



New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection  
Division of Community Investment & Economic Revitalization  
Historic Preservation Office

# NEW JERSEY'S PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDINGS



*Photo: Weequahic High School, Newark, Essex County, ca. 1932.*

## A BRIEF FIELD GUIDE

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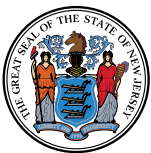
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## NJ Historic Preservation Office

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# Introduction

**SCHOOLS HAVE EXISTED IN NEW JERSEY SINCE THE EARLY YEARS OF THE** colonial period, and the buildings that have housed them have been many. To better appreciate them, it will help to classify them according to their various types. This article is too brief to treat private, parochial, special-purpose or experimental schools; or higher education buildings; but, given that large caveat, here is a brief guide to the earliest and most recognizable types of public school buildings.

## One-room schools

Of the schoolhouses in New Jersey from before 1750, we know little more than that such buildings existed. None of these buildings have survived, so that if any will be found in the future, it will be as archaeological traces in the ground.

The town of Newark, for example, opened a school in 1677, and other towns followed. Some of the earliest schools may have been conducted in houses or meetinghouses, because with only a few students and one teacher it was not always necessary to have a building that would be used exclusively for the school. Our most common mental image of the early school is that of the one-room schoolhouse. But while all of the earliest school buildings had but one room, during the last two hundred years they evolved considerably.

### Oldest survivors

The earliest schoolhouses that still stand in New Jersey date from the second half of the 18th century. The *Old Schoolhouse* or “Brainerd Schoolhouse” (HABS NJ-100) in Mount Holly, built in 1759, is the oldest of the small number of early primary schools that still stand in New Jersey. It is a well-constructed, brick building — qualities that set it apart from most of its vanished predecessors.



**PHOTO 1.** *The Old Schoolhouse in Mount Holly, Burlington County, built in 1759. (Credit: Joan Berkey 2008.)*



**PHOTO 2.** *Lyons Farm Schoolhouse in Newark, Essex County, ca.1782-84. (Credit: 1973 photo, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*

Other 18th century schools that survive include the *Lyons Farm Schoolhouse* (1782-84; HABS NJ-3) of Newark, built of stone and the brick *Quaker School* (1792) in Burlington City. Longer in proportion than the Brainerd school, the Lyons Farm Schoolhouse’s entrance was placed in the gable end, foreshadowing a change that would become standard in the 19th century. The organizing of schools and hiring of teachers was becoming increasingly widespread in New Jersey during the generation before the Revolution, and during the first generation after independence one-room schools became a commonplace throughout the New Jersey landscape for the first time.

### Schoolmasters

Schooling in southern New Jersey was also aided by a Quaker-led reform: the building of houses for schoolmasters to live in. Such houses were meant to make the master an established member of the community and take the itinerancy out of teaching. It was expected that by this means that better educated teachers could be recruited. One *Schoolmaster’s House* (ca.1781) still stands at *Stony Brook*

## New Jersey's Public School Buildings : A Brief Field Guide

in Princeton, Mercer County. Nearly all of the schools of this period have vanished, but references to them can sometimes be found in 19th-century local histories.

### Shapes of early schoolhouses

The shape of early schoolhouses took various forms, but the general course of their evolution until after the Civil War paralleled the evolution of meetinghouses to churches. The Mount Holly schoolhouse of 1759 features a facade 24 feet long with a center door, and side walls of 20 feet. This arrangement, putting the entry in the middle of the long side, was like that of many meetinghouses of the colonial period.

In contrast, the Lyons Farm schoolhouse is about 31 feet long and 21 feet wide — about the same footprint as many small 18th-century meetinghouses — but the entrance is in the gable end. There is some evidence that many favored a square plan for schoolhouses, based on descriptions that survive. Such schools ranged from 16 × 16 feet to 24 × 24 feet, and 20 × 20 feet may have been the most common size. The original part of the *Old Franklin School* in Metuchen (ca.1807, expanded ca.1840; HABS NJ-226) originally featured a square, 20 × 20-foot schoolroom.



