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**The Complexities Found, as Well as Insights Gained, From
the Identification of a Birthplace of Free Public Education:
The Case of Rehoboth, Massachusetts**

By

Kelly Ann Kolodny

The debate over when and where free public education began in the United States continues to demand attention. Understandably, this is a complicated debate that entails reflection on what free public education means, consideration of how one could identify the birth of this activity, and difference of opinions regarding who should be credited for this large, powerful and conflicted undertaking. In the midst of this deliberation, rest communities which claim to hold the credit to be the birthplace of free public education, one of which is the small agricultural town of Rehoboth, Massachusetts. Though such community claims often are dismissed as celebratory in nature, there are important reasons to warrant their consideration. For example, an examination of the historical circumstances of a community with claims to be the birthplace of free public education, such as Rehoboth, provides important insights into educational history, as it illuminates with background and color accounts of the past (in this case accounts which have roots in the colonial era), specifically through the introduction of local characters and circumstances. Likewise, while examining the complications that surround a community's perception to be the origin of free public education in the United States, insights into early efforts of education also are gained, as well as information about how certain wider practices and ideologies largely flourished. In this article, the claim of Rehoboth to be the birthplace of free public education is, therefore, examined. It

begins with an analysis of the term free public education, proceeds with a brief review of the colonization and development of this community, thereafter an exploration of the reasons for the claim that Rehoboth is the birthplace of public education is undertaken, the context of the colonial era is discussed and then the challenges to Rehoboth's claim are reviewed in detail.

"Free public education" is an intricate concept to define. The term "free," for example, has wide-ranging meanings. It suggests that schooling is unhindered and voluntary. Perceptions of schooling experiences such as those advocated by A.S. Neill, who believed in freedom for children, might be called to mind.¹ He believed that children should be free to learn who they are and where their interests lie in a self-governing, democratic community. Alternatively, the term free might take a different meaning and indicate that a cost is not associated with participation in an endeavor such as schooling. One is able to take part without having to pay a fee. Such undertakings might be funded through alternative venues, such as taxation.

The term "public," also holds diverse connotations and significance. It could suggest something that is generally known, as in a public sense. It might be publicly known that there are appropriate standards of conduct that guide behavior in particular situations. Conversely, public might imply that an experience is open and unrestricted to a community. In the United States, this would suggest that all individuals would be able to participate in an experience such as education, regardless of background.

"Education" also is an idea that is associated with broad meanings. Gerald L. Gutek writes that the word education "refers very broadly to the total social processes that bring a person into cultural life."² Education might be associated with the day to day experiences that an individual learns in order to survive and thrive in society. It is the

¹ A. S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (London: Hart Publishing Company, 1960).

² Gerald L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives on Education* Second Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 4-5.

transmission of culture from generation to generation.³ For others, however, education takes a different meaning and is closely linked to a formal schooling experience. School is “led by teachers who are regarded as experts in the learning process.”⁴

The term “free public education” understandably is difficult to define. Each concept in the term brings forth diverse ideas and meanings. Whereas free public education might be associated with broad enculturation processes of individuals, in the United States it often is connected with formal schooling experiences that are open to all students, compulsory until specific ages, and funded through taxation. Some would suggest that this is the type of schooling experience that is intended to function in the United States in the contemporary context.

Due to the complexities that surround the term free public education, it is reasonable to assume that the identification of a community as a birthplace of free public education would be difficult to identify. For example, one might wonder what guidelines a community would utilize to claim that it is the birthplace of free public education. Nonetheless, though this may seem like a difficult task to determine, it has been an area of speculation and/or claim for institutions and communities in the United States, one of which is the town of Rehoboth, Massachusetts.

Rehoboth, Massachusetts is considered to be one of the older towns in the United States, said to be formally founded in 1643 by a Puritan, the Reverend Samuel Newman, who came with his flock from Weymouth, Massachusetts to a place on the east bank of the Pawtucket River in the colony, referred to as “Seekonk” by the Native Americans. There Reverend Newman joined with others from Hingham, some of whom had lived in the Rehoboth area since 1641. Local histories suggest that Reverend Newman surveyed the land and with gratitude

³ Richard J. Altenbaugh, *The American People and Their Education: A Social History* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), 4; Madonna M. Murphy, *The History and Philosophy of Education: Voices of Educational Pioneers* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2006), 1; Timothy Reagan, *Non-western Educational Traditions: Alternative Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice* Second Edition (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), xiii.

⁴ Gutek, 5.

called the area Rehoboth (quoting Genesis 26:22). He said, "For now the Lord hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." Henceforth, the area was referred to as Rehoboth by colonists.⁵

Prior to the colonization of this land, the area was home to diverse Native American groups. Several archeological digs conducted in and nearby the town, as well as undocumented surface findings, revealed that the earliest Native American groups occupied land in Rehoboth since 10,500 B.C.E.⁶ Known as the Paleo-Indians to archeologists, these early inhabitants were nomadic and wandered New England in small bands of four or five families following herds of animals. The geography, which was different at that time due to retreating ice glaciers, consisted of tundra flora followed by an evergreen forest.

