

**Finding Aid to the Martha's Vineyard Museum
Record Unit 92**

Early Island Education and Leavitt Thaxter

By Jean Cargill

Descriptive Summary

Repository: Martha's Vineyard Museum

Call No.

Title: Early Island Education and Leavitt Thaxter

Creator:

Quantity: 1.5 cubic feet

Abstract: This record unit is composed of materials from early Martha's Vineyard educational institutions, especially Thaxter's Academy (1825-1834), Dukes County Academy (1833-1940), and the Dukes County Educational Association (1848-1902), that also document the leading role of Leavitt Thaxter (1789-1863) as a teacher, school administrator and leader in professional development of teachers on the island. Also included are Student Exercise Books (1740-1880) by island students.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information: The documents in this collection were acquired by the Martha's Vineyard Museum from various sources on the Island.

Processing Information: Jean Cargill

Access Restrictions: none

Use Restrictions: none

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Index Terms

Martha's Vineyard - Schools

Edgartown, Massachusetts - Schools

West Tisbury, Massachusetts - Schools

Thaxter's Academy

Dukes County Academy

Dukes County Educational Association

Thaxter, Leavitt 1789-1863

Pease, Cyrus W.

Luce, Grafton

Holmes Hole Female Union Society

Series and Subseries Arrangement

Series I: Student Exercise Books

Series II: School at Captain Grafton Luce's

Series III: Leavitt Thaxter and Thaxter's Academy

Series IV: Dukes County Academy

Series V: Dukes County Educational Association

Historical Note:

During the first decades of American independence, a variety of educational institutions emerged on Martha's Vineyard and Leavitt Thaxter assumed a leadership role in Island education through his teaching, school administration and as first president of the Dukes County Educational Association. Student exercise books from this period document the changeover from English currency to Federal dollars in story problems utilizing the common commodities of the day, *e.g.*, bushels of salt, bundles of hoops, and gallons of molasses. Little is known of the schoolchildren who filled these books with their ciphers and elegant penmanship as the 1790 Census did not list children's names. One exception is the student Joseph Worthington Tilton who, records show, lived on a farm in Chilmark and moved west with other Tilton family members to Olive Township, Noble County, Ohio, circa 1820. Also, Suzie Jernegan is named among the 1881 graduates of Edgartown High School.

In the nineteenth century, Leavitt Thaxter emerged as a leader among educators on the Island, carrying on the work of his father, Joseph "Parson" Thaxter [*see* RU 141]. Leavitt studied at Harvard, although he did not complete his course there. After some years in the merchant marine, Leavitt turned to teaching and school administration, first in western Massachusetts, then three or four years in Sparta, Georgia. In 1823, he returned to Edgartown and two years later dedicated Thaxter's Academy. A former student, Henry Baylies, wrote in his account of "Edgartown Schools in the 1830s" (*Dukes County Intelligencer* November 1992) that "Squire [Leavitt] Thaxter kept a very good school but, according to my recollection, he was a rather severe disciplinarian." In December 1837, Thaxter served as the first teacher at Dukes County Academy in West Tisbury.

Dukes County Academy was first conceived in 1797, but it was not until David Look, Representative to the General Court (1830-1835), secured an appropriation of \$3,000 from the Commonwealth that the idea came to fruition. The original \$3,000 was supplemented by contributions by individuals known as proprietors. The proprietors were to receive interest on their gifts by a reduction in the tuition of their children. However, some promissory notes went unpaid and lawsuits and threatened lawsuits to recover the money became a constant source of trouble for the treasurers and trustees of the Academy.

The Academy finally opened in December 1837 with Leavitt Thaxter as teacher, who earned \$12.50 a week. Thaxter was also directed to “draft By-Laws and make a list of such apparatus as he may want in school.” Classes met for three terms of fourteen weeks a year. Tuition for residents of the County studying the “common branches of an english education” was \$2.50 a term and \$5.00 for others. Those students aspiring to college or otherwise wishing to “study the higher branches, such as Greek, Latin” paid \$3.50 and \$7.00 a term.

In 1848, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had enacted a grant in aid of \$50 to county associations of teachers that held “semi-annual meetings of not less than two days each.” Leavitt Thaxter and his colleagues on Martha’s Vineyard responded to the opportunity and held the first meeting of the Dukes County Educational Association at the Methodist Church in Holmes Hole on September 15, 1848. During the morning session, Thaxter was elected the first president of the Association. During the afternoon, Thaxter presented a lesson in “Arithmetic, etc.”, followed by a lecture by S. W. Coggeshall on the “condition of the public schools of this Island and the means of improving them.”

