



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MONOGRAPH

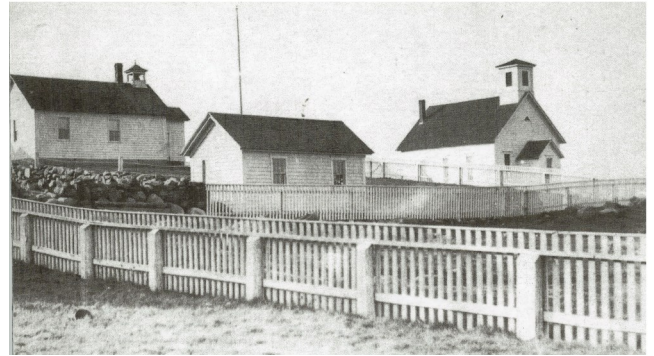
SUMMER 2023

CONTINUITY AMIDST CHANGE: THE CUTTYHUNK SCHOOL AT 150

When the Cuttyhunk Elementary School first opened its doors in 1873, the one-room schoolhouse was typical of the spaces in which the majority of American schoolchildren learned. Today it is the only one of its kind left in Massachusetts, and in large part across the country. In the intervening 150 years, it has both exemplified and defied broader trends in American education, but it has always functioned as a microcosm of Cuttyhunk.

The school is the oldest of the current town buildings clustered at the base of Tower Hill. Its predecessors reach even further back in time: there has been a school presence on the Elizabeth Islands as early as the mid-18th century, with town records showing appropriation of funds in 1754 and again in 1789-90 for a school that was likely located on Cuttyhunk. In the 19th century, the community experimented with various venues for educating its children. In the 1840s Holder and Mary Allen first hosted a schoolroom in their home (which hasn't survived), and then built a separate building on their property. At some point before the late 1850s the building was moved—by oxen!—up to the top of Tower Hill to assist Allen's piloting (guiding ships to port), since the resident teacher served as his lookout. In the days when piloting, a crucial means of income for islanders, was a competitive market—first spotted, first hired—relocating the school to the lookout resulted in quicker intelligence to Allen (and probably less time lost in class!).

The decision to build a new school in the 1870s marked a shift in the town's formal commitment to primary education, and reflected the growing influence of Horace Mann's "common school" movement, which aimed to democratize access to education by providing every community with a free primary school. Mann's reforms were rooted in his study of Massachusetts education, and in 1860 the state mandated universal compulsory primary schooling; each school's calendar, curriculum, and infrastructure remained matters of local control. On Cuttyhunk, the land for the new school was purchased or acquired from the Slocums' holdings, possibly via the Cuttyhunk Club. Many of the features



Gosnold Town Center c.1900
Left to right Schoolhouse, Library and Church
The fencing kept the sheep out of the public space.

that were used in the Cuttyhunk School from the start followed Mann's recommendations and still epitomize classic classrooms: desks and chairs with backs (to counteract the spinal effects Mann feared of backless benches), a bell to broadcast the rhythms of the school day, blackboards, and standardized textbooks. The new school's first teacher was Annette Stetson Veeder, and within ten years enrollment was up to 18 scholars.

In addition to its educational mission, the schoolhouse served other municipal functions for the Town of Gosnold in the decades before there was a town hall (built 1926), particularly by holding town meetings and elections, and it's possible it served as a religious meeting house before the church was erected in 1881. A report by a visitor from the mainland who attended the Town Meeting of 1902 spoke in glowing terms of the school as a learning environment: "The voters assembled in the schoolhouse, while the dozen or so youngsters who usually occupied the desks rejoiced in a day of freedom. Plain and simple outside, the interior of the school was cheery and comfortable. Modern desks filled the single room. At a glance one could see that Cuttyhunk had a school as efficient as those of many a larger town on the mainland."

