

## White, Mary: A One Teacher School <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Mary White: a one teacher school

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 6/11/2006. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited Mary White in her hometown of Belvidere, a predominantly Quaker community in Perquimans County, in northeastern North Carolina. She was one of thousands of mostly young, single women who left home to teach in remote, one-room schools early in the 20th century. Most had only a year or two of college, but they had a tremendous impact on the nation's intellectual life, spreading progressive ideas, a love of learning, and a spirit of social activism across the country.

Though she recently celebrated her 100th birthday, Mrs. White has not slowed down much. Last year she gave up driving and playing piano for her Sunday school, but she still loves to crochet, read and eat out. She is also an active member of the state's oldest religious congregation, the Piney Woods Friends Meeting, a Quaker assembly that first convened in the 1670s.



**Mary White.** Photo by John Rottet, 2006. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

I started teaching in Chowan County in a one-teacher school. That was in 1927. Then there was a one-teacher school in every community, because all the children had to walk to school. My father taught at Goodwin Mill. There was a one-teacher school. Nobody ever talked me into being a teacher. I just grew up wanting to be a teacher. When I was little, I had dolls for the students and I taught the dolls! We also had a lot of children in my family, four boys and four girls. I was next to the oldest. There's a friend of mine here now: I'd go to her house every Monday morning, hold her, rock her, so her mother could wash clothes. I love little children, I do.

That first teaching job, I boarded almost a mile from the school. Of course I had to walk. And this place I boarded was \$13 a month. There was not a rug on the floor, no blankets for the beds, just cold bed quilts.

They packed my lunch every day. Every day I had the same lunch: a cold biscuit with a fried egg between it, a piece of meat and a slice of cake. That was every single day, except Monday. On Monday, I had a piece of chicken.

I only had 15 students and some of them were just as large as I was, because I had first grade through the seventh. In the subject matter, I most wanted to teach them reading. If a child likes to read, they can somehow get everything else. If a child doesn't like to read, they can't get anything else. We had a wood stove, and the big boys were responsible for toting the wood into the schoolroom. I had to go real early mornings when it was cold to make the fire, so the building would be warm when the students got there.

There was also a pump, a water pump, on the school ground, and those big children were responsible for keeping the water bucket filled in the schoolroom. The water dipper was a long-necked gourd, and each student had a collapsible cup. I visited my students' homes every afternoon during good weather. That way you got to know the parents and what the home life was like. Back then you were expected to do it. Some of the students would have to walk with me every afternoon. Sometimes they'd invite me to spend the night. I'd spend the night, and they'd pack my lunch the next morning. I loved it. You saw all kinds of homes, some very primitive, some not so primitive.

Our postmaster, Lloyd Bunch, his home was one that I used to spend nights in. For years and years he's been our postmaster. He already celebrated his 50th anniversary in the post office years and years ago, but he didn't retire. Oh, he was a good man. I will never forget his mother--bless her heart, she's gone now -- she had a rocking chair with these great big sweeps, you know, great big. She would just rock so far back, you'd think that she was going to turn over every minute. She was the best. But where I boarded, now, used to, they raised a lot of peanuts. All the peanuts were shelled by hand. Great, big bags of peanuts were setting in the kitchen. I'd help them shell peanuts nights, because everything they planted, you see, they raised. But one thing, see, I had a room upstairs and I had a tin heater in there. A lot of times, I had work that I had to do at night to keep up with all those grades. But a lot of times, the wood was green and I couldn't get the fire started. The next morning I taught there three years. When I got married, I started teaching out here at Belvidere. Now, Belvidere School used to be an academy, and as long as it was an academy, it was a Quaker school.

There were a lot of Quakers raised in Belvidere, a lot of old, old Quakers, a lot of conservatives, the kind that didn't believe in hired preachers and hymn singing and things like that. But the Quakers have always been strong for education.

I say I taught eight years at Belvidere, but one of those years that building had burned down. The rest of that school year, I had my first and second grades over there in my parents' big hall, and the others were bused to Winfall, Hertford, any of the other schools. After that, I stayed home 10 years, had my two children. Then I taught 19 years at Perquimans Central Grammar School and finished out my 30 years, mostly first grade. I didn't want to retire then, but they made you at 65.

If you don't like children, especially little ones, you better not teach first grade. I had to have a drawer full of underwear all the time. You deal with first-graders; they have accidents. But you would not believe how many of them came to my birthday.

### Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina :

Mary White lived from February 22, 1906-Sept. 27, 2010

Obituary: Mary White. The Virginian Pilot, September 30, 2010.<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/pilotonline/obituary.aspx?n=mary-white&...> <sup>[3]</sup>

U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014. Ancestry Library edition. Accessed 3/2/2016.

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### Authors:

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### Origin - location:

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[Perquimans County](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

### From:

[Listening to History, News and Observer.](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

### Years:

1906-2010

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