In the seventeenth century, closer to the time of the arrival of the Puritans, the geography and vegetation growth of the area had changed drastically due to a warming climate. The area was occupied by the Wampanoag tribe during a period known as the end of the Ceramic-Woodland Indian Period. The Wampanoags, like the other local tribes such as the Narragansetts, Pequots, and Mohegans, shared the Eastern Algonquin tongue, though there were differences of dialect that evolved in the tribes.⁷ They resided in horticultural villages, lived in wigwams, cultivated maize, and practiced the storage of food for winter months.⁸ It was the Wampanoags with whom the first European settlers of Rehoboth came into contact.

⁵ Sylvanus Chase Newman, *Rehoboth in the Past: An Historical Oration Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1860* (Pawtucket: Robert Sherman, 1860), 15.; Leonard Bliss, *The History of Rehoboth, Bristol County, Massachusetts: Comprising a History of the Present Towns of Rehoboth, Seekonk, and Pawtucket From Their Settlement to the Present Time Together with Sketches of Attleborough, Cumberland, and a Part of Swansea and Barrington* (Boston: Otis, Broaders, and Company, 1836), 21-27.

⁶ Charles Robinson, *Asleep Beneath the Meadows: The Indian Archeology of Rehoboth, Massachusetts* (Providence: Universal Press, 1992), 1-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-45.

The name of Rehoboth (produced by European colonists) first appeared in written town reports and accounts in 1645. It was at that time that the community was recognized formally as a town by Plymouth Colony.⁹ However, local histories suggest that the land had been explored and perhaps lived on by European settlers even prior to Reverend Newman and his congregation. William Blackstone, for example, was an initial European settler on land in the Boston area and then later in Seekonk (later renamed Rehoboth).¹⁰ Roger Williams also obtained a verbal grant of land in Rehoboth in 1636 from Osamequin, after Williams was banished from Salem.¹¹ Osamequin was the Chief of the Wampanoag Tribe at the time of the arrival of the Puritans in Plymouth.

Celebratory accounts of the founding of the town suggest that it was established during an epoch making era in America. This thought is suggestive of an idea that the colonists (the Puritans) were building a society, perhaps a city on a hill in a land of wilderness.¹² The Puritan founders, likewise, were interested in building a body of laws that would give “effect to their ideas with respect to religion, government and the arrangement of social classes.”¹³ Ultimately, they were to create a good society, a covenant, which would win God’s approval.

During the seventeenth century and thereafter, Rehoboth largely functioned as an agricultural community. Forests were cut, land cleared and crops planted.¹⁴ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, farms flourished, dairies opened and livestock were raised in Rehoboth.

⁹ Bliss, 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2-8.

¹¹ Bliss, 17; Robert Trim, *Rehoboth 325th Anniversary* (1968), 12-13.

¹² Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 26.

¹³ Newton Edwards and Herman G. Richey, *The School in the American Social Order* Second Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), 49-50.

¹⁴ Trim, 61.

Rehoboth residents, like other settlers in Massachusetts, peacefully cohabitated with the Native Americans during a substantial portion of the seventeenth century. This peace lasted nearly fifty years.¹⁵ However, warfare eventually occurred. Part of the reason for this warfare related to conflict over land. Whereas the Native Americans held land communally, the colonists sought private ownership of land. Questionable land transactions took place. The colonists also sought to convert Native Americans to their particular cultural beliefs. For these reasons, tensions escalated and conflict and violence ensued, such as that seen in King Philip's War. The Native American population, including the Wampanoag Tribe, eventually was reduced. Disease, such as smallpox, also reduced the Native American population. The quickness with which the disease spread suggested that tribes, such as the Wampanoag Tribe, had no immunity and had not been previously exposed.¹⁶

Thereafter, the growth, development and historical circumstances of the town of Rehoboth reflect the colonization by English Puritans and thereafter by other immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italian and Portuguese. Since the initial colonization of the town in the seventeenth century, the land of Rehoboth has grown, as well as been redistributed. Rehoboth, in its greatest extent, included the towns of Seekonk and Attleborough, Massachusetts, Pawtucket, East Providence and Cumberland, Rhode Island, as well as parts of Swansea, Massachusetts and Barrington, Rhode Island. The first purchase was recorded to be made from the Massassoit in 1641, and included eight square miles. The second and third purchases were thereafter made. This land was overseen by Plymouth Colony. Over time, the town was redistributed and separate towns incorporated. Attleborough first was separated and incorporated in 1694. Attleborough thereafter was divided and Cumberland became its own town. In 1812, Seekonk became a separate township from Rehoboth, assuming its original Native American name. In 1828, Pawtucket separated from Seekonk.¹⁷

¹⁵ James Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love and Death in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 11, 24.

¹⁶ Robinson, 68.

¹⁷ Bliss, 1-2.

