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Kids Live History At One-Room Seneca Schoolhouse In Maryland

By: Rebecca Sheir



Miss Darby (a.k.a. Anna Glenn) leads a class of fourth graders in the authentic classroom of Seneca Schoolhouse.

It's 10 a.m. at the one-room Seneca Schoolhouse in Poolesville, Maryland. The red-sandstone structure was built in 1866 to educate the children of local farmers, C&O Canal workers and stone-cutters from the nearby Seneca Quarry.

On this particular morning, 27 fourth-grade students sit in wooden desks, boys to the right of a crackling pot-bellied stove, girls to the left. In her high-necked blouse and bustled skirt, their instructor, Miss Darby, stands at the blackboard, below a portrait of the current President of the United States: Rutherford B. Hayes.

The date scrawled on the blackboard, in perfect cursive, is March 13, 1880.

"Now, I know many of you are helping your parents with chores before school so please, put out your fingers," Miss Darby says, as she begins walking around the room. "I just want to check and make sure you washed up. We can't have any dirt coming in unwashed hands from chores."

Suddenly, she stops in her tracks.

Staring at one little girl's hands, she cries out: "My dear! What is on your fingernails? Oh dear, that looks awfully painful! Oh my!"

What's on the girl's fingernails is polish. Bright-red nail polish. Something you didn't really see in the United States until the 1920s.

And here, perhaps, is our first hint that we're not in the year 1880.



The Seneca Schoolhouse was built in 1866 to educate the children of farmers, canal workers and stone cutters in the Seneca area of Maryland. (Courtesy Julie Shapiro)

A trip to the schoolhouse of the past

No. Our students are from Cedar Grove Elementary in Germantown, Maryland. They're on a field trip at The Seneca Schoolhouse Museum.

"You walk through the door here and forget you're in 2015," says Maureen O'Connell, director of the Historic Medley District, the nonprofit that brought the schoolhouse back to life after decades of neglect. For nearly 35 years, the Seneca Schoolhouse museum has drawn public-, private- and home-school students from Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C.

"What I find so fantastic and heartwarming about this is children come here and they find out they don't need their phones, their tablets, their computers," she says. "They're actually learning here in the methods used in 1866."

Not only that, but they're actually portraying pupils from the era. Miss Darby (an actual teacher from the time, portrayed today by local resident Anna Glenn) has the students introduce themselves, in character, at the start of class. One boy stands up and introduces himself as George.

"My name is George. In the summer I live on a canal boat. While the canal is frozen my father cuts the sandstone into big blocks that get sent down the canal to Washington City," he says.

Miss Darby smiles and tells the other students: “We must be very kind to George today, as it might be his last day with us. He lives on a canal boat, and as you know the canal is no longer frozen, and he may be having to move on. So please be very kind to George today, is that clear?”

They respond with a resounding “Yes, ma’am!” That’s part of the Seneca Schoolhouse experience too. In the late 1800s, the Maryland State Board of Education mandated lessons in “good behavior.” The consequence for bad behavior was the dunce cap; and you’ll find one of those at the Schoolhouse, along with the requisite stool in the corner.

Though as Miss Darby points out to the students assembled today, “You are being very well behaved. Not a single one of you has been in the dunce today! Whereas yesterday, all of you were in the dunce at one point or another, it seemed. Especially the boys.”

Reading was another compulsory subject. Today’s class is using the pocket-sized volume students used in 1880: McGuffey’s First Eclectic Reader. Then comes handwriting, as Miss Darby shows the children how to write cursive letters on their little chalk slates. The students also do mathematics, and since it’s the end of the week, they observe the Seneca Schoolhouse tradition of the Friday spelling bee.



A 4th grader reads from McGuffey’s First Eclectic Reader inside the Seneca Schoolhouse.

Pam Cromwell is the real fourth-grade teacher of our class from Cedar Grove. She says her students prepared for today’s trip using information sent by the Historic Medley District — like details about the characters they’d play, the classroom rules, even lunch.

“We talked about that from the awesome information we got,” she says. “We went over how there was no such thing as sandwiches, peanut butter wasn’t invented, and they were all looking at me like I’d lost my mind. But some of them got seriously into it and tried to figure out how to eat as authentically as they could.”

“They found baskets to carry their food,” she adds. “They have little towels or handkerchiefs.”

And, to Cromwell’s delight, some also have costumes: long skirts and hair bows on the girls, and knee-length breeches and woolen caps on the boys.

“The parents actually took some of the information that we were given, and they created these costumes themselves,” she says.

The Historic Medley District designed the Schoolhouse museum’s curriculum for fourth graders, because in Montgomery County, the Civil War era used to fall under the fourth-grade lesson plan. But as Pam Cromwell notes, that’s changed; her fourth graders are studying the period of 1492 to 1763.

“The explorers coming from Europe and the original settlements,” Cromwell explains. “So this is a little bit ahead of what they would have had. On the other hand, it gives them a feeling for history.”

Taking history with them

And that, says Anna Glenn — a.k.a Miss Darby — is what the Seneca Schoolhouse experience is all about.

“Students have been learning the same things for hundreds and hundreds of years,” she says. “It might look a little bit different, but they’re all learning to read, and learning times tables, and history. I want them to remember that, and that’s what I want to teach here.”

Shortly before the clock strikes 2 p.m., “Miss Darby” has the students sit down, close their eyes. “Think about all the boys and girls that have been sitting in these desks, in this schoolhouse, in 1866.”

When they open their eyes again, Anna Glenn welcomes them to the present: March 13, 2015.

And the hope is they’ll remember this day, as a day they brought the past to the present, and the present to the past... whatever the future holds.