

## The First Public Schools

The first public school, the Fayetteville Male and Female Academy, was established by an act of the Alabama legislature in 1838. There were no state monies for schools at that time so the school was built mostly from contributions and supported in part by tuition charges to the students. Consequently, most of the first school students were limited to children from the wealthier families.

The Act chartering Fayette's first school reads as follows:

ACT OF ALABAMA, 1838 .....To incorporate the Fayetteville Male and Female Academy in Fayette County.

Sec. 1 That Jesse VanHoose, James M. Morrow, William S. Harkins, Levi Lindsey, Charles H. Jones, Alvis Davis, and Daniel Peyton, and their successors in office shall be and they are hereby created and established the trustees of the Fayetteville Male and Female Academy, and by that name and style, they and their successors shall have the power to receive donations, borrow money purchase, have, hold, dispose of real and personal property and to sue and be sued, plead and be impleaded, in any court of law or equity, and to recover all debts due and owing, or that may become due, or owing to them for the benefit of said institution.

Sec 2. Trustees may appoint officers and fill vacancies.

Sec 3. Trustees have the power to establish, use and keep a corporate seal.

Sec 4. That all property of said corporation be exempt from any tax whatsoever.

Approved February 1839.

The Fayetteville Male and Female Academy was located near the Fayette City Cemetery. James Middleton was the first schoolmaster. Mr. Middleton was selected to become the Fayette County's first Superintendent of Education in 1854 when the state general assembly appropriated funds for a public school system.

Teachers were most always male and were strict disciplinarians (rarely were women allowed to become teacher until after the Civil War began in 1860 and few men were available on the home front.) Teachers' salaries were generally \$1.00 per month, per student. Therefore, it was advantageous to the teacher to encourage attendance.

Students who attended the Academy who lived out in the county were boarded in private homes of the "best families" in Fayetteville for a fee of \$7.00 per month during the school term. Tuition was charged by the month and ranged from \$1.50 per month for the first class or primary class up to \$3.50 per month for the higher classes. All Students were charged an incidental fee of 12 and 1/2cents per month. Students received instruction in spelling, reading geography, arithmetic, English grammar, penmanship, history, languages – Latin, Greek and French, philosophy and music.

The first two free public rural schools were established in the 1850s at Haley Creek and Hopewell. By the 1890s free public schools were prevalent all over the county. Most rural schools were one-room log schoolhouses or were held in churches of different communities. Teachers were often not much older than many of the students.

The people of the communities wanted and expected the teacher to be a good disciplinarian but they also expected the teacher to set the example and “walk the line”. The following rules were posted on an early school bulletin board. I do not know if this was an edict from the Superintendent of Education or Trustees.

1. After ten hours of school, the teachers should spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books.
2. Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes, or two evenings a week, if they go to church regularly.
3. Women teachers who marry or engage in other unseemly conduct will be dismissed.
4. Every teacher should lay aside from each day a goodly sum of his earnings for his declining years so that he will not become a burden on society.
5. Any teacher who smokes, uses liquor in any form, frequently goes to pool halls, or gets shaved in a barber shop will give good reason to suspect his worth, intentions, integrity and honesty.
6. The teacher who performs his labor faithfully and without fault for at least five years will be given an increase of 25 cents per week in his pay providing the Board of Education approves.

Given these expectations, one wonders why anyone would aspire to the teaching profession. However, census records show that several men relocated from other areas in the state and listed their occupation as “teacher” or professor.

Many of the early teachers in Fayette County began teaching without a certificate. It was not until the 1899 that teachers were required to become certified. Each year thereafter, a state exam was given in Montgomery for teachers throughout the state wishing to become certified. On one occasion, nine applicants were arrested for having in their possession the answers to the exam. A law was past that anyone caught cheating on the teacher certification exam would be sentenced to one year of hard labor and fined \$100.00.