# To Start a School, To Envision a New Society

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The American Revolution is most often remembered as the war that resulted in the creation of an independent nation. Yet the Revolution was equally transformative in social institutions such as education. Before the Revolution, education was built on aristocratic ideologies and the main purpose was to prepare students for the ministry as most schools were run by religious authorities. After independence was achieved and the nation was created, education was no longer seen principally as a route to the ministry, but instead as preparation for citizenship and for roles in trade and the mercantile and then capitalist economy in the new society and its participatory form of government. Moreover, education became essential to the survival of the republic itself, as Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson and others wrote in the years after the American Revolution. The academies that came into being helped to carry forward this transformation, embodying the ideals of citizenship and new opportunities that the new nation was trying to build after colonial rule.

In the history of education in the United States after the colonial times, the academies are often left out. In fact, Theodore Sizer's 1964 volume, *The Age of Academies,* is seen as the first scholarly book on the academies as a movement in American Education. Sizer, who later became headmaster of Phillips Academy Andover, focuses on the age of the academies from the mid-1700s to the Civil War era in the 1860s. The academies, he argues, should be taken on their own and not treated merely as failed precursors of the system of public high schools created in the 19th and 20th centuries. "While many have long since vanished, in their day these academies, founded locally or regionally, flourished and in a small way provided the country as a whole

with what is now called secondary education (Sizer, 1964, p.1)." The academies were a crucial bridge between colonial education and contemporary secondary schooling, initiating curriculum and a leap toward greater accessibility that continued in the 19th and 20th centuries with the expansion of mass education as a public institution.

# Colonial Education

Before the United States became the nation it is today, education was primarily driven by religious tendencies, to teach children to read the bible and prepare them for the ministry. In 1647, the "Old Deluder Satan Act" law was established in Massachusetts, requiring any town with 50+ families to hire a teacher and provide the children with a primary education. It is considered the first step toward public schooling, though the act was weakly enforced, parents still paid the teacher directly, and it was mainly for wealthy white males, making formal education inaccessible to most people.

The first Latin grammar school in the American colonies was founded in Boston in 1635. The curricular outcome was that students would understand and read classical Latin authors, speak Latin and Greek, and be ready for college admissions such as Harvard College. The principles of Christianity were prominent goals of study, as the Bible was required reading and students were expected to attend church regularly. Women were left out of these schools and men were admitted according to their families' social rank in the community.

By the mid-18th century, the predominant type of education and its limited distribution among the people of society seemed inadequate as the colonies started to become more organized politically and more commercially involved in trade and business. In particular, the old grammar schools with their classical approach failed to meet the needs of a growing merchant class and new roles in the occupational structure of the economy and 18th century society. As Pemberton (1978) has argued, the Latin grammar school was becoming outdated, unable to prepare students for the practical demands of a changing economy. This constraint resulted in the emergence of alternative forms of education, notably the academies.

# The Academies

The American academies offered a new form of secondary education that was more adaptable, inclusive, and practical. They were semi-private schools that filled the gap between primary school and college before the notion of government-sponsored public schools arose as the dominant form of education. The academies were practical as they taught "useful arts" like surveying, navigation, bookkeeping, and modern languages, catering to the rising middle class (Sizer, 1964). “There was more in this “preparation of life” than simply Latin, Greek, and arithmetic (p.5).” The academies moved away from the European “ways of life.”

Benjamin Franklin was one of the Founding Fathers in the American Revolution who understood that you cannot simply declare independence and hope people will know how to be citizens of the new nation. Education has the power to cultivate citizens. In 1743, Franklin wrote a proposal for establishing an academy. Six years later he published “Proposal Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania,” which was widely read in the following decades. Franklin’s vision was remarkable as he was establishing an educational foundation for living in a new kind of society three decades before independence was even declared. With donations, the Academy and Charitable School opened with a focus on practical subjects like surveying, navigation, modern languages, alongside traditional classical studies. Franklin believed that students should take a more active role in society with practical skills alongside traditional knowledge.

In a letter to his brother James, Franklin criticized the Latin schools as being "the temple of learning” where wealthy men's sons got admitted because of their status and often paid poor brilliant students to help them succeed (Pemberton, 1978). His image of the academy was to democratize education to provide opportunities for poorer students who could later qualify as schoolmasters for the common schools. By expanding educational opportunities beyond the upper class, he was expanding who could have access and be a participant in civic life. The Academy and Charitable School eventually grew to become what we know today as the University of Pennsylvania.

