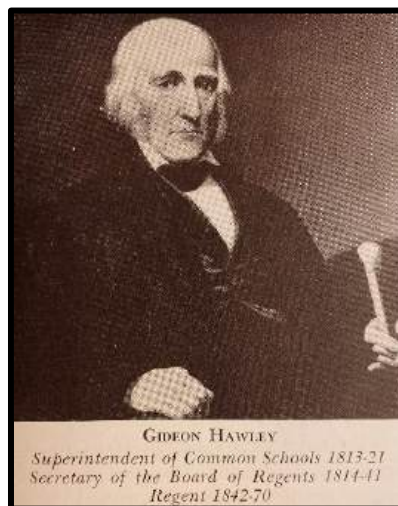


This Week in Saratoga County History

Gideon Hawley: The Father of Common Schools

Submitted by Paul Perreault November 6, 2024

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Gideon Hawley 1785-1870

Saratoga County has been blessed with many gifted educators, but none surpass in importance Gideon Hawley. Although born in Connecticut in 1785, his family moved to the Town of Ballston in 1794 and four years later relocated to a farm in the Town of Charlton. Gideon worked on the family farm until 1804 when in his own words "too infirm in health for farming", he entered the newly established Ballston Academy to prepare for college. The Academy was founded by a fellow Charlton resident and a graduate of Union College, John W. Taylor. Taylor would later serve in the House of Representatives for twenty years and was twice elected Speaker of the House.

After a year of study at the Academy, Hawley entered Union College where he studied under the supervision of the renowned college president Eliphalet Nott. Gideon must have been an outstanding student because upon his graduation in 1809, he was invited to remain at Union as a tutor. At the same time, he "read" law under Henry Yates, brother of a future governor of New York State. As we shall see, this relationship would lead to his life's work.

Education in New York State has no single starting point. People have always educated their children and those living on the frontier in New York 200 hundred years ago took responsibility for transmitting the skills and attitudes

necessary for survival. Although the State of New York established the Board of Regents as early as 1784, its single duty was to govern Columbia University (formerly known as King's College prior to the Revolution). Efforts from then until 1812 were inconsistent. That year the legislature passed an act entitled "An act for the establishment of Common Schools."

Common schools were publicly funded, non-sectarian schools designed to teach the elementary skills of "reading, writing and rithmatic". The law authorized the establishment of self-governing common school districts in each town and provided aid to each, based on the number of children from age 5 to 15. The districts would only receive the money if they held school three months a year and were required to match the state aid with local tax funds but were allowed to charge tuition (referred to as a Rate Tax) for additional expenses.

The law also created the position of State Superintendent of Schools. The first Superintendent was Gideon Hawley, from the Town of Charlton, Saratoga County, who is known as "The Father of Common Schools" in New York. Why was Hawley, only four years out of college, selected for this important position? Probably because he had the support of three important connections: President Nott, who was so impressed with the young Hawley when he was at Union College, John Taylor, his old school master, now a member of the New York Assembly and the Yates-DeWitt Clinton faction of the Democratic-Republican party.

To understand the significance of Hawley's contribution, one must remember that he had no precedents to guide him nor a bureaucracy to assist him. Yet, he created the system that distributed the school funds equitably to the towns, formed the structure for creating school districts and how they should be governed, and established a reporting system that allowed a single individual to manage common schools throughout the state. Somehow, he also found time to write the state's first instructional syllabus. After only two years in the position, he was able to report to the Assembly on his achievements and convince them to incorporate his suggestions into the basic educational laws of the State that lasted until 1829.

The Town of Malta responded immediately. At the annual meeting of the Town Board held on April 6, 1813, three Commissioners were selected, four Inspector of Schools appointed and a resolution to provide \$100 for the support of Common Schools approved. The Commissioners were to receive one dollar a day for their service, and they apparently got to work immediately because Spafford's Gazetteer of 1813 reports that Malta had seven schoolhouses and a "small library".

Hawley's tenure as State Superintendent ended in 1821 as a result of a political battle between Governor Dewitt Clinton and Martin Van Buren. The Legislature was so upset by this "gross outrage" that they refused to fund the position, and the duties of Superintendent of Common Schools were assigned to the Secretary of State. This injustice did not end Hawley's contributions to education because in 1814 he had been appointed Secretary of the Regents of the University, a position he held until 1841. As such, he was instrumental in the establishment of the State's first Normal School for the preparation of teachers, the New York State College for Teachers at Albany (now SUNY at Albany). He served as a trustee for both the Albany Academy and the Albany Female Academy, both of which still exist today. He was appointed a Regent of The Smithsonian Institute upon its founding in 1846, probably due to his connection with Joseph Henry at Albany Academy, who was the first Secretary of The Smithsonian.

In addition to his many educational commitments, Hawley served as the Master of Chancery (administrator of the State's Court System), Secretary of the Albany Insurance Company and director of the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad, the first railroad company in the state.

Gideon Hawley's contributions to public education have been recognized by both his contemporaries and those who have followed him. In 1844, S.S. Randall said of Hawley " To no individual in the State are the friends of Common school education more deeply indebted for the impetus given to the cause of elementary instruction in its infancy than Gideon Hawley." Today, his alma mater, Union College, annually presents the Gideon Hawley Teacher Recognition Award to a secondary teacher nominated by a current Union student in appreciation. Certainly, a fitting tribute to the man known as The Father of Common Schools in New York.

*Sources: Union Worthies #14: Gideon Hawley
History of the Common School System in New York by S. S. Randall
History of Saratoga County NY by N. B. Sylvester
Saratoga County Heritage (ed) Violet B. Dunn*