

2nd Bench School (1881-1886)

The 2nd Bench School was also known as the Cowichan South School. Built in 1881 it stood on a hill, then known as McLean's Hill, on the east side of the current TransCanada Highway overlooking Dougan's Lake. There were no roads to this school only trails converging on it from various directions. Water was supplied by a clear spring shadowed by willow trees about 50 yards down the hill from the school.

The outer wooden walls of the school were of an old wide rustic style while its inner wooden walls, ceiling and floor were of a type of tongue and groove. Handmade shingles covered the roof. The entrance door faced west and there were two windows on each side of the building. The lower sashes of those windows were glazed over such that students could not see outside and anyone on the outside could not see in! The desks were hand-dressed boards in the form of an oblong table sloping slightly down to the side facing the students who sat on stools.

The first teacher at this new school was Mr. A. Mackenzie, who only worked at the school one month, August 5 to September 6, 1881, for which he was paid \$55. He was immediately replaced by Thomas Clyde whose assignment included alternating daily between this 2nd Bench School, which had 14 registered students, and Koksilah School, which had 24 registered students. By April 1883 the number of students attending Bench School had risen to 28.

A division of the South Cowichan School District was made in 1884. Koksilah School was now on its own, but Bench School was included in a newly defined Shawnigan School District.

Hired in March 1884 teacher William John Mufford found himself alternating his daily teaching duties between Bench School and what is today Mill Bay School. At that time there were 17 children at Bench, three of them only five years old.

Eli Joseph Campbell was the next teacher, hired in August 1884. He had 24 students in his class. At the school inspection of September 15, 1884, only 8 of the 24 registered students were present. It was felt that a great measure for the decreased attendance at Bench School was the inclusion of that school in the new Shawnigan School District.

The last teacher at the 2nd Bench School was Walter Hunter who taught there between January and June 1886. One of his students, Nathan Paul Dougan, later wrote: "Mr. Hunter was a left-handed penman; and I heard him relate how in his youth he had been a ploughboy in his native state, and had his right arm badly shattered by a kick from a horse. Unskillful setting had left his arm almost crippled and he had then taken to study and worked his way through college. . . . Walter Hunter was an exceptionally competent teacher. . . .by 1887 he was teaching in Nanaimo, where in the course of time he succeeded the late Dr. E. B. Paul as principal of Nanaimo High School."

The 2nd Bench School closed for good at the end of June 1886 and was replaced by the 3rd Bench schoolhouse. There are no remains of the 2nd Bench School today.

By Carolyn Prellwitz, Secretary-Treasurer
Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society
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