



Early Schools in Whatcom

The first school on Bellingham Bay was for miners who worked at the Sehome Mine. Started during the 1850's, it was a night school. During that same time, a school for children was started across the bay in an office in the settlement of Whatcom. Both schools didn't last long.

In 1861, the first public school on Bellingham Bay was started. Built of cedar shakes and rough lumber from the Roeder saw mill, it was set on a bluff next to Maple and Cornwall streets not far from the Sehome Mine. Two little streams trickled down on both sides of the schoolhouse. Below it was a ditch that carried water down past the mine. A wooded hillside rose in front of the schoolhouse. In springtime, it was full of flowers. It was called Sehome School.

The schoolhouse was 24 feet by 16 feet. It had 5 windows, 2 on each side and one at the back of the schoolhouse which faced the bay. The wall boards were 12 inches wide and hammered onto a simple frame straight up and down. Slim pieces of wood called *battening* covered the cracks between the boards.

Inside the schoolhouse, homemade double desks lined both walls. In the center was a stove, which burned coal from the mine. Benches for small children surrounded it. At the door the teacher placed a bucket of water and a drinking ladle. Everyone drank from it, even children with colds.

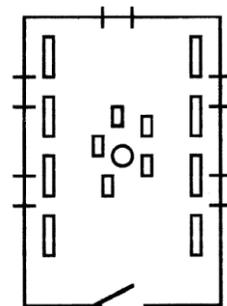


Diagram of Sehome School

George Hall, an English sailor who had jumped ship and ran away to Bellingham Bay became Sehome School's first teacher. He was an well-educated man. He taught school for three months

which was the usual school year. He was paid forty dollars a month. A couple of years later, the school board hired Mrs. John T. Griffin. She became the first woman public school teacher in Whatcom County.

Schooling was simple in the early settler days. All grades were together in one room. There were no high schools. Students brought their own school supplies from home. They wrote on **slates** with pencils made of lead or soapstone. They did their final writing in copybooks or composition books with pen and ink. All these things cost a lot of money.

Books cost the most. Sometimes families used books that they had in their homes or ordered a few for their children to share at school. The Territorial Department of Education had lists of books they wanted schools to read in the classroom. Some books were for geography and arithmetic were an important part of early settler life. A first reader cost \$.25. A reader for an older student cost \$1.20.

School children were expected to pay attention in class. To show that they knew their lessons, they were often asked to **recite**. Reciting is saying a poem or part of a play or speech. You cannot read from a book. You have to know the words by heart. One of the poems they might recite is:



“T’is royal fun” cried lazy Ned,
To coast upon my fine, new sled,
And beat the other boys;
But then, I can not bear to climb
The tiresome hill, for every time,
It more and more annoys.”

So, while his school-mates glided by, and
And gladly tugged up hill, to try
Another merry race,
Too indolent to share their plays,
Ned was compelled to stand and gaze,
While shivering in his place.

Children went to school though the eighth grade. There were no high schools in the early years. People thought that was all the education you needed. A student who wished to continue their studies could go onto an “academy” where extra subjects were taught. Those who wanted to become teachers studied this way. You could be 16 years old and be a teacher. Later Whatcom started the first high school in the northwest.

Washington Territory started school districts in the 1860’s. Twenty years later, lands in Skagit Valley separated from Whatcom County and became a new county. New school districts had to be named for Whatcom County. The City of Whatcom had the first one. It was called District Number 1. They built a new two room elementary schoolhouse right away. Later, two bigger schools were built because by 1890 there were 341 boys and 326 girls in the schools. Two of those students were hearing impaired. At one of the two elementary schools, there was one male teacher and 4 female teachers.

Sehome, Bellingham (a little town between Sehome and Fairhaven), and Fairhaven also had their school districts. Today all those districts are a part of Bellingham School District #501. There are thirteen elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools. As the city grows, there will be more. But it all started on the banks above the bay near the Sehome Mine. If you walk around the city trail near Maple Street and Cornwall Avenue you will be walking where children played long ago. If you listen you may hear them count out jump rope games or swing on a branch by the schoolhouse. If you listen you’ll know that they were happy to go school and help the towns on Bellingham Bay grow.