1902 was a significant year for Cuttyhunk, marking the tricentennial of Gosnold's landing, and for American education, as the publication year of John Dewey's landmark book *The Curriculum and the Child*, in which he tried to forge a middle ground between the "old education" (characterized by highly structured, teacher-centered classrooms oriented around rote memorization) and the "new education" (which jettisoned structure altogether). For Dewey, adaptability was key, since each student's "learnings and achievements are fluid and moving. They change from day to day and from hour

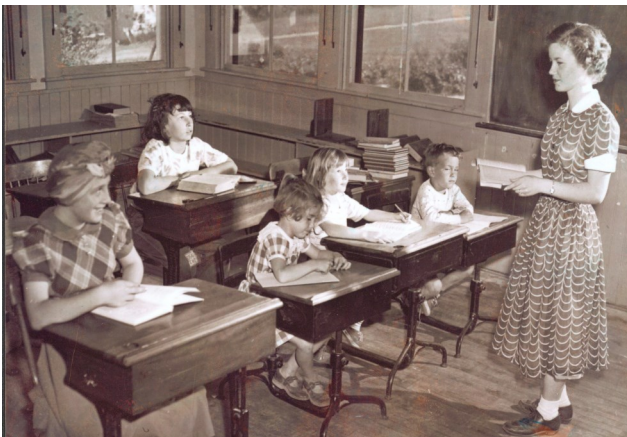


Annette Stetson Veeder
(1857-1935)

Thought to be the first teacher in the new Schoolhouse.

to hour.” All the same, from the Progressive Era onward, U.S. school systems grappled with where to fall between the poles of standardized vs. customized instruction, teacher vs. student centeredness, passive vs. active learning.

Whether by design or default, Cuttyhunk’s classroom provided a ready venue for a more holistic and individualized approach. The school district resisted centralizing and modernizing pressures to divide into grade-level classrooms and to consolidate rural schools into larger administrative units, retaining instead its highly localized, individualized character. Of course, it was the teachers who determined whether and how to execute more “traditional” or “progressive” approaches. But it was not always easy to strike the right balance of meeting requirements and conducting assessments while treating each student as a whole person with unique gifts and needs. As Louise Taylor Haskell put it in her 1947 school report: “Sometimes I wish there were no such things as marks and report cards. For since each pupil is an individual personality with very different character traits and with differing abilities such standard norms as marks and report cards fail to tell the whole story and often cause heart aches and discouragement. In many cases a mark of fair means far more effort and accomplishment for some other pupil.”



Catherine “Katie” Carney
the only 8th grade graduate in 1953.
here she is shown helping younger classmates
left to right Sandra Tilton, grade 5,
Bonnie Veeder, grade 4, Elaine Tilton,
Carlyn Veeder and Jimmy Tilton, all grade 1

The district typically employed one teacher per year, except in years when multiple teachers were assigned to different terms. (The spouses of the teachers also provided unpaid labor, such as George Haskell, who taught lessons in local ecology, and Nancy Hornbach, who was a trained teacher like her husband and provided tutoring support.) Some teachers came with many years of experience elsewhere, while others cut their teeth in the Cuttyhunk classroom right after completing their own education. By the early 20th century, a strong majority of teachers in the U.S. were women, and the Cuttyhunk School is no exception. Before the Second World War, the vast majority of these were unmarried professionals.

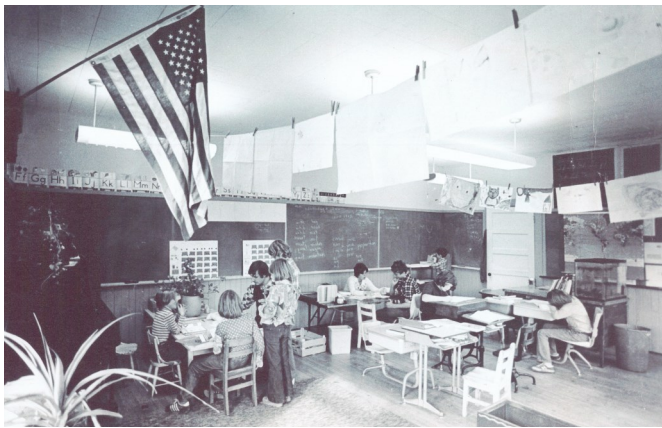
By far the longest-serving teacher in the school’s 150-year history was Louise Taylor Haskell, who taught from 1926 to

