

Nathan Cobb

Revered in the 1850s as Tarrytown's public school patron, Nathan Cobb is unknown today. In 1851 he donated a modern brick school, intended to bring wealthy and poor together, supporting a high level education to all social classes. This action should place him in Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow's hall of fame.

Commemorative Essay by Laura Epstein, Sleepy Hollow

Sleepy Hollow High School, May 25, 2011

Nathan Cobb

While revered in the 1850s as Tarrytown's patron of schools, today, Nathan Cobb is an unsung hero of education. In 1851 Cobb built Tarrytown's first modern brick public school, equipping it to rival the best school houses of the state. This elegant facility was intended to bring the wealthy and poor together in one school and to spur ongoing support for public education. Nathan Cobb not only gave Tarrytown the means to educate its children, he set the standard for the provision of a high level education to all social classes. This should earn him a place in the Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame.

Although little is known about Cobb's early life, we do know that he was born in Stonington, Connecticut around 1783, and that he was a leading packet ship master and owner. In the mid 19th century, Nathan Cobb retired in the village of Tarrytown. Although he hadn't originally lived in Tarrytown, Cobb grew fond of it as most who settle down in our wonderful community do. Right away, he became very active in town life, contributing often in simple yet worthy ways. *The Tarrytown Daily News* extolled Cobb's acts of kindness in bringing "huge baskets of cakes and goodies to many ill folks." The District School Journal of 1851 describes how "Cobb... had already contributed handsomely to every improvement of the Village since his residence among them." Cobb's largest and most significant gift, of course, was the building of the district's first modern school.

The social significance of Cobb's educational philanthropy is best understood in historical context. During the 19th century, schooling for children was not yet commonplace. Literacy wasn't considered vital to those who worked at home or on a farm. While the Old Dutch Church had been providing the basics of education to children of Philipsburg Manor, it centered on religious instruction. Secular education was generally provided in single room school houses exposed to the elements. Tarrytown built its first public school in 1831, where students shared

12 foot long desks and wooden benches without backs. The students were lucky just to have slates to write on and be warmed by a wood-burning stove at the center of the room. Water was drawn from a well and stored in a pail with a tin cup attached. Nathan Cobb realized that the existing school needed much improvement so he set out to provide a luxurious facility that would attract the wealthy but also serve the poor. In 1851 Cobb donated \$4,000 to the village of Tarrytown for the construction of a two story modern brick school and the lot it stood on. The school was on the southeast corner of Broadway and East Franklin Street and had all the necessary equipment of a school of that time. By 1852, two hundred and thirty-two students were attending the school and in 1854 the Union Free School District was established. Twice enlarged, it ultimately had six large classrooms, an assembly-room, a library with 2,300 books and two play-rooms which were all heated, properly ventilated and comfortably furnished. The concept of free education was relatively new, and yet Cobb boldly set a new standard for valuing education and valuing the poor.

In 1891 an explosion three quarters of a mile away from the school destroyed the foundation of the building, but the school was still utilized up until 1897 when a new and larger building was completed. Cobb's gift to the village represented one tenth of his total assets; clearly intended to be his greatest legacy.

To thank Nathan Cobb for his generous gift and his vision of a socio-economically integrated education, prominent community members including writer Washington Irving, Jacob Vanderbilt, and Jacob Odell, attended the school's opening and a dinner in his honor. Reverend Wm. Creighton acknowledged, "He came among you only a few years since a stranger. What he has done for you in that time will be remembered as long as gratitude is recognized as a virtue among men... rich and poor will meet together and drink free of charge from the fountain of knowledge..."

Nathan Cobb died in Florida in either late 1859 or early 1860. During his day, he was very well known, respected and praised for the great impact he made on our town and was supposed never to be forgotten. Jacob Vanderbilt said “May his memory be enshrined in the hearts of our children and our children’s children, even to the remotest generations ...” Unfortunately, the importance of Cobb’s efforts is now virtually overlooked. Most people today have not even heard of Cobb and it is difficult to find detailed information about his life. Nathan Cobb set the standard for providing an excellent education to all social classes. Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown have long since embraced this standard; we should also remember to honor the man who inspired it.

Citations:

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