In the 1840s, rural schools were not large buildings with many small classrooms like most schools today. Schools were small and had only one teacher. These one-room schools did not have computers, televisions, or even indoor bathrooms! A one-room school in the 1840s had goose-quill or steel nibbed pens, slates and slate pencils, and a ferule (ruler) for each student. Ink was kept in a pottery jar. A blackboard, erasers made of sheepskin, chalk, a water bucket and dipper, a shelf clock, a large stove, and a globe were also common in an 1840s school room. Sometimes the classrooms had small closets were students could keep their coats and lunch pails. Teachers had an attendance ledger, a pointer, books, a hickory stick or ferule for punishment and other teaching aids.

Children between the ages of five and twenty-one were allowed to go to school. Children attended school until their parents wanted them to stop. Parents often needed their older children to do work on the farm or in shops, stores, or factories. Young men in rural areas did not usually go to school past the age of fourteen. By age fourteen, children were expected to be able to read, write, and do basic arithme-
tic. Children were also expected to know enough civics to be good citizens. Girls could usually stay in school until they were seventeen or eighteen, since they were not expected to go to work like the boys.

By 1840, the school year was about eight months long. Some schools were open for only six or seven months. The school year was divided into two terms: a winter term from November to March, and a summer term from May to late August or early September. The actual days and lengths of the two terms were set by each school district. The school week was usually six days. Sometimes students would have a half day of school on the second or third Saturday of each month.

During the winter term, the rural school teacher was usually a man, because the older boys could attend more often in the winter. People believed that a male teacher had more control over the older boys than a young woman teacher. In the summer, the teacher was usually a woman who was at least eighteen years old. In summer, girls and younger boys attended school and discipline was less of a problem for the teachers. Teachers during both terms were expected to keep the schoolhouse clean by sweeping the floors, cleaning the blackboards, and filling and cleaning the lamps each day.

In 1840 the one-room school offered its students classes in a variety of subjects. Students, or scholars, were not divided into different grade levels like they are today. The teacher placed students in groups based on their reading and spelling levels at the beginning of a term. Each school had four or five small groups of students, each at a different level. A teacher may have divided a group according to age, so that older students could learn with people their own age.
age. Students moved over time from lower and more basic groups to more advanced ones as they learned. It was a big job for just one teacher to teach all the subjects to children of different ages in a one-room schoolhouse.

### A School Day in the 1840s

During the 1840s, a school day was divided into a morning and an afternoon session. There were several short recesses within each session and a longer recess for lunch. During the winter, the school day began around 9:00 a.m. and continued until 3:00 p.m. In the summer, the school day was longer and might have started at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 5:00 p.m.

#### Opening Exercises
The school day often began with a reading from the Bible, then prayers, demonstrations, readings, and recitations. In some schools, the students were to sit in respectful silence during opening exercises, their feet together on the floor and their hands folded on their desks. The schoolmaster or schoolmistress would then read a psalm or have the scholars read a psalm. Then the teacher might have started the day with a prayer like this one: “Our Father in heaven, who has kindly preserved the pupils and the teacher of this school during the past night, come and grant us a continuance of thy protection and blessing during this day. Come then, and be in this school-room during the day and help us all to be faithful and successful in duty.”

#### Lessons to be Learned
The older children spent much of their time doing math problems, studying geometry, and doing recitations about what they had read. Younger children learned to read and write and do simple arithmetic. Children also studied geography and history, which they learned about by reading about people from other lands and times. Sometimes textbook information about other lands and people was not very accurate, since many areas around the world hadn’t been fully explored during the 19th century.

Children used slates to draw pictures of things they saw around them. In addition, they

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5. Sample school schedule from the mid-1800s.
learned about colors, the collecting of minerals and other things, daily activity planning, and recitation. At recitation, children were to speak clearly and show the teacher how well they learned their lessons.

All students received instruction in moral habits. Moral habits were taught in the classroom through the use of phrases that contained a moral, or in readings that shared moral lessons. Moral lessons dealt with knowing right from wrong and often included lessons on lying, cheating, stealing, respect for authority and elders, patriotism, and the love of God.

Teachers rarely instructed the entire class together. Work was assigned to groups to be done at the desks. The teacher would call each group up to the front of the class to recite work they completed. The front benches were the recitation benches and one group would go forward at a time. While one group was reciting, the other groups were supposed to be working on their own assignments. Each recitation could last for 15 to 20 minutes, followed by a brief recess. Then the teacher would give them more assignments and bring a different group up to recite.

