

Paternity Test



Between Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, which Founding Father did the most—by far—to promote and shape the future of public education in America? (Hint: He also published a periodical with the same name as this one.)

By Michael Zuckerman

They all say the same thing. Even the ones who should know better. Even the ones who *do* know better. They all take Thomas Jefferson for a visionary pioneer of public education in America. Many of them take him for the very first figure of consequence in the emergence of the country's common schools.

Lawrence Cremin, the great historian of American education, declares that "it was Thomas Jefferson who first articulated the inextricable tie between education and the politics of a free society." Jefferson was, for Cremin, the founding father of the schools we take for granted today, and other eminent students of American education concur. Jonathan Messerli, biographer of Horace Mann, considers Jefferson almost the only man on this side of the Atlantic to "advance ... proposals for a comprehensive public school system" before the Massachusetts reformer did, and Carl Kaestle and Colin Greer alike attribute to Jefferson the first articulation of the "basic logic of state-sponsored schools for republican citizenship" in their respective histories of public schooling.

There is something to be said for these effusive encomia. In 1779, in his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, Jefferson declared that the best safeguard against tyranny was "to illuminate as far as practicable the minds of the people at large." The state should educate all

"at the common expense of all" rather than confide "the happiness of all" to the well-born few. Forty years later, he still held that the education of the masses was the essential thing. Between creating a system of common schools and establishing a university, he professed to prefer public schooling. "It is safer to have a whole people respectably enlightened," he said, "than a few in a high state of science, and the many in ignorance."

But, as it often did, Jefferson's writing went beyond his thinking. And, as it often did, his thinking went well beyond his actions. His politics and his performance betrayed his agile pen.

Kaestle hints at this in his acknowledgment that an 1817 bill for free primary schooling for all Virginia children cleared the lower house but died in the upper chamber at Jefferson's behest. Greer all but admits it in his wry observation that historians of education often substitute "the record of proposals and philosophies" for "actual school history." There are, then, flies in the ointment. Or, perhaps better, in the snake oil. Jefferson could not—or would not—dance to the tune he played so prettily.

Not even his failed proposal of 1779 can stand scrutiny. Had it passed, it would have provided a scant three years of elementary schooling—in little more than the three Rs—for the "free children" of Virginia. Beyond that, it would have set up 20 secondary schools around the state, each of

them offering a conventional classical curriculum to the sons of the affluent planters. Each year one boy from each elementary school would have been chosen to study, at public expense, alongside dozens of scions of privilege. But after a year, a third of that paltry cohort of scholarship boys would have been sent home. After a second year, the rest would have been sent packing as well, "save one only, the best in genius and disposition" in each secondary school, who would have been eligible to go on for four more years, solitary recipients of state support among swarms of boys who attended because their fathers could afford the tuition. "By this means," as Jefferson proudly proclaimed, "twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually."

As he grew older, Jefferson grew even more cramped in his thinking about school, and even more unabashedly elitist. In the first decade of his public life, he was merely indifferent to serious schooling for the poor and middling children of Virginia, the vast majority of the youth of the state, whom he bluntly called "rubbish." In the last decade of his life, he fought actively and ardently against the education of the children of commoners, at the one moment of his entire career when a plan for their public schooling had a chance of passage.

Jennings Wagoner's *Jefferson and Education* tells Jefferson's side of the story. But even in Wagoner's sympathetic ver-

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS SHARP

sion of the founding of the University of Virginia, it is impossible to ignore Jefferson's antipathy to the yeomen for whom he sometimes said he spoke. As a member of the board that projected the Albemarle Academy, the first incarnation of the institution that was to become the university, he dismissed out of hand the interests of those he called the "laboring classes." With them and their education, he assured his fellow trustees, "we shall have nothing to do." They would learn to read, write, and cipher and then become farmers or artisans. The academy would concern itself solely with the "learned classes." They would go on to more advanced studies and then enter "the learned professions" or become leaders in "conducting the affairs of the nation."

As Jefferson's ambitions for an academy expanded—as the Albemarle Academy became Central College became the University of Virginia—his appetite for public financing grew apace. He enlisted his friend Joseph Cabell to seek the support of the state, and specifically to secure the resources of Virginia's Literary Fund. Cabell reported that the legislature was likely to balk at Jefferson's request, since the Fund was explicitly dedicated to the education of the poor. Jefferson, undeterred, pressed Cabell to press on.