**PHOTO 3.** *Fairview Schoolhouse in Knowlton Township, Warren County, is the only survivor still bearing witness to this brief vogue. (Credit: HABS NJ-429 1937.)*

The shape of the early schoolhouse was an important consideration. One Quaker-led reform popular in Hunterdon County was the octagon schoolhouse, a reaction to the shortcomings of existing school buildings. Octagon schoolhouses were better lighted because they had no dark corners and the windows were, on average, closer to the student desks; and they were better heated because the heating stove was moved from along a side wall to the middle of the room and bench seating was arranged concentrically around it. At least 25 octagon schools were built in New Jersey between 1800 and 1851, but only one survives — the *Fairview Schoolhouse* (1835) in Knowlton Township, Warren County.

### The first segregated public schools

Segregated schools for African American children began to appear, starting with the *Carpenter Street School* (1840) in Woodbury, and they grew in number as the century progressed, especially in southern and central New Jersey. The Carpenter Street School also represents the one-room school before the influence of education reformers began to be felt.



**PHOTO 4.** *The Carpenter Street School in Woodbury, Gloucester County, built in 1840, was the first segregated school in New Jersey built for African Americans. (Credit: Caroline Gavin 1997, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*

## The reformers

The first American book on schoolhouse design was published in Boston in 1832, and New Englanders for the next generation led a national movement for education reform. In 1846, New Jersey appointed its first state school superintendent (today the Commissioner of Education). In 1848, Henry Barnard published *School Architecture*, which provided useful designs of model schoolhouses. From this period on, schools that adhered to the new reforms would be built with rectangular plans on raised foundations, and the classrooms would offer high ceilings and to the students individual “patent” desks arranged in columns and rows. Other authors followed Barnard’s lead, and the state superintendent encouraged local school committees to use the most appropriate designs.

### Common one-room form

The ***South Branch Schoolhouse*** (1873), in Branchburg Township, Somerset County, is a well-preserved schoolhouse where this advice was followed. Such schools made their narrow, gable end their front side, sometimes with a front porch, and perhaps a datestone in the gable. These schoolhouses were rectangular but not square, with narrow facades and long side walls. The side walls featured multiple double-sash windows, individually framed at first, but from the 1870s on, often set together as a bank of several sash windows beside one another in a single frame. Small belfridges sometimes crowned the roofs, with a school bell permitting a teacher to more effectively summon the students.



**PHOTO 5.** *The Flocktown Schoolhouse, Washington Township, Morris County, built about 1868. (Credit: 1980 photo, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*

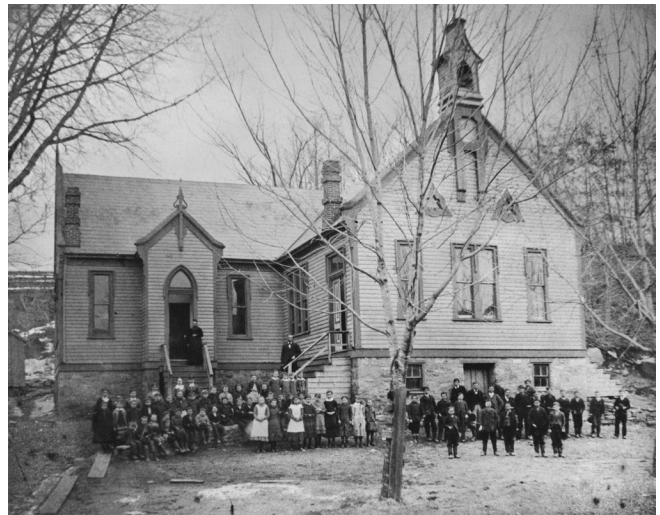
Most surviving one-room schools were built after the Civil War, and in rural areas they continued to be the norm until the early 20th century. Buildings such as the ***Flocktown Schoolhouse*** (ca.1868) in Washington Township, Morris County, date from the heyday of rural one-room schools and represents the type of 19th-century schoolhouse probably most familiar to the general public. A book has even been written — *Chickaree in the Wall* — about Ocean County's one-room schoolhouses. The ***Ocean Gate School*** (1914) in Ocean Gate Borough, is one of the last one-room schoolhouses built in New Jersey, and, housing a kindergarten class, it is perhaps the last one still in use for regular classroom instruction.

## Multiple-room elementary schools

As long as there have been education commissioners, they have complained that there are too many school districts in New Jersey. Such complaints can be found in their annual reports at least as early as the 1860s, when New Jersey had more than 1,400 school districts (there are more than 600 today) and when the first attempts to persuade districts to merge were made. Such a consolidation was originally known as a “union” district, and sometimes these districts were able to build larger schools. As small towns grew in population, they too could afford larger schools, and architects came forward with designs.