1949. Beloved by generations of students and remembered for her care, generosity, and creative pedagogy, Haskell made a lifelong vocation out of island teaching (despite her claim that she intended to stay only a year!). As Seamond Ponsart Roberts remembers, she “taught me to love learning.” U.S. primary school enrollments grew along with the population in the first half of the 20th century, though it dipped during the Depression. By contrast, the 1930s were a high-water mark for Cuttyhunk’s enrollments, reaching 17 in 1934-35, and school days provided students with an escape from hard times. During Haskell’s tenure, a typical day began with the raising of the flag—a duty rotated among students—and the pledge of allegiance, with grade-specific instruction in the morning and multi-grade learning in the afternoon. Roberts appreciated the chance to interact directly with older students during fun activities like quiz shows, and to emulate the older children by writing on the blackboard. Haskell was widely remembered for her music lessons, which she gave on the piano in the schoolroom. In 1930 the school committee purchased a radio, which allowed new means of connection to the wider world and enriched Haskell’s arts curriculum, particularly through NBC’s “Music Appreciation Hour” with Walter Damrosch, an outgrowth of the interwar movement to popularize classical music with young people; indeed, listening to these Friday afternoon broadcasts in the Cuttyhunk schoolroom gave many of Haskell’s students an enduring love of music. She also started a 4-H Club and woodworking collective. In 1953 she wrote *The Story of Cuttyhunk*, commissioned by the school committee and dedicated to all her students, which remains an invaluable resource for public history.

The WWII years were a formative experience for the school, as they were for the whole island. Seamond Ponsart Roberts, whose parents were Octave Ponsart, the last lighthouse keeper, and Emma Cornell, who had also attended the school with all of her siblings, remembered the island as an “armed camp.” She lived with her family in the lighthouse on the West End, which was quite isolated, and she listened longingly to her island cousins who would “regale her with school stories.” Although Seamond was only four years old, Haskell discovered that she had learned to read and invited her to enroll as a first grader: “a landmark day for this happy little lighthouse kid!” The military transport that connected the bases on the West End and the Neck provided Roberts’s daily ride to school, and she typically had lunch at the Haskell home over Louis Ramos’s store; when foul weather prevented her return home, she happily stayed overnight with cousins in town, having notified her father via the Coast Guard’s crank telephone. For her part, Haskell did not remember the war years with such fondness, as fuel shortages forced the school to close in the winter of 1943 (the shortfall to be made up on spring Saturdays), and family deployments made school attendance fall to single digits.

The war proved a turning point for the school in many ways, and enrollments never recovered their pre-war numbers. Yet individualized learning continued to be a hallmark, with attendant challenges and benefits. Some teachers found exclusive one-on-one teaching difficult, either with a single student per grade or overall; Carolyn Cooper observed in 1963 that “the magic stimulation of the class situation is absent between one pupil and one teacher.” All the same, the intensive teacher-student contact got results. The 1955 town report

lauded Hazel Warren for ensuring that all of the students who had started behind were now “approaching their grade level rapidly.” The multi-disciplinary curriculum also stayed rich, going far beyond the “3 Rs” in its scope. Ella Mae Fallon reported of her first year in 1964-5 that she “found the curriculum carefully organized, the classroom pleasant and well stocked with supplies and the students active, interested, and cooperative. We continue to work to develop the basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics; to add to the students’ knowledge of the natural world about them; to stimulate a concern for people within our community and in the larger world community; to create a love for art and music and to enlarge the avenues of self-expression therein provided.” Still, the “3 Rs” themselves remained important. In 1959 Warren introduced the phonics method for learning reading. John Hornbach made reading the main focus of his teaching when he began in 1973, using the Stanford achievement test, and Nancy tutored algebra, having quickly discovered that students needed extra support in this area. And the eventual necessity of post-8th grade placement in off-island schools required adhering to a common academic plan while providing additional mentoring to anticipate those transitions, as both John Hornbach and Michelle Carvalho have recalled.



