

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, National Park Service
An Oral History Interview with John Mulhern
Child of Water Plant Worker, 1908-1927
Interviewed by Elaine Harmon, NPS
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Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2012



John Mulhern in his ROTC uniform late 1920's.

Photo courtesy NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

EH: ...1982 and I have the pleasure of talking with John Mulhern in preparation for an exhibit which we are about to entitle at the Sandy Hook Museum called "The Fort Hancock School." I have always been very curious about the subject of the old school here. And we are fortunate to have John Mulhern bring us his recollections and some old photographs and his old report cards from the Fort Hancock School dating as far back to 1912. Just to repeat the date today is March 13, 1982 and I am at the Sandy Hook Museum with John Mulhern sitting here. He is glancing at his report cards dating from 1912 to 1915 and the first teacher he has recorded on the report card of 1912 when he was in the 2nd grade is Helen G. Zea, Z-E-A. Could you tell us something about Mrs. Zea?

JM: She was my first experience with a school teacher. She as I saw here then was a tall slender and attractive teacher one who looked like she could really get close to the students. And I think we did get very close to Mrs. Zea and found here to be really a

delightful teacher as such. We had her for that one year and then there was a slight rearrangement in school and Miss MacDonald was my next teacher.

EH: Your report cards for the 3rd, 4th and 5th grades show Anna E. MacDonald as your teacher. How much longer after that was she still your teacher?

JM: That was the end of the school at Sandy Hook. The school, the classes at Sandy Hook were from the 1st to the 5th grade. And as soon as I had completed the 5th grade then I was assigned as all of us were for the 6th and upward grade grades to Leonardo School. And part of it became Middletown Township High School and it was no longer a combination of the grammar school plus the high school grades. So, my association with Miss MacDonald ended at the end of the 5th grade here on Sandy Hook.

EH: You mentioned to me before that you never attended 1st grade here at Fort Hancock. Can you explain why?

JM: Well, it seemed that my father and mother both had an interest in us kids and what were gonna do school wise and they purchased a few little books called primers. A sort of an elementary type book and they used to have us read and read to us. They used to have us go through a number of problems and I guess we learned some of our arithmetic and some of our spelling and some of our reading from these little books. So when it became time to go to school and the teachers had an opportunity I presume to talk with my parents the decision was made that I was eligible for the 2nd grade. I didn't start school until I was about 8 for far and goodly reason. We lived about a mile and a quarter from the school and in those days, of course, there was no busing problem because there was no buses. We simply had to walk to school and it seemed like a long walk to my parents to have me walk to school every morning and walk home every afternoon hence the beginning at the 2nd grade.

EH: Describe where you walked from your house to the school. Can you give me a description? Your house was located where?

JM: The house was located by what was then known as the Pumping Station about a mile and a quarter from the school location down in a woodsy area down in Horseshoe Cove as it had come to be called now. And it was also called Camp Lowe for some reason or another. We would walk from the house up a cinder path, a cinder road from a house in the woodland up to the beginning of a sidewalk in front of Officers' Row. And then we would walk the sidewalk all the way up to the school house. And that was alright in fine weather but when the wind was blowing from the northwest or from the west and there was snow on the ground that could be a very uncomfortable walk.

EH: I can imagine. Could you really locate where that first school was? Give us some idea in relationship to the Post Chapel or Officers' Row?

JM: Yes. If you were to continue walking the same direction as the sidewalk in front of Officers' Row and continued for about another 6 or 7 city blocks along the roadway you

would be right at the school. It was located somewhere between the end of the officers' quarters and the Roundhouse or the water tank, the presently existing water tank.

EH: Can you describe the structure now to us?

JM: The building at that time was a two room two story building and it probably was built around the turn of the century. There was just the two rooms. I went to school in that building for only a year or two. Then it was considered to be hazardous from a fire point of view. The building was demolished and another two room one story building was erected in its place.

EH: What was on the 2nd story of that original building?

JM: On the 2nd floor of the original building was the other classroom. There were only two classrooms in the building, one on the first floor and one on the 2nd floor and there were a combination of grades evidently. On the 2nd floor, there probably was a 3rd, 4th and 5th grade and probably on the 1st floor there probably was the 1st and 2nd grade.

EH: Did Mrs. Zea teach all the grade levels? She was in charge of the five grades?