Town residents and members of a stable antiquarian society have documented the history of Rehoboth with some consistency. Local histories and newspaper articles have been written that call attention to historical events. For example, there was an iron works in the town in the eighteenth century that utilized a substance from the local swamps to produce iron, for which information was written.¹⁸ Cotton mills also operated in Rehoboth in the nineteenth century in which number 12 yarn was manufactured. This, too, was documented in town publications.¹⁹ This history reflects the context of a small agricultural town.

The celebrated significance of Rehoboth, however, does not rest with the idea that it's an old agricultural town with some interesting history. Indeed, a celebrated attraction is that the town also is the birthplace of free public education. The establishment of free education for community members was cited to be one of the first important acts of the town. Townspeople of Rehoboth asserted that the early English colonists (the Puritans) made provisions for free public education in 1643, four years before the Old Deluder Satan Law was passed in 1647. The Old Deluder Satan Law is considered by some educational historians to be a ruling that planted the seeds for free public schooling of children in the United States. It required every town of fifty or more households to make provision for reading and writing of children. If towns grew to one hundred households, they were to establish grammar schools.²⁰ The Puritans believed that "Old Deluder Satan" was "abroad in New England and would thwart the salvation of as many souls as possible, even those of the children of the covenant."²¹ Education which would emphasize the regeneration of the

¹⁸ James Johnston and E. Otis Dyer, Jr., "The Palmer River Iron Works," *The Rehoboth Reporter*, July/August 2000, 4A-8A.

¹⁹ Trim, 67.

²⁰ Tony W. Johnson, *Historical Documents in American Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), 7; Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 17-18.

²¹ N. Ray Hiner, "The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into: Educational Analysis in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *The Social History of American*

Puritans, thus, was necessary. Some educational historians have linked one of the Puritan's significant contributions to education to the 1647 ruling. Indeed, some educational historians viewed this act to function as a cornerstone of the American state school systems.²² Yet, it is claimed that Rehoboth proprietors made provisions for education by taxation beforehand in 1643, thus suggesting to some that the town is the birthplace of free public education. The Rehoboth 325th Anniversary booklet reported:

At that time, Rehoboth was made up of what is now known as East Providence, Seekonk and Rehoboth. Prior to this time, it had been the custom in this country as well as in Europe for parents to finance the schooling of their children. At the second meeting of the proprietors of Rehoboth, in 1643, it was voted that the schoolmaster was to have a certain portion from each settler and in all land allotments, and a lot to the value of fifty pounds was to be reserved for the schoolmaster. Four years after Rehoboth placed in law this right of public education by taxation, the Massachusetts Bay Colony did likewise.²³

This suggests that Rehoboth was the first New England community to formally tax inhabitants to provide for free education.

Prior to the publication of this Rehoboth anniversary booklet, this historic claim may be traced back to a history book written in 1918 by Reverend George H. Tilton.²⁴ It is then further traced back to another history book written in 1836 by Leonard Bliss, Jr. Bliss indicated in his book that when he compiled the history of the town of Rehoboth, he worked with original materials.

Education, eds. B. Edward McClellan and William J. Reese (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 3.

²² Edwards and Richey, 48.

²³ Trim, 52.

²⁴ George H. Tilton, *A History of Rehoboth, Massachusetts: It's History for 275 Years 1643-1918* (Boston: Tilton, 1918).

The sources from which the materials for this history have been drawn, are faithfully referred to throughout the whole work. It should here be remarked, that the records of the old town of Rehoboth, commencing in 1643, are still extant; and, though in hand writing, very difficult to decipher, and sometimes almost illegible, they afforded very abundant materials for the earlier part of our history. From these very copious extracts have been made, which are marked with quotations. In all of these the exact language of the original has been preserved, and in some case the orthography; that the events of olden time might be presented to the reader in their own native costume.²⁵

Local newspaper reports also have drawn attention to the claim that Rehoboth is the birthplace of free education in the United States. For example, the *Providence Sunday Journal* on November 8, 1964 printed one such article entitled "Rehoboth: Birthplace of Free Education." In this article, it was noted that Rehoboth held a strong legacy in the field of education.

School bells throughout the country will begin ringing tomorrow in commemoration of American Education Week. In Rehoboth, Massachusetts the bells will ring especially loud and proudly. There, more than 300 years ago, free public education in America probably had its beginning. Tomorrow when millions of youngsters across the land trudge off to school, they may thank, in part, those original planners of Rehoboth who voted in their first meeting on Dec. 10, 1643, that "the teacher should have a certain portion from each settler" thus making the first provision on record for free, public schools by taxation. The authority for this little known fact is the Rev. George H. Tilton who in 1918 published a history of the Town of Rehoboth based in

²⁵ Bliss, iv-v.

part upon another history written in 1836 by Leonard Bliss, Jr.²⁶

The *Taunton Daily Gazette* also printed an article (a copy of a Rehoboth program written in celebration of the town) in 1894 entitled “Rehoboth: The Old Town’s Celebration.” In this article, the claim that Rehoboth is the birthplace of public education also is addressed.

