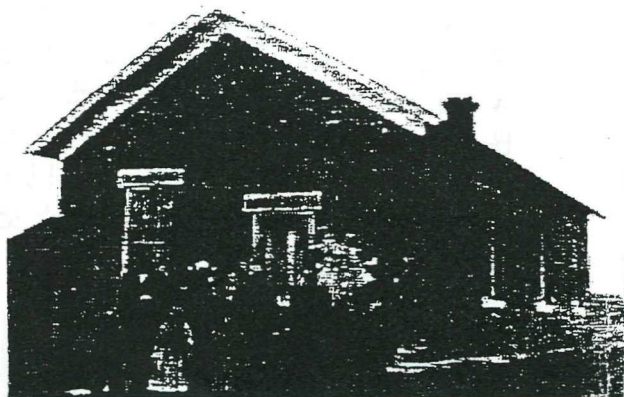


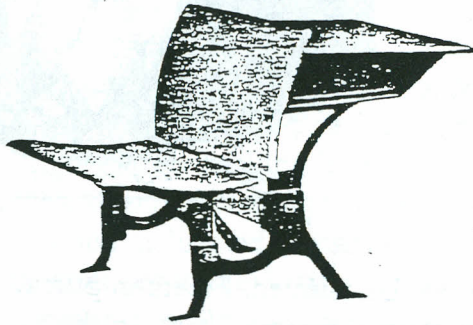
Freeman School



The Freeman School stands as a reminder of the role the schoolhouse played in the history of the prairie frontier. Officially known as School District Number 21, the Freeman School was a center for education of children from 1872 until 1967. At that time, it was one of the oldest continuously operating schools in Nebraska. During its long history, the school served as a meeting place for the First Trinity Lutheran Church, the polling place for Blakely Township, and a gathering place for many debates, socials, and clubs.

The school stands quiet now. The sounds of the teacher's bell, children at recess, and Sunday hymns have faded, just as the tall grass prairie has all but disappeared. Today, the school provides us with a window to the past - a small glimpse of life on the prairie frontier.

Homesteaders and pioneers placed a high value on public education. Simple, one room schoolhouses were often built before their permanent homes. Unlike many of the more typical wood or sod-walled schools found west of the Missouri River, the Freeman School was constructed of a locally-baked brick. According to school records, Thomas Freeman, unrelated to the homesteader, Daniel Freeman, was paid \$100.15 "on account of Brick." Furnishings were usually hand made, but the Freeman School was furnished with desks shipped from Indiana.



Teachers were young, often younger than their oldest students. Salaries were meager and many teachers collected a large portion of their wages in room and board. It was not uncommon for a teacher to rotate from one prairie community to another to be housed and fed.

Books were precious. Many students had to supply their own texts. The family Bible was often used. Different editions and often different titles added to the teacher's woes. When more money was available, McGuffey readers reduced their problem. In 1881, the Freeman School provided textbooks for its students, ten years before schools were required to by the Nebraska legislature.

The one room school house was the focal point for a young community. Many homesteaders saw their children baptized in the school house, heard friends eulogized there, and shared a box supper with their neighbors at the Saturday night social.

It is unclear if the school is named for Daniel Freeman, or for Thomas H. Freeman. Thomas Freeman and Daniel Freeman were highly regarded in the community and were active board members of School District 21. While not much known about Thomas Freeman, it is documented that he was the director of the school district at the time the school was constructed.

Today, most one room school houses are gone. Fortunately some, like the Freeman School, have been saved to preserve this rich part of our cultural heritage.



Daniel Freeman v. Board of Education

The year 1899 saw the beginning of a law suit that would bring national attention to the Freeman School. In that year Daniel Freeman took issue with the use of the Bible in classroom instruction. Miss Edith Beecher was employed as teacher at that time. Being a woman of strong religious convictions, she asked and was granted permission by the school board to conduct religious exercises in the school, including reading passages from the Bible, singing songs from a gospel hymn book, and offering prayers. When Daniel Freeman (who had children attending the school) asked Miss Beecher to stop, she refused.

Freeman then challenged the school board as to the "goings on" at the school. The board defended Miss Beecher, maintaining that the ten minute exercises she conducted "were for the best interest of the pupils." The board denied that the exercises were sectarian or dogmatical, noting particularly that Miss Beecher did not comment on the Biblical passages she read, nor did she force her opinions or beliefs on any of the children. The board added that if anyone was guilty of anything, it was Mr. Freeman, who "harassed and hounded" teachers the school had hired and generally interfered in school affairs.

True to his nature, Freeman appealed and eventually filed suit against the school board in the Gage County District Court, asking for a *writ of mandamus*. The court denied the writ, and voted in favor of the school board, ruling that there had been no violation of the state constitution and that such matters were to be determined by the authority of the school board.

District 21 Gage County, Nebraska



Daniel Freeman

Undaunted, Freeman pursued his case to the Nebraska Supreme Court, in the case of *Daniel Freeman versus John Scheve, Et. al.* John Scheve was an officer of the school board, and an organizer of the First Trinity Lutheran Church. On October 9, 1902, the State Supreme Court ruled in favor of Daniel Freeman, saying that the school district was in violation of Article 8, Section 11, of the Nebraska Constitution which provides that "No sectarian instruction shall be allowed in any school or institution supported in whole or in part by the public funds set apart for educational purposes." In his findings, Supreme Court Commissioner John H. Amos stated that Bible reading, even without comment, together with the offering of prayers constituted sectarian instruction. The fledging state had moved to a position on separation of church and state even before the United States Supreme Court came to the same conclusion.

Location

Located a quarter of a mile west of the Visitor Center on Highway 4, the Freeman School is part of the Homestead National Monument of America. The school was donated to the National Park Service in 1971. Work began at that time to restore the building to its present appearance. This one room school house appears much the same as it was when pioneer children attended school there in the late 1800's.

About Your Visit

You may visit the Freeman School and grounds at any time. Parking is limited to 2 or 3 cars on the east side of the building. A larger parking lot to the north of the structure can be opened upon request. Access to the inside of the school is limited to Ranger conducted tours which can be arranged at the Visitor Center during normal operating hours. Behind the school you can find native tall grass prairie. This area, never plowed, served as a playground for many years.

For More Information

The Ranger on duty at the Visitor Center can give you more information about the Freeman School. You may also write or call the park directly.

Homestead National Monument of America



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