

Benjamin Burkholder

Imagine a world where teachers were paid a \$171.44 annual salary and had to do farm work in the summer months to supplement their income. Imagine teaching a class where students ranged from very young children to adults in their early twenties.

Such was the career of one of Waterloo's best-remembered pioneer teachers. Benjamin Burkholder was notable as the teacher who made the transition from the 1820 log school house to the "new" stone school built in 1842.

It is no wonder that after a teaching career that began in 1841 and spanned more than thirty years, Burkholder applied to the Ontario Superannuated Public School Teachers' Fund in 1875 writing that he was "disabled and worn out while in the work of teaching and unable to teach a school any longer."

Burkholder, who was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania on March 26, 1814, was remembered as a "prominent and successful Common School teacher" and a "most faithful and energetic teacher."

The four-acre piece of land on which the stone school house was built where Burkholder began his career, was donated by Abraham Erb. Erb also set aside money to provide books for poor children. He stipulated that the land could be used for a school house, meeting house or grave yard and all future proceeds from the land must be used on behalf of needy students.

The old log school house was moved to the Greenbush area, near the present-day Kitchener Collegiate Institute, where a "one-legged slave" rented it as his family's home for many years. In 1894 it was moved to Waterloo Park where it still stands.

Shortly after the new stone school was built the Common School Act was passed that divided the area into school districts, provided for elected school trustees, the building of new schools, and teacher salaries. The act also spelled out that teachers had to pass an examination and receive a license to teach.

Burkholder was among the first to receive a teaching certificate after being tested in 1843 by a commission that included a doctor, an Anglican clergyman and three other men. Burkholder would have been tested in "reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, a little grammar and geography."



It is written that one teacher from Berlin, walked out of the Board of School Commissioners after “remarking quite audibly” that he would not be examined “by a set of farmers.”

There is an historical account by a former student who recalled that Burkholder was a “rather peculiar but not a bad teacher.” The student recalled that he used “a Solar System apparatus in teaching astronomy.”

While Burkholder is honoured for his years as a teacher, he was also a newspaperman for two years previously. He published a German weekly called the *Morgenstern* between 1839 and 1841. Burkholder ran the newspaper out of an office at his father’s farm about one mile north of the Village of Waterloo.

Photo courtesy of Waterloo Public Library.