

The Breakfast Club

Constitutional Minute for 13 April 2024

American Education – Part 2 of 5

Education in Our Founding Period

The history of education in each of the colonies is as varied as their uniquely different settlements: Virginia was settled as an economic venture, Massachusetts by religious dissenters, as were Connecticut and Rhode Island, Maryland was established as a refuge for Catholics, Georgia as a refuge for debtors, Pennsylvania was founded by William Penn, a Quaker, who saw it becoming a beacon for religious toleration, etc. Each colony had its unique story, and there was no “cookie-cutter” pattern to the educational systems that were eventually established. One exception was the *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*, which was organized in 1701 and placed 300 missionaries throughout the colonies, mostly in the South, intending to teach native children and those of blacks, both free and slave, to read and write (and of course learn about the Gospel). That is the only “colonies-wide” educational project we can point to.

With the exception of Massachusetts, the other colonies were settled by groups of adults who barely, if at all, knew each other. It would be some time before women and children began arriving, normally well after the colony had gained a firm foothold. Schools were not seen as necessary for quite a while.

Various means of education were used in colonial times and included:

Home Schooling. Most elementary-level schooling took place at home, whether by the parents or private tutors. James Madison’s elementary instruction was provided by his grandmother, Frances Taylor. John Quincy Adams was schooled by his mother, Abigail, probably to age 8 or so, and then tutored at home until age 11 by “Mr. Thaxter,” a lawyer working for his father. George Washington was one of the few Founding Fathers who did not attend college; he was almost completely homeschooled by his mother, although there is evidence he attended a local church school for a short period before it closed its doors in 1743, when George would have been eleven.

Community schools. Thanks to the laws passed in 1642, 1647 and 1648, mentioned last week, Massachusetts, and soon the rest of New England, became home to the first “systematic” educational initiative. The 1642 law charged “*ye chosen men appointed for managing the prudentiall affajres*” of the town with seeing to the education of the boys and girls in their community. The 1647 law required each township of 50 households to appoint (and pay for) a

teacher. When the township reached 100 households, the community was required to erect a grammar school for that purpose.

Dame schools. What were called “Dame schools” had become popular in Great Britain and were soon “exported” to the colonies. These were private schools taught by one of the women of the community for the colony's growing cadre of boys and girls. One room, one teacher, and whatever children the locale contained. The “standard textbook” was usually [The New England Primer](#) perhaps supplemented by the [Bay Psalm Book](#) and, of course, the Bible. The curriculum focused on reading, writing, English grammar, French (depending on the teacher), arithmetic, music and dancing; some schools taught the girls “imbroidry.”

One recipient of Dame School education you’ll recognize was 2nd President John Adams, who was first schooled by his parents, then attended a Dame School across the street run by a neighbor. Adams’ father (John Sr.), a farmer and deacon in the Congregational Church, next placed his son in a nearby Latin School run by Joseph Cleverly, who turned out to be a big disappointment, nearly turning off the future President to the concept of learning, at least that was Adams’ assessment later in life. At age 14 (1749), at his son’s request, John Sr. transferred his son to a nearby private school run by Joseph Marsh. There Adams’ love for learning took root and at age 16, Master Marsh declared his pupil ready for Harvard.

Boarding Schools and Academies. Several famous boarding schools operated in the colonies. In Virginia, the Donald Robertson school, opened in 1758 and operating for 15 years, producing a future President (James Madison), famous explorer (George Rogers Clark, of Lewis and Clark fame), and a Virginia Attorney General, (James Innes).

Donald Robertson taught as many as 30-40 students each year, mostly the sons (and some daughters) of local planters. Robertson, himself a product of classical education at the University of Edinburgh, immersed his students in what today we call “The Great Books.” Robertson’s Account Book¹ shows that “Jemie” Madison bought “textbooks” by Virgil, Horace, Justinian, and Cornelius Nepos, and probably read others by Caesar, Tacitus, Lucretius, Eutropius, and Phaedrus that were in Robertson’s extensive library. In 1762, Robertson’s Account Book shows Madison focused on English; in 1763 and 1767 it was Latin.² Robertson taught Madison to read and write French (but not to speak it very well, as became evident one day at Princeton).³

Thomas Jefferson’s education was even more intense than Madison’s: his father, Peter Jefferson, placed his son in “an English school” at five years of age and at age nine, transferred him to a “Latin School,” conducted by the Reverend William Douglas. Early in 1758, Jefferson, then 15, began two years of study at the boarding school of Reverend James Maury, whom Jefferson credited as “a correct classical scholar.” Jefferson boarded with Maury's family near Gordonsville, Virginia, and studied history, science, and the classics to prepare him for the entrance exam at William and Mary.

