

The Memory & Meaning of the One-Room Schoolhouse

The little one-room schoolhouse is an instantly recognizable symbol to most Americans, despite the fact that very few actually attended a one-room school. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, American writers began to glorify the one-room school as a place representing both community and individuality in American society. It served as a community gathering place and yet also served as a place where a rebellious boy could act out against his teacher and affirm his individualism. As in Edwin L. Sabin's poem "The Country Schoolhouse," writers romanticized the experience of attending a one-room school, glossing over its less enjoyable aspects such as rote memorization or whippings.



Students in Washington, D.C. pledging allegiance to the flag, c. 1899. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress)

After the Pledge of Allegiance became a daily ritual in schools after 1892, one-room schoolhouses came to represent patriotism. Some Americans, including the Ku Klux Klan, used the symbol of the schoolhouse to demonstrate their distaste for immigrants and their desire to keep "native" Americans, meaning white Protestants, in power.

By about 1895, the one-room schoolhouse had lost its association with anti-immigrant sentiment, but it continued to be a symbol of American values. Republican presidential candidate William McKinley displayed an image of a schoolhouse prominently during his campaign in 1896. As depicted on McKinley's campaign poster, artists typically portrayed one-room schools as red in color, although they were usually white or gray.

By the 1950s, nearly all one-room schools in the nation had closed, but they retained their cultural meaning. Leaders of the United States feared the spread of communism, and the one-room schoolhouse offered a representation of Americanism attractive to opponents of communism.

Beginning in the 1960s, both conservatives and progressives found inspiration and meaning in the symbol of the one-room school. Conservatives valued the strict discipline and religion which had been taught in one-room schools. Progressives praised teaching methods which they wanted to revive such as the open classroom and the practice of older children helping younger ones learn.

Both approaches to remembering the one-room school can be compelling, but each also tends to leave out part of the story. The complex history of one-room schools and how they have been remembered makes it difficult to view them as they truly were, but this does not mean that we should give up trying to understand these influential institutions and how they shaped our nation and our communities.

*O little country school! In vain
May critics hold you in disdain.
The greatest lessons that you taught
Were not by chalk and pencil wrought.
As ope'd your door on fields and sky,
So, likewise just as wide and high,
You opened to the eyes of youth
The principles of love and truth.*

- from "The Country Schoolhouse"
by Edwin L. Sabin



A poster promoting William McKinley's bid for president in 1896. His publicists counted on the fact that their audience would associate the one-room school with patriotism and American values. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress)

What words or ideas do you associate with the one-room schoolhouse?

What meaning does it have for you?