

**ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSES IN THE EEL RIVER DELTA:
A SOURCE FOR INFORMATION ABOUT
CERTAIN EARLY HISTORIC CULTURAL PATTERNS IN HUMBOLDT COUNTY**

JOSEPH L. CHARTKOFF
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, EAST LANSING

Early non-Native American settlements around California have been studied by archaeologists and historians. Documents from those settlements have survived to a significant extent, and archaeologists have studied some categories of early historic sites, such as cemeteries, homes, and businesses. In general, historic-period archaeology has been much less substantial than prehistoric archaeology, but it is being done. This article looks at a category of historical sites that have been given comparatively little attention so far, though: early schoolhouses. Many early schoolhouse sites still survive, however—some with the original buildings still standing, and others with the buildings gone but with the cultural deposits in the soil still relatively intact. This article will review a series of schoolhouse sites near the village of Ferndale on the Eel River delta to discuss what has survived archaeologically and what value it can offer for learning more about Humboldt County's past.

The field of historical archaeology provides some very important contributions to the study of cultural patterns of societies which have existed in times for which written records provide the primary source of information about culture content, regularities, and changes. Written records, though immensely valuable, have limits as to the breadth and depth of their contents, for a variety of reasons. Physical evidence left behind by past behavior can confirm interpretations of those societies based on written information, or it can raise disputes. Gaining new insights into the substance of our own cultural backgrounds can be very valuable.

This article looks at some aspects of nineteenth-century history in coastal Humboldt County using examples of sites of early schoolhouses. It also looks at variations in the nature of the schoolhouse sites to gain some perspectives as to what comparable sites in other parts of our state might be able to contribute.

THE REGION AND ITS SCHOOLHOUSE SITES

The region being considered involves the delta of the Eel River in the coastal region of central Humboldt County. The Eel River, though hardly of the magnitude of the Sacramento or San Joaquin River, or even the Klamath or Trinity River, is nonetheless a substantial stream, currently the longest free-flowing river in California. The delta itself, which lies south of Eureka and Humboldt Bay, is substantial in size, covering some 100 mi², and is regarded as the richest grassland for dairy cattle grazing in North America. The primary community in the delta is Ferndale, a Victorian village with a population of about 1,400 (Bess et al. 2004). Fortuna, several times larger, lies just to the east of the inland edge of the delta. The delta is part of the traditional homeland of the Wiyot people, who still have communities in the area. Control of the area was taken over by Euro-Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. Communities such as Ferndale were established before 1850 (Edeline 1986).

Because Ferndale was not linked to the Gold Rush or to other major resource extractions such as whaling or salmon fishing, it did not get settled by a single interest group, but rather drew settlers from several different sources who were looking for more traditional options, such as farming or animal raising. Ferndale in particular became a focus for immigrants from three European countries: Portugal, Italy, and Denmark. While the community became substantially integrated, ethnic background became an important source of identity and focus for interaction. Even today, Ferndale has a Portuguese Hall and a Danish Hall with club members who conduct regular social activities there, while descendants of the

Italian community especially focus on the bar and restaurant of the Hotel Ivanhoe. These differing backgrounds also still have some reflection in church congregation memberships (Edeline 1988).

From the community's early days, its families had strong interests in providing school educations for their children. Before regional, county, and state school patterns became established, local communities began to create their own schools. They therefore were not following mandated regulations or guidelines for school design, but rather were reflecting more informal and generalized principles.

Since the village of Ferndale was then much smaller than it is now, and most families lived in rural areas, the main pattern involved the creation of a number of small, one-room schoolhouses to serve nearby families. Such schools typically served children who lived within 1 to 2 mi. of the schoolhouse. Each school was overseen by a committee made up of individuals from several local households. The households paid basic fees, or taxes, to allow the schools to operate. The local committee would decide which particular patterns and practices to follow. A schoolteacher would be hired by each school group, and would be essentially overseen by the committee. Over time, these independent neighborhood school districts evolved into regional school districts, but they started with small-sized, local management. Most such schools operated at essentially an elementary school level, but in some cases some more advanced education was provided for older children. This perspective makes the school patterns sound rather standardized, and indeed there were a number of commonly shared features among them, but there also were differences (Hansen 1993).

The Ferndale area formed several neighborhood schools in the nineteenth century, and historical records of them have been kept to varying degrees. For example, the Grizzly Bluff School, located 5 mi. east of Ferndale, still stands as a building, but it was converted to a house. Some nineteenth-century school artifacts probably still lie in the surrounding soil, but features, such as the well or outhouse pit, are unlikely to remain. The Grizzly Bluff Schoolhouse was built over time as a rectangular, framed wooden one-room building with windows on the sides and a bell tower on the roof, making it evolve into a classical form of a one-room schoolhouse.

The Centerville School was located some 5 mi. west of Ferndale, quite close to the Pacific Ocean shore, at the base of a sandstone upland. What had been a functioning village in the nineteenth century became an abandoned village site whose buildings are now all fallen or removed, so nothing remains there now except for a few piles of old wooden boards and beams. The schoolhouse, however, was hauled several decades ago to the Humboldt County Fairgrounds, north of Ferndale, and restored as a historic feature. Its location at Centerville has not been redeveloped, and the school artifacts and features probably are largely intact.