It was in the context of his campaign to raid the Literary Fund that Jefferson helped orchestrate the defeat of the proposal for a public school system in the Commonwealth. By 1817, it was widely believed that the federal government would reimburse the Old Dominion for its expenditures on national defense in the War of 1812. Once past their incredulity, state legislators agreed among themselves to put the promised repayment into the Literary Fund. Together, the money already in the Literary Fund and the windfall from Washington amounted to a million dollars, enough in 1817 to enact a comprehensive scheme of schooling for all the children of the state.

In December 1817, Charles Mercer introduced a bill in the legislature to effect exactly such a scheme. The moment could not have been more propitious for the fulfillment of Jefferson's decades of dreaming of an enlightened citizenry. Yet Jefferson did all in his power to defeat the bill. When push came to shove, when he

had to act rather than revel in rhapsodies of rhetoric, his allegiance lay wholly with his own planter class. Mercer's plan, he fumed, would "exhaust the whole funds" in establishing primary schools and leave nothing for his darling university.

At the one auspicious moment when the system of public education he professed to seek could have been secured, Jefferson resumed his old endeavor to found a university. As he did, he abandoned the cause of public education. He fought for its defeat in the assembly, and he did everything in his power to divert funds designed for commoners to the creation of his college. He was shameless in his assaults on the Literary Fund. He was more shameless still in his determination to seize money appropriated for counties in support of pauper schools. Without a twinge of embarrassment or even of ambivalence, he played the part of Robin Hood in reverse. He stole from the poor to pay for the prerogatives of the rich.

Yet the myth of Jefferson's democratic devotion to the cause of common schooling persists. It is the nature of myths to be invincible, or at any rate to rise invincibly above their contradictions.

In fact, there is a Founding Father who can be invoked as a visionary exponent of popular education. But that Founder is not Jefferson.

Almost 70 years before Jefferson began formulating his plans for Albemarle Academy, Benjamin Franklin published his own proposals for an academy in Philadelphia. Where Jefferson envisioned an academy teaching a traditional curriculum that conferred gentility on the sons of the wealthy and wellborn, Franklin projected one providing an extraordinary array of instruction to prepare students for all the "professions" in which they might find themselves. Where Jefferson's academy would have had nothing whatever to do with the "laboring classes," consigning them to their fates as farmers and artisans, Franklin's academy would have welcomed those of its students destined for commerce and "handicrafts."

Franklin foresaw that a subject such as natural history would aid students who aimed to be merchants "to understand many commodities, drugs, etc." and those

who aimed to be artisans "to improve [their] trade or handicraft by new mixtures, material, etc." In the curriculum that he envisioned, students would have worked with their hands as well as their heads and improved their bodies as well as their minds. They would have learned by doing as well as by classroom study.

In Franklin's capacious conception of his academy, students would have had "apparatus for experiments in natural philosophy and for mechanics." They would have been "taught to write with a fair hand," and they would have "learnt something of drawing." They would have declaimed and debated, and they would have been "frequently exercised in running, leaping, wrestling, and swimming." They would have worked at "gardening, planting, grafting, inoculating, etc.," not only in classes but also on "excursions" to nearby fields "of the best farmers." As far as Franklin was concerned, "the improvement of agriculture" was "useful to all" and "skill in it no disparagement to any."

If departures from the classical curriculum self-consciously colored Franklin's imagination of the academy that became, a few years later, the College of Philadelphia, they utterly dominated his imagination of "the English school" that he projected at the same time. In that plan, he scarcely even gestured at gentility. As he proclaimed in the very name of the school, he would have had it disdain to teach the learned languages entirely. He aimed to fit the youth who attended it "for learning any business, calling, or profession except such wherein languages are required." Its graduates would leave "unacquainted with any ancient or foreign tongue" but "masters of their own." And through the last four years of its six-year sequence of study, they would also have mastered "natural and mechanic history," since "next to the knowledge of duty, this kind of knowledge [was for Franklin] the most useful as well as the most entertaining." The student who meant to become a merchant would "better ... understand many commodities in trade." The one who hoped to become a "handicraftsman" would "improve his business by new instruments, mixtures, and materials."

Jefferson did flirt for a moment with such concern for the common pursuits of

common people. In his initial design, his academy included a school of technical philosophy that would have offered evening lectures on practical subjects to local laborers. But he never developed a plan for the school in any detail, and he forgot about it almost as soon as he conceived it. He was simply not serious about educating the yeomen masses whom he had once called “the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people.”

