

# Inside the One-Room Schoolhouse

The architecture and floor plan of Stewart School represents a common design for frame schoolhouses in the nineteenth century. Schoolhouses were often rectangular with a window and two entrances at the gabled end of the structure. Almina Sadler, who attended a school in nearby Northampton Township very much like Stewart School, described the building's other features.

*"I was privileged to attend a one-room school for seven years...a one-room school was really something. There were eight grades in one room. In the middle of the room was a pot-bellied stove. In the wintertime the ones near the stove roasted...while the ones further away froze...We had one teacher. The seats were 'graduated' with small seats first, then the large ones. The younger children sat closer to the teacher's desk; and the children progressed by age to the rear of the room...The teacher...had a platform near the front of the room where she taught the students and she would call groups forward when it was their turn for their lesson...The school had separate outhouses and separate cloakrooms for the boys and the girls. We didn't have drinking fountains then; instead we filled our cups from a bucket of water."*

- Almina Sadler



A one-room schoolhouse in Saum, Minnesota displaying some of the improvements that communities made to their schools over time, including manufactured desks, blackboards, and pictures and teaching tools displayed on the walls. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress)



A one-room school in eastern Oregon. Notice the organ on the left in this image. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress)

As communities grew more prosperous and could afford additional improvements, school committees might add blackboards, window shades, curtains, and a clock to the school room. An organ might be purchased to provide music when the class sang together, and a school library would provide reading material. Maps and diagrams might be purchased to decorate the walls and provide educational information. Many schools added a washbasin and mirror near the water pail to encourage children to cultivate neat and clean appearances.

Some communities kept their schoolhouses in good repair, while others did not have the interest or the funds to do so. The result was a wide variance in the quality of one-room schools – some were tidy frame structures with all of the improvements available while others were drafty, leaky rooms with barely enough desks in good repair to seat the students.

One-room schoolhouses across the United States varied widely in quality during the nineteenth century. Some were well-kept with many amenities, while others were run-down and lacking basic comforts.

What are the most important aspects of the physical environment of a school that make it conducive to learning?