

Preparing for Rock School Day

Once a year, at the beginning of June, the third grade pupils from the Colebrook Consolidated School spend an entire school day at our schoolhouse/museum located at the intersection of Colebrook Road and Sandy Brook Road. The building was erected during the summer of 1779 and remained in use from that date until decreases in population caused it to close in 1911.

The Colebrook Historical Society makes certain that all aspects of the vintage school are as historically accurate as is possible. For the most part, everything is in place and only needs the teacher and her third graders to complete the picture. Minor adjustments do need to be made occasionally, and a few years ago we tackled two of them. One involved the flag. Up until now, we have always used a conventional 50 star flag with which the pupils conducted opening flag ceremonies, and which flies over the school throughout the day. In the year 2000, Rock School Day was held on June 14, which happens to be Flag Day. Because of the added significance, a 32 star flag was constructed reflecting the year 1858, the date being portrayed that year. The Society feels that any year from 1779 through 1911 would be historically appropriate. The type of desks that we have, however, represent the mid-nineteenth century, thus the choice of year. The 32 star flag was current from July 4th, 1858 until July 3rd, 1859. It consisted of five rows of stars arranged with the top row of seven, followed by three rows of six, and ending with another row of seven. Any flag that has ever been authorized may be flown today. There is no such thing as an obsolescent American flag. When a new state joins the Union prior to July 4th, a new star is applied to the flag beginning on July 4th. When the admission date is after July 4th, then its star is not added until the following Independence Day.

So much for flags; our second upgrade concerned writing instruments. Up until 1858, with the advent of the first successful steel-tipped pen, writing, at least with ink, involved the use of wing feathers from crows, turkeys or other large birds. Thus we tell our time-traveling students that when they grow up and have children of their own, they will be able to tell them that theirs was the last American generation that learned to write by using a quill pen.

You might well ask what's the big deal about quill pens; how difficult would it be to get a large feather, sharpen it, dip it into ink, and start writing? Long ago, that's what I thought. I attempted to do some research on the subject, only to discover that if anyone had ever written one word about how to go about creating a writing instrument from a feather, I certainly couldn't find it!

My first attempt was to make the tip look the same as a steel nib – in other words, having a long taper with a slit in the center. It didn't work, not even close. Finally I gave up for a while, only to be involved again when a friend shot a wild turkey, from whom I begged the wings. I needed quite a few feathers to hone my skills. Here is what was discovered: There are several types of feathers that can be made into writing tools. The length isn't all that important, although you don't want the largest. The shortest may be as short as four inches, especially when you consider that we were making pens for nine year olds. What is essential is that only feathers having a transparent end be used; those having a milk-white, or dark tip won't work because they seem to be too soft, drag on the surface of the paper, and don't evenly distribute the ink. Neither do they need a split to

facilitate the flow of ink. The point can be fairly blunt. The top of the point is determined by holding the feather so that it fits your hand comfortably. When this is accomplished, make a mark at the top of the stem of the feather. Turn it over and cut at about a forty-five degree angle (a single edged razor works best for me). Remove the small, transparent disks that you will find inside the stem, dip into ink, dragging the tip along the edge of the ink well, and write! You will no doubt need to make a few adjustments, but from here on, you are basically finished. There is one more item that you will need, and as far as I've been able to find out, you will have to make your own. We're talking about an ink blotter. These were easy enough to come by a few years ago, but they are as hard to find today as hen's teeth! I have settled on pieces of the thickest paper toweling, which does a credible job as long as you are careful not to smudge the ink.

I'm not certain our 3rd graders will fully appreciate the technology employed in writing the Declaration of Independence, but I certainly do!