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Public Schools in Southwest Florida, Part I: A Photographic Essay

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The old school house, a favorite teacher, the school play, or one’s first paddling, these are memories synonymous with childhood and with school days. The right to a free, public education has become entrenched in American society, expected by parents and accepted by children. It is, indeed, hard to imagine life before the public school. Yet the public school system was well established in the rest of the United States long before it flourished in Florida.

Prior to the passage of the 1868 constitution, Florida had no established public school system. Children fortunate enough to receive an education did so in either private or “public/private” schools—a system common in the early frontier regions of America. An example of the “public/private” system was Tampa’s first school, established in 1848, and located in the county courthouse. The teacher, W.P. Wilson, began with fourteen pupils and was paid from fees collected from their parents.

Several factors contributed to the slow development of a uniform public school system, including a lack of funds, suitable facilities, supplies, and a teaching force. In addition, there was no clearly defined course of study or set of educational regulations. Other obstacles included Florida’s wilderness environment, a poor transportation system, the sparseness of settlement, widespread fear of integrated schools and apathy among state residents.

The establishment of schools remained the responsibility of the local community with little or no interference or support from state officials. And while the 1868 Constitution provided for a public school system and the 1869 school law called for a uniform educational system, neither had much effect on southwestern Florida. In the Tampa Bay area, education remained the responsibility of individuals or communities.

It was not until the late 1800s that this region saw an improvement in the educational system. The coming of the railroad opened up the frontier section of Florida, and soon a steady wave of transplanted northerners poured into the area. By 1900, towns were popping up all along the southwest coast and as the railroad stretched into the interior of the state, so did the settlements. The region became a haven for would-be entrepreneurs and for those seeking a respite from the cold northern winters. South Florida entered a boom period that ebbed and flowed but never died.

As more and more people settled in the area, they brought with them many of their native cultural institutions. One of the most important was the public school. New residents transported hometown ideas which they readily adapted to fit regional demands, often lending their educational institutions a uniqueness not found in other localities.
In the 1880s and 1890s, schools were rough in appearance with few amenities. On occasion, if funds were low and supplies limited, students and teachers might find themselves forced to attend class in a natural setting such as a sandy field, hopefully in the shade of a large oak tree. These “open air” classrooms were established, at first, out of necessity; later they became popular among founders of private schools who hoped to capitalize on Florida’s growing seasonal clientele and the state’s reputation for a healthy climate.

As cities grew, community leaders and concerned citizens established increasing numbers of public schools, though they often relied on donations from local businesses and philanthropists for buildings and educational supplies. The first schools were usually built of wood and followed the early pattern of the one room schoolhouse. These schools, however, were very susceptible to fire and many were destroyed. When towns could afford the cost, they build school houses of brick or stone which were more long-lasting. As towns built new high schools, older facilities were sometimes converted into elementary or junior high schools.

Community schools were intended to provide residents with a common bond and a local identity, and they often functioned this way for white citizens. However, racial differences were reinforced. Florida schools followed a segregated system prevalent throughout the South. If black children received any education, they were usually separated from white students. While this was the norm, there were reports of integrated classrooms in the more remote sections of the region. The influx of white settlers into the area changed this relaxed attitude, and by 1900, the towns had created separate facilities for their black students. Despite the improved educational system, the Works Progress Administration reported in 1938 that a high proportion of Florida blacks were illiterate.

As the black community grew, it was increasingly isolated from the white community. The so-called “separate but equal” doctrine of education allowed parallel but not necessarily equivalent systems of education to develop. Most black schools had many of the same traditions, clubs and courses found in the white schools, but funding was never equal and black school facilities were often inadequate. Nonetheless, school pride and local support among blacks equalled that found in the white community.

For those students who lived in the rural sections of southwest Florida, an improvised educational system was developed to fit the agricultural needs of the residents. Children who worked in the strawberry fields or picked citrus found themselves attending school on a seasonal basis, often at times when the normal school term had ended. And although Florida touted her schools as she touted her climate, this “migrant” system of education died a slow death.