6. “Kept in at recess”

7. Boy being feruled on the hand.

Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child: Discipline and punishment were considered to be an important part of educating a student during the 1800s. Teachers and parents believed that good behavior was important. The teacher was responsible for keeping good order in the schoolroom and on the playground. He or she decided what kind of punishment was necessary when students misbehaved. However, there were limits to what a teacher could do to punish students. The teacher was not supposed to injure students when punishing them, but some were strict in their discipline.

One man remembered his early school days by describing the types of punishment used by one of his teachers. Though this man most likely went to school in the early 1800s, his description would have been common in the 1840s:

The first morning of the school [the schoolmaster] read us a long list of regulations to be ob-

served in school and out. ... Half the time was spent in calling up scholars for little misdemeanors, trying to make them confess their faults, and promise stricter obedience, or in devising punishments and inflicting them. ... Some were feruled on the hand; some were compelled to hold out, at arm’s length, the largest book that could be found, or a great leaden inkstand, till muscle and nerve, bone and marrow, were tortured with the continued exertion. ... He had recourse to another method ... it was standing in a stooping posture, with the finger on the head of a nail in the floor. It was a position not particularly favorable to health of body or soundness of mind, the head being brought about as low as the knees, the blood rushing to it, and the pressing unnaturally on the veins, causing a dull pain, and a staggering dizziness. ... The above punishments were sometimes rendered doubly painful by their taking place directly in front of the enormous fire, so that the ... culprit was roasted as well as racked. ... Then we occasionally had our hair pulled, our noses tweaked, our ears pinched and boxed, or snapped. ... There were minor penalties, moreover, for minor faults. The uneasy urchins were clapped into the closet, thrust under the desk, or perched on its top. Boys were made to sit in the girls’ seats ... and the girls were obliged to sit on the masculine side of the aisle, with crimsoned necks, and faces buried in the aprons.”

Recess: Following the morning session, students generally had one and a half to two hours for lunch. Some students lived close enough to go home for lunch. Many students brought their lunches to school. A student’s lunch may have consisted of bread and butter, cheese, or perhaps some cold beans. In winter, a student might have brought a potato to heat in the stove. In season fruit, such as an apple in the autumn, would also have been common in a student’s lunch

At recess, children played active, seasonal games and sports. Few playgrounds had exercise and game equipment, so students played hide-and-seek, snap-the-whip, follow the leader, tag games, or London Bridge. Boys carried jack-knives and they carved and whittled any wood in sight. Sometimes older children played pranks on younger children or even the teacher. Students also enjoyed playing word games like tongue twisters, reciting rhymes or telling stories.

Closing Exercises: At the end of the day, the teacher would lead closing exercises that often included a moral lesson, a hymn, and a closing prayer. Students rarely took their books home. Teachers did not usually assign homework because most students had chores at home and because lighting would have been a problem in the evenings during this time period. Following a full day at school, students often had to walk long distance to get home and do their daily chores.

Try some 19th Century Word Games!

The Story Game
One player starts a story and leaves off at an exciting place. Another player continues the story. The game ends when the last player finishes the story.

Tongue Twisters
- A big black bug bit a big black bear and the big black bear bled blood.
- Sheep shouldn’t sleep in a shack; sheep should sleep in a shed.
- A skunk sat on a stump. The stump thunk the skunk stunk; the skunk thunk the stump stunk.
- She’s so selfish she should sell shellfish shells but shells of shellfish seldom sell.

Choosing “It” Rhyme
Little boy driving cattle, don’t you hear his money rattle? One, two, three, out goes he.
Try some sample exercises from these 1840s textbooks. In what ways are these exercises the same as you might find in textbooks today? In what ways are these exercises different?
WORDS TO KNOW:

- **Civics** — the study of the rights and duties of citizens
- **Ferule** — a flat stick or ruler sometimes used for punishing children
- **Moral** — dealing with the distinction between right and wrong
- **Psalm** — a sacred song or poem; one of the hymns that make up the Old Testament Book of Psalms
- **Recitation** — the act of repeating or saying aloud something that has been memorized
- **Rural** — relating to the country; the open area outside of towns and big cities
- **Schoolmaster** — a male school teacher
- **Schoolmistress** — a female school teacher
- **Term** — a division of a school year

PICTURE CREDITS:

1. *Cobb’s New Juvenile Reader, No. 1*, 1843
2. New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown
3. New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown
7. *Rural Repository*, April 22, 1843
8. *Harper’s Weekly*, March 6, 1866