JM: No. There was just teachers. Just two teachers and I don't know how they divided up their responsibilities and I don't know whether one was designated as principal or not. This school was a sort of a satellite school on the Middletown Township system. You must remember, of course, that Sandy Hook has for many, many years been a political subdivision of Middletown Township and a geographical subdivision of Middletown Township. So, there probably was no one here that was designated as principal in the usual sense of the word.

EH: How many children were in your class? How small was this school actually?

JM: I think there must have been about 20 children in my class and on my floor, would probably be a better way to say that. And maybe on the upper floor were the same number of children. We do have some old school registers from around that time or maybe a little later which indicates exactly or somewhere in that neighborhood of 20 children on each floor of that whole school and one teacher taught all the grades on that floor and another teacher taught all the grades on that floor.

EH: Can you describe the interior of the building like the desks and you know some of the details?

JM: The desks I think were characteristic of the desks of the period and it seems to me that a desk would accommodate two pupils and a bench seat alongside or a seat alongside of it. It had a folding up seat.

EH: This was an old fashioned wooden...

JM: Yes an old fashioned wooden...

EH: Hinged seat.

JM: Yes with a hinged top. And I guess there was probably one inkwell between the two sections of the hinged top.

EH: And a lid that came up and you put your books inside.

JM: That's exactly it.

EH: And did it have a shelf underneath that for books or anything?

JM: I don't recall that there was any other shelf. There was just the space under the cover. Lifted the desk part, the writing area of that desk and then the books fitted inside.

EH: Were the desks fastened to the floor? Were they actually fastened in place?

JM: Oh yes, the desks were fastened to the floor and the seats were also fastened to the floor so however they were adjusted, that was the way they were.

EH: And the floor was a wooden one?

JM: A wooden plank floor. As I recall the walls in the building, the interior walls in the building as I recall were wainscoting. Not a lively color but an adequate.

EH: Would the teacher have her desk in front of the room?

JM: Oh yes.

EH: Were there blackboards?

JM: There were slate blackboards around on both the upper and the lower floors of that particular building.

EH: And did you use fountain pens at the time? Do you remember much?

JM: No. We had the nib pens, as they were called, straight pens. It had inkwells in each desk. I guess there were really not much by way of fountain pens at that time.

EH: 1912, yeah.

JM: It seems to me, well, it seems to me there may have been but I certainly know that we didn't have. We had straight steel pens in black holders and they could be replaced easily when they became laden with ink or otherwise unserviceable.

EH: Do you recall the outside of the building, the exterior? Was it clapboard?



1st Fort Hancock School, c. 1900

JM: The outside of the building as I recall it was weatherboarding or clapboard as it is sometimes called. It is sometimes called ship lap however, a wooden building and well maintained. It seems to me that the wooden floors were oiled periodically and that may have contributed to the hazard aspect of a two story building entirely of wood which mitigated in the direction of having the building replaced sometime around 1919 or 1918 or somewhere in that neighborhood.

EH: Do you recall the color of the outside of that building?

JM: As my memory serves me the color of the outside was probably the same as most of the military buildings were around here at that time. They were kind of a buff color. I would say a buff color with a darker trim, OD trim or something of that nature.

EH: Was there a porch and steps do you remember?

JM: There was a small porch and steps on the old building and a railing around. (That was) the extent of the building, as I recall.

EH: Did you teachers travel in every day to school? Do you recall them arriving by horse and carriage or something?

JM: I really don't know whether they lived on Sandy Hook which they well might have done or whether they came in on the train. There was no transportation by horse and carriage as I ever remember it for that type of transportation. Now, there was a local travel on the Post with mule teams and a couple of carriages or coaches. But if they lived

off Sandy Hook they probably traveled by train and there were trains that transported other workers on Sandy Hook. Trains (ran) in the morning. Trains (ran) in the afternoon and trains around noon time.

EH: Amazing schedule really.

JM: The schedule, of course, was built around the working hours of the large civilian population that we had at that time. The Proving Ground was in full operation at that time. The machine shops were in full operation at that time. I would say that probably 150 people moved in and out of Sandy Hook every day by train. Normally there were two coaches and the steam locomotive and the coaches would probably hold 60 people each and they were generally pretty well filled up. And then of course, the school children who were going out to Leonardo on the same train constituted probably a number of some 30 children. So, on most of the time the train went in and out from the point of the Hook or the Roundhouse area out to Highland Beach if all seats would be taken. The only unbusy trip of the day is the one which left here at 1 o'clock every day and the train would go to Highland Beach and remain there all day 'til about 4 o'clock or whatever the time that the children would be coming home from Leonardo and then the train would come back into Sandy Hook and subsequent to that would take a trip to Highlands to take the civilian workers out there to the Highlands and remain out there for a half an hour or an hour and then bring any shoppers that might have been out in the Highlands area back to their nightly repose at Sandy Hook.

