Education in Colonial America | The Freeman

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One of the main objections people have to getting government out of the education business and turning it over to the free market is that “it simply would not get the job done.” This type of thinking is due, in large measure, to what one historian called “a parochialism in time,” i.e., a limited view of an issue for lack of historical perspective. Having served the twelve-year sentence in government-controlled schools, most Americans view our present public school system as the measure of all things in education. Yet for two hundred years in American history, from the mid-1600s to the mid-1800s, public schools as we know them to day were virtually non-existent, and the educational needs of America were met by the free market. In these two centuries, America produced several generations of highly skilled and literate men and women who laid the foundation for a nation dedicated to the principles of freedom and self-government.

The private system of education in which our forefathers were educated included home, school, church, voluntary associations such as library companies and philosophical societies, circulating libraries, apprenticeships, and private study. It was a system supported primarily by those who bought the services of education, and by private benefactors. All was done without compulsion. Although there was a veneer of government involvement in some colonies, such as in Puritan Massachusetts, early American education was essentially based on the principle of voluntarism.

Dr. Lawrence A. Cremin, distinguished scholar in the field of education, has said that during the colonial period the Bible was “the single most important cultural influence in the lives of Anglo-Americans.”

Thus, the cornerstone of early American education was the belief that “children are an heritage from the Lord.” Parents believed that it was their responsibility to not only teach them how to make a living, but also how to live. As our forefathers searched their Bibles, they found that the function of government was to protect life and property. Education was not a responsibility of the civil government.

Education Began in the Home and the Fields

Education in early America began in the home at the mother’s knee, and often ended in the cornfield or barn by the father’s side. The task of teaching reading usually fell to the mother, and since paper was in short supply, she would trace the letters of the alphabet in the ashes and dust by the fireplace. The child learned the alphabet and then how to sound out words. Then a book was placed in the child’s hands, usually the Bible. As many passages were familiar to him, having heard them at church or at family devotions, he would soon master the skill of reading. The Bible was supplemented by other good books such as Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan, The New England Primer, and Isaac Watt’s Divine Songs. From volumes like these, our founding fathers and their generation learned the values that laid the foundation for free enterprise. In “Against Idleness and Mischief,” for example, they learned individual responsibility before God in the realm of work and learning.

How doth the busy little bee
Improve each shining hour,
And gather honey all the day
From every opening flower.

How skillfully she builds her cell,
How neat she spreads the wax
And labours hard to store it well
With the sweet food she makes.

In works of labour, or of skill,
I would be busy too;  
For Satan finds some mischief still  
For idle hands to do.

In books, or work, or healthful play  
Let my first years be passed;  
That I may give for every day  
Some good account at last.

Armed with love, common sense, and a nearby woodshed, colonial mothers often achieved more than our modern-day elementary schools with their federally-funded programs and education specialists. These colonial mothers used simple, time-tested methods of instruction mixed with plain, old-fashioned hard work. Children were not ruined by educational experiments developed in the ivory towers of academe. The introduction to a reading primer from the early 19th century testifies to the importance of home instruction. It says: “The author cannot but hope that this book will enable many a mother or aunt, or elder brother or sister, or perhaps a beloved grandmother, by the family fireside, to go through in a pleasant and sure way with the art of preparing the child for his first school days.”

Home education was so common in America that most children knew how to read before they entered school. As Ralph Walker has pointed out, “Children were often taught to read at home before they were subjected to the rigours of school. In middle-class families, where the mother would be expected to be literate, this was considered part of her duties.”

Without ever spending a dime of tax money, or without ever consulting a host of bureaucrats, psychologists, and specialists, children in early America learned the basic academic skills of reading, writing, and ciphering necessary for getting along in society. Even in Boston, the capital city of the colony in which the government had the greatest hand, children were taught to read at home. Samuel Eliot Morison, in his excellent study on education in colonial New England, says:

Boston offers a curious problem. The grammar (Boston Latin) school was the only public school down to 1684, when a writing school was established; and it is probable that only children who already read were admitted to that . . . . they must have learned to read somehow, since there is no evidence of unusual illiteracy in the town. And a Boston bookseller's stock in 1700 includes no less than eleven dozen spellers and sixty-one dozen primers.

