

The Breakfast Club

Constitutional Minute for 27 April 2024

American Education – Part 3 of 5

Educational Changes in the 19th Century

This is probably a good time to introduce you to a definition of education from the Founding Era, one found in Webster's 1828 Dictionary, the first dictionary of the American version of the English language. The work took Webster 30 years to complete, so the vernacular contained therein bridges the 18th and 19th centuries:

EDUCA'TION, *noun* [Latin *educatio*.] The bringing up, as of a child, instruction; formation of manners. *education* comprehends all that series of instruction and discipline which is intended to enlighten the understanding, correct the temper, and form the manners and habits of youth, and fit them for usefulness in their future stations. To give children a good *education* in manners, arts and science, is important; to give them a religious *education* is indispensable; and an immense responsibility rests on parents and guardians who neglect these duties.¹ (Emphasis added)

Several points bear emphasis: education was not just the passing on of knowledge (“enlighten the understanding”), it was the mechanism by which society created a responsible adult, fit for “their future station.” The goal was an adult with correct manners, one whose emotions (temper) were in check. The “indispensable” component of a complete education included religion, by which Webster meant Christianity. Finally, and most importantly, education was the responsibility of parents, not society. Founding era Christian parents understood their duty to bring their children up in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.”²

Today's parents may still take this responsibility seriously....until it is time to turn their little five-year-olds over to the public education system for the next 13 years. As we will see in our last essay in this series, today's public education system is filled with “landmines” for impressionable young children, and God will hold parents responsible if those “landmines” inflict injury. Numerous studies have shown that the first seven years of a child's life are the most important in establishing their character;³ the public school system wants access to **all** children for at least the last two.

Education in America until the early 1800s was decidedly Christian in complexion. There was no concern that saying a prayer or quoting the Bible in class would “establish religion” as there is today. Nearly every state already had an established state religion, even after the First

Amendment was ratified, and the first schools, whether public or private, reflected that state religion to some extent. Massachusetts, home of the “Old Deluder Satan” law, was the last of the thirteen original states to disestablish their official state religion (Congregationalism), in 1833.

The Founding Period was unquestionably a turbulent time in American history: new settlers streamed to the thirteen established colonies, an eight-year-long war nearly destroyed the American economy and dislocated thousands of residents, and our political structure went from monarchy to confederation of independent nation-states, to political union of those same states in thirteen short years. In historical terms, if you blinked, you missed it. It had taken 193 years to get us to the turn of the nineteenth century (1607-1800), but the next hundred years would be even more packed with change, and American education was no exception.

The 1800 census showed just over 5 million people living in the sixteen united states (Tennessee became the 16th state on June 1, 1796). One hundred years later, over 76 million people resided in forty-five states, a 1335% increase in population. The nation more than doubled in physical landmass.

Millions of children needed an education and the hodge-podge of private and public options, from homeschooling, Dame Schools, Common Schools, boarding schools, and private tutors would simply not be sufficient. Colleges still lay beyond the reach of most.

But just as we saw the “baby steps” of public education were influenced by regional differences in population density and logistics, as these differences began to subside, there remained considerable pushback over a comprehensive, tax-supported state educational system.

“Friends of education” movements began to spring up across America. Education-related magazines and journals sprang up seemingly overnight:

- The American Journal of Education (1826)
- The American Annals of Education (1830)
- The Common School Assistant (1836)
- The Common School Advocate (1837)
- The Journal of Education (1838)
- The Connecticut Common School (1838)
- The Common School Journal (1839, begun by Horace Mann, who we will soon study)
- The American Journal of Education (1855)

Everyone in America, it seemed, was suddenly interested in education, as long as they didn’t have to pay for it. We will briefly examine the experience in four states.