Private Tutors. James Madison's experience with a private tutor was typical. Although Robertson's school prepared students for college, Madison's father apparently felt his son needed more instruction before taking the College of New Jersey entrance exam.

Reverend Thomas Martin (1743-1770), a 1762 graduate of what became Princeton, was the newly appointed rector of the Anglican "brick church" near Montpelier in Orange, Virginia. From 1767-1769, Martin boarded with the Madisons at Montpelier and finished Jemie's instruction in Greek and Latin.⁴ In early July 1769, Madison, accompanied by Martin,⁵ his older brother Alexander (later to serve as Governor of North Carolina), and "Swaney," Madison's personal attendant, mounted their horses and began the ten-day trip to Princeton, New Jersey. After seeing Madison secured at Princeton, the Martins went on to visit family elsewhere in New Jersey, leaving Swaney to return to Montpelier unescorted.

A version of the entrance requirements at the College of New Jersey, published in 1789, shows the reason for the "finishing" Rev. Martin provided. Applicants were required to "*render Virgil and Tully's orations [from Latin] into English and to turn English into true and grammatical Latin, and to be so well acquainted with the Greek, as to render any part of the Four Evangelists [Gospels] in that language into Latin or English, ... be acquainted with vulgar arithmetic, . . . [and master] reading English with propriety, spelling the English language, and writing it without grammatical error.*"⁶ Other colleges of the time were similar. Martin's additional tutoring paid off; Madison "aced" the exam and started with the sophomore class. He then went on to finish the remaining three years of instruction in two, a process he later characterized as an experiment in minimal sleep; he graduated with the class of 1771.

Colleges. By the seventeenth century, the university systems of England and the rest of Europe were centuries old. Students came from all over the world to learn at the feet of seasoned professors. Ten of the fifty-five men who attended the Constitutional Convention received their degrees from colleges in England and Holland.⁷ But it did not take long for American parents to tire of sending their sons across the seas for a college education.

Harvard College was founded in 1636 by Puritans, William & Mary in 1693 by Anglicans, Yale in 1701 by Congregationalists, The College of New Jersey in 1746 by Presbyterians, Kings College in 1754 by Anglicans, Brown in 1764 by Baptists, Rutgers in 1766 by the Dutch Reformed Church and Dartmouth in 1769 by Congregationalists. Each of these institutions was established to prepare young men for the ministry. The College of Philadelphia (1756) was the first institution of higher learning established without a denominational affiliation. Many more would follow.

Four of the Constitution's "Framers" graduated Harvard, four from Yale, nine from the College of New Jersey, five attended William & Mary, and another seven attended lesser-known colleges. Several others at the Convention received honorary degrees from some of these same institutions, including George Washington, who received an honorary LLD from Harvard in 1776. In February 1785, James Madison received an honorary LLD from William & Mary.

With that as an overview, we'll now briefly examine the early educational efforts in some selected colonies.

Virginia (Founded 1607). In early August 1619, (a year *before* the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth) the first Virginia Assembly passed this law: *“Be it enacted by this present assembly that for laying a surer foundation of the conversion of the Indians to Christian religion, each town, city, borough, and particular plantation do obtain unto themselves by just means a certain number of the native’s children to be educated by them in true religion and civil course of life. Of which children the most towardly boys in wit and graces of nature to be brought up by them in the first elements of literature, so as to be fitted for the college intended for them, that from thence they may be sent to that work of conversion.”* That same year [Henricus College](#) was chartered, the first educational establishment in the American colonies. *“It was designed initially for Powhatan Indian boys who were carefully chosen from their own communities and there attend school for trades, agriculture, and Christian education.”*⁸

The Virginia legislature was responding to the requirement, laid down by the King in their 1606 charter, of: *“propagating of Christian Religion to such People, as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true Knowledge and Worship of God, and may in time bring the Infidels and Savages, living in those parts, to human Civility, and to a settled and quiet Government.”* As we will see later in this series, the best way to change society (unless you’re really short for time) is to teach the children! Last week I covered the multiple attempts by Thomas Jefferson to establish a publicly funded school system in his home state.