The answer to this supposed problem is simple. The books were bought by parents, and illiteracy was absent because parents taught their children how to read outside of a formal school setting. Coupled with the vocational skills children learned from their parents, home education met the demands of the free market. For many, formal schooling was simply unnecessary. The fine education they received at home and on the farm held them in good stead for the rest of their lives, and was supplemented with Bible reading and almanacs like Franklin's Poor Richard's.

Some of our forefathers desired more education than they could receive at home. Thus, grammar and secondary schools grew up all along the Atlantic seaboard, particularly near the centers of population, such as Boston and Philadelphia. In New England, many of these schools were started by colonial governments, but were supported and controlled by the local townspeople.

In the Middle Colonies there was even less government intervention. In Pennsylvania, a compulsory education law was passed in 1683, but it was never strictly enforced. Nevertheless, many schools were set up simply as a response to consumer demand. Philadelphia, which by 1776 had become second only to London as the chief city in the British Empire, had a school for every need and interest. Quakers, Philadelphia's first inhabitants, laid the foundation for an educational system that still thrives in America. Because of their emphasis on learning, an illiterate Quaker child was a contradiction in terms. Other religious groups set up schools in the Middle Colonies. The Scottish Presbyterians, the Moravians, the Lutherans, and Anglicans all had their own schools. In addition to these church-related schools, private schoolmasters, entrepreneurs in their own right, established hundreds of schools.

Historical records, which are by no means complete, reveal that over one hundred and twenty-five private
schoolmasters advertised their services in Philadelphia newspapers between 1740 and 1776. Instruction was offered in Latin, Greek, mathematics, surveying, navigation, accounting, bookkeeping, science, English, and contemporary foreign languages. Incompetent and inefficient teachers were soon eliminated, since they were not subsidized by the State or protected by a guild or union. Teachers who satisfied their customers by providing good services prospered. One schoolmaster, Andrew Porter, a mathematics teacher, had over one hundred students enrolled in 1776. The fees the students paid enabled him to provide for a family of seven.

In the Philadelphia Area

Philadelphia also had many fine evening schools. In 1767, there were at least sixteen evening schools, catering mostly to the needs of Philadelphia’s hard-working German population. For the most part, the curriculum of these schools was confined to the teaching of English and vocations. There were also schools for women, blacks, and the poor. Anthony Benezet, a leader in colonial educational thought, pioneered the education for women and Negroes. The provision of education for the poor was a favorite Quaker philanthropy. As one historian has pointed out, “the poor, both Quaker and non-Quaker, were allowed to attend without paying fees.”

In the countryside around Philadelphia, German immigrants maintained many of their own schools. By 1776, at least sixteen schools were being conducted by the Mennonites in Eastern Pennsylvania. Christopher Dock, who made several notable contributions to the science of pedagogy, taught in one of these schools for many years. Eastern Pennsylvanians, as well as New Jerseyans and Marylanders, sometimes sent their children to Philadelphia to further their education, where there were several boarding schools, both for girls and boys.

In the Southern colonies, government had, for all practical purposes, no hand at all in education. In Virginia, education was considered to be no business of the State. The educational needs of the young in the South were taken care of in “old-field” schools. “Old-field” schools were buildings erected in abandoned fields that were too full of rocks or too overcultivated for farm use. It was in such a school that George Washington received his early education. The Southern Colonies’ educational needs were also taken care of by using private tutors, or by sending their sons north or across the Atlantic to the mother country.

Colonial Colleges

A college education is something that very few of our forefathers wanted or needed. As a matter of fact, most of them were unimpressed by degrees or a university accent. They judged men by their character and by their experience. Moreover, many of our founding fathers, such as George Washington, Patrick Henry, and Ben Franklin, did quite well without a college education. Yet for those who so desired it, usually young men aspiring to enter the ministry, university training was available. Unlike England, where the government had given Cambridge and Oxford a monopoly on the granting of degrees, there were nine colleges from which to choose.

Although some of the colonial colleges were started by colonial governments, it would be misleading to think of them as statist institutions in the modern sense. Once chartered, the colleges were neither funded nor supported by the State. Harvard was established with a grant from the Massachusetts General Court, yet voluntary contributions took over to keep the institution alive. John Harvard left the college a legacy of 800 pounds and his library of 400 books. “College corn,” donated by the people of the Bay Colony, maintained the young scholars for many years. Provision was also made for poor students, as Harvard developed one of the first work-study programs. And when Harvard sought to build a new building in 1674, donations were solicited from the people of Massachusetts. Despite the delays caused by King Philip’s War, the hall was completed in 1677 at almost no cost to the taxpayer.