Franklin was always too serious to fantasize idly or mistake generous words for generous deeds. Even in his last years, as he worked intermittently on the memoir in which he fashioned the image of himself by which he wished to be known, he identified as much with the lowly lad he had been as with the accomplished scientist and civic leader he had become.

Though he had just two years of elementary schooling and wore the leather apron of the working class for several decades, Franklin had a healthy appreciation of his own talents. And he knew better than to scorn the aptitudes of others who did or were destined for manual labor.

Indeed, from his first writings, Franklin chafed at elite assumptions of the intellectual incompetence of commoners. He devoted the earliest of the substantive Silence Dogood Papers in its entirety to a denunciation of Harvard College, where he saw admission determined “by two sturdy porters named Riches and Poverty.” The latter “obstinately refused to give entrance to any who had not first gained the favor of the former.” And since attendance at the college thus depended on the parents’ “purses” rather than the “children’s capacities,” “the most part” of those who studied there were “little better than dunces and blockheads.” They spent their college years learning “little more than how to carry themselves handsomely and enter a room genteelly.” They graduated “as great blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited.” Franklin’s criticism surely reflected the disappointment of his own hopes of a Harvard education. But he got over his exclusion from the company of the “idle” and “ignorant” easily enough. And once he was in a position to promote an education reflective of his own values, he invariably conceived schools that would serve the learning of the low and the middling rather than the pride of the high and the mighty.

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From the first, Franklin could also conceive the schooling of females. He took up the topic in his very next Silence Dogood Paper. Two weeks after he disparaged Harvard, he decried “one of the most barbarous customs in the world ... that we deny the advantages of learning to women.” Why, he demanded, were girls taught only “to stitch and sew, or make baubles”? Why was it “the height of a woman’s education” to read and “perhaps” to write her name? “What has the woman done to forfeit the privilege of being taught? Does she plague us with her pride and impertinence? Why did we not let her learn, that she might have had more wit?” Barely advanced beyond his 16th birthday, Franklin already felt that the denial of more liberal instruction to girls accounted for much of the “folly” with which “we reproach the sex.” Had they “the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less [folly] than ourselves.”

In all his life, Jefferson never approached the appreciation of female intellectual potential, or the value of cultivating it, that Franklin had already achieved in his adolescence. For Jefferson, women were always “the weaker sex.” Nature had marked them merely for “protection.” As he told Nathaniel Burwell near the end of his life, “a plan of female education” had never been “a subject of [his] systematic contemplation.” The education of girls “occupied my attention only as the education of my own daughters occasionally required.”

Jefferson did not speak carelessly or casually when he confessed that even the education of his own daughters engaged him only occasionally. In 1783, he wrote to his eldest, 11-year-old Martha, presenting her with a schedule for “the distribution of her time.” From eight to

10 in the morning, she was to “practice music.” From 10 to one in the afternoon, she was to “draw one day and dance another.” From one to two, she was to draw on the day she danced and “write a letter” on the other. From three to four she was to “read French,” from four to five “exercise [her] self in music,” and from five to bedtime “read English, write, &c.” In short, she was to read, write, and otherwise occupy herself with the very trifles of decorative femininity that Franklin, barely beyond boyhood, already recognized as a dismaying waste of female intellect.

As a father himself, Franklin did not push his beloved daughter Sally toward strenuous learning much more than Jefferson pushed Martha, though he did urge her “to acquire those useful accomplishments arithmetic and book-keeping.” But as an older brother and especially as a faux father to younger females, he was a more demanding—and encouraging—mentor. He discussed theology with his sister Jane and begged her to read Jonathan Edwards. He sent books to his friend Catharine Ray. He assumed as ambitious a responsibility for the advanced education of Mary Stevenson, the daughter of his landlady in London, as any 18th-century parent did for the tutelage of a son.

Take the letter he wrote to Mary Stevenson on September 13, 1760. In it, he ranged over the theory of heat, scientific method, river tides and wave motions, gravity, currents, and more. At the end of it, he thought to finish his letter “in the mode” by concluding with a compliment. And then he thought better of it. “6 folio pages of philosophy to a young girl!” was, he decided, “of itself a compliment.” It said that she had

“a mind thirsty after knowledge, and capable of receiving it, and that the most agreeable things one can write to her are those that tend to the improvement of her understanding.”