Leavitt Thaxter’s public service was not limited to teaching. When the Martha’s Vineyard Agricultural Society [see RU 233] formed in 1858, Thaxter was elected president. At the first Society Fair, held at the Dukes County Academy, Thaxter won prizes for his sweet corn, apples, beets and turnips and Valpariso squash. Earlier, in 1836, Leavitt was commissioned as Guardian to the Indians of Chappaquiddick and Christiantown “and continued to discharge the duties of that appointment for nearly twenty years, with a tender regard for their comfort and welfare that greatly endeared him to them.” Also Thaxter, who was a practicing lawyer, held a variety of government positions, including State Senator, Justice of the Peace, Commissioner in Bankruptcy, Judge of the Court of Insolvency, and Collector of Customs under commissions from Presidents Tyler, Taylor and Fillmore.

In 1861, a number of former students commissioned a portrait of Thaxter by Cyrus W. Pease. The portrait was to be kept in a public building in Edgartown “in perpetual remembrance of one of our most eminent and public spirited citizens, who has through a long life been closely and intimately identified with this town and in its educational and material interests.” Today, the portrait hangs in the main entrance to the Dukes County Courthouse at Edgartown.

Scope and Content Note:

The collection documents early American educational methods, private academies and a professional teaching association on Martha’s Vineyard as well as the leading role Leavitt Thaxter (1789-1863) played in the development of these institutions. Student Exercise Books (1740-1880) by Island children are included. A notebook containing a list of pupils “Keeping School at Captain Grafton Luce’s” (1848) also includes the

constitution of the Holmes Hole Female Union Society. Also present are the published dedication speech, tuition records and an example of student work for Thaxter's Academy (1825-1834); records, promissory notes, correspondence and a blueprint for alterations for Dukes County Academy (1833-1940); and records of the Dukes County Educational Association (1848-1902). Also included is a subscription list of townspeople who commissioned a portrait of Leavitt Thaxter to be painted by Cyrus W. Pease.

Series Descriptions

Series I: Student Exercise Books 1740-1880

Box 1 of 2

Folder 1: Sarah Howland's Book, ca. 1740

Folder 2: Peace Case's Book, ca. 1800

Folder 3: Joseph Worthington Tilton's Book, n. d.

Folder 4: Joseph Worthington Tilton's Book, 1814

Folder 5: Parnell Smith's Book, ca. 1800

Folder 6: Three unsigned cipher books, ca. 1800

Folder 7: Sheet of schoolwork, n.d.; Elizabeth Howe Mayhew's multiplication table, 1840.

Folder 8: Two practice ledgers belonging to Suzie Jernegan, 1880.

Series II: School at Captain Grafton Luce's

Box 1 of 2

Folder 9: List of pupils "Keeping School at Captain Grafton Luce's," March 28, 1843. [within a notebook containing the Constitution of the Holmes Hole Female Union Society].

Series III: Leavitt Thaxter (1789-1863) and Thaxter's Academy 1825-1834

Box 1 of 2

Folder 10: Leavitt Thaxter obituary, *Vineyard Gazette*, January 8, 1864; Letter from Harriet M. Pease to C. E. Banks, August 4, 1907, regarding Thaxter obituary; Subscription list for memorial portrait of Leavitt Thaxter, January, 1861; Draft of subscription letter.

Folder 11: *An Oration, delivered at the dedication of Thaxter's Academy in Edgarton[sic], Martha's Vineyard, November 29th, 1825. Also, a Hymn, composed for the occasion. By Leavitt Thaxter. 1825.*

Folder 12: Names of Parents and students, tuition payments, April 9, 1832-March 1834.

Folder 13: Sarah Dunham's Album, 1830

Series IV: Dukes County Academy, 1833-1940

Folder 14: *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Dukes County Academy at West Tisbury. 1841. (2 copies); Prize Speaking by Students of Dukes County Academy at the Congregational Church, West Tisbury, Mass. March 6, 1896.*

Folder 15: Bills and Receipts, 1870-1887.

Folder 16: Dukes County Association. Correspondence, 1933-1940.

Folder 17: Promissory notes, 3 vols., 1835-1868.

Folder 18: Copies and reference materials.

Box 2 of 2

Folder 1: Dukes County Academy Records, 1837-1850.

Misc. Oversized Documents

Box 3: Blueprints for alterations to Dukes County Academy building, 1940.

Series V: Dukes County Educational Association, 1848-1902

Box 2 of 2

Folder 2: Secretary's Book, 1848-1853.

Folder 3: Secretary's Book, 1853-1862.

Folder 4: Secretary's Book, 1862-1883.

Folder 5: Secretary's Book, 1896-1902; *Constitution of the Dukes County Educational Association, and a List of Members, 1891* (3 copies).

Folder 6: Prize Essays, 1851-1866.