As the population grew and Florida became an increasingly urban state, the public schools finally developed into the uniform system called for in the 1869 school law. The post-World War II era, brought more young families to Florida, who came as permanent residents rather than tourists. The southwestern region of the state experienced a population boom which found many towns unprepared for the increased financial burden of public education. Nevertheless, by 1950, local and state advertising campaigns never failed to boast of Florida’s educational system. Public schools were now recognized as an important element in Florida’s overall development.
A Clearwater scene, (c. 1880) taken from South Ft. Harrison Avenue looking north. To the left is the old South Ward School with the Methodist Church in the background.

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
A teacher poses with her students in front of their makeshift classroom in the 1890’s. While this thatched hut is primitive by today’s standards, children of rural Florida were fortunate to receive any educational training in this frontier era of Florida's past.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

Florida’s temperate climate made open-air schools a feasible alternative before more substantial facilities were available. (c. 1900)

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.
Largo’s Pinehurst School students, looking as though they stepped out of a Mark Twain novel, may be starting a school outing or ending a school term. Incidentally, the teacher looks as happy as the students. (c. 1905)

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.

Domestic science, the forerunner of Home Economics, was a very popular class for girls. Shown here is the class from Tomlinson School in St. Petersburg. (c. 1905)

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
As this 1908 picture of Plant High School’s chemistry class shows, science courses were becoming an increasingly important part of the school curriculum. Interestingly, this class appears to be composed entirely of girls. Principal Robert M. Ray is on the left, with Professor D.F. Pattinshall in the center.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

With their friends gathered about them, Gert and Edna Lealman of St. Petersburg have their picture taken in front of an unidentified school building. (c. 1910)

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
The 1910 St. Petersburg High School girls’ basketball team consisted of Susie Loveland, Ira Hilliard, Frances Johnston, Mary White, Elizabeth Thracher, Mae Odom (?), Betty Johnstone, Elsie Lutz, Elizabeth Ferguson, Adene Gregory, and coach, Miss M. Nelson. Although appearing cumbersome, their uniforms were less restrictive than everyday clothing.

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
Before the implementation of mandatory physical education classes, recess provided children with a recreational period combining fun with physical exercise. Here, a Manatee County kindergarten class enjoys a circle game under the supervision of their teacher, Mrs. Woodward. (c. 1912)

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.
Compared to modern-day classes, the first graduating class of Largo High School (1915) seems tiny. Its six students included, from left to right, Charles Saunders, May Dieffenwierth, Robert C. McMullen, Louise McMullen, Frank Saunders, and Clara Kech.

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.

An early photograph of the original St. Petersburg High School shows a group of young girls in uniform performing in parade, possibly for the town’s annual Washington Day celebration. (c. 1916)

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
A 1916 school “bus” loaded with students at Atwood Groves in Manatee County. This early air-conditioned vehicle was a decided improvement over the horse and buggy.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.

The W.B. Henderson School at the corner of Jefferson Street and Henderson Avenue was named after one of Tampa’s most prominent citizens. (1919)

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
Bringing an apple for the teacher may have been the intention of this young scholar. His instructor, Mrs. Frances Howze, taught at the Palmetto School. (c. 1920)

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.

This c. 1920 photograph shows St. Petersburg’s Harris Elementary School which was located near present-day Northeast High School. Pinellas County’s Heritage Park staff is planning to build a replica of the original school to be dedicated next year.

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
The school yard served as a meeting place year round. Here four young boys meet up at the V.M. Ybor School at 1409 East Michigan Avenue in Tampa. (c. 1921)

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System.

This photograph of a Fort Meade school, taken in 1922, shows the students during their play period. Whether taking a turn on the slide or just chatting with friends, this time provided children with a break from studies.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Tampa’s Philip Shore Elementary School’s playground allowed teachers as well as students to enjoy the fresh air. Games and exercises were supervised but were much less structured than today’s physical education classes.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System.

Poor transportation kept many students from attending school regularly. Imagine the excitement then as schoolchildren rode in Pinellas County’s first bus, driven by Norma Mohr. (c. 1923)

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
This youthful faculty taught at Sarasota High School in 1924. The teachers themselves, as indicated by the citations after their names, had not always completed their college degrees.

Photograph courtesy of Sarasota County Historical Archives.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