The simple truth of the matter was that Franklin enjoyed the company of women as Jefferson never did. He engaged them flirtatiously, as Jefferson scarcely dared to do, and he engaged them intellectually, as Jefferson scarcely dreamed of doing. As Walter Isaacson noted in his 2003 biography, Franklin formed few intimate bonds with his male friends but “relished being with women” and “formed deep and lasting relationships with many.” Over the course of his life, he lost many male friends but “never ... a female one.”

Franklin also came to be convinced, long before the colonies claimed their independence, that African Americans had as much capacity for schooling as European Americans did. How he came to that conviction is a long and winding story, and it does not end at the point of his conversion. But it is a story utterly at odds with any that can be told of Jefferson.

Jefferson’s aspersions on African capacity for education and indeed for civilization are now as notorious as they are noxious. His gratuitous inventory of black deficiencies marked the dawn of scientific racism in America. Dichotomizing “the blacks” and “the whites,” he drew one invidious distinction after another. Blacks were incapable of “forethought.” Their griefs were merely “transient,” their afflictions “less felt” and “sooner forgotten.” Their existence had in it “more of sensation than reflection.” Compared to whites, they were “in reason much inferior” and “in imagination ... dull [and] tasteless.” Among them there was “no poetry.” Not a one of them had ever “uttered a thought above the level of plain narration.” Jefferson admitted that it was “right” to “make great allowances for the difference of condition” of blacks and whites. But he devoted himself to discounting the difference rather than developing it.

Just as Jefferson’s misogyny makes his ideas and ideals of female education useless to us, so his racism makes his ideas and ideals of minority education worth-

less to us and worse. He could not bring himself to grant African Americans any “rights of will” or to consider them any more capable than “children of taking care of themselves.” And he could not contemplate a prospect of whites living together with blacks in any relation other than as masters and slaves. Were those in bondage to be freed, they would have to be deported. Coexistence was never, in his mind, a feasible alternative to colonization. If emancipated slaves were not “removed beyond the reach of mixture,” their presence would “produce convulsions” that would “never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.”

Franklin never harbored such homicidal racist fantasies. He did hold slaves, and he did take for granted the lesser aptitude for learning of African Americans. But he always insisted on the relativity of cultural norms. He reminded his countrymen that “we” call others savages “because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility,” but that “they think the same of theirs.”

He did not doubt that he had preferences, but he did not pride himself on his prejudices. In fact, he tried—far more successfully than most—to overcome them. He conquered his initial antipathy to the German immigrants he once scorned as “Palatine boors” and wound up working closely with them in politics. He knew that partiality to one’s own “is natural to mankind,” but he tried to wean himself from it. He reveled in the endlessness of education.

Franklin’s education in the educability of black youth began in 1757, when his wife and a Philadelphia clergyman enticed his interest in the Associates of Dr. Bray. Dr. Bray was an Anglican cleric. His organization, based in London, had been sending books and catechists to America since 1724, in an unavailing effort to promote education and conversion among slaves in the colonies. After three decades of desultory accomplishment, the Associates were ready to try another approach. Thinking to organize formal Negro schools in the New World, they turned to Franklin for assistance.

Franklin was enthusiastic. He knew that, “at present, few or none give their Negro children any schooling, partly from a prejudice that reading and

knowledge in a slave are both useless and dangerous” and partly because no schoolmaster would “take black scholars, lest the parents of the white children in the school should be disgusted and take them away.” Franklin was willing to brave the hostility of his fellow Philadelphians. He persuaded the Associates that “a separate school for blacks” would afford slave children the education otherwise denied them, and by the spring of 1758 he had secured funding for a school in Philadelphia that opened the following fall. That school was such a success that the Associates approved three more a year later, soliciting and accepting Franklin’s advice on where to establish them and whom to appoint as superintendents in each place. All of them lasted to the eve of the Revolution, and the Philadelphia school, for which Franklin secured a substantial endowment, reopened after the Revolution with Franklin and a friend in charge.