### Two-room and three-room schools

Two-room and three-room schools were designed as one-story buildings. The ***District No. 98 School*** or “Stockton School” (1872, enlarged in 1884) in Stockton Borough, Hunterdon County, is an architect-designed three-room school in a situation where the merger of two neighboring districts allowed for a larger building than either of the districts alone could have afforded.



**PHOTO 6.** *The District No. 98 Consolidated School, Stockton Borough, Hunterdon County, built 1872-73. This 1878 photo shows its original appearance before it was enlarged in 1884. (Credit: National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*



### Four-room and early two-story schools



**PHOTO 7.** *The Higbee Street School, Trenton, Mercer County, built 1857. (Credit: Gerald Harcar ca.1970s, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*



**PHOTO 8.** *The Church Street School, in the Town of Nutley, Essex County, built 1875. After the Civil War, multiple-room, two-story schools began to proliferate in New Jersey's small towns. (Credit: NJHPO Collection.)*

Four-room schools could also be of a single story, but they were more likely to be of two stories, like Trenton's *Higbee Street School* (1857). Schools in New Jersey's cities also began to grow dramatically in size before the Civil War.

This school captures the beginning of that trend, during the latter years of the Greek Revival style's popularity.

After the Civil War, multiple-room, two-story schools like the *Church Street School* (1875) in Nutley began to proliferate in New Jersey's small towns.

### Eight-room schools

Eight-room schools began to make their appearance in the larger towns after the Civil War, as a two-story school with double-loaded corridors, four classrooms to a floor. A single hipped roof over all of the classrooms often served to unify the design.

## Secondary education before the high school

Academies were the first secondary schools, before the emergence of high schools during the latter half of the 19th century. They sprang up in several towns before the Revolutionary War, and in many more towns afterward. Sometimes, as at the *Amwell Academy* (1811; HABS NJ-513) in Ringoes, these were simply large houses. In other cases such as at the *Basking Ridge Classical School*, a.k.a. "The Academy" (1809) in Basking Ridge, some effort was made toward the development of a recognizable building type. In *Hamill House* (1814) at the *Lawrenceville School*, a 3-story, stone building, we are reminded that in these academies we are looking at the beginnings of both public and private secondary education in New Jersey. A few academies later grew into major educational institutions that still provide private secondary education.



**PHOTO 9.** *Basking Ridge Classical School, Bernards Township, Somerset County, built 1809. (Credit: 1974 photo, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*

### The academy curriculum

The academies taught Latin and Greek, English, algebra, geometry, geography, penmanship and sometimes history and science to students who sometimes did, but more often did not, attend college afterward. Some academies were coeducational from the beginning, but many were intended for boys only.

### Young ladies' seminaries

In time, a parallel institution emerged — the young ladies' seminary — which adopted some of the curriculum of the academies but also emphasized music, literature and drawing classes. Sometimes these institutions were housed in large, fashionable residences; others were in housed in buildings that resembled the early academies for boys.

## 19<sup>th</sup> century schools in cities and towns

In the 19th century, railroads produced a landscape that was dominated by densely-packed industrial cities and sizable towns. With few exceptions, the first suburbs were railroad suburbs. On the other hand, railroads did little, if anything, to increase the rural farm population. By 1928, for example, when automobiles began to eclipse railroads, Mercer County had a farm population estimated at only 6,000, out of a total population of about 170,000. The effect that these population realities had on the design and construction of schools was enormous.

The largest school buildings were built in the fastest-growing cities, and a middle range of schools, smaller than the urban schools but far larger than rural ones, began to emerge in the towns. And from the second quarter of the 19th century through the second quarter of the 20th, educational leadership in New Jersey would come chiefly from the cities. Newark, the state's largest city, became its largest school district, with the largest number of schools and many of its largest and finest.

### Post-Civil War reforms



**PHOTO 10.** *North Long Branch School, Long Branch, Monmouth County, built 1891. (Credit: C. Cielo 1996, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*

After the Civil War, two laws reshaped public education in New Jersey. Laws of 1867 and 1871 ushered in public education in the modern sense: school would be tuition-free but attendance would be compulsory for children between 5 and 16 years old, and the schools would follow the 180-day, September-to-June calendar that has been standard ever since, replacing the old, 3-month winter-term and summer-term calendars of the past. School districts could for the first time tax their citizens to pay for school construction, and several years later would also be empowered to sell bonds, thereby spreading the financial burden of new school construction over a period of years.