But Rehoboth’s chief glory is that its founders, with due credit to their Oxford and Cambridge training, originated one institution without which the experiment of a free government on this continent must have proved a failure. It was nothing less than the free public school; the idea of a free, universal, compulsory education, maintained by the taxation of citizens.²⁷

This article also suggests that the origins of public education may be found in the Rehoboth law of 1643, though it is noted in the larger article that other towns also competed for this claim. This article also suggests that the 1643 law, in addition to providing free public education, was a forward motion for universal and compulsory education, though compulsory school attendance was not put into place until the nineteenth century.

Most recently Rehoboth’s claim was revisited in *The Boston Sunday Globe* in November 2005. This particular article was titled “Schools Vie For Honor of Being the Oldest: Several Lay Claim to Birth of Education” and suggested that several Massachusetts towns,

²⁶ Andrew B. Burkhardt, “Rehoboth: Birthplace of Free Education: Town Lays Claim to First Public Schools in America,” *The Providence Sunday Journal*, 8 November 1964, N45.

²⁷ “Rehoboth: The Old Town’s Celebration,” *The Taunton Daily Gazette*, 3 October 1894, 5.

including Boston, Dedham and Rehoboth, claim to be the birthplace of public education.²⁸

Bliss, who appears to have transcribed Rehoboth's original record, summarized it as follows:

The next meeting of the proprietors was held at Weymouth, the 10th day of the 10th month [December,] when regulations were made as to the planting of corn. The teacher to have a certain portion from each settler. Servants, after four years, to be inhabitants, and entitled to their privileges. Richard Wright employed to build a corn mill.²⁹

It is from Bliss that it is learned that the original record indicated that "the teacher was to have a certain portion from each settler." Bliss also recorded how lands granted by the Court of Plymouth to the town in 1643 were divided at that time, according to person and estate. What is learned from this list is that land allotments were included for townspeople and the pastor, as well as a teacher and schoolmaster.³⁰ This is important to consider in Rehoboth's claim, because during this time pastors and teachers functioned in roles that existed for religious purposes. The pastor preached sermons and handled pastoral concerns, while the teacher taught the Bible and doctrine. The idea that land was set aside for a teacher and a schoolmaster may suggest that the schoolmaster functioned in a more secular sense. Indeed, Hiner suggested that schools were expected to assist with religious matters, but they also were facilitated to teach children to read and write, as well as cultivate civility.³¹ Though there is speculation about the

²⁸ Maria Sacchetti. "Schools Vie For Honor of Being the Oldest: Several Lay Claim to Birth of Education," *The Boston Sunday Globe*, 27 November 2005, B1, B7.

²⁹ Bliss, 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

³¹ Hiner, "The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into," 9-10.

proprieters' distinction between teacher and schoolmaster, it is known that tax was put in place for the maintenance of a teacher who would provide educational services. The taxation to support a teacher is the foundation of Rehoboth's claim to be the birthplace of public education.

To develop a stronger background of how and why the town of Rehoboth developed this law in 1643, the context of the time is explored as well as some of the specific undertakings in Rehoboth. Thereafter, the challenges to Rehoboth's claim are addressed, which subsequently offers insight into educational history of this time.

The Puritans immigrated to New England with the intent that they were to create a model religious commonwealth in the New England wilderness.³² Though the colonists initially experienced difficult circumstances, a diversity of New England settlements and colonies, such as Plymouth Colony and eventually Rehoboth, gradually were established and governed. John Higginson, a seventeenth century Puritan, who wrote an attestation to Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana: the Ecclesiastical History of New England, From its First Planting, in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of Our Lord 1698*, summarized this undertaking, albeit in the sacred and celebratory approach that was more common at that time.

It hath been deservedly esteemed one of the great and wonderful works of God in this last age, that the Lord stirred up the spirits of so many thousands of his servants, to leave the pleasant land of England, the land of their nativity, and to transport themselves, and families, over ocean sea, into a desert land in America, at the distance of a thousand leagues from their own country; and this merely on the account of pure and

³² Lawrence A. Cremin, *Traditions of American Education* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 10; Douglas McKnight, *Schooling, the Puritan Imperative, and the Molding of an American National Identity: Education's "Errand into the Wilderness"* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 24; Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old & New England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 21-23.

undefiled Religion, not knowing how they should have their daily bread, but trusting in God for that, in the way of seeking first the kingdom of God, and the righteousness thereof: And that the Lord was pleased to grant such a gracious presence of his with them, and such a blessing upon their undertakings, that within a few years, a wilderness was subdued before them, and so many colonies planted, towns erected, and churches settled.³³

One common perception about the Puritans is that overall they were an educated and literate group. Morison noted that at least one hundred and thirty university educated men (Oxford and Cambridge alumni) came to New England prior to 1646. This meant that there was an average of one university-trained man for every forty or fifty New England families. In addition, there were a large number of men who also had a classical education in an English grammar school.³⁴

Puritan education in New England initially consisted of apprenticeship, literacy activities and religious learning. Apprenticeship was necessary for the Puritans because it prepared an individual for a function for which God had suited him/her.³⁵ Literacy was critical for the Puritans because it provided the means to read and study the Bible. Reading and study of the Bible likewise was imperative because it allowed one to interpret the written word, “instead of passively receiving the word as a mysterious missive delivered by a priest.”³⁶ For the Puritans, the learning experience was perceived not to be an end in itself, but a means to Godly utility. It led one to share in the covenant of Grace.

