

## The First New Hampshire Teacher: John Legat

In 1647, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed an education act generally referred to as the “Old Deluder Satan Act” (*see the following page*). It required all Massachusetts towns with more than fifty households to “appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read...” By this act the town of Hampton (then part of the combined province of New Hampshire and Massachusetts) was required to have a school.

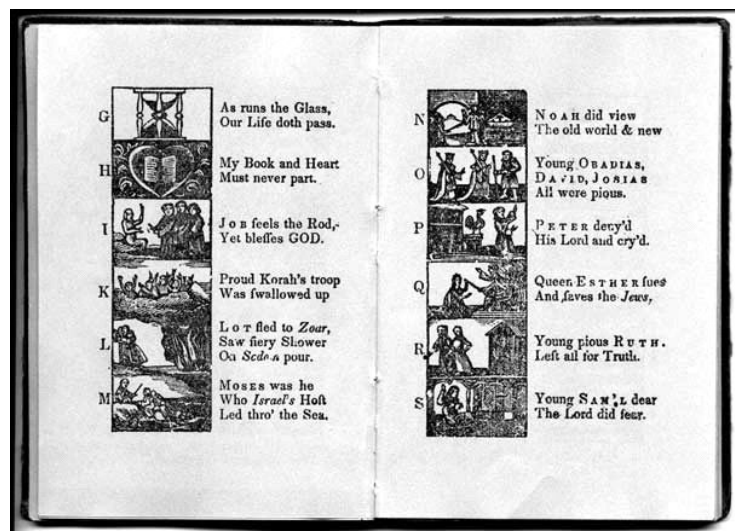
More than a year passed, but in 1649 the town hired as a teacher John Legat, a man who had resided in Hampton in 1640 but had since moved to Exeter. Mr. Legat thus became the first teacher for whom there are records of employment in present day New Hampshire. From the records of the town of Hampton:

On the 2 of the 2 mo; 1649: The selectmen of this Towne of Hampton have agreed with John Legat for this present yeare ensuing — To teach and instruct all the children of or belonging to our Towne, both mayle and femaile (wch are capable of learning) to write and read and cast accountes, (if it be desired), as diligently and as carefully as he is able to teach and instruct them; And so diligently to follow the said imploymett att all such time and times this yeare ensuing, as the wether shall be fitting for the youth to com together to one place to be instructed; And allso to teach and instruct them once in a week, or more, in some Arthodox chatechise provided for them by their parents or masters. And in consideration hereof we have agreed to pay or cause to be payd unto the said John Legat, the som of Twenty pounds, in corne and cattle and butter att price currant, as payments are made of such goods in this Towne, and this to be payd by us quarterly, paying 5£ every quarter of the yeare after he has begun to keep school.

Later the following entry in the records appears: “John Legat entered upon schooling the 21 day of the 3 month, 1649.”

In the county court in October of 1650, however, John Legat sued the selectmen of Hampton for payment “of debt for scooleing & other writings done for ye Towne.”

Legat later withdrew his lawsuit; presumably, the matter was settled out of court.



The title of the 1647 education law comes from its opening sentence:

It being one chief project of that **old deluder, Satan** [emphasis added], to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these latter times by persuading from the use of tongues, that so that at least the true sense and meaning of the original might be clouded and corrupted with false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers; and to the end that learning may not be buried in the grave of our forefathers, in church and commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors.

It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to fifty households shall forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read, whose wages shall be paid either by the parents or masters of such children, or by the inhabitants in general, by way of supply, as the major part of those that order the prudentials of the town shall appoint; provided those that send their children be not oppressed by paying much more than they can have them taught for in other towns.

And it is further ordered, that when any town shall increase to the number of one hundred families or householders, they shall set up a grammar school, the master thereof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the university, provided that if any town neglect the performance hereof above one year that every such town shall pay 5 pounds to the next school till they shall perform this order.

## Notes

An earlier law (1642) had required parents and masters of apprentices to educate their charges in reading and writing. It also stipulated that the government would take charge of any child whose education was being neglected and assign an apprenticeship.

The grammar schools mentioned in the 1647 law referred to boys. “Dame” schools, located in a private home and taught by the woman of the house, also offered rudimentary instruction in reading and writing, which might be the only “formal” education available to females.

For a chronology of events in the history of education in New Hampshire, visit our web site (at <http://www.nhhistory.org/edu/support/nhrowingupindex.htm>) or the “Timeline of New Hampshire Education” page on our CD-ROM.

## Sources

**John Legat:** Joseph Dow, *History of the Town of Hampton New Hampshire from Its Settlement in 1638 to the Autumn of 1892* (1893), pp. 473-474. Also, L.K.H. Lane’s “Historic Hampton,” *The Granite Monthly*, 26, 1 (July 1896), noted in “Historic Hampton” online [cited November 21, 2004] (<http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/history/pamphlets/HistoricHampton.htm>).

**Act of 1647:** From *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (1853), II: 203, noted in “The Old Deluder Act” online [cited August 29, 2004] (<http://personal.pitnet.net/primarysources/deluder.html>).

**Primer:** The pages shown are from a facsimile of *The New England Primer Improved for the More Easy Attaining the True Reading of English to Which Is Added The Assembly of Divines and Mr. Cotton’s Catechism* (Boston, 1777).