Virginia. Virginia established a literary fund in 1810, the interest of which was to be appropriated ‘to the sole benefit of a school or schools, to be kept in each and every county’⁴

By 1816, the fund had accumulated sufficient interest to contemplate the start of a state-sponsored system of primary schools, academies and colleges. Legislation to that effect was passed in the House only to be defeated in the Senate. In the commonwealth, “no alliance of the “friends of education” during the pre-Civil War era was able to prevail against the relentless opposition of eastern landowners, who refused to be taxed for a public school system, and western populists, who were not at all certain they needed one.”⁵ “[T]he very northernness of public schooling made it increasingly suspect in the South during the 1850 and 1860s, and when Reconstruction governments imposed public schools after Appomattox, the suspicion was confirmed.”⁶

There were other major efforts in 1829 and 1846 to establish a state-wide system in Virginia, but the result was a system only for the poor; for other children, it became a local option (for the most part locally paid for). The 1846 legislation mandated county boards of education and a county superintendent of schools, but few of these superintendents had a system to oversee. Not unexpectedly, the Civil War brought any progress toward a comprehensive educational system to a complete halt. It was not until the 1870 Virginia Constitution, required under Reconstruction, that “a uniform system of public education” became mandated, along with a State Board of Education and a State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

New York. The legislation in Massachusetts I previously discussed might suggest that that state led the way in establishing a truly public education system, but New York beat them to it. While Massachusetts’ laws of 1642, 1647, and 1648 did require local schools in each locality of 100 households and more, there was initially no state-wide system of control, standardization or even oversight; local schools were truly “local.” It was not until 1837 that these schools were supported by a state-wide tax system.

In 1784, New York’s legislature created a board of regents and charged it with oversight of Columbia College (recently renamed from King’s College, alma mater of Alexander Hamilton). Within a few years, the Regents had extended their authority to all secondary schools and colleges in the state. Between 1787 and 1876 the Regents incorporated over 300 academies in New York.⁷

In 1805 the Free School Society, organized by philanthropists, was chartered by the state legislature to teach poor children.⁸

There were still multiple options to educate children, as these statistics regarding New York City show:

In 1829 there were 43,000 children ages 5 to 15 in a city of 200,000. About half were poor and did not get any formal schooling. About 14,000 paid tuition to attend one of the many nonsectarian private schools. Some 4,000 attended church-sponsored schools, such as the Collegiate School, founded by the Dutch in 1628). And 5,000 attended public elementary schools. (There were no public high schools. Working-class youth who had

some schooling seldom stayed after age 14, when they started work or became apprentices).⁹

New York finally adopted a compulsory attendance law in 1874.

Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, one of the strongest proponents of public education was Dr. Benjamin Rush (1746-1813). A signer of the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Rush was the preeminent physician of his day. His 1786 “[P]lan for the establishment of public schools and the diffusion of knowledge in Pennsylvania laid out a system of schools from elementary to university level. But it would be many more years before the tide of Common Schooling swept down from New England.

The year 1818 saw the first public school established that welcomed children of all income levels (in Philadelphia County). In 1831, the Pennsylvania legislature followed Virginia in creating a fund to support the establishment of public schools (called the Common School Fund in this case), funded by the sale of state lands. In 1834: a Free Schools Law divided the entire state into school districts with voters in each district deciding whether they wanted local schools, paid for partially by the state. By the end of the next year, 59% of the state’s districts had voted in favor. The School Code of 1854 gave local school boards the authority to set teacher salaries, the grade levels provided by each school, the textbooks to be used, and subjects to be taught. They could also limit which students could attend,. The only state-wide requirement was that the curriculum include reading, writing, grammar, spelling and geography. The law required separate schools for African-Americans in any county with more than 20 black students. School boards were to be overseen by a County Superintendent.

The year 1857 saw the establishment of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. In 1872, the last district in the state voted to establish public schools, and in 1895 the second compulsory attendance law in the United States required children ages 8-13 to attend school for 13 weeks(!) a year.¹⁰

Massachusetts. As noted earlier, Massachusetts had a “headstart” on establishing a public education system, thanks to Puritans taking the education of their children seriously. The schools they began were decidedly.... Puritan. The teachers were Puritans (most often the local minister); the curriculum reflected Puritan doctrine, and the mood in such schools reflected the seriousness of a charge to educate one’s children as levied by God Almighty himself. All that began to change in 1837. But first we must back up a bit.