³³ John Higginson, attestation to *Magnalia Christi Americana or the Ecclesiastical History of New England* (Hartford: Silas Andrus, 1820).

³⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England* Second Edition (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956), 17-18.

³⁵ John Morgan, *Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes Towards Reason, Learning and Education, 1560-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 147.

³⁶ McKnight, 15.

The education of Puritans in New England initially occurred in family settings, as well as in the Church. Cremin proposed that the family provided the young “their earliest ideas about the world and how they ought to believe and behave in it.”³⁷ A pedagogy of apprenticeship functioned in the household, as well as at times tutoring and communal devotion.³⁸ The Church, a congregation of families, also took part in teachings that were approved by clergy. Formal schooling eventually followed.

Puritans expected their ministers to be learned individuals, and to draw upon their studies when engaged in ministerial work such as when delivering sermons. Morgan noted, it was “argued that it was better to have a few good (learned) ministers than a`great many evil’ (unlearned).”³⁹ And indeed, ministers typically were educated and spent time involved in their studies. In their relocation to New England, early Puritan ministers brought books with them on immigrant ships, imported books from Europe and circulated volumes among friends.⁴⁰

Ministers, elected by their congregations, held a special status in the community, viewed by some to be special intermediaries between God and the congregation.⁴¹ Proper preaching by ministers was considered a central component of religious learning. Proper preaching helped congregation members, young and old, move towards God’s salvation. The Puritans were Calvinists and they believed in predestination (believing that some individuals were predestined to be God’s chosen people, while others were not).⁴² The world was built to

³⁷ Cremin, 12.

³⁸ Cubberley, 15.

³⁹ Morgan, 97.

⁴⁰ David Cressy, *Coming Over: Migration and Communication Between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 234.

⁴¹ Morgan, 84, 97.

⁴² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

glorify God, and some were selected to be a part of this experience. The Puritans believed that it was necessary to have faith and believe that they were the chosen ones.⁴³ In this process, Puritans were to work to the best of their ability at whatever task was set before them, partake of the good things that God filled the world with, and keep their attention fixed on God.⁴⁴ Schools which were established during this time functioned as a “handmaiden of the church.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, education was the responsibility of the Church, which initially took a Congregational focus in New England.

The founding members of Rehoboth included a group of approximately fifty-eight men and their families.⁴⁶ As previously stated, some of these families were from Hingham, Massachusetts and others came from Reverend Samuel’s congregation of Weymouth, Massachusetts. The groups joined and set plans to develop the Rehoboth plantation in 1643. The Reverend Samuel Newman, who was the leader of this group, had a strong educational background that helped him to carry out his leadership role. Born at that start of the seventeenth century (perhaps May 1602), he was the son of Richard Newman, a man who worked as a distributor of leather articles of apparel. During his childhood, Samuel Newman and his family lived in Banbury, Oxford where he received a respectable early education, a Protestant upbringing, and later schooling at St. Edmunds Hall at the University of Oxford.⁴⁷ In 1633 he then may have studied at Emmanuel College which later became a part of the University of Cambridge. The Cambridge University Alumni records indicate that a Samuel Newman was enrolled at the college at that time.⁴⁸ Reformers started Emmanuel

⁴³ Middlekauf, 4.

⁴⁴ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 8.

⁴⁵ Edwards and Richey, 13.

⁴⁶ Bliss, 26-27.

⁴⁷ Newman, 11-14.

⁴⁸ *Cambridge University Alumni: 1261-1900* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com, 2000).

College to increase the cadre of university educated ministers, so it may very well have been the Samuel Newman in question.

Samuel Newman became a minister and preached in different pulpits in England. In 1625, Samuel Newman was installed as pastor of Midhope Chapel in West Riding of Yorkshire where he remained for a period of time. In 1635 he immigrated to New England with his wife Sybel and three children, Samuel, Antipas and Noah for religious reasons.⁴⁹ Newman later had a fourth child, Hopestill, who was born in New England. During this time, which was the time of the Great Migration, Archbishop Laud, who was appointed by Charles I, is said to have silenced Puritan preaching. Conformity was demanded, or punishment administered.⁵⁰ Following such occurrences, the Puritans left for New England, concerned about the corruptions they believed were shaping the Church of England. Though some left England for material gain, the predominant reason for these Puritans was that they were dissatisfied with the established order.⁵¹

In New England, Samuel Newman lived in Dorchester, Massachusetts for a period of one to four years. It is not recorded that he practiced as minister during that time however he was engaged in concordance writing. A concordance is an alphabetical listing of words in the Bible with citations of the book, chapter and verse of each occurrence. Newman's was the first to be completed in North America, though it was printed in London. Connections were maintained with family and friends in England, which conceivably facilitated this process. After the concordance was printed, it was distributed by English booksellers. Copies were imported to New England. It was printed for over two centuries, which is suggestive of receptivity to Newman's work.⁵²

⁴⁹ Newman, 13.