EH: Incredible when you think of a pilgrimage of just getting people back and forth in those days. And I just think it's amazing.

JM: If you learned to travel to any of the adjoining towns at that time you had a choice of, you had a few choices: on the train, you could ride your own bicycle, or you could walk the five and a half or six miles to the Highlands.

EH: That's great. Getting back to the Fort Hancock School, we are delighted that you brought in your old report cards. These are small printed booklets that had a very detailed cover, rather elaborate. And it says, "Scholars Monthly Reports," and inside it says, the first one says, "September 3, 1912 John Mulhern, a pupil of the second grade, A class, Sandy Hook School. Helen G. Zea." And I notice your subjects here. Would you like to talk about them? You have reading, spelling, writing and arithmetic as your first four subjects in the 2nd grade. What was that like to be here in the 2nd grade?

JM: This seems to be kind of a carry over from what my father and mother had used as subjects when we had those little old fashioned primers or school books. It looks like the same kind of thing and, of course, when I look at the terrific grades of that time near the highest in the class I can only think that the teacher before Mrs. Zea had also done a good job for me and...

EH: Mrs. Mulhern.

JM: I should get the grades that I did when I finally started to a formal school. This little report card or report book, monthly report book has quite a number of subjects listed. And I suppose that the same book could have been used for grades through high school because it does go along with the basic reading, writing and arithmetic kind of thing to discuss such things as zoology, rhetoric, literature, and classics. And I am sure that those were not included in the curriculum of the grammar school of that time. Every time we got a report card too, we had to take it home and have it reviewed by our parents who had the responsibility of signing it either the father or the mother. And all of these pages it appears were signed by my father in a very good handwriting.

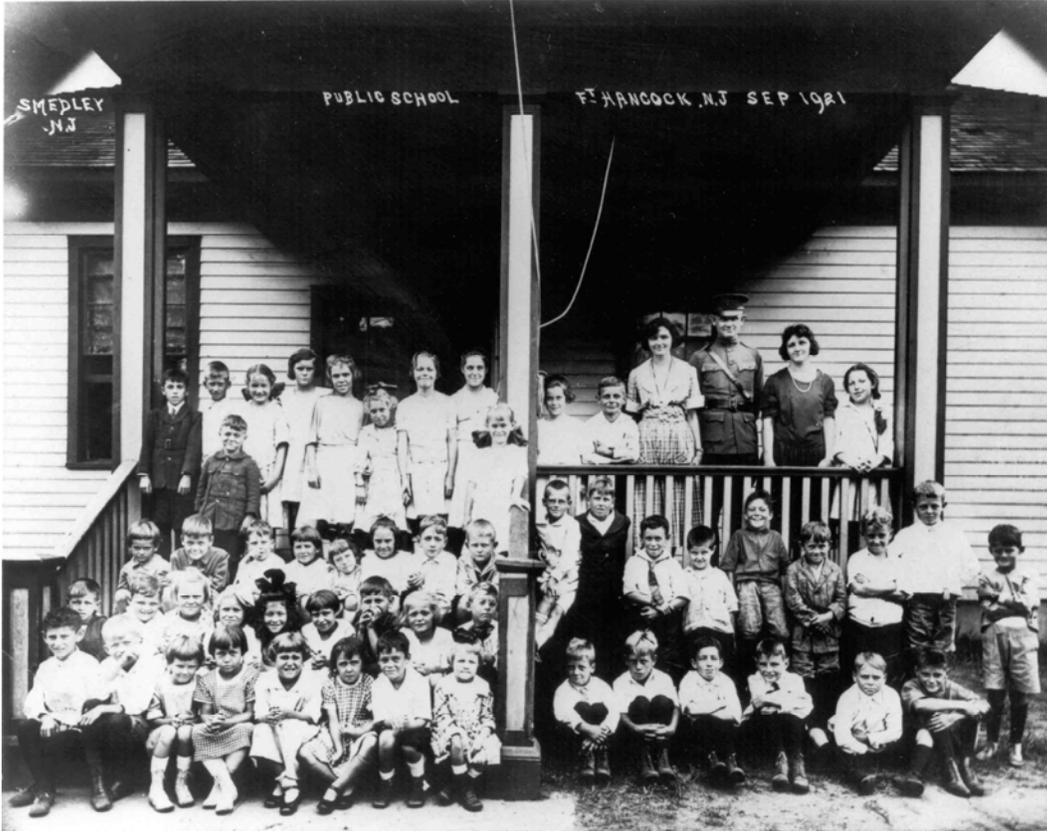
EH: I am also noticing the later report cards do add subjects as you were remarking by the 4th grade, excuse me 5th grade you now have 8 subjects. And it looks like history was added. Geography was added. I guess physical education or hygiene it says here is not present in the 2nd grade. Grammar is added and it looks like well, you have got arithmetic again. But any rate you are right about the book. It just keeps on being progressive as you go up the grades. What would happen, what would your parents remark about these report cards? Did they encourage you in kind of, give you a treat if you brought home a good report card?

