By Dawn Handschuh

Dennis’ Nobscusset Schoolhouse may well be the oldest schoolhouse in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, according to local history buffs.

The schoolhouse, also known as the West Schoolhouse, now sits on the Josiah Dennis Manse grounds.

Nancy Reid, vice president of the Dennis Historical Society, told the tale of the building’s beginnings.

Back in 1649, when the concept of public education first took hold in New England, schoolhouses were nonexistent, she said. Instead, the schoolmaster would travel from neighborhood to neighborhood, from one living room parlor to another in what were called “squadron schools.”

The schoolmaster might remain in the Dennis-Yarmouth area (at that time one town) for a stay of perhaps two to four months, though a thorough round of towns could take as long as two years.

Just around the time when the moving school system began to disappear, the Nobscusset School was built — in 1770, Mrs. Reid believes. The school was a one-room structure with separate entrances for boys and girls. The fireplace, still intact today, was never modernized for stove cooking.

In 1793, Dennis became an independent town. Then, between 1859 and 1864, schools were built in each of the five villages of Dennis and the Nobscusset School was obsolete. Mrs. Reid said. Over the years, the schoolhouse was renovated and used as a workshop, toolshed, and storage house.

The school was later moved from its original site, to a location near the Dennis Union Church cemetery. In the mid-1970’s, the town bought the bought the schoolhouse and brought it to its present location on Obscussset Road.

According to Mrs. Reid, references to the original location of the school in various deeds of land are vague. But despite such ambiguous clues as “the lane that leads to the schoolhouse,” some believe the school’s original location was on the point of land across from the Dennis Public Market at the corner of Route 6A and New Boston Road.

Dr. Robert McGurty, professor at Teachers College at Bridgewater State College, has listed the schoolhouse’s dating in the National Register of Historical Places. His finding is based on two premises: first, the architectural style is reminiscent of other buildings of the same period,

(that the beams of the ceiling are pegged and the fireplace was built without a mantle provides a significant clue); secondly, there are records of a schoolhouse built in 1771 that is remarkably similar to the Nobscusset School. And there are no records of a fire which may have destroyed the school, Mrs. Reid claimed.

If the Nobscusset school is indeed the oldest schoolhouse in the commonwealth, the school coming closest to it in age is one built in Sturbridge Village. Even so, this school was originally built in Maine and then moved there.

Mrs. Reid said a schoolhouse museum would be a great asset to the Cape, although the Eastham Historical Society owns a schoolhouse museum (it is not refurbished as it was originally) and West Dennis boasts of two schoolhouses. (One is now used as a guesthouse and the other is part of a house.)

The Josiah Dennis Manse Historical Center is now furnishing the school by reproducing most of the early furniture. Since the school was built by the parents of children who attended the school, local historians hope pieces of schoolhouse furniture are still in the hands of older families in Dennis.

The schoolhouse itself will be recreated as accurately as possible. The ceiling has been left exposed to show the construction of the wooden beams while the walls will be wainscoted and plastered as they were originally.

The room in the rear will contain various pieces of furniture common to other periods, said Mrs. Reid.

Anyone wishing to donate old school furniture, pictures, books, or maps dated from 1860 on, is encouraged to donate them to the museum.
[1982-07-01; article in the *Cape Cod Oracle*, “Dennis schoolhouse goes way, way back”,
concerning the Old West Schoolhouse located at the Josiah Dennis Manse. Nancy Reid
gave a talk at the official dedication ceremonies. Has a photo.]