Massachusetts (Founded 1620). Most people have been taught that the Pilgrims came to America for religious freedom. That’s not exactly true. It is true they fled England for Holland to avoid religious persecution (and perhaps worse), but in more tolerant Holland they were, at least initially, free to worship as they wished. As immigrants, however, the Pilgrim men were ineligible to join the Dutch unions, forcing them to take less lucrative jobs. As [this article](#) explains, Pilgrim life was harsher than for the native Dutch—manageable, but becoming less so. Another factor the Pilgrims faced, little mentioned today, was seeing the effect of the Dutch schools and Dutch society on their children. As William Bradford explains in *Of Plimouth Plantation*, the “licentiousness” and “evill examples” of the Dutch children were starting to exhibit in their own kids.⁹ So to America they came.

The Plymouth Colony was decidedly different from Jamestown, or any other colony for that matter. Jamestown was settled by a mixed group of businessmen and adventurers, people hoping to make a quick buck. No women or children were among them, initially. They were not initially interested in forming a society; Plymouth was.

Roughly half the shipload of 102 Plymouth passengers (not counting the 30 crewmembers) were part of the Leiden, Holland congregation. Men, women and children—people who had known each other for years. That forming a society was foremost on their mind is evidenced by the compact they drafted and signed before even setting foot on dry land. Naturally, the

continued education of their children, disrupted by the voyage, remained an important goal, but bare survival was the first priority. We'll look more deeply at Massachusetts next week.

Maryland (Founded 1633). "The scattered population and absence of towns, the great social diversity of the people, and the habit of looking to England for the higher things of life, together with the means of obtaining them on the part of the more wealthy, all tended to prevent or defer the establishment of schools in the province. England contained the schools in which the better sort of the inhabitants had received their education, and there they sent their sons to make the acquaintance of kinsfolk and family friends, to receive an education, and become Englishmen."¹⁰

"There was no law in colonial times requiring parents to educate their children, the theory being that parents could be trusted to do what was best for their children in accordance with their means. The first mention of education occurs in a law passed in 1663, entitled an " Act for the preservation of orphans' estates."¹¹

North Carolina (Founded 1653). A state highway historical marker in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, reads "First School. Charles Griffin Taught In This County, the First Known School in North Carolina, 1705-1708." According to Wikipedia, the first public school in North Carolina was established in New Bern in 1749. A complete public school system was not established until 1839. Independent academies, however, did spring up.

One was the oddly named "*Clio's Nursery*."¹² Established by Presbyterian minister James Hall, the "Nursery" was a successful classical academy, offering college-level instruction, located in what is now Iredell County. The exact date of opening is unknown, but a surviving certificate given to a student in 1780 confirms that it was in operation by at least August 1778. Hall managed the academy while leaving the teaching to others. The school was closed from May 1780 to April 1782, as the British Army plundered the land. The school appears to have closed for good in 1787. One distinguished graduate of Clio's Nursery was Moses Waddel (1770-1840) who went on to receive a B.A. from Virginia's Hampden-Sydney College in 1791 and then opened Willington Academy in South Carolina in 1804.

As I noted last week, North Carolina copied Pennsylvania's 1776 Constitution concerning education nearly word-for-word, including the authorization to establish universities. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was chartered on December 11, 1789, and opened officially on January 15, 1795.

South Carolina (Founded 1663). The first school in South Carolina appeared in 1701, operated by *the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*,¹³ mentioned earlier. By 1705, the school boasted twenty blacks who could read and write¹⁴

The ministers/teachers were required to:

- "take especial care of the manners of the pupils in and out of school

- warn them against lying and falsehood and evil speaking
- love truth and honesty
- be modest, just and affable
- [teach them] in their tender years that sense of religion which may render it the constant principle of their lives and actions."¹⁵

On April 8, 1710, the South Carolina legislature passed "*An Act for the Founding and Erecting of a Free School for the Use of the Inhabitants of South Carolina*,"¹⁶ and then approved funds to establish several "common schools" in and around the Charlestown area. Students were taught reading, writing, religion, and morality by a teacher who was also a local minister. In 1712, the colony established requirements for teachers:-first, they must belong to the Church of England. Second, they had to be able to teach the "learned tongues," i.e., Latin and Greek. For compensation the schoolmaster was given the use of the schoolhouse, a dwelling house, out-buildings and land (which he was probably allowed to plant), and "for further encouragement," the sum of 100 pounds per year, to be paid every two years. He was also authorized to collect four pounds per year from the parents of each student except the designated "free" pupils, i.e., the poor children educated without charge.

