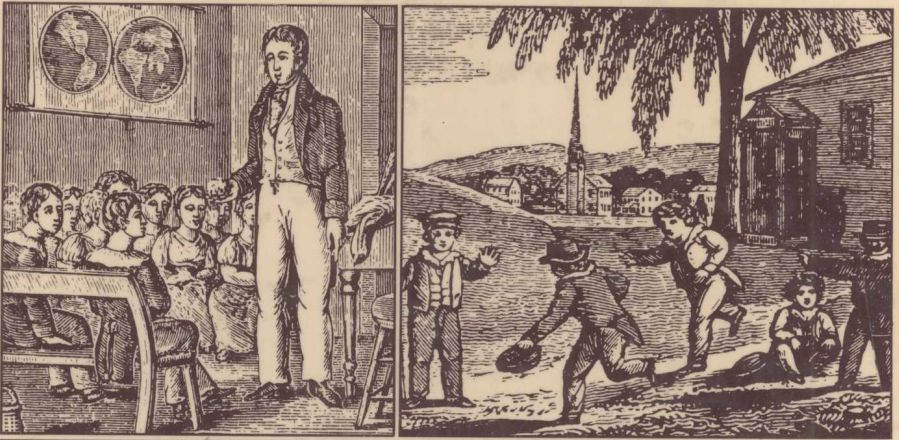


# HISTORY of EDUCATION & CULTURE in AMERICA



H. Warren Button  
Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr.

# **HISTORY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE IN AMERICA**

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**To Raymond E. Callahan**

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# INTRODUCTION\*

This work focuses on the relationship between education and American culture. While it deals mainly with the history of the public schools, it also attempts to understand less formal means of education. We do not assume that the schools have been the sole, or even the most important, source of learning in our culture. For example, schools are not, nor have they ever been, as important as the family in the educational process. In the education of many people they have often been less important than religion or even apprenticeship. In our own era, schools seem to play a less important role than television in the education of many people.\*\*

We assume that our readers are primarily interested in schools and their history. Many will be teachers or prospective teachers. Our emphasis will therefore be on schools and the people who have taught and learned there. We hope to present students, teachers, and administrators, as well as others who have been involved with schooling, as real people coping with the problems of living in a complex and changing culture. While much that we will present will be abstract, the

\* The introduction is an adaptation by the authors of H. Warren Button's paper, "Creating More Usable Pasts: History in the Study of Education," *Educational Researcher*, VIII (May, 1979), pp. 3-9. Republished with the permission of the American Educational Research Association.

\*\* For citations, see "Bibliography, Sources, and Notes," pp. 343-367. The last three words of each quotation are given, followed by its source.

people we will discuss have been and are more than merely abstractions of thought or belief.

Texts on the history of American education have traditionally focused on the public schools to the exclusion of nearly any other subject. The public school was seen as the agency or institution that led to most of what was admirable in American life—a society that was open, but orderly; a society that was safe from revolution, and a society in all respects equitable and just.

The traditional historical interpretation of American education has been one focusing on the perfection of the schools—the story of their foreordained, inevitable, and successive triumphs. The schools spread from their beginnings to every territory and state. They spread to include high schools and public colleges and universities. They spread downward, providing kindergarten for young children, and even nurseries for still younger children. More and more the schools provided learning that had previously come from the home, or from an apprenticeship. The schools taught morals and values. They taught occupational skills. They taught appreciation of the arts, and fear of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.

The most important of the traditional educational historians was Ellwood P. Cubberley of Stanford University, whose *Public Education in the United States* (1919) stayed in print for thirty years and was read and studied by generations of prospective teachers. Some earlier historians had written in the same spirit, and for decades books about the history of education were patterned after Cubberley's. A few books in this tradition are still in use—for instance, S. Alexander Rippa's *Education in a Free Society* (1980). R. Freeman Butt's *Public Education in the United States* (1978) seems in many ways to be a return to this earlier tradition.

Much of the information that the traditional educational historians have amassed is still useful and illuminating. We dispute many of their interpretations, however. That the growth and shaping of the public schools was inevitable is an argument that we do not necessarily agree with. We understand the beginnings of that convention in the history of American education. It was written in times when most American historians dealt with something like the inevitable destiny of the United States—a destiny closely linked to the belief in progress. The historical imperative, the inevitability of progress, was a part of Hegel's philosophy and for fifty years was the most prominent assumption in American education. However, to understand it is not necessarily to accept it.