John Hornbach and his wife Nancy busy at work with eight students during 1974-1975.

The diminishing numbers of students over the past 50 years reflect changing island demographics, and make the school a recurring object of fascination in the media. Particularly in years when there is only one student, and even more so when that student is the last foreseeable scholar, Cuttyhunk schooling tends to be characterized as a “lonely” experience, emblematic of an isolated island community struggling to survive—as shown by press profiles of Claudia Jenkins and John Paul Hunter.

At the same time, the school has presented a remarkable record of resilience and reinvention in the last half-century, both in its own right and in teachers’ approach to the islands as a classroom. Terri Lowell’s students studied the cemetery as a joint historical and geological site and visited the sheep-shearing on Naushon. Michelle Carvalho’s students increased Cuttyhunk’s turtle and tadpole populations through the Frog Pond and Ice Pond projects, and hatched chicks in the schoolroom. (There were highs and lows to encountering these natural life cycles and selection processes up close; when Ben Parker had to go off island for a medical emergen-

cy, he learned in his absence that his chick had died.) This hands-on learning has involved collaborations with island and off-island partners (such as a Wampanoag representative who came to speak about early colonization), and produced many tangible products of the imagination: the Frog Pond Project culminated in a children’s book, and Seymour DiMare’s research on the first fallen soldier in the American Revolution inspired Carter and Gwen Lynch to write a libretto for an original musical. A staple of recent decades has been student-run newsletters and newspapers, featuring interviews with islanders and visitors and reports of curricular units and field trips. In the 1990s, these communiques benefited from the introduction of computer software and the internet, and subsequent technological innovation (e.g., faster broadband and an LCD projector) was mapped onto traditional instruction. By 2017 island students were involved in a number of remote networks with other students, including book groups and environmental action programs.

The school has also functioned as a learning space outside of the academic year. The Cuttyhunk Historical Society housed its first exhibits there before erecting its own building. The school has also hosted the summer arts camp program since the mid-1990s, and Tammy Zimbone’s watercolor workshop since 2002. Michelle Carvalho launched the STEAM Academy in 2019, and frames its goals for visiting students in the same terms she does for her Cuttyhunk students: encouraging young people to “become experts to solve problems” like the disappearance of eelgrass meadows.

In fact, the structural and infrastructural footprint of the school has changed very little since its initial construction. The oldest part of the building is the core schoolroom. In 1885 the vestibule was added for insulation and storage. In 1964 a boiler was added to replace the valiant wood stove and provide hot water. The bathroom, for many years located in the dank basement (a scary prospect for many a small child), was moved to the main floor in the 1970s following John Hornbach’s lobbying, with Joe Moore installing new plumbing. In 1958 the district began renting the church parsonage as the teacher’s residence, a practice that continued until recently when the parsonage was de-winterized.

Perhaps the most constant feature of the school over its 150-year history has been its embeddedness in the community. Michelle Carvalho, who instituted a community “welcome walk” for students on their first day of school, remarks that a “school is always integral to a community but especially so on an island.” For over a century, islanders have regularly been invited to the school for annual Christmas parties, plays and performances, and end-of-year exercises, which has helped bridge geographical or social distance on the island. One teacher, who mainly served as a sub but found herself spending the whole winter of 1917-18 on Cuttyhunk when it was “frozen over,” was grateful for the society and good cheer supplied by the school: “At Christmas we’d decorate the schoolhouse. We’d string popcorn and cranberries, [picked] up where the windmill is...We’d decorate the tree at the school and everybody took a present.” Graduations are huge events, especially when it is a class of one, showcasing the collective responsibility the community takes for each of its students. The school has also played a role in navigating island politics and mending the rifts that are so endemic to