In his book on the academy movement, Sizer argued that the academies were a perfect reflection of the laissez-faire spirit of the 18th and early 19th centuries. This era was defined by a "brisk market" in education. If a town wanted a school, it didn't wait for the government, it started an academy. If the academy did not teach what parents wanted, it went out of business. This flexibility made academies responsive to local needs. "The academy movement, then, is not easy to label, but the general pattern—the establishment of schools offering a wide variety of subjects beyond the rudiments and organized largely on a private basis—is clearly apparent, the several exceptions notwithstanding" (Sizer, 1964, p.11). Pemberton (1978) suggested that the American academy was not just a new type of school, but a social bridge. It moved American education from a traditional model borrowed from Europe and rooted in aristocratic and religious hierarchies to a uniquely American democratic model of self-initiated community schools holding similar values.

By the mid-nineteenth century, educator Henry Barnard counted around 6,185 academies operating across the United States. Most of them were founded by groups of men as boards of trustees who saw what their communities needed and acted on it. A few of them were founded by women and community groups holding similar values outside the mainstream culture. This strong commitment to schooling laid the groundwork for building education systems in the new republic unleashed by the American Revolution. At the same time, it left open the question of how schools should be organized in a nation founded on the universal statement of human rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Further developments in education over the next two centuries and more would challenge this limitation and call for changes making greater and more equitable distribution of educational opportunity an imperative.

# Did they fail?

What happened to the academies? Did they fail and disappear? Or does their legacy still exist across different forms of schooling in the United States? The answer to these questions remains opaque, but to understand it better requires attention to who was making the argument. When writing his work, Sizer was aware that the historiography and existing literature on American education, largely written by school administrators, presented the argument about the

academies failing and being replaced by the public school system. These advocates of government-sponsored mass education were touting the victory of the public school system which they were guiding with their expertise. Sizer himself challenged this narrative as he centered the academies as an example of initiative and creativity in founding new schools. He wanted to urge educators to look back at the academies for inspiration and see how communities built those institutions. This vision later showed his own work, especially the Coalition of Essential Schools he launched in the 1980s, proposing whole-school models of reform that looked remarkably like the best independent schools in the United States.

One of the limitations in Sizer's book is that his focus was narrowed to New England academies. *Chartered Schools* (2002), co-edited by historians Nancy Beadie and Kim Tolley, provides an update to Sizer's *Age of the Academies.* If Sizer's book was the standard version of this history, Beadie and Tolley's book can be seen as revisionist history. They include essays that examine the diversity of the academy movement across communities and populations. For example, Catholic academies allowed immigrant communities to maintain their religious identity while gaining practical skills for participation in American civic and economic life. Female education in academies provided intellectual training for women for civic engagement. The co-editors argue that because these schools were independent, they allowed marginalized groups to educate themselves when the public system excluded them. This is a crucial point for understanding American civic education. The very independence that Sizer saw as a limitation, that academies couldn't serve everyone equally, was what allowed diverse communities to create their own educational opportunities.

# The Long-Term Influence

The academies established principles that remain central to debates about education and citizenship today. As part of the history of schooling in the United States, their legacy remains a source for understanding that education is an essential method for a republic government, that practical skills matter as much as classical knowledge, that educational opportunities must extend beyond elite classes, and that communities and educators should have agency in creating their own schools.

Franklin's vision remains relevant today. Republics do not sustain themselves through laws and institutions alone. Every generation must be educated into active citizenship and must learn essential skills for such participation. The American academy movement was the first systematic attempt to build this civic education infrastructure that changed education from aristocratic schools into a network of institutions with an explicitly democratic purpose. It provided a tool for cultivation of citizenship. Like the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the academy movement was a call to action and an educational moment of great importance. Those new schools offered inspiration for the new nation coming into being. They set an example that made it possible to envision schooling in every community as the nation expanded and mass education developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. For a republic committed to the practice of democracy in its founding, the academy movement is a reminder of the imperative to continue strengthening education for citizenship as a necessary component of the nation's future.

# References

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