General Assembly passed legislation that put each of the county schools under one board of seven members. In 1909, the legislature mandated that 25% of all state revenue go toward public education. Monies were made available to each county by enrollment for general education, high schools, school libraries, and teacher training. The University of Tennessee was made part of the state's school system.

**First Public High School:** In 1908, the County Court, urged by the Exchange Club and other groups, established a high school. This first high school was in the Old Court House, now the Historical Society Museum, on Main Street. Students from around the county were boarded in town.

**Education Reform Act of 1912:** In 1912, the state raised the general school fund to one-third of the state's gross revenue. School attendance was made compulsory. Uniform examination and certification of teachers were required. Schools were encouraged to consolidate, and transportation of students was funded.

**Education Reform Act of 1925:** The next wave of educational reform led by educators, business and civic leaders crested in the General Education Law of 1925. The state provided funds to

support an 8-month school term and teacher salaries. A state salary schedule was set. The state provided greater support for high schools through a general building program.

**County Education 1920s - 1940s:** The Cumberland Mountain School, a Methodist boarding school, opened in 1921 and operated until 1939. \$5,000 was budgeted in 1926 to pay all of the county's high school teachers. In 1930, the Old High School building across from the hospital was built. The average teacher's salary was \$32 monthly. In 1933, the Tennessee Education Association was organized. After World War II, the state and community could get back to improving education. In 1947, the state legislature enacted the General Sales Tax, most of the funds being used for education.

**County Education 1950s:** During the mid-1950's, Cumberland County had three high schools (City, Pleasant Hill, and Homesteads) and 30 elementary schools scattered across the county. 5,093 children were enrolled. Most of the monies for public education came from the state (84% of a \$731,000 school budget). The County Commission asked Peabody Teacher College to study its school system and suggest ways it could improve. Peabody told the county that it contributed less to public education than most counties in Tennessee and that the county could do better. Only 55% of the teachers in the county schools were graduates of college. The low salary of elementary teachers meant a high turnover: \$2,115 compared to a national average of \$3,932. The educational quality was judged to vary widely among the schools. The average class size was 33 students. Buildings were not well maintained. Out of 100 pupils in first grade in 1945 only 25 finished high school in 1956 - a dropout rate of 75%. The Peabody report recommended that the high school seek accreditation and that health services be provided through the schools.

**County Education 1960-1970s:** During the 1960s through 1970s, communities tended to leave education to the professionals. These were the years of consolidation and the consequent hard-feelings of local communities when their small schools were closed. The present high school was built in 1962. Funding for public schools increased. By 1967, TN ranked 11th among states in the amount the state appropriated for education, but because of lagging local contributions, TN students ranked 46th in what was spent on their education.

**National Education Reform Background:** The 1980s saw the next wave of educational reforms sweep through the state and nation. It started with growing public concern that, despite increased funding and better trained teachers, students were not being well educated. Tighter budgets made policymakers more focused on how the taxpayers' dollars were spent. The public and policy makers wanted accountability and measures of performance, but neither could be found. Then in 1983, the Department of Education's National Commission on Education released its report, *A Nation at Risk*, which detailed how student achievement was slipping behind what students in other developed countries were doing. This report is credited with kicking off the present period of educational reforms.

**National Education Reform Trends:** Parents and policymakers wanted to improve quality of instruction and increase accountability through testing and changing accreditation standards. High school students were required to take more courses to graduate. Teacher certification requirements were made stiffer, and teacher salaries increased as a way to improve competency and retention. Administrators were expected to become educational leaders through increased education requirements and professional development. Programs for special populations - the gifted, disabled,

the economically at risk - were mandated. State aid was increased, and attempts were made to make it more equitable.

**TN Education Reform Act of 1984:** In Tennessee, the Comprehensive Education Reform Act of 1984 brought many of these reforms home: Career Ladder for teachers and administrators, increased evaluation of teachers and principals, restructuring of the state school board, encouragement of school systems to provide for Kindergarten and first grade readiness, testing of high school students for minimum proficiency in basic subjects, increased graduation requirements, and detailed statewide standardized curriculum frameworks. In 1985, Basic Skills testing was implemented. This was to be used as a tool to identify at risk students who needed more help in mastering the basics.

**Education Reform Act of 1992:** In 1991, the TN Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the State's system of funding public education because all TN public school students are entitled to "substantially equal educational opportunities" regardless of where they live. This decision was in response to the 1988 suit brought by 77 rural school systems that claimed funding inequities between wealthy and poor school systems.

The Educational Improvement Act of 1992 resolved this inequity to the Court's satisfaction since it based state funding on a county's fiscal capacity. The State also increased the sales tax, allocating all the new revenue to school improvement through its Basic Education Program (BEP.) These new funds primarily paid for new teachers to decrease class sizes and the introduction of computer technology into classrooms. Other reforms increased accountability of local school systems, individual schools, and teachers as measured through the TN Comprehension Assessment Program (TCAP), results reported annually by the state through system report cards.

## 21ST CENTURY EDUCATION

The story of public education has come a long way since the arrival of the first settlers in Cumberland County. The road from the subscription schools to what we have today has been long and often difficult. We can take strength from the educational progress this community has made to go further down that road to give each one of our community's children the best education available.

In the years ahead, we can look forward to more efforts to improve education. We have the challenge to provide every child with a meaningful education, reducing the barriers of racism, poverty, and disability that make it difficult for many children to learn. This time, however, rather than looking toward the state, we the people of Cumberland County must develop within our own community the will to nurture and support the educational development of our children.

**REFERENCES:** Jack Brizius, et. al. *Educational Reform in Rural Appalachia: 1982-87*, Appalachian Regional Commission, June 1988; Helen Bullard and Joseph Krechniak, *Cumberland County's First Hundred Years*, Crossville Centennial Commission, 1956; Stanley Folmsbee, et. al. *Tennessee: A Short History*, UT Press/Knoxville, 1969; W.D. McClurkin, et. al. *Public Schools in Cumberland County, TN: A Survey Report*, Peabody College for Teachers/Nashville, 1955; W. Calvin Dickinson, *Cumberland County*, TN Tech Univ. 1992.

The Obed Community Association has as its purpose community appreciation and volunteer involvement in ongoing appreciation for our natural and cultural heritage of the Obed River watershed within Cumberland County. Louise Gorenflo, OWCA community educator, produced this fact sheet. Those wanting to join this membership organization or more information may contact OWCA at 484-2633 or at 185 Hood Drive, Crossville, TN 38555.