

4-1-1947

# Schoolbooks for Sarah Gillespie

Josephine Donovan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Donovan, Josephine. "Schoolbooks for Sarah Gillespie." *The Palimpsest* 28 (1947), 113-121.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol28/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## Schoolbooks of Sarah Gillespie

When chubby four-year-old Sarah Lorinda Gillespie, one spring day in 1870, walked shyly into the schoolhouse, which had just been erected in Subdistrict Number Six, Coffins Grove Township, Delaware County, she was not in the least frightened. With her was her six-year-old brother, and the teacher, Harriet Hawley, was her aunt who lived in the Gillespie home about a mile and a half away — a long walk, it would seem, for a four-year-old.

This is the story of the schoolbooks that Sarah Gillespie used during the years between 1870 and 1879. These treasured volumes, long preserved at home, were deposited in 1945 in the library of the State Historical Society, with a brief autobiography by the original owner, Mrs. Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, who was living on a farm near Manchester.

The first books, of course, were primers. Little Sarah had three of these. One, the *American Illustrated Primer*, seems to have had only a paper cover, but someone carefully bound the edges of each sheet with a narrow band of heavy blue paper. Lists of words to be learned (by a first

grader or pre-school child) include dilemma, apostate, and pollute. A second volume, coverless, is *The Little Folks' Pictorial Primer: And Child's Book for Home and School*, dated 1856. Both primers were published by Kiggins, Tooker & Co., New York, and both are profusely illustrated with pictures of children whose faces are those of adult men and women.

The third primer, still in its bluish-green cover, is *Sargent's Standard School Primer*, part two, published in 1868 by John L. Shorey of Boston and copyrighted by John O. Sargent. The author, however, was probably his brother, Epes Sargent. Another brother, George B. Sargent, was one of Iowa's early bankers and promoters. The title page informs us that it was "illustrated by Billings" but no further information concerning him has been found. The pictures in this reader show children with children's faces, not those of men and women.

The collection contains five readers. First among these is *Sanders' Union Reader* "for primary schools and families", by Charles W. Sanders, A. M. When Sarah had finished this reader, she was given a *Second Eclectic Reader*, by the famous William H. McGuffey, and then she was promoted to a third reader prepared by Epes Sargent. She also used a fourth reader by the same

author. The last reader in the collection is McGuffey's *New Sixth Eclectic Reader*, containing excerpts from the works of such writers as William Shakespeare, William Pitt, Charles Dickens, Walter Scott, and Felicia Browne Hemans. A bookmark of colored floss at page 304 of this Sixth reader calls attention to "Discontent: An Allegory", by Joseph Addison, a story in which men are permitted to discard their own burdens and take those which seem lighter, only to find that they were in no better condition.

William H. McGuffey was also the author of the *New Eclectic Spelling-Book* from which Sarah Gillespie painstakingly learned to spell such words as "dis'-pu ta ble" and "pros e lyt ism" and write from dictation "After a *dose* he fell into a *doze*" and "It is certainly *meet* to *mete* out *meat* to hunters". The type in this old spelling book is small and much space is given to the study of vowels, diphthongs, and triphthongs. Pronunciation was a mechanical process and to facilitate it, words were syllabicated and embellished with significant dots and figures.

Samuel S. Greene, A. M., "Professor in Brown University", and S. W. Clark, A. M., wrote the grammars in Sarah Gillespie's collection. These books have the small type of the period, but their contents do not vary greatly from the usual gram-

mar textbooks. The Clark grammar, however, featured two intricate, circular "grammatical charts" which, it was claimed, presented "the entire Etymology of the English language". The Greene text includes a fascinating series of ungrammatical expressions "collected from a large number of schools". These were to be corrected; but present-day psychologists would probably frown on focusing the attention of pupils upon such glaring errors as, "I can't get it no way", "Where be I goin' to set?", and "I've larned it to her".

A statement enclosed in James S. Eaton's *Common School Arithmetic* indicates that the complete mastery of this volume required three years. Sarah Gillespie began its study in 1874 when she was nine years old. The pupils reached decimals the first year and percentage the second year. The third year they were supposed to finish the book, including square and cube root, geometrical progression, mensuration, and the metric system. The "examples" often seem complicated to us. Usually the answers were given to what were considered difficult problems, leaving the pupil to struggle only with the process of arriving at them. "If a globe of gold 1 inch in diameter is worth \$100, what is the diameter of a globe worth \$6400?" was considered fairly easy; no answer was given. But the next one was considered more difficult. "Sup-

pose the diameter of the earth is 7912 miles, and that it takes 1404928 bodies like the earth to make one as large as the sun, what is the diameter of the sun?" One can imagine twelve-year-old Sarah Gillespie struggling to come out with the right answer — 886,144 miles. Another problem was less astronomical. "A fox has 18 rods the start of a hound, but the hound runs 25 rods while the fox runs 22; how far must the hound run to overtake the fox?"