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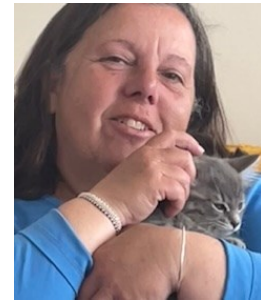
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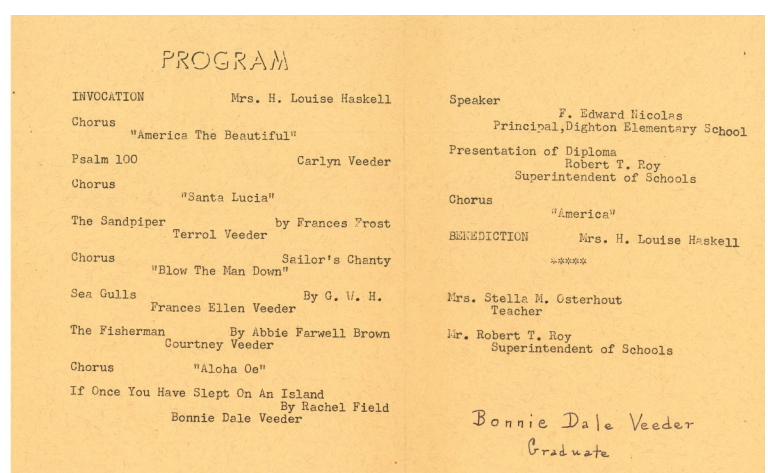
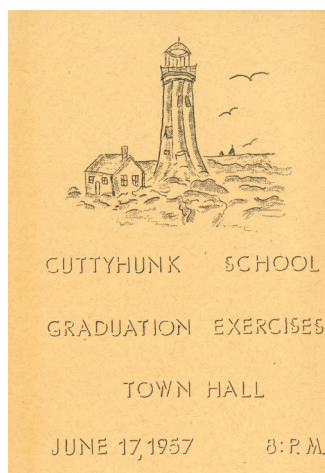
small communities. John Hornbach, who was hired by a school committee that was internally divided, instituted a regular covered-dish supper to bring islanders together over a shared meal. And the school provides extended families with a multi-generational touchstone; island students find it very meaningful to attend the same school as their parents, grandparents, and more distant forbears – Carter and Gwen Lynch, for instance, consider themselves 6th-generation alums of Cuttyhunk Elementary School.

After Gwen Lynch's graduation in 2019 the school closed, by all appearances indefinitely—a wrenching moment for the school's symbolic ties to the past. But the COVID-19 pandemic that upended schools everywhere else soon generated an unexpected opportunity to reopen the Cuttyhunk school in the 2020-21 year, with numbers not seen for decades: 4 students began in the fall, which grew to 5 in the winter and 8 in the spring. Cuttyhunk temporarily regrew its year-round population, demonstrating the island's essential resilience, while enabling the school to continue prioritizing community engagement and the natural world as a learning environment. The island lockdown did not mean students were isolated from the context of the moment: they conducted a year-long study of invasive viruses and species, with each student researching a local case study and theorizing ways of reducing impact (by, for example, turning phragmites into papermaking).

Indeed, though the school has witnessed and reflected significant historical shifts, it has provided a steady beacon in those storms of change. Whether they attended the school for a few weeks or for many years, former students all cite the deep and enduring impact of the school and its dedicated teachers. Alumni of the school have gone on to become educators themselves as well as entering numerous other professions with service at their core, based near and far—including government and military service, scientific and social research, captaining and commercial fishing, and the creative arts. Throughout its history this one-room schoolhouse has functioned variously as a classroom, lecture hall, laboratory, library, animal shelter, music room, art studio, gallery and museum, workshop, newsroom, literary salon, theatre, social hall—but always as a creative and collaborative learning space. Whatever else its future holds, it will undoubtedly continue to serve that essential purpose.



Michelle Carvalho
Most recent teacher of
Cuttyhunk Elementary School and
creator of its STEAM Academy



Graduation Exercises from June 17, 1957, honoring Bonnie Dale Veeder. Four of her siblings, Bonnie, and Mrs. Louise Haskell participated in the program along with the principal of Dighton Elementary School and Superintendent Robert Roy. Bonnie moved to the mainland to complete grades 9-12.