⁵⁰ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Baptist Piety: The Last Will and Testament of Obadiah Kolmes* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1978), 9.

⁵¹ Edwards and Richey, 34; Deetz and Deetz, 14, 31.

⁵² Kelly Kolodny, "The Utility of the Education, Study and Writing of Puritan Samuel Newman from Rehoboth, MA," *The New England Journal of History* 61: 2 (Spring 2005): 27-45.

Samuel Newman eventually ministered in New England, first in Weymouth and then later in Rehoboth.⁵³ During the initial formation of Rehoboth, the town proprietors in 1643 voted that each settler would contribute toward the funding of a teacher.⁵⁴ These proprietors were concerned with the education of the community members, though the more renowned and recognized Old Deluder Satan Law would not be passed until 1647. Other laws, such as the 1634 and the 1638 laws had introduced taxation for town and colony benefits.⁵⁵ However, they were not specifically for an educational endeavor which is where Rehoboth's claim rests. Rehoboth proprietors voted on the 1643 ruling at the second meeting of the proprietors which also suggests that it was a matter of importance. The proprietors also were concerned with assigning plots of land, making arrangements for planting corn, building a corn mill, identifying when servants would become inhabitants of the plantation, as well as fencing in lots of land. These were pioneer concerns.⁵⁶

It is not improbable that the founders of Rehoboth would vote to support free education of community members through a form of universal contribution (taxation). In New England, there was a deep understanding of the importance of education. As previously stated, it led to Godly utility. Puritans also were concerned about the rising generations, some of whom could not demonstrate to their parents or ministers that they had "received in full measure the blessings of the new covenant."⁵⁷

In addition to understanding the religious importance of education, the Puritans also were familiar with education, which reflected the colonists' English roots. The social institutions that evolved in New England, including schools, resembled the institutions with which the

⁵³ Bliss, 24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵ Cubberley, 14.

⁵⁶ Bliss, 25.

⁵⁷ Hiner, 3.

colonists were familiar.⁵⁸ The Boston Latin School, for example, was founded in 1635. The ideas of this school were drawn from existing Latin Schools in England. At the end of the sixteenth century, there were no fewer than 361 such schools in England.⁵⁹ Harvard University, likewise, was founded in 1636 by a vote of the General Court or Legislature of Massachusetts and in 1638 the first class was introduced to studies at the institution.⁶⁰ Harvard University prepared males for the ministry, though it has been argued that the focus of Harvard was to function as an institution of higher education. The roots of Harvard also may be found in the universities, such as Oxford, that were operational in England during the seventeenth century.⁶¹ Since educational schools and initiatives were developed in New England at this time, and the significance of such institutions clearly considered, it would not have been a distant idea for the settlers of Rehoboth to consider educational undertakings.

The Reverend Samuel Newman, the minister of Rehoboth, also was connected with influential Puritan leaders, who in turn were connected with various educational endeavors in New England. For example, Newman was acquainted with Reverend Richard Mather, who is remembered for his work with the Cambridge Synod and his writing of *A Platform of Church Discipline*. Richard Mather, originally from Lowton, England, had immigrated to New England in 1635 and within a year assumed duties as minister of the church in Dorchester.⁶² Samuel Newman and Richard Mather journeyed to New England together on the same ship.⁶³ Newman thereafter attended Mather's church when he lived in Dorchester. Later when Newman lived in

⁵⁸ Edwards and Richey, 5; Cubberley, 5-6.

⁵⁹ Edwards and Richey, 19-20.

⁶⁰ Morison, 28.

⁶¹ Cubberley, 31-32.

⁶² Middlekauff, 10-51.

⁶³ Newman, 13.

Rehoboth, there was a time when he was traveling from Boston back to his community, when he decided to stop and listen to a sermon that Reverend Mather was to deliver. It is written in different sources that upon arrival, however, Reverend Mather asked Newman to preach a sermon in his place, which he did.⁶⁴ Newman and Mather appeared to have shared a collegial and collaborative relationship.

Newman also was said to be a participant in the aforementioned Cambridge Synod which developed principles of church government and discipline, which had taken a Congregationalist nature. The Synod recommended that each church should maintain some local autonomy and authority, though consultation among churches in a loosely federated system also was supported if and when needed.⁶⁵ Representatives from all of the churches in Massachusetts, except four, and neighboring states are said to have attended the synod. Though no records of participants of the Synod meetings were kept, it is assumed that Newman took part in the yearly meetings, and considered aspects of the principles of church government and discipline that were developed. At least one component of *A Platform for Church Discipline*, a result of the Synod, focused on the role of ministers and teachers in which it was noted that pastors and teachers were to be church officers, and not the pastor for the church and the teacher only for the schools. Overlap was expected. It was noted that schools were necessary for the learning of those who may be called forth to be a pastor or teacher in the church. The Synod followed Rehoboth's 1643 law, but it demonstrates an avenue through which connections were facilitated and educational endeavors of the time discussed.