The Cubberley tradition of history of education was reconsidered and largely supplanted in the 1960s. Bernard Bailyn, prominent historian of colonial America, was one of the first and most influential critics. *Education*, he argued, was properly defined as the sum of everything intended to enculturate child, youth, and adult—family, church, newspaper, and so on. Among those institutions intended to enculturate, schools—especially colonial schools—were a small part of the pattern and process. Bailyn's advice was in some ways awkward to accept. It entailed a complete redefinition of a subfield of history. More exactly, it abolished the accepted definition. History of education was cultural history and social history; all of history but “with politics left out.” It was a prospect that opened bright possibili-

ties for educational historians. It was also life in a *ganzfeld*, a world without cues and direction.

The second critic of the 1960s was Lawrence A. Cremin. (Cremin as historian has many strengths: The most unusual of them is the ability to reconsider, and to change his mind.) In *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Cubberley* (1965), a critique and bibliographic essay, his formulation of the history of education was that it should be a history of "institutions" that have educated including not only schools, but also families, churches, libraries, publishers, newspapers, television, and so on. These institutions were to be seen in the context of the society of their time. Educational historians underwent a completely new way of looking at their subject.

Several new historians of education brought to the history of education new political orientations. Cubberley had been sure that all had been for the best. By the 1960s, some had no such certainty. First, Raymond E. Callahan brought to the history of education the old radical conviction that in a great many ways schools had worked out badly, that reform was an imperative. Callahan's *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (1962) was dedicated to George S. Counts, who of course had been one of the pioneer radical sociologists of education.

One of the most prominent historians of education in the 1960s and 1970s has been Michael B. Katz, who has been categorically certain that in a great many ways schools have worked out badly. He has perhaps been as sure in his conviction as Cubberley had been in his. Katz's contributions to history of education in works such as *The Irony of Early School Reform* (1968) and *Class, Bureaucracy, and the Schools* (1971) have been devoted to why schools did and do support existing class structure because of their formal, hierarchical, bureaucratic, unyielding nature.

Katz is among the most distinguished of the new wave of educational historians loosely known as *Revisionists*. While we agree with much that revisionist history has to say about American educational history, we also disagree with certain of its assumptions. Revisionist history often has about it the air of predestination, of inevitability, of certain evolution. If in traditional history there was unwavering progress toward perfection, in revisionist history there is often the assumption of certain disintegration and decay, of schools as institutions that can only grow more and more exploitative, more and more repressive, more and more an impediment to change.

Bailyn changed the field of educational history by extending its boundaries. Katz and the revisionists changed educational history by introducing political and social philosophy into the field. Other changes, somewhat quieter, but perhaps even more important, have now begun in the methodology of educational history. While old techniques are still valid, new research methodologies have the potential to reorient the field. Historians in general, and educational historians in particular, are beginning to discover the usefulness of the computer and empirical approaches to historical research. Content analysis, a particular interest of one of the authors, is just beginning to come into use, as is the analysis of visual and photographic data related to education. Such methods encourage the pursuit of what may be termed "history from the bottom up"—a grass-roots history. In this sense, the more tradi-



tional intellectual history that has dominated much of the writing in the field is being supplemented by a new type of history. Much of the content of our text reflects some of these new directions.

History of education is a hybrid specialty, as are the sociology of education and educational psychology. As they do, it comes from a parent that is a "pure" discipline. Unlike sociology of education and educational psychology, history of education comes from a pure discipline that is one of the humanities. The grand strategies of all empirical inquiry, all inquiry about the real palpable world whether in the physical sciences, the social sciences, or history, are much the same. What may be unique, however, to a particular field of inquiry are its tactical approaches. History has its own tactics, conventions, and canons of research. It answers in its own way the analogues of the empiricists' questions about reliability and validity. History lives with its uncertainties, just as the social sciences live with probabilistic findings.

While, like the social scientist, the historian is often interested in widely applicable findings and theory, the historian is more often interested in the particular or unique event, the specific era, the set of closely interrelated events.

History, or specifically, the history of education, is not, except in a certain philosophic sense, the past. History is a description and interpretation of the past. It is history in this sense that can be useful. As historians, however, we feel that history should be more than merely useful. Part of the discipline of studying the past is literary. In the United States, the first great historians—Irving, Prescott, Bancroft—were interested as much in form as in content. History should also be of value simply because the lives of people in the past—their actions and deeds, their motives and meanings—are intrinsically interesting.

For improving education, we believe that history can explain something of the present, how we have gotten where we are. It can generate hypotheses that account for the schools' obstinate, perverse, adamant resistance to change. History can lead to the formulation of general laws—in this context, concerning schools, schooling, and education.