New Jersey was the only colony that had two colleges, the College of New Jersey (Princeton) and Queens (Rutgers). The Log College, the predecessor of Princeton, was founded when Nathaniel Irwin left one thousand dollars to William Tennant to found a seminary. Queens grew out of a small class held by the Dutch revivalist, John Frelinghuysen. Despite occasional hard times, neither college bowed to civil government for financial assistance. As Frederick Rudolph has observed, “neither the college at Princeton nor its later rival at New Brunswick ever received any financial support from the state.” Indeed, John Witherspoon, Princeton’s sixth president, was apparently proud of the fact that his institution was independent of government control. In an advertisement addressed to the British settlers in the West Indies, Witherspoon wrote: “The College of New Jersey is altogether independent. It hath received no favor from Government but the charter, by the particular friendship of a person now deceased.”
Based on the principle of freedom, Princeton under Witherspoon produced some of America’s most “animated Sons of Liberty.” Many of Princeton’s graduates, standing firmly in the Whig tradition of limited government, helped lay the legal and constitutional foundations for our Republic. James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, was a Princeton graduate.

Libraries

In addition to formal schooling in elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities, early America had many other institutions that made it possible for people to either get an education or supplement their previous training. Conceivably, an individual who never attended school could receive an excellent education by using libraries, building and consulting his own library, and by joining a society for mutual improvement. In colonial America, all of these were possible.

Consumer demand brought into existence a large number of libraries. Unlike anything in the Old Country, where libraries were open only to scholars, churchmen, or government officials, these libraries were rarely supported by government funds. In Europe, church libraries were supported by tax money as well, for they were a part of an established church. In America, church libraries, like the churches themselves, were supported primarily by voluntarism.

The first non-private, non-church libraries in America were maintained by membership fees, called subscriptions or shares, and by gifts of books and money from private benefactors interested in education. The most famous of these libraries was Franklin and Logan’s Library Company in Philadelphia, which set the pattern and provided much of the inspiration for libraries throughout the colonies. The membership fee for these subscription libraries varied from twenty or thirty pounds to as little as fifteen shillings a year. The Association Library, a library formed by a group of Quaker artisans, cost twenty shillings to join.

Soon libraries became the objects of private philanthropy, and it became possible for even the poorest citizens to borrow books. Sometimes the membership fee was completely waived for an individual if he showed intellectual promise and character.

Entrepreneurs, seeing an opportunity to make a profit from colonial Americans’ desire for self-improvement, provided new services and innovative ways to sell or rent printed matter. One new business that developed was that of the circulating library. In 1767, Lewis Nicola established one of the first such businesses in the City of Brotherly Love. The library was open daily, and customers, by depositing five pounds and paying three dollars a year, could withdraw one book at a time. Nicola apparently prospered, for two years later he moved his business to Society Hill, enlarged his library, and reduced his prices to compete with other circulating libraries.

Judging from the titles in these libraries, colonial Americans could receive an excellent education completely outside of the schoolroom. For colonial Americans who believed in individual responsibility, self-government, and self-improvement, this was not an uncommon course of study. Most lawyers, for example, were self-educated.

Sermons as Educational Tools

The sermon was also an excellent educational experience for our colonial forefathers. Sunday morning was a time to hear the latest news and see old friends and neighbors. But it was also an opportunity for many to sit under a man of God who had spent many hours preparing for a two, three, or even four hour sermon. Many a colonial pastor, such as Jonathan Edwards, spent eight to twelve hours daily studying, praying over, and researching his sermon. Unlike sermons on the frontier in the mid-19th century, colonial sermons were filled with the fruits of years of study. They were geared not only to the emotions and will, but also to the intellect.

As Daniel Boorstin has pointed out, the sermon was one of the chief literary forms in colonial America. Realizing this, listeners followed sermons closely, took mental notes, and usually discussed the sermon with the family on Sunday afternoon. Anne Hutchinson’s discussions, which later resulted in the Antinomian Controversy, were merely typical of thousands of discussions which took place in the homes of colonial America. Most discussions, however, were not as controversial as those which took place in the Hutchinson home.