Horace Mann was born in 1796 in what had come to be called Franklin, Massachusetts, after the Benjamin Franklin made a sizable donation of books to start a public library, a library that now bears the distinction of being the oldest public lending library in continuous existence in the United States.¹¹

Mann's father was a poor farmer, and as soon as the boy was old enough to assume chores on the farm, the youngster was called into service, to the detriment of his early education and later health. "From ten years of age to twenty he had never more than six weeks' schooling during any year, and he describes his instructors as 'very good people, but very poor teachers.'"¹² Despite this less-than-stellar education, Mann was admitted at the relatively late age of 20 to Brown University, graduating valedictorian in 1819. The theme of his oration was "The Progressive Character of the Human Race."¹³ After graduation, Mann studied law at Connecticut's Litchfield Law School, the first non-affiliated law school in America. After being admitted to the bar, he quickly formed a reputation as a successful defense attorney. From 1827-1833, Mann served as a Representative in the Massachusetts legislature and from 1835-1837 as a State Senator. While serving as the presiding officer of the Senate a bill came before the Senate creating the State Board of Education. Mann took an interest in the bill and ensured it passed.

In 1837, Mann was appointed to the newly created Board and was immediately selected as Secretary. There he developed the concept of the "Common School" and began standardizing the schools in the state. He became nothing less than a zealot for public education. His Annual Reports as Secretary were widely disseminated and read. In 1843, Mann traveled to Germany to study the widely acclaimed Prussian education system. Upon his return to the United States, he lobbied heavily to have the model adopted nationwide.

Mann saw public education as the "savior" of society. Common Schools would be a "preventive means" against crime by inculcating "all Christian morals" in their students:¹⁴

"Let the Common School be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged; men would walk more safely by day; every pillow would be more inviolable by night; property, life, and character held by a stronger tenure; all rational hopes respecting the future brightened."¹⁵

But such moral teaching would not have the assistance of the Bible. Even though the Bible was made available in these schools, to teach from the book was to cross a bridge to the establishment of religion. The Bible must "speak for itself."¹⁶ Thus began the first truly non-sectarian schools in the nation, which eventually gave way to completely secular schools in the nation, where the Bible may or may not be found in the school library.

In 1848, Mann was elected to Congress, filling a vacancy caused by the death of John Quincy Adams¹⁷ and served two terms. In 1852, Massachusetts passed the first compulsory attendance law in the nation. It went on to serve as a model for the rest of the states; every state had compulsory attendance laws by 1918.¹⁸ That same year, Mann was chosen president of the newly established Antioch College at Yellow Springs, Ohio, serving in that capacity for seven

years before succumbing to typhoid fever following the school's 1859 Commencement. But death did not end Mann's influence on public education, not by a long shot.

Horace Mann is revered in the public school community, and for good reason: his exertions eventually created positions for the 4 million public school teachers we have today.

Mann held to some controversial principles that would adversely influence public education for the next hundred years and more:

His greatest innovation was in wresting educational control away from local communities and imposing state-wide standards and regimentation on all public schools in the state. This led to a "one-size-fits-all" pedagogic approach and the age-assigned grade-level system we are familiar with today. Now nearly all students are routinely advanced to the next grade level each year regardless of whether they have mastered the subjects they were taught.

Mann was instrumental in developing the concept of "non-sectarian" education. After setting out such ambitious goals for his new educational system, Mann realized that teaching morality would be necessary, even imperative. He announced that "Christian morality" would be taught.¹⁹ But here Mann faced a dilemma: Christian morality had to be taught without making use of the Bible. What does Christian morality even mean apart from the words and examples of the Bible? Without the Bible, "Christian morality" could and did become anything the teacher wanted it to be.

Mann hated the phonics method of language instruction, calling it "repulsive and soul-deadening to children". He described the letters of the alphabet as "skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions;" teaching the alphabet before reading itself was "entirely illogical."²⁰ Mann faced considerable opposition in his day. A committee composed of thirty-one Boston Grammar school masters submitted a 150-page rebuttal to the State School Board.²¹ Despite the pushback, within 50 years of Mann's death, phonics as a method of teaching reading instruction in public schools had virtually been extinguished. Rudolf Flesch's 1955 book, [*Why Johnny Can't Read*](#) led to a modest return to phonics-based reading instruction.

