Josiah Holbrook Biography

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Biography

Josiah Holbrook (1788-1854), American educator, founded the lyceum, a popular 19th-century lecture system for educating adults.

Josiah Holbrook was born into a prosperous farming family in Derby, Conn. At Yale College he developed an interest in chemistry and mineralogy under the direction of the noted scientist Benjamin Silliman. After graduation in 1810 Holbrook conducted a manual training school for the application of science to farming, and he also traveled throughout New England lecturing on geology.

In 1826 Holbrook published a proposal in the *American Journal of Education* for organizing the lyceum, a voluntary association of individuals seeking to improve their knowledge of natural science and other subjects and to advance the interest of public education. He organized his first lyceum in Millbury, Mass., in 1826. Within a short time neighboring towns followed this example, and by 1827 delegates from these lyceums formed the first country organization in Worcester, Mass.

Individual associations to investigate new knowledge existed prior to Holbrook's plan. He, however, envisioned a broad social institution that would join groups together for the organized advancement of knowledge. The lyceum would expand educational opportunity for adults by providing "a system of mutual instruction."

Holbrook used the profits of his successful Boston business, manufacturing equipment for use in educational establishments, to travel throughout America promoting the lyceum. He wrote instruction pamphlets and in 1832-1833 edited the *Family Lyceum*.

Holbrook hoped to organize the lyceum system into a national organization. His crusade expanded in the early 1840s as he sought to form an international lyceum. More formal means of education, however, steadily overshadowed such organization.

The town lyceum flourished, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, up to the time of the Civil War. It served as a popular rostrum for men of letters, science, religion, and politics; provided a platform for the demonstration of scientific method and laboratory technique; and helped publicize America's need for more uniform educational improvements and better teacher training.

Holbrook had married Lucy Swift in 1815, and they had two sons. At the end of the 1840s he moved to Washington, D.C., where he continued to write about the benefits of the lyceum and to engage in geological expeditions. On an expedition in Virginia in June 1854, he drowned.