Another book on mathematics was a *New Elementary Algebra*, prepared by Horatio N. Robinson, LL. D. A note in the front indicates that it was purchased in September, 1877, when Sarah was twelve years old.

Sarah Gillespie used two geographies during her years in school in Coffins Grove Township, both published by Cowperthwait and Company of Philadelphia. D. M. Warren's *A New Primary Geography*, published in 1873, introduced the children to a study of the world in this wise: "This is the beautiful land which God hath given us for our dwelling-place." Descriptive materials are combined with questions to be answered from the text. The illustrations stimulate the imagination. One can imagine an Iowa farm child pouring over pictures of a "tiger hunt in India" or "ladies of Havana riding in a volante".

Warren's *Common School Geography*, "the big g'ography", boasted of "an entirely new series of finely engraved Copper-plate Maps". And maps are omnipresent; in fact most of this geography is given over to maps and the questions to be answered from the maps. But one can extract information that is of interest today. In 1875 the population of the United States was estimated at 40,000,000. In 1870, New York claimed 942,000 people and London 3,000,000. Alaska had "500 whites"; San Francisco was the largest city in California and neither Los Angeles nor Hollywood was mentioned. The population of St. Paul surpassed that of Minneapolis by 2,000 souls. In Iowa, Davenport, with a population of 20,038, was the largest city. Dubuque, cited as "the largest city in the mining district", was the second largest city with 18,434.

In the appraisal of States producing "important staples", according to the 1870 census, Iowa ranked fourth in corn (topped by Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri), fifth in oats, third in wheat, eighth in potatoes, fifth in hay, and sixth in barley. Iowa was characterized as one of the most fertile States in the Union. In addition to the thirty-seven States, this geography listed ten Territories — Idaho, Washington, Montana, Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and

the Indian Territory — the District of Columbia, and Alaska.

Of Europe's "sixteen states", Russia, Austria, Germany, and Turkey were described as empires; Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece were kingdoms; and Switzerland and France were republics. The German Empire was described as having been constituted "for the purpose of repelling French invasion." France was rated as "one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world" while England, with colonies in every quarter of the globe, "unites under one sovereign a greater number of people than are ruled by any other government." The Russian Empire was described as "the largest in extent in the world." In 1875 Spain controlled many islands including Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines. The "Five Great Powers" in 1875 were Great Britain, Germany, France, Russia, and Austria. The United States was not included.

A series of questions required that the pupil remember each statement and give the proper response when the teacher asked the question. "What is manufacturing?", the teacher was to ask, and the pupil was supposed to reply, "Manufacturing is the art of adapting natural productions to the uses of man."



A. S. Barnes was the author of the *History of the United States*, down to the centennial year, 1876. Sarah Gillespie and her schoolmates lived in the reconstruction period and the current topics at the supper tables included the Atlantic cable, Horace Greeley's "Go west young man", and the impeachment of President Johnson, but Barnes devoted much space to military matters. In the back of this history are two hundred and eighty-nine questions "for class use" and two hundred under the heading "Historical Recreations". Some of these were forerunners of our "information please" questions. "What three ex-presidents died on the Fourth of July?" Another asked, "What President introduced rotation in office?"

What about writing? "We used the Spencerian Copy Books", wrote Mrs. Huftalen, "with their large lined pages headed by beautiful penmanship, principles of the letters, and the copies were fine mottoes to learn and follow. We also used slates with pencils of slate or soap stone." Sponges and bottles of water were kept on hand by each pupil. Blackboard erasers were homemade blocks of wood having sheepskin tacked on.

These books used by Sarah Gillespie in the seventies and eighties preserve something of the mother's interest in her daughter's education. On many of the fly leaves, in fine Spencerian hand-

writing, are inscriptions such as the one in the arithmetic — "A present to Sarah for trying to learn. October 8, 1874. Thursday By E. E. Gillespie". In the fourth reader Sarah's mother made the same note and wrote below it this verse:

"Play well your part and bear in mind  
A constant friend is hard to find  
When you find one that is kind and true  
Change not the old one for the new.

Emily E. Gillespie."

The books show evidence of care and interest. "Our textbooks", wrote Sarah Huftalen in 1945, "were neatly covered with remnants of cloth from our dresses, shirts, and aprons. They were not marked, soiled, or dog-eared intentionally."

And so the schoolbooks of a girl in the seventies mutely portray the standards and the problems of the period. Geography was learned by rote, not by trips; grammar was intricate not casual; reading was supposed to inculcate morality and information rather than stimulate the imagination; arithmetic dealt with such problems as labor costs, carpeting, or farm sales and purchases, not to mention mind-teasers. Education is the preparation of youth for its own age. Sarah Gillespie's books are history.

JOSEPHINE DONOVAN