Newman's connections with individuals involved in educational endeavors (religious in nature) also are reflected in the individuals to whom his children married. His son, Antipas Newman, married

⁶⁴ Ibid., 27; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; The Ecclesiastical History of New England, From Its First Planting in the Year 1620 Unto the Year of Our Lord 1698 Volume One* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967/1852), 430.

⁶⁵ Henry Wilder Foote, "The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform of 1648," *The Cambridge Platform of 1648*, ed. Henry Wilder Foote (Boston: The Beacon Press and The Pilgrim Press, 1949), 47.

Elizabeth, the daughter of Governor Winthrop. The Governor, a member of the Massachusetts Bay Charter, was instrumental in setting up the initial state governing structure in New England. Newman's son, Noah Newman, married Joanna, daughter of the Reverend Henry Flinit who was the minister of Braintree, Massachusetts. Joanna's uncle was the third president of Harvard College. His daughter, Hopeskill Newman, married the Reverend George Shove who was the third minister of Taunton, Massachusetts.⁶⁶ These connections suggest that Rehoboth was a community that was connected with outside affairs. It was not isolated.

The interactions of the town leader, Reverend Newman, with other New England Puritan leaders, as well as his participation in various church activities, facilitated connections in which the role of education was familiar, considered and thereafter acted upon in Rehoboth. Indeed, Morgan noted that Puritan ministers' "advice was frequently asked and frequently given; their influence over the people was invaluable."⁶⁷ Rehoboth, Newman's congregation, nonetheless was not passive with regard to these affairs. Authority ultimately rested with the laymen. The townspeople, who elected Newman to his ministry, served as officers in the church and voted on various aspects of community life. Indeed, at one of the first meetings of the community, nine men were chosen to order the prudential affairs of the plantation.⁶⁸ In addition, it was decided that every forty days a meeting was to be held by all the inhabitants to consider and act on concerns of the plantation.⁶⁹ Townspeople of Rehoboth, likewise, assumed leadership positions as deputies to the General Court in Massachusetts. Mr. John Browne, a Rehoboth resident, also served as a Governor's Assistant.⁷⁰ Governor's Assistants were elected to their positions by freemen and met as a General Court to deliberate on issues and make laws for the colony. In addition to Samuel Newman's connections in which

⁶⁶ Bliss, 57-58.

⁶⁷ Morgan, 96.

⁶⁸ Bliss, 26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

education would have been discussed and considered, his congregation took on roles in which such happenings would have occurred as well.

In 1643, the time appeared right for taxation by all community members in Rehoboth in support of education (religious in nature). The Rehoboth community was forming, laws established, and living arrangements reviewed. In order for this Puritan community, a congregation, to function and operate according to the Puritan beliefs, education was necessary. However, unlike other communities such as Boston, Rehoboth did not grow into a town of prominence. Though it is often referred to in the Plymouth Colony Records, it remained an agricultural town and over time the influence that it was afforded due to the prominence of early leaders was lost. Its role in the development of the educational system in some senses lacked its initial acclaimed notoriety, a notoriety that was founded on Puritan religious ideals, but interpreted differently at a later time.

Undoubtedly educational historians would argue with the celebratory claim that townspeople of Rehoboth issued, that their community is the birthplace of free public education. Nonetheless, when considering the challenges to this claim, additional insight is gained about the local context in Rehoboth, as well as information about early educational efforts. Challenges to Rehoboth's claim include: when the founding of the first free public schools occurred; laws the proceeded Rehoboth's in 1643 that focused on mass education; geographical issues; and what it means to be a birthplace of public education.

The challenge of when the first free public schools were founded needs to be addressed when considering Rehoboth's claim. It is known that outside of the United States, a variety of schools have been facilitated since 2000 B.C.E, starting in the area of Sumeria.⁷¹ It also is known that efforts to facilitate free schools were orchestrated at different points and in different places prior to 1643. For example, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) recommended compulsory public schools.⁷² Prior to 1643, the Church of England also had conceived of public education that was intended for orphans and children of the poor, a

⁷¹ Murphy, 2.

⁷² Ibid., 41.

charity effort.⁷³ This would seem to suggest that Rehoboth is not the birthplace of free public schools.