History can inform. Probably more than in any other aspect of education's history, there has been informative work on the history of school administration. It seems clear that school administrations' use of management standards for efficiency and business procedures was initially the result of outside pressures and influences, rather than an organic part of schools, schooling, or the process of education. It is strongly argued that the development of the typical city school administrative bureaucratic hierarchy was not inevitable, and that there were real alternatives to it—far less constraining alternatives. These historians' conclusions have become part of the general literature of school administration.

History can describe. It is often more valuable when it explains. As historians, we strongly feel that the results of historical research in education are useful but must be used in their own ways. History has limits, because it cannot provide the degree of certainty that comes from testing hypotheses in empirical research. History, instead, has its own strength: wide perspectives, long views, rich sources,

and rich data. History is not solely utilitarian; it could not be and should not be. But history has been and should be used to improve education.

Since education is always in a cultural context, the history of education should also be within that context. In four general sections we have sketched events, developments, and moods that have been important in our culture—in Colonial times, in the first century of independence, in the times of Progressive reforms, and since the beginning of the Depression. Without that background an account of the history of education is far less meaningful.

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# PART ONE

# BEGINNINGS

Education and schools are part of a wider culture and society. Therefore the history of education, or even the history of schools only, must be written against the background of a more general history. Since the roots of American education are English, this brief description begins with England and follows the growth and change of the colonies until the time of the American Revolution.

The sixteenth century was a time of change for Europe. The New World and voyages to the East had yielded rich and splendid cargoes of gold and silver, silk, and spices. The revival of trade circulated the new wealth throughout Europe. Intellectual riches resulted from the rediscovery and continued reexamination of texts and manuscripts from classical Rome and Greece. It was the time of the Renaissance, the rebirth or reawakening of the traditions of classical culture. The scholars known as *humanists* who led this revival saw themselves as taking up the pursuit of knowledge where barbarians had interrupted Classical authors a thousand years before. Other men looked at the decadent Church and protested. They became Protestants. The Church, they said, had to return to its essentials, to its original simplicity. Imperatively, the teachings of the Bible were to be followed in the Church. The Church's accumulations of a thousand years—the elaborate ceremonies and rituals, its riches and worldliness—were to be discarded. Protestantism was, of course, a cause to which men dedicated their lives and for which some suffered death. While there were many Protestant sects in England in the 1600s,



the most important single group there at that time was the Puritans, whose purpose was to purify the Church of England—not to replace it.

In England, with the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, an age of exuberance was coming to an end. A great age of seamanship and discovery, typified by the explorer Sir Francis Drake, was over. The splendid flowering of English literature and drama, at its height in William Shakespeare's plays, was also coming to an end. The 1600s in England were less colorful than the Elizabethan era, less remarkable for art than for science, and most remarkable for religious disputes and revolution inspired by religion. By 1600, the middle class was, as a result of peace, prosperity, and trade, much more numerous than it had previously been and had an increased influence in politics. The middle-class merchants and craftsmen and landowners accumulated wealth and, as Puritans, power enough by the 1640s to challenge—and execute—a king.

When Columbus searched for a shorter way to the Far East, his voyage joined together the fates and futures of Europe and the Americas. In South and Central America the Spanish found empires to conquer and riches to loot. For them the land farther north was less promising. There were no gold mines or riches to seize. The eastern shoreline of North America stretched for 2,000 miles and more, northward and eastward. It was indented and broken in many places by river mouths and other safe harbors. The climate was temperate in most places. The Native Americans, misnamed *Indians*, belonged to hundreds of tribes with almost as many different languages. In general, they had little in common with one another and did not unite in order to resist the settlement of their lands by the early colonists. The existence of numerous rivers and harbors, of a moderate climate, and natives unorganized for resistance, made North America splendid for colonization, if not for immediate exploitation. The Atlantic seaboard, a narrow strip along bays and navigable rivers, was the location of the first settlements. It was also the area in which nearly all settlers lived until after the Revolution.

The establishment of the colonies followed a fairly general pattern. The first step was the organization of a *company*, a group of adventurers or investors. It was desirable, if not absolutely necessary, to have a charter—a license to occupy a part of the land. An expedition was organized and ships contracted. The voyage itself was hazardous and trying—the Pilgrims' six-week passage from old England to New England, for example, was not long by the standards of the times. In the early colonies there were "starving years," the interval between arrival and the harvesting of food enough for survival. Only after these stages could a colony prosper and grow. There were always risks and often failures, especially for the earliest colonies. It is to be understood that there were exceptions to the general pattern of settlement. Plymouth Colony was established in a place where the Pilgrims did not have charter rights to settle. Rhode Island and Connecticut were begun without sea voyage, by men and women who came by land from Massachusetts. There was no "starving time," or famine, in Boston.

Many different motives underlaid the establishment of the colonies. No colony was begun for a single reason. Some colonies were established strictly for