The **North Long Branch School** a.k.a. Primary No. 3 (built 1891) in Long Branch, Monmouth County, exemplifies two decades of schools built in New Jersey's cities in the wake of the 1867 and 1871 school laws that together ushered in the modern era of "public" education. Schools built during this period also served as examples for the schools built in the state's suburbs and small towns following the 1894 school consolidation act.

### Second Empire

The result of this new environment of needs and opportunities was a new generation of schools frankly declared to be "public." **Public School No. 1** in Perth Amboy (1871), now the Thomas M. Peterson Elementary School, is a representative example. Because the 1871 act was passed during the heyday of the Second Empire style, the finest of the new schools built in the immediate aftermath of its passage bore its trappings. **Public School No. 2** in Paterson (1871; HABS NJ-927) is another survivor. These schools were architect-designed, of masonry construction and two stories under a mansard roof, featuring a main entrance in a projecting porch or pavilion in front of the main line of the facade.



**PHOTO 11.** *Concept illustration for the mid-1990s rehabilitation of Paterson's Public School No. 2, built 1871. (Credit: NJHPO collection.)*

### **Romanesque Revival and related styles**

In the 1880s and 90s, mansard roofs gave way to hipped roofs in many schools, and the Second Empire style gave way to features from the Romanesque Revival, Richardsonian Romanesque and other styles. Gas lighting supplemented natural illumination during this period, hardwood floors became standard, and coal-fired steam boilers powered central heating systems. **Public School No. 20** (ca.1890) in Paterson and the **Washington School** (1899) in New Brunswick are representative urban examples from the end of the century. The **Mercer Street School** (1894) in Hightstown is a good, small-town example.

### **Classical Revival and Collegiate Gothic**

During the early 20th century, schools in cities and large towns increasingly became major civic institutions. Influenced by college and university architecture, they typically featured Classical Revival or Collegiate Gothic designs, often with a central pavilion flanked by symmetrical wings. The pavilions, however, projected only slightly, if at all, unlike the bold projections of their predecessors. This was made possible by integrating stair towers within double-loaded hallways of classrooms, rather than isolating stairwells in projecting towers. **Jersey City High School**, a.k.a. Dickinson High School (1906-11), designed by architect John T. Rowland, is one of the most outstanding examples of the Classical Revival style in a public school building. Elementary schools in this period popularized separate entrances for boys and girls, who spent their recess in separate areas of the playground.



**PHOTO 12.** *Jersey City High School, Jersey City, Hudson County, built 1906-11. (Credit: 1981 photo, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*

## **Schools between the World Wars**

Catching up with improvements to curriculum and electrical, plumbing, and heating advances, the new schools of this period were complex, modern buildings. They typically featured graded classrooms up through the eighth grade. School “systems” gradually emerged in the sense that the several schools in a community were administered under a centralized leadership headed by a superintendent and backed by a school board. Sizes of buildings usually followed a hierarchy, from smallest (elementary schools) to largest (high schools), with junior high schools (today’s “middle” schools) somewhere in between.



**PHOTO 13.** *The Vineland High School, City of Vineland, Cumberland County, completed in 1927. (Credit: Craig Terry 1993, National Register of Historic Places Nomination.)*