JM: Well, I guess that they would always expect that I would get a 100 in every subject and if I ever got any less they probably would tell me I should do better next month. I don't think there were any real prizes for being smart in school, but I am sure there was some persuasion or maybe even greater action to extenuate you in the direction of more work for the next month. (laughter)

EH: Well, actually that is very good because that is a vanishing phenomenon today. That's for sure.

JM: Well, I know that we hear a common complaint now that many young people that even get to college have great difficulties in reading perception, in knowing how to use their numbers, in speaking the right kind of English language which we are all supposed to speak. Many of them being very deficient in many areas, particularly in the proper use of personal pronouns. So, that I think that when we got this basic reading, writing and arithmetic kind of thing it did something to get us ready for higher grades and for things that we would be expected to know about for the rest of our lives.

EH: If you don't mind can you move to describing this second Fort Hancock School? Describing it you know as physically as to its appearance. It looks like you have some photographs here of that building I believe which are much later on but still are valid I guess. This one says, "Sandy Hook Public School, Smedley Photo, New York." Is this the exterior of the 2nd building?



2nd school at Fort Hancock in 1921

JM: Yes. This is the exterior of the 2nd building.

EH: Which you said was a one story structure again clapboard or ...

JM: Two rooms and a one story building, the rooms side by side and a wide hallway separating the two rooms.

EH: And a front staircase.

JM: The building had a similar front staircase. It was also painted the characteristic buff color that was common of many, many military buildings at that time. (The definition of military buildings meaning Army buildings with some trim in a kind of a brown or dark olive or whatever that color happens to be. The building, of course, was brand new when we went into it.

EH: Where was it located?

JM: The building was immediately adjacent to the first school building. As a point of reference, there is a little building there in that immediate vicinity now that once was a Chapel and later became a Rod and Gun Club. (St. Mary's Chapel, Building 123 is located in the Coast Guard Station.) The old building was immediately adjacent to the chapel and the second building was the next building in a row as you might say going

south. In other words, if you look at the buildings discussed on that street, on your right you would see a (Ordnance) Laboratory Building, (Building 109) then St Mary's Chapel, then the 1st wooden school, and then the 2nd wooden school. As soon as the 2nd wooden school was ready for occupancy the old one was torn down.

EH: And what year do you think that was?

JM: I think it was around World War I, something like that. I don't exactly remember when that was. One building was probably torn down and the other one erected during summer vacation period.

EH: I notice in this photograph it looks like Pearl Murray standing on the steps. Do you have any recollection as to what date she was here? I know the school registers that we have in storage are from 1923 to 1933. So that may be, you know, have some connections with the dates that she was a teacher, I would think. She was here for many years something like thirty years or so.

JM: She was here for a long time. And the registers that we have don't completely cover her period here.

EH: Yes. I know.

JM: There were a few prior registers that were disposed of in some other manner by Pearl Murray or her husband but this may well have been around that time. As I look at the picture though it seems odd to me that none of our family is in this picture. And I had a sister and two brothers and again I don't know exactly when this happened. This picture conceivably could have been taken during the World War I period and that may account for the fact that none of us are in this picture. But again this is only a matter of conjecture on my part because I am not sure about that.

EH: Was the school inside very similar, that 2nd school similar to 1st school. The same type of desks and inkwells and...