Today's public school system claims its roots in Horace Mann's Common School movement,²² but Horace Mann was not the only progressive who sought national salvation through public education. His "right-hand man," the lesser-known James G. Carter (1795-1849) was just as progressive and just as passionate about using free public schools for social control.²³ If you believe in the perfectibility of mankind, the central principle of the progressive movement, compulsory education presents itself as the natural prescription to achieve that perfection. In his classic work: *The Messianic Character of American Education*, Rousas Rushdoony analyzes many of Mann's contemporaries and successors.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) published his [Communist Manifesto](#) on February 23, 1848, two days after John Quincy Adams suffered a heart attack while seated at his desk in the House chamber, paving the way for 52-year-old Horace Mann to leave his position as Education Secretary and be elected to Congress.

The Tenth Point of the Manifesto contained this demand:

10. Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, etc., etc.

Elsewhere, Marx is quoted as saying: "The education of all children, from the moment that they can get along without a mother's care, shall be in state institutions."

The question that naturally arises is: What advantage did Marxists/Communists see in a system of free education for all children? One can only surmise.

Marx's Manifesto was not published in America until 1871; twelve years after Horace Mann had died, so no direct connection can be drawn between the two, but the confluence of the two men's thoughts regarding education cannot be ignored.

In summary, the nineteenth century saw America transition from a system of largely sectarian schools to one composed of mostly secular schools. Christian schools persisted, to be sure, patronized by those parents who could afford the tuition, and a parochial school system also gradually emerged in reaction to the minimally Protestant "atmosphere" still present in the public schools, but the seeds of progressive education had been sown and would soon begin to bear fruit.

Next week: Part 4 - The Effect of Another Progressive: John Dewey.

For further reading (these are classics):

- Rousas Rushdoony, [The Messianic Character of American Education](#), (Valliceto: Ross House Books, 1963).
- Alan Bloom, [The Closing of the American Mind](#), (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).
- Samuel Blumenfeld, [Is Public Education Necessary?](#), (Devin-Adair Publishers, 1987).

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¹ Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language: Republished in Facsimile Edition* (Chesapeake: Foundation for American Christian Education, 2008), "Education."

² Ephesians 6:4, KJV.

³ <https://www.healthline.com/health/parenting/first-seven-years-of-childhood>.

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- ⁴ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education, The National Experience, 1783-1876*, (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), p.156.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ⁸ Wikipedia: "History of education in New York City." Accessed at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_education_in_New_York_City.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ The compulsory attendance age was later raised to 18, but in 1972, Amish across the country would win an exemption to such laws in *Wisconsin v. Jonas Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, lowering compulsory attendance for the sect back down to 8th grade. Interestingly, the Pennsylvania Department of Education's current website discussion on compulsory attendance does not mention the *Yoder* decision or the "Amish Exemption."
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin_Public_Library_%28Massachusetts%29.
- ¹² https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Appletons%27_Cyclop%C3%A6dia_of_American_Biography/Mann,_Horace.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Horace Mann, "Twelfth Annual Report of the Massachusetts State School Board" (1848) in *The American Nation: Primary Sources*, ed. Bruce Frohnen (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2008), p. 248.
- ¹⁵ *The Common School Journal*, Vol. III, p.15, January 1, 1841, Introduction., cited in *The Messianic Character of American Education*, p. 29.
- ¹⁶ Horace Mann was a staunch Unitarian; but it bears mentioning that 18th and early 19th Century Unitarianism had not yet separated itself from Christianity as it has today.
- ¹⁷ JQA died quietly sitting at his desk in the House chamber.
- ¹⁸ Garris, Zachary. *Thinking Biblically About Education: Why Parents Should Abandon Government Schools and Take Back Control of Education*. Zachary M. Garris. Kindle Edition.
- ¹⁹ Horace Mann, "Twelfth Annual Report of the Massachusetts State School Board" (1848) in *The American Nation: Primary Sources*, ed. Bruce Frohnen (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2008).
- ²⁰ Horace Mann, "On the Best Mode of Preparing and Using Spelling-Books," an oration given in Boston, August 19, 1841. Accessed at: https://www.google.com/books/edition/Lecture_on_the_mode_of_preparing_and_usi/WiGTMGUjSm8C?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=On+the+Best+Mode+of+Preparing+and+Using+Spelling-Books&pg=PA1&printsec=frontcover.
- ²¹ Mitford M. Mathews, *Teaching to Read, Historically Considered*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966). P. 86.
- ²² <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf>.
- ²³ Rousas Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education*, (Valliceto: Ross House Books, 1963), p. 35.