

WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP SCHOOL NO. 6:



WASHINGTON CENTER

Open May – September

By appointment

641-483-2458 ■ 641-483-2110 ■ 641-483-3002

Free Admission

302 East Main Street
State Center, Iowa
www.statecenteriowa.org



An estimated 75% of Iowa students were educated in one-room schools during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This peaked at 12,623 schools in 1901, more than any other state. Marshall County peaked at 141 schools. While today we refer to these schools as “country” schools, back then they had names such as Bear Grove, Quail Trap, or Washington Center.

In 1858, Iowa established the township as the governmental unit for providing a system of common schools. Each township was divided into sub-districts with a school in each. Most sub-districts were made up of four sections of land with the school located on the inside corner of one of these sections. A township board of directors governed each school. Each school or sub-district elected a director to the township board. This director hired teachers, usually based on the recommendations of the county superintendent, and, at times, served as a disciplinarian or a handyman if the need arose. Directors served a three-year term with one-third of the township board elected each year. The county board of education and county superintendent supervised the board.

In 1869 an acre of land located one mile south of the present Marshall County Jail, then the County Poor Farm, was deeded to the Washington Township School District for a site for Washington School No. 6. A building of similar architectural design was constructed for Washington School No. 2 in LaMoille in 1870. Washington Township School No. 6, then called Washington Center, was one of 10 schools that made up the Washington Township School District. After 1872 a change in Iowa law allowed sub-districts to become independent districts with a three person-governing board; this did not happen in Washington Township.

Washington School No. 6 served as a school until 1920 when the students began attending the LaMoille Consolidated School District, formed in 1914. Washington Township bought the land and school in 1921.



The Washington School No. 6 building continued to serve Washington Township as a community center and voting site until 1980. In 2001 the State Center Historical Society acquired the building, and it was moved to its current location on the grounds of the Gutekunst Public Library on State Center's Main Street in 2003.

The one-room school reflected several cultural and physical realities. Americans had a long-standing belief in the importance of education. Children were an important source of labor on the farms. Iowans believed in local control and keeping taxes low. Roads were poor, making travel difficult.

The lives of most of the children that attended these schools revolved around three institutions: the home, the church, and the school. For many, the home or farm meant responsibility and hard work. The church and school were the centers of rural social life. School brought contact with other children and the outside world. It offered opportunities to many who found rural life dull. Teaching became one of the few jobs open to girls and young women in rural Iowa. It was common for a third of all country school teachers to be new each year, making them a source of eligible women for marriage in these rural communities. Schools were as good or as bad as the teacher who ran them. Some students thrived in these schools and became teachers or went on for advanced education and professional careers. Other students found school a brief and unpleasant experience before full time work.

Three forces brought an end to the system of one-room country schools: improved transportation, an economy that demanded more training and technical skills, and the decline in the rural population. The Model T Ford, consolidated high school districts, and larger farms and smaller families symbolized these forces.

An Iowa Country School Chronology

- 1830 – First school formed in future state of Iowa in Lee County.
- 1846 – Iowa becomes a state with 30 organized counties and a constitution that says “the General Assembly shall provide for a system of common schools.”
- 1857 – Iowa adopts new constitution and “from that time on a permanent and prosperous school system has been developing.”
- 1858 – Iowa makes the township the unit for common schools and provides for the town independent district for common schooling, including education of grammar grades and high school.
- 1872 – Rural Independent School Districts created when township residents voted to make each sub-district independent.
- 1876 – Iowa State Normal School at Cedar Falls established for the support of the Common Schools.
- 1896 – United States establishes Rural Free Delivery in Iowa, increasing interest in good country roads which facilitates movement of students as well.
- 1897 – Iowa grants funds for school transportation which marks the start of closing of one-room township schools. First Consolidated School District established at Buffalo Center in Winnebago County.
- 1901 – The number of one-room schools in Iowa peaks with 12,623 in operation, more than any other state.
- 1902 – Iowa requires all children ages 7 to 14 to attend school.
- 1921 – Iowa has 439 consolidated school districts in 94 of 99 counties.
- 1932 – Iowa has 9,279 one-room schools. Only Illinois has more with 10,041.
- 1946 – End of high school normal training courses for new teachers in Iowa.
- 1952 – All new teachers in Iowa must have at least two years of appropriate education for certification.
- 1953 – The law forming Community School Districts to include all the non-high school districts closes most country schools that were one-room districts.
- 1958 – There are 102 new Community School Districts formed to meet the requirements of State rules.
- 1960 – After this year all new teachers certified in Iowa required to have a B.A. Degree.
- 1965 – *The Des Moines Register* photograph of Amish students running into a cornfield leads to legislative passage of a law allowing religious groups to operate their own schools.
- 1997 – Research conducted by the Iowa State Education Association reveals that more than 2,800 former one-room schools remain in existence in Iowa. More than 180 of these schools have been preserved as museums open for visitors.
- 1998 – Nearly 40 one-room schools are being used by religious groups to provide instruction to approximately 1,100 children.

From William H. Dreier, “A Brief History of Iowa’s One-Room Schools,” in [Iowa’s Country Schools Landmarks of Learning](#), edited by William L. Sherman.