The Coffee Creek School was halfway between Grizzly Bluff and Ferndale. The building was torn down many years ago, and the land has been turned into pasture. School-period artifacts, though moved, probably are substantially still present underground, as are key features. The school's location is now covered with pasture grass, which gets eaten by local farm cattle. Stone cobbles can be seen around the pasture area, and some might be remnants of bases to hold the vertical support posts of the schoolhouse building.

The Island School was about 2 mi. north of Ferndale. That area started its own school district in 1866. A school was built there in 1874 and enlarged in 1885. In 1903, that building was replaced by a two-story schoolhouse, which lasted until 1947, when it burned down. It was replaced by a Quonset hut, used as the school until 1959, when the district merged with Ferndale. The Quonset hut still stands, and the surrounding land has not been seriously disturbed, so buried artifacts and features are likely to still exist.

Ferndale's own original village school was located on the grounds on the west side of the village where the current elementary school now stands. The current building, however, was not built on the spot where the original schoolhouse stood, but some 150 ft. to the north. The site of the original schoolhouse is

the playground area for the current school, so survival of buried remains from the original school are likely to have remained in place over the decades.

Several other schools once existed in the Ferndale area, and the histories of particular locations can vary even more. The variations among these five sites, however, suggest the sorts of variations in the survival of archaeological remains, as well as in the things reflected by the various remains. This in turn suggests an area of research focus that may produce varied but significant information about our past cultures.

Some potential insights about these lessons may be gained by seeing what archaeologists in other regions have done in the study of similar sites. One interesting example comes from Michigan. One of my former graduate students at Michigan State University, Valerie Hartzler, did an excavation project at a rural one-room schoolhouse site for her Master's thesis (Hartzler 1998). The site, called the Merle Beach School, was located in a rural area about 10 mi. north of Lansing, the state's capital. The schoolhouse was still standing but had long since been abandoned and had been modified for reuse over the years. However, Valerie was able to map the grounds accurately and excavate a number of test pits to sample the area.

One thing she found was a buried and refilled pit that had originally been the school's water well. The well originally had a surface structure around the pit, and probably a simple shed roof over the pit, so that water buckets could be lowered into the well and so that common debris could be kept out of it. These surface structures had been removed some time in the past, but certain kinds of artifacts associated with them, such as old nails and rope pulleys, were found in the dirt around the pit. Also, the soil used to fill the pit had been brought in from another area, so it was distinct from the soil surrounding the pit and therefore was easier to identify.

She discovered a second pit, some distance from the water well pit, that turned out to have been the pit for the school outhouse. Since the school was built in the nineteenth century, it had no indoor plumbing. There had been an outhouse building standing over the pit, but as with the water well, the outhouse building had long since been torn down, with its construction materials mostly removed, and the pit refilled with dirt brought in from a nearby dune. The outhouse pit, when re-excavated, turned out to contain a much larger amount of schoolhouse trash than did the water well pit.

Valerie also discovered the remains of a third constructed feature, in this case a moderate-sized shed that included a number of artifacts related to horses, such as hoof nails, a few rein clips and pickles, and a few pieces of horseshoes. Since these horse-related artifacts were not found scattered around the entire schoolyard, it appears that the shed was used as a horse barn when the school was in operation.

Two major distribution patterns were found for school-related artifacts, apart from the pieces of trash that had been thrown into the outhouse pit. One was at a trash heap which had been created on the top of a creek bank some distance from the schoolhouse. The other pattern involved artifacts scattered on the ground around the schoolhouse, and appears to have reflected outdoor playgrounds for school pupils.

Some of these outdoor artifacts were school-related, such as small pieces of blackboard chalk and fragments of broken blackboard slate. It was not uncommon to find metal pen points from old ink pens. The pen point handles, made of wood, were much rarer, most likely because they easily decayed or rotted in the moist soil. However, empty glass ink bottles, or fragments of them, were quite durable and were frequently found scattered around. Pieces of broken blackboard chalk were occasionally found. Less common were pieces of wooden pencils, because pencils were still uncommon when the school was in use.

Other artifacts found outdoors in the schoolyard tended to come from the schoolchildren themselves. Clothing buttons, made from bone or ivory, had fallen off their clothes and were lost in the playground fairly often. Grade-school children rarely wore jewelry, however, so pieces of jewelry were rarely found. Children's toys, on the other hand, were frequently brought to school and played with in the

playground, so it was not uncommon to find toys and toy parts in the playground soil. Glass marbles were a category of commonly lost toys, for example, while board-game pieces, such as dominoes and chess pieces, were rare.

One interesting discovery Valerie made was of a number of small glass whiskey bottles, which she found mainly in the outhouse pit. She learned through archival research that the schoolteacher who taught at Merle Beach for a number of years was male. He was the one who rode a horse to the school each morning and kept the horse in the shed during the school day. He was not allowed to drink alcohol at school while children were present, but apparently he did a good deal of drinking after, and possibly before, the school period. He threw away the empty bottles, mainly in the outhouse toilet pit, and only a few in the water well, where they were not likely to be seen by others. The bottles did not turn up in the trash pile, indicating that he was trying to keep his drinking away from public attention. He apparently therefore helped himself to tolerate the school-day experiences without sacrificing his job.

This can give some ideas about the potential of schoolhouse archaeology for learning more about communities and life in them. Communities with different backgrounds are likely to leave different patterns in the schoolhouse sites, but we still have more to do in order to find out what those patterns are and what they can tell us.

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