Pennsylvania. (Founded 1682). As noted last week, the 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution required the state legislature to establish at least one school in every county, but the legislature took no action for many years. In 1790, they passed "Poor Laws" which led to the creation of schools in various parts of the state that were available only for poor children to receive free education. In 1818, the first public schools for children of all income levels were started in Philadelphia County. In 1831, a "Common School Fund" was created to raise money to build schools through the sale of land. In 1834, the "Free Schools Law" divided the state into school districts with voters in each district voting to decide whether they wanted local schools. If so, the state would pay for part of the costs. By the following year, 59% of the state's districts had voted yes and the first public high schools began to spring up (Central High School in Philadelphia being the first).¹⁷

In summary. Education was highly esteemed by America's founders; but not just for the transfer of knowledge for knowledge's sake, an educated public was seen as a necessary ingredient to the continuation of good government: "*Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render them safe their minds must be improved to a certain degree. This indeed is not all that is necessary, though it be essentially necessary.*"¹⁸

There was no "one-size-fits-all" approach to education in the founding period. The education of children was seen as first and foremost a parental responsibility, normally met through homeschooling. Homeschooling, community schooling, boarding schools and private tutors were all employed, leading, for those who could afford it, to a college education that prepared men for the ministry or other lettered careers. Outside of Massachusetts, where the Common

School system would first take root, the education of *poor* children was the primary justification for the first publicly-funded educational systems.

Next week: Part 3 - Educational Changes in the 19th Century

For further reading:

- [*The Education of James Madison, A Model for Today*](#), by Mary-Elaine Swanson, (San Francisco, Foundation for American Christian Education, 1992). Highly recommended.
- [*The Remarkable Education of John Quincy Adams*](#), by Phyllis Lee Levin, (New York, St. Martins Press, 2015).
- [*The Education of John Adams*](#), by R. B. Bernstein, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020).
- [*Schools for Statesmen; The Divergent Educations of the Constitution's Framers*](#), by Andrew H. Browning, (University Press of Kansas, 2022).
- [*Jefferson and Education*](#), by Jennings Wagoner, (Monticello Monograph Series, 2004).

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¹ Accessible at the Virginia Historical Society.

² In 1764-66, Madison is not shown in the list of students; we do not know whether this was simply an oversight.

³ College President John Witherspoon, who spoke French, had invited a French dignitary to the college but was not present when the visitor arrived. With the visitor not speaking any English, Madison was summoned to translate, a task he admitted later was performed with some awkwardness.

⁴ Undoubtedly including Madison's younger brothers and perhaps even his sister Eleanor, now age 9.

⁵ Thomas Martin died at Montpelier the following September (1770) from unknown causes at the young age of 27, as Madison began his second year at Princeton.

⁶ Ralph Ketcham, "James Madison at Princeton," in *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, Autumn 1966, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 24-54. Ketcham quotes from "Rules adopted May 4, 1709;" printed in *The Pennsylvania Journal*, July 13.

⁷ <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/resource/convention/delegates/education/>

⁸ "Henricus & Beyond," accessed at: <https://henricus.org/history/>.

⁹ BRADFORD'S HISTORY "OF PLIMOTH PLANTATION," From the Original Manuscript. WITH A REPORT OF THE PROCEEDINGS INCIDENT TO THE RETURN OF THE MANUSCRIPT TO MASSACHUSETTS, PRINTED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH, BY ORDER OF THE GENERAL COURT. BOSTON: WRIGHT & POTTER PRINTING CO., STATE PRINTERS, 18 Post Office Square. 1898. Accessed at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/24950/24950-h/24950-h.htm>, p.32.

¹⁰ Bernard Christian Steiner, *History of Education in Maryland*, (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1894), p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹² <https://www.ncpedia.org/cliios-nursery>.

¹³ <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0067.xml>

¹⁴ C. W. Birnie, "The Education of the Negro in Charleston, South Carolina, before the Civil War," *The Journal of Negro History*, Volume 12, 1927, p. 13.

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- ¹⁵ Virginia B. Bartels, ed., *The History of South Carolina Schools*, Accessed at:
https://www.carolana.com/SC/Education/History_of_South_Carolina_Schools_Virginia_B_Bartels.pdf.
- ¹⁶ https://www.carolana.com/SC/Education/1710_04_08_Act_for_Free_School_in_SC.html
- ¹⁷ <https://www.pahistorian.org/education-pa-1776-1937/>.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 14, 1781.