But the real transformation in Franklin’s views did not occur until he returned to Philadelphia and visited the Negro school in 1763. Observing the progress of the black boys and girls, he wrote to John Waring that he “was on the whole much pleased.” He did not simply come to hold “a higher opinion of the natural capacities of the black race than [he] had ever before entertained.” He actually came to conceive “their apprehension ... as quick, their memory as strong, and their docility in every respect equal to that of white children.” When he reported what he made of what he had seen to the Associates, he had a sense that they would not be as impressed as he was by his newfound conviction of the parity of black and white aptitudes. He suspected that they would “wonder perhaps” at his original doubts of the potential of their black pupils more than at his recent conversion. In his extenuation, he knew he had little to offer. “I will not undertake to justify all my prejudices,” he wrote, “nor to account for them.”

Some scholars have hailed Franklin’s outspoken leadership of American abolitionism in the last years of his life. Others have been more reserved, emphasizing that it was only then that he came round to the cause. But the visit

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to the Negro school, 25 years before his assumption of the presidency of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, was the turning point. Within less than a decade of that revelatory day, he was “act[ing] in concert in the affair of slavery” with Granville Sharpe and Anthony Benezet, the very vanguard of the intrepid little band that would one day bring down slavery in the British Empire. Years before he gave up hope of reconciliation between Britain and its rebellious colonies, at a time when he still hoped to play a moderating role in the imperial crisis, Franklin had become a radical in his opposition to slavery. Benezet referred to him in 1772 as his “real friend and fellow traveler on a dangerous and heavy road.”

Liberal Britons congratulated themselves on the Somerset case, which outlawed slavery in England. Franklin expressed his impatience with the trifling effect of the celebrated decision. While it reached a handful of slaves at home, it left untouched almost a million men, women, and children in bondage in British colonies and another hundred thousand arriving in the slave trade every year. Even if nothing could be done to free the poor souls already snared in slavery, at least a law could be passed “for abolishing the African commerce in slaves and declaring the children of present slaves free after they become of age.” More than that, he posed questions that would still be asked by none but extremists for another half-century. “Can sweetening our tea &c. with sugar be a

circumstance of such absolute necessity” as to justify slavery? “Can the petty pleasure thence arising to the taste compensate for so much misery produced among our fellow creatures and such a constant butchery of the human species by this pestilential, detestable traffic in the bodies and souls of men?”

Franklin addressed this scathing rhetoric to his American countrymen as much as to his mother country. He saw and said that colonists who demanded liberty for themselves and enslaved others were hypocrites. He wrote that the rebels had to “get clear of a practice that disgraces them.” In 1773 he went out of his way to visit the enslaved American poet Phillis Wheatley in London and to offer her “any services [he] could do for her,” despite the disapproval of her American master. A decade later, Thomas Jefferson, disdainful even to spell Wheatley’s name right, would dismiss her work—the first American poetry ever to receive the metropolitan recognition of publication in London—as “below the dignity of criticism.”

In his last years, Franklin would devote much of his time and energy to abolition. He would write and sign the first remonstrance against slavery ever addressed to the new American Congress, and when the Congress disavowed authority to interfere in the internal affairs of states, he would petition once more. He would forgive a debt owed him by his son-in-law in return for the manumission of the son-in-law’s slave, thereby purchasing the freedom of that slave. He would dedicate his last public writing to a satirical assault on slavery.

But his efforts on behalf of blacks were not a belated effort to make right a lifetime of wrong. For more than three decades, he had done more to promote the enlightenment and uplift of African Americans than all but a handful of the most heroic abolitionists. Time after time, he had risked a reputation of which he was inordinately protective in order to do justice. And though his commitment had grown incrementally over the years, it had formed most profoundly on his visit to the Negro school and his realization there that black boys and girls were as educable as anyone else.

Franklin’s mid-18th-century proposals for the education of youth in Pennsylvania were more innovative by far than Jefferson’s design for higher learning in Virginia many decades later. As Charles and Mary Beard wrote, in *The Rise of American Civilization*, Franklin’s idea of a university not only “anticipated the most enlightened program evolved by the liberal university of the late nineteenth century” but also “stands out like a beacon light in the long history of human intelligence.”

But Franklin attended to much more than the education of the privileged few. He also wrestled conscientiously and creatively with educational issues that perplex and preoccupy us to this day, issues of class, gender, and race about which Jefferson has nothing to tell us except to mark the distance we have traveled from his failures of intelligence and fellow-feeling.

Of all the Founding Fathers, perhaps only Benjamin Rush was Franklin’s equal as an educational thinker. Certainly no one was his superior. No one was any more far-thinking or visionary than he, or any more humane and generous, or any more insightful and illuminating on the questions that still concern us most. ♦

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