

Curator's Choice

Writing Slate

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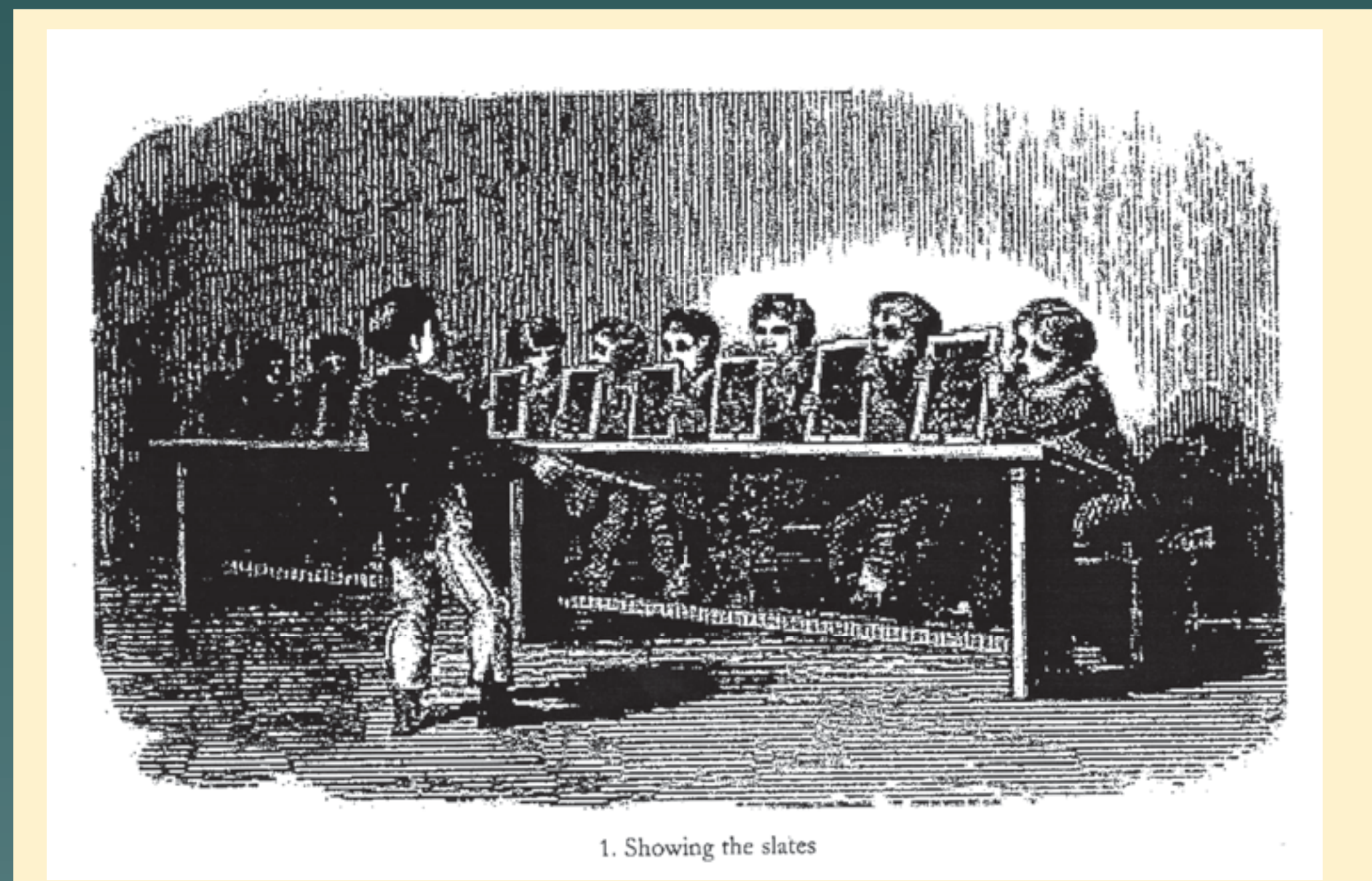
Archaeologists working on historic sites often find fragmented slate pencils once used on writing slates. It is less typical to recover flat pieces of the slate used as writing surfaces. Excavations at the site of the Juvenile Justice Center in Baltimore City (18BC139), however, yielded a slate whose educational function is quite clear.



Front (Top) and back view (above) of writing slate from the Juvenile Justice Privy showing numbers 1 to 42 on front, and 43 to 72 on back. (photo by Marco de Pompa III)

References Cited

Hall, Nigel
n.d. The role of the slate in Lancasterian schools as evidenced by their manuals and handbooks. Available at <http://faculty.d.uiuc.edu/westbury/paradigm/Hall.doc>



Showing the Slates, from Joseph Lancaster, *Improvements in Education*; Abridged, Containing a Complete Epitome of the System of Education, Invented and Practised by the Author, London, (1808).

Recovered from a privy that was filled between 1815 and 1830, this slate was scored front and back with a grid. Incised within the grid sections were numbers from 1 to 72. The unworn, cleaner areas along the finished top and side edges of the slate suggest it had originally been set into a wooden frame. Although fragmentary, the slate's original dimensions were approximately 4 x 6 inches.

Because slate could easily be split into thin sheets, it was well suited as a substitute for paper. Also more durable and economical than paper, slate could be wiped clean and re-used indefinitely. Pencils of soft slate, soapstone, pressed clay or chalk were used to write on slate. Writing slate production was a big industry in Wales in the nineteenth century and slates were available plain, or with incised lines, grids, or even simple maps. Bound slate books, made from thin, small (3" x 5") sheets of slate, were sometimes used by adults in their workplaces.

Although the Oxford English Dictionary provides a date in the late fourteenth century as the first reference to slate as a writing tool, the use of slate in this fashion was not common until the eighteenth century (Hall n.d.). Stationers were selling slates by the second half of the eighteenth century, but there is no real evidence to support their educational use by children until the nineteenth century (Hall n.d.:6). Research suggests that Joseph Lancaster, an English proponent of mass education, was at least partly responsible for the widespread development of slate as an educational tool beginning in the early nineteenth century (Hall n.d.).



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