America's Country Schools.
By Andrew Gulliford.


The country school has assumed an almost iconic status in the American landscape. It is difficult to think of an architectural form that signals its function — or former use — as tellingly as the one-room school. When lecturing to beginning geography students on reading the landscape for clues to settlement change, I show slides of relict features like canal locks and interurban rail beds as well as examples of adaptive use: a gas station reborn as a drive-in bank, a bank as a storefront church, a police station as a restaurant, even a church near Cincinnati that has found new life as a Toyota dealership. But the buildings that students can always identify despite their newest incarnations are the one-room schoolhouses. Their forms are unmistakable.

Yet, as Fred Schroeder notes in his eloquent Foreword to America's Country Schools:

The simple architectural unity of these structures disguised the remarkable complexity of the activities they contained, just as the presence of a single teacher disguised the versatility that rural school teaching required and as the isolated setting masked the interrelationships with local, regional, and national concerns (p. 7).

Over 200,000 one-room schools remained in use as recently as 1913; today that figure has collapsed to 835 (with perhaps 12,000 extant buildings). Andrew Gulliford and the Preservation Press have composed a paean to these hardy remnants based on a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The attractive layout and design, by Meadows & Wiser of Washington, D.C., seamlessly weaves over four hundred stunning photographs into the descriptive text. The book's potency is its images: whether provided by the photographs or by personal recollections quoted at length, they prove to be as indelible as the marks on those old slate blackboards.

The contextual material is arranged in three sections: “Country School Legacy,” “Country School Architecture,” and “Country School Preservation.” The first section, which comprises almost half the book,
is an overview of the place of rural schools in American education. This section discusses teachers' lives on the western frontier; the use of schools as community centers; the role of schools in the Americanization of immigrants; schools provided for Native Americans and Blacks; and the current use of rural schools. The section is strongest when it recreates the ambience of the era through specifics like salaries and textbooks and personal reminiscences and weakest when it reaches for the big picture: "In the 17th century children were considered inherently evil, but by the 19th century parents believed their children were inherently good" (p. 38).

The second section on architecture describes building materials, styles, and the organization of space within the classroom — laying to rest the myth of the little red schoolhouse as the ubiquitous form. In form, materials, and embellishment, the country school usually resembled the church, houses, or farm buildings of a community. Size was "limited by an often overlooked factor: the range of the human voice" (p. 160). Building materials varied regionally and the photographic essay accompanying the chapter unveils the possibilities, from a brush arbor school in Texas to a Greek Revival cobblestone school in New York. Gulliford proposes four categories of form: folk vernacular, mass vernacular, designs derived from plan books, and those commissioned from architects. The vernacular builders worked with mental templates of what schools should look like: the folk, patterned after rural outbuildings; the mass, patterned after churches or civic structures. When schools were built from more formal blueprints, they incorporated the prevailing fashions — Greek Revival or Gothic or octagonal. But always there was change: "An important unifying element in the design and building of country schools was that they tended to follow a progression within each community of replacement by a sturdier and more pleasing specimen as resources would permit" (p. 166). Gulliford gives scant attention to the important question of siting. Centrality is mentioned in connection with New England, Section 16 in the Township and Range system, marginal agricultural land in some areas, but no regional conclusions are drawn.

The last section on preservation suggests a basic agenda for documenting and saving country schools. One-room schools can be excellent small-scale projects for local historical societies and preservation groups with limited funds and staffs. Case studies detail the mechanics of restoration and rehabilitation of two schools that were recycled as a branch bank and a "living history" museum.

America's Country Schools chronicles a distinctive era in American
education from a material culture perspective. Readers who note an unevenness in the volume's scope should recall that the project was expanded from an initial survey of rural schools in eight western states. An appendix listing one-room schools by state, for example, includes only seventeen examples from Pennsylvania, primarily from southeastern Pennsylvania. (Swetnam and Smith's Guidebook, in contrast, lists almost two dozen for Western Pennsylvania counties, still but a fraction of those that remain in the landscape.) [See article, this issue, on Slippery Rock area.—Editor]

Now that the National Trust has furnished this handsome introduction to the country school, can a companion volume on the city school be in the works? Though lacking the mythic power of the one-room schoolhouse, urban public schools of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain pivotal buildings in their communities and face similar problems of abandonment, rehabilitation, and adaptive use. ■

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This third number in the American Antiquarian Society's series of facsimiles, published as part of its program in the history of the book in American culture, presents the six issues of John Peter Zenger's newspaper, the New-York Weekly Journal, which were the basis of his famous prosecution for seditious libel of the government of William Cosby. Each facsimile issue is preceded by a brief introduction and followed by excerpts from the administration organ, The New-York Gazette. As the editor, Professor Stephen Botein, notes, the controversial portions of the Journal have been reprinted and extensively annotated in Stanley N. Katz's edition of James Alexander, A Brief Narrative of the Case and Trial of John Peter Zenger (2d. ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1972). The current publication allows the student of history to examine the political writings in context and therefore en-