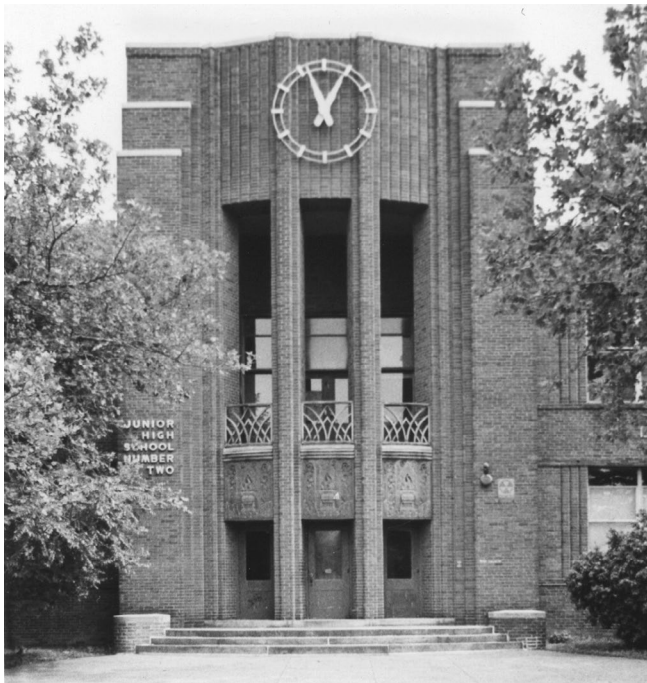


### Continuing prewar trends

Through the 1920s, design trends of the prewar period were strengthened and reinforced, and as the buildings became ever larger and more complex, they came increasingly to be designed by architectural firms that specialized in school construction. The Newark architectural firm of Guilbert & Betelle designed the *Vineland High School* (1927) in the City of Vineland, Cumberland County, which represents the popularity of the Tudor Gothic Revival in 20th century public schools. High schools in this period sometimes featured colossal porticoes in one or another of the classical orders, as in the *Trenton Central High School* (1930). They featured gymnasiums, auditoriums, and cafeterias in wings that extended toward the rear of the buildings, and they added “manual” (vocational) training, business courses, and physical education.

### Art Deco and Art Moderne

Beginning in the latter half of the 1920s, some architects began to include elements of the new Art Deco and Art Moderne styles. Paterson's *Public School No. 5* (1939) is a good example in the Art Deco style. In the 1930s and early 40s, Trenton built a series of schools in this fashion, such as *Junior High No. 2* (1940), now Hedgepeth-Williams Elementary School.



**PHOTO 14.** After 1930 Trenton changed school architects. The result was a decade of schools like this one, *Junior High Number 2*, built in 1940 in the Art Deco style. (Credit: NJHPO collection.)

## The Baby Boom and beyond

School construction surged during the Baby Boom years (1946-1964) and for a decade afterward, which with New Jersey's rapid suburbanization, brought another generation of schools that were very different from their predecessors. Many of these schools have reached 50 years of age, or will soon.



**PHOTO 15.** The *Luis Muñoz Marín School* in Newark, built in 1959, represents the International Style that was the dominant stylistic influence on schools in the Baby Boom era. (Photo: Cultural Heritage Research Services, Inc. 2005)

### International Style

They arrived in the era of the International Style, and adhered to many of its dicta: a disdain for natural materials, historical detail, or symbolic ornament; combined with a frank expression of structural elements, simple massing, stark rectangularity, fluorescent lighting, and abundant use of glass and aluminum mullions. The Classical Revival and the Collegiate Gothic styles, which dominated schools in the 1920s, were nowhere to be seen, and the Art Deco style faded fast. These schools also featured a single story under a flat roof. Where a school was built with a second story, it usually covered only a very small fraction of the first story, as if it were a vestige. The *Luis Muñoz Marín School* (1959) in Newark is an example of this style in use within a larger urban district.

### Reliance on the automobile

High schools in rural areas such as Hunterdon County were “regionalized,” but whether in rural or suburban settings, new schools were set on large tracts of acreage that provided ample space for multiple athletic fields, lawns, parking lots for the cars of faculty, staff, and for school buses. To a higher degree than ever before, schools were no longer within effective walking distance for their students.

## The present era

The forces that fueled these changes carried their momentum through the 70s and 80s, but the era of the Baby Boom schools has ended. The Post-Modern architectural movement has left its stamp on the newest schools, whose designs have broken ranks with the postwar schools. In plan and layout, many similarities remain, but the computer revolution during the past thirty years is bringing profound changes, as new classrooms become “wired” and even “wireless” as never before and as more “classroom media” factors in instruction.

The Abbott decisions of the New Jersey Supreme Court have launched a surge of new school construction in New Jersey's poorest districts, while low interest rates in the past ten years have prompted suburban districts to add new schools and large additions to existing schools. High schools in many places have become the largest buildings of any kind in their municipalities, with average square footages per pupil never before seen. In addition, the rise of “community education” as a grass-roots movement since the 1970s has brought a new constituency — tuition-paying adults — into the schools in large numbers.

