

A Calvert County Treasure – two 1880's One- Room School Houses

That provides a 'view of the past' in early education

What a difference 130 years make! The Maryland House & Garden Pilgrimage on May 17 includes two carefully restored one-room school houses that offer an authentic story of early education in Calvert County. Old photographs and memories from oral history provide a 'snapshot' of time during segregation when the Port Republic School #7 educated hundreds of white students and the Old Wallville School provided education for African American students.

The Wallville School House which was in operation until 1934 is one of the few such structures still in existence in the state. Originally located in Wallville where it was first used as a white school, the building was rescued from destruction and relocated in Prince Frederick near the Board of Education building. The restoration of both schools was based on oral histories collected from former students and teachers and reflects the schools' appearances in the 1930's. The Port Republic School was built in 1876 and restored by the Calvert Retired Teachers Association as a bicentennial project in 1976. Walk into each of the schools and imagine sitting three to a bench in a chilly room around a pot-bellied stove for your lessons.

Children in 1900's must have been taught by resolute, persevering and tenacious angels in their one-room school houses. According to rules posted at Port Republic School #7, when teachers were hired they were asked to abide by rules which today we would find unacceptable. Among other things required of them: they were not to marry; they were to spend 10 hours a day at the school; they were to sweep the floors daily, and scrub them with soap and water weekly; they were to provide a scuttle of coal or wood for the fire in the stove each morning, and a bucket of water and dipper from the nearest stream for the children's drinking water; they were to dress neatly and modestly with no bright colors; their skirts were to be no higher than 2 inches above their ankles; they were to spend their evenings at home reading the Bible or other good books; and they were not to be seen loitering in the ice cream parlor. One teacher at the Port Republic School had a 14-year engagement before her marriage because she didn't want to give up her job.

Young men teachers, in addition, were neither to be shaved by the barber nor to frequent pool halls; they might court two nights a week but no more, all of this on pain of dismissal. Both men and women teachers were counseled to save a portion of their pittance pay for their old age, and to attend church each Sunday.

For students lucky enough to attend these schools in the late 1890's, it meant trekking several miles through the woods with lunch pails in hand. While schools by law were required to be placed within a three-mile radius, black students often had a much farther journey, using cast-off textbooks from white schools with black teachers that were paid less. Education was valued by all.

Port Republic School #7 has a number of old photos of the teachers and students of long ago. Old Wallville School and Port Republic School have been lovingly restored and give one a good feel for what it was like to attend school here long ago. Oral histories were crucial in restoring the buildings and telling the stories that make these buildings come alive.

What a wonderful opportunity to honor the educators who served us well, and the buildings that housed the very beginnings of public education for our youth. The Calvert tour of the Maryland House and Garden Pilgrimage is sponsored by the Calvert Garden Club on May 17 from 10 am to 5 pm (rain or shine). For more information about all 11 sites, see www.mhgp.org or www.calvertgardenclub.com. Tickets are \$30 in advance; \$35 on site. Proceeds benefit the restoration of gardens at the Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum.

Submitted by Annette Davis