Thus, without ever attending a college or seminary, a church-goer in colonial America could gain an intimate knowledge of Bible doctrine, church history, and classical literature. Questions raised by the sermon could be answered by the pastor or by the books in the church libraries that were springing up all over America. Often a sermon was later published and listeners could review what they had heard on Sunday morning.

The first Sunday Schools also developed in this period. Unlike their modern-day counterparts, colonial
Sunday Schools not only taught Bible but also the rudiments of reading and writing. These Sunday Schools often catered to the poorest members of society.

Modern historians have discounted the importance of the colonial church as an educational institution, citing the low percentage of colonial Americans on surviving church membership rolls. What these historians fail to realize, however, is that unlike most churches today, colonial churches took membership seriously. Requirements for becoming a church member were much higher in those days, and many people attended church without officially joining. Other sources indicate that church attendance was high in the colonial period. Thus, many of our forefathers partook not only of the spiritual blessing of their local churches, but the educational blessings as well.

**Philosophical Societies**

Another educational institution that developed in colonial America was the philosophical society. One of the most famous of these was Franklin’s Junto, where men would gather to read and discuss papers they had written on all sorts of topics and issues. Another society was called The Literary Republic. This society opened in the bookbindery of George Rineholt in 1764 in Philadelphia. Here, artisans, tradesmen, and common laborers met to discuss logic, jurisprudence, religion, science, and moral philosophy (economics).

Itinerant lecturers, not unlike the Greek philosophers of the Hellenistic period, rented halls and advertised their lectures in local papers. One such lecturer, Joseph Cunningham, offered a series of lectures on the “History and Laws of England” for a little over a pound.

By 1776, when America finally declared its independence, a tradition had been established and voluntarism in education was the rule. Our founding fathers, who had been educated in this tradition, did not think in terms of government-controlled education. Accordingly, when the delegates gathered in Philadelphia to write a Constitution for the new nation, education was considered to be outside the jurisdiction of the civil government, particularly the national government. Madison, in his notes on the Convention, recorded that there was some talk of giving the Federal legislature the power to establish a national university at the future capital. But the proposal was easily defeated, for as Boorstin has pointed out, “the Founding Fathers supported the local institutions which had sprung up all over the country.”

A principle had been established in America that was not to be deviated from until the mid-nineteenth century. Even as late as 1860, there were only 300 public schools, as compared to 6,000 private academies.

**A Highly Literate Populace**

The results of colonial America’s free market system of education were impressive indeed. Almost no tax money was spent on education, yet education was available to almost anyone who wanted it, including the poor. No government subsidies were given, and inefficient institutions either improved or went out of business. Competition guaranteed that scarce educational resources would be allocated properly. The educational institutions that prospered produced a generation of articulate Americans who could grapple with the complex problems of self-government. The Federalist Papers, which are seldom read or understood today, even in our universities, were written for and read by the common man. Literacy rates were as high or higher than they are today. A study conducted in 1800 by DuPont de Nemours revealed that only four in a thousand Americans were unable to read and write legibly. Various accounts from colonial America support these statistics. In 1772, Jacob Duche, the Chaplain of Congress, later turned Tory, wrote:

> The poorest labourer upon the shore of Delaware thinks himself entitled to deliver his sentiments in matters of religion or politics with as much freedom as the gentleman or scholar . . . . Such is the prevailing taste for books of every kind, that almost every man is a reader; and by pronouncing sentence, right or wrong, upon the various publications that come in his way, puts himself upon a level, in point of knowledge, with their several authors.

Franklin, too, testified to the efficiency of the colonial educational system. According to Franklin, the North American libraries alone “have improved the general conversation of Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges.”

The experience of colonial America clearly supports the idea that the market, if allowed to operate freely,
could meet the educational needs of modern-day America. In the nineteenth century, the Duke of Wellington remarked that “the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton and Cambridge.” Today, the battle between freedom and statism is being fought in America’s schools. Those of us who believe in Constitutional government would do well to promote the principle of competition, pluralism, and government non-intervention in education. Years ago, Abraham Lincoln said, “The philosophy of the classroom will be the philosophy of the government in the next generation.”

4. Psalm 127:3.
5. Romans 13.
7. Ibid., p. 42.
13. Ibid.
23. Rudolph, p. 15.


29. Wright, pp. 126-133.


31. This later became, of course, the American Philosophical Society.

32. Bridenbaugh, pp. 64-65.


34. Boorstin, p. 183.


39. Farrand, p. 86.