With evening classes, weekend programs, and summer schools, high schools as a result have become more heavily used than ever before. What all of this will mean for historic preservation in the future is not yet clear.

# Selected properties

## *From the 2008 article*

### **BURLINGTON COUNTY**

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#### **Burlington City**

- **Quaker School**  
231 York Street  
Built 1792

#### **Mount Holly Township**

- **Old Schoolhouse**  
*a.k.a. Brainerd Schoolhouse*  
35 Brainerd Street  
Built 1759

### **CUMBERLAND COUNTY**

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#### **Vineland**

- **Vineland High School**  
*a.k.a. Landis Intermediate School*  
*Now Vineland Public Schools Administration*  
61 West Landis Avenue  
Built 1927

### **ESSEX COUNTY**

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#### **Newark**

- **Luis Muñoz Marín School**  
663 Broadway  
Built 1959
- **Lyons Farm Schoolhouse**  
University Avenue, part of the Newark Museum of Art  
Built 1782-84

#### **Nutley**

- **Church Street School**  
*Now Nutley Historical Society Museum*  
65 Church Street  
Built 1875

### **GLOUCESTER COUNTY**

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#### **Woodbury**

- **Carpenter Street School**  
48 Nelson Avenue  
Built 1840

### **HUDSON COUNTY**

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#### **Jersey City**

- **Jersey City High School**  
*a.k.a. Dickinson High School*  
2 Palisade Avenue  
Built 1906-11

### **HUNTERDON COUNTY**

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#### **East Amwell Township**

- **Amwell Academy**  
*Now Harvest Moon Inn*  
1039 Old York Road, Ringoes  
Built 1811

#### **Stockton Borough**

- **District No. 98 School**  
*a.k.a. "Stockton School"*  
19 South Main Street  
Built 1872-73, expanded 1884

### **MERCER COUNTY**

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#### **Hightstown Borough**

- **Mercer Street School**  
230 Mercer Street  
Built 1894

#### **Lawrence Township**

- **Samuel McClintock Hamill House**  
*a.k.a. Hamill House, Talbot Hall*  
Within Lawrenceville School, 2500 Main Street  
Built 1814

#### **Princeton**

- **Stony Brook Friends Schoolmaster's House**  
Within Princeton Friends School, 470 Quaker Rd  
Built ca.1781

## Trenton

- **Higbee Street School**  
20 Bellevue Avenue  
Built 1857
- **Junior High No. 2**  
*Now Hedgepeth-Williams Elementary School*  
301 Gladstone Avenue  
Built 1940
- **Trenton Central High School**  
400 Chambers Street  
Built 1930  
*[Demolished 2015]*

## MIDDLESEX

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### Metuchen

- **Old Franklin School**  
491 Middlesex Avenue  
Built ca.1807, expanded ca.1840

### New Brunswick

- **Washington School**  
*a.k.a. Washington Elementary School*  
141 French Street (approx.)  
Built 1899  
*[Demolished between 1983-1986]*

### Perth Amboy

- **Public School No. 1**  
*a.k.a. Thomas M. Peterson Elementary School*  
274 State Street  
Built 1871

## MONMOUTH COUNTY

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### Long Branch

- **North Long Branch School**  
*a.k.a. Primary No. 3, "Church Street School"*  
465 Church Street  
Built 1891

## MORRIS COUNTY

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### Washington Township

- **Flocktown Schoolhouse**  
186 Flocktown Road  
Built ca.1868

## OCEAN COUNTY

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### Ocean Gate Borough

- **Ocean Gate School**  
126 West Arverne Avenue  
Built 1914

## PASSAIC COUNTY

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### Paterson

- **Public School No. 2**  
22 Passaic Street  
Built 1871
- **Public School No. 20**  
500 East 37th Street  
Built ca.1890

## SOMERSET COUNTY

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### Bernards Township

- **Basking Ridge Classical School**  
*a.k.a. The Academy, The Brick Academy*  
*Now Somerset Hills Historical Society*  
15 West Oak Street, Basking Ridge  
Built 1809

### Branchburg Township

- **South Branch Schoolhouse**  
2120 South Branch Road  
Built 1873

## WARREN COUNTY

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### Knowlton Township

- **Fairview Schoolhouse**  
Within Fairview Cemetery,  
19 Cemetery Road, Blairstown  
Built 1835