JM: No. It seems to me and I only have a faint recollection of this is the entire furniture was all new and a different type of furniture and it possibly was one seat and one little desk for each student. There were blackboards on the walls, slate blackboards. The interior was done in sort of a walnut or plaster finish and was not wainscoting as the original school was. It was much brighter and much lighter and more airy and presumably a lot safer for the students.

EH: And directly adjacent to the 1st school in location.

JM: In location and then removed.

EH: And then was removed.

JM: The 1st school was demolished.

EH: Do you think the 3rd school was the Ordnance Laboratory?

JM: No. I think the 3rd school possibly was the Ordnance Soldiers' Barracks Building. (Building 102)

EH: The big red brick building.

JM: Possibly so. And the final building was the Laboratory Building, although again I am not sure about that. But I have been told that there was too much noise in the barracks building in the Ordnance Soldiers' Barracks Building, too much noise, too much disturbance for the children in class. So the school building was moved to the Laboratory Building, quiet by itself.

EH: If you look carefully by the way on the top of the doorway of the Ordnance Laboratory Building which is now in the Coast Guard Boundary, it does say Fort Hancock School right above the door in very faint letters.

JM: Yeah. That is interesting that that still appears there.

EH: So that is possibly the 4th. That is possibly the remnant of the 4th school. It's amazing, really. Can you briefly trace where you went? You went from Fort Hancock School up through the 5th grade, 2nd to 5th grades. Then you went to Leonardo. Just quickly give us the outline.

JM: Well, there was a little different. At least I started in the Fort Hancock School and then when the War came along in 1917 all civilians were moved off Fort Hancock and we moved to the Highlands at that time. So I went to the Highlands Grammar School for a couple of years and then we returned to Sandy Hook in 1919 and immediately went back to Leonardo. So whatever grades, I guess it was 7th and 8th grades in Leonardo and then onto high school.

EH: So, there was an interruption. The last thing I wanted to mention. Unfortunately we have to take a break. Is your very interesting publication called the Odrin (spelling) and it's the Middletown Township High School yearbooks for 1923 and '24 and you very perceptively have pointed out in the class photos of this yearbook under the freshman class is listed Howard Campbell, Fort Hancock, New Jersey. And there he is standing on page 30 photograph at the right hand of the doorway at the Leonardo School. Why do you make note of the Campbell family for our information?

JM: Well, we lived in Sandy Hook and all the time we lived in Sandy Hook there was only one black family on Sandy Hook. And that family consisted of Mr. Campbell who was a manager of the Officers' Club, a building that adjoins the Headquarters Building on Sandy Hook now. His wife, Mrs. Campbell who was a cook in that building and two children, Howard and Hazel lived with them in the Officers' Club Building. They were

the only, that was the only black family on Sandy Hook. Those two children went to school with us through their grammar school days and on into high school. And since there has been a considerable amount of interest in black history within the last few years in this part of the world I guess and all over the United States I have been asked on numerous occasions if I could any documentation or photographs of the Campbell family. And in looking over my old yearbooks from the years 1923 and '24 from Leonardo I came across a picture of Howard Campbell and while he is only one of a group, only one in a group picture he is so positioned in the picture that it would be very simple to enlarge this photograph and have copies made of this young Howard Campbell. He, I don't know exactly when they moved from Sandy Hook but about three or four years ago this same Howard Campbell came back to the Highlands area looking for his old teacher, Pearl Murray. And at that time, she had retired from teaching and was living in the foundation section of the lower floor of the Postal Telegraph Tower in the Highlands and Howard went up to see Pearl. She was home that day and he said that he really wanted to see her and he really wanted to see the desk that she used to sit when she was his school teacher in Sandy Hook. Apparently she moved her desk out there when she stopped teaching at Sandy Hook. And it seems strange that we don't know just where Howard went from then there. Pearl, evidently, Mrs. Pearl Murray didn't have a forwarding address. Her husband doesn't seem to know of any correspondence of Howard Campbell but we sort of have a faint idea that he lives somewhere on Long Island and we have made a few attempts to trace down the name but up to present have not been successful in contacting Howard Campbell.

EH: And her husband is Manuel Masciale, this gentlemen that I did met that did give me the school registers through you. Was it four years ago that you think that Mr. Campbell came roaming around reminiscing?

JM: About four years ago.

EH: It's too bad that somehow we didn't all get together and meet. It would have been interesting. We still are interested in finding the Campbell family. I have looked through the directories and called nine telephone numbers and not found anyone

END OF INTERVIEW