If, however, the discussion of being a birthplace of free public schools is focused solely on the area of the United States, it also is known that schools existed outside of Rehoboth, but in North America, prior to 1643. Knight and Hall, for example, noted that a colony had been established in Virginia in 1606 and plans had been made to establish Henrico College as well as plans for the East India School, a free school in Charles City. These plans were disbanded when Native Americans attacked the settlement. Yet, it may be argued that these were the first educational efforts of English North America and that they served as a foundation for free public education, though it was not by taxation.⁷⁴ Early free schools in Virginia, at times were supported with endowments and tuition, though there were also some public spaces for those who could not afford to pay.⁷⁵

Likewise, in 1635 the Boston Latin School also opened and was “recognized as the first formal ‘public’ secondary school in the original British colonies. The Boston Latin School, adhering to an institutional form transplanted from England, also was public in the sense that it was under civic or public control, partially supported by public funds, and accessible to children in the local community.”⁷⁶ Edwards and Richey, however, commented that “the records do not disclose whether the town of Boston appropriated funds for the support of any kind of school before 1643,” which might draw inquiry about its claim to be the birthplace of public education.⁷⁷ In 1636, at a meeting of the richer inhabitants of Boston, a subscription was taken for the maintenance of a free school. Edwards and Richey, however, noted that if the school was actually opened it must have been supported for a number of years

⁷³ Cubberley, 25.

⁷⁴ Edgar W. Knight & Clifton L. Hall, *Readings in American Educational History* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1951), 1-7.

⁷⁵ Edwards and Richey, 137-139.

⁷⁶ Wayne J. Urban & Jennings Wagoner, Jr., *American Education: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 47.

⁷⁷ Edwards and Richey, 55-56.

by contributions and tuition fees. The records disclose that later in 1644 the town of Boston appropriated eight pounds toward the keeping of a school during the previous year.⁷⁸ It has been argued that the Boston Latin School was the institution of the birth of public education, though it was not by taxation by all community members which is where Rehoboth's claim rests.

Rehoboth's claim to be the birthplace of free public education also may be challenged because of specific laws that were put into effect prior to that of Rehoboth's in 1643. For example, in 1642, a law was passed that directed the officials of each town in Massachusetts to ascertain if parents and masters were attending to their educational duties of children. It had become evident that voluntary efforts of people would not be enough to insure the general education that was required by Puritan religious theory. The law of 1642 enabled officers to impose fines on those who failed to give proper instruction to children.⁷⁹ The law of 1642 suggests the idea of mass education of children was considered at an earlier time than Rehoboth's claim. Nonetheless, though this law ordered that all children be taught to read, it did not make provision for free public education of children which is said to have occurred in Rehoboth, Massachusetts in 1643.

Those who have studied closely the history of Rehoboth, particularly with regard to the development of schooling, also could find complications with such assertions that the community is the birthplace of free education for geographical reasons. The land of Rehoboth was vaguely defined and largely unsettled in 1643. The first meeting of the Rehoboth proprietors was held in a Weymouth (Weimoth) Church because the parish served as the rallying point for expeditions toward the settlement of Rehoboth. Thus, though it is claimed that Rehoboth is the birthplace of free public education (by taxation or compulsory contributions), the proprietors of this community actually developed such law in an outside location.

To address additional challenges to the claim that Rehoboth is the birthplace of free public education, one also must also revisit the meaning of the term "free public education" and what this term means to those who put forth the claim. The term "free" is of first

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Cubberley, 17.

consideration. If one considers that Rehoboth's 1643 law meant that no fee was required for education, it is possible that this occurred and that Rehoboth's claim might stand, which is where the claim rests. However, one can not assume that a sense of freedom characterized the education that was facilitated. It was a religious education that adhered to specific conventions. The founder of the town, the Reverend Samuel Newman, was referred to as both minister and teacher in different town records, so he may have been Rehoboth's first teacher.

June the 26th, 1655. At a town meeting it was agreed upon that Mr. Newman, our teacher, should have fifty pounds a year; and these seven men whose names are hereto appended were chosen committees for the buying of a rate according to person and estate for the raising of said maintenance: Joseph Peck, Thomas Cooper, Richard Bowen, Stephen Payne, Robert Martin, Peter Hunt, Will Sabin.⁸⁰

He also was referred to as teacher of the church of Rehoboth in his concordance. Newman may have served as the first teacher, as well as community minister. If this was not the case, Newman certainly had a role in the oversight of any teachers or school masters who were hired, as this was a responsibility of the Church.

The term "public" also is of consideration when considering Rehoboth's claim. With good reason it could be argued that the early colonists of Rehoboth were connected to a church congregation, thus free education was provided for one specific group, not for a general public. When public education is considered in the contemporary context, it typically is connected with a town or city, not a church congregation. This raises questions as to whether the Rehoboth group was a town, or merely a church congregation. Or more likely, in Rehoboth, the church was the town and the town was the church. The 1643 law, like the 1647 law, was designed to impose on children the Puritan creed, particularly for the first generation of native-born New Englanders. Edwards and Richey have suggested that religion during

⁸⁰ Bliss, 46.

this time “was a powerful instrument of social control and direction.”⁸¹ Since education fell under the realm of religion, it was not open and available to all. Indeed, to become a member of a church congregation, one had to be admitted by vote. Education was not inclusive, nor democratic in nature.

This point is clearly seen if one explores tensions and disruptions that took place in the Rehoboth community at this time. Bliss records, for example, that the Puritans sought to remove Native Americans from the land:

The 29th of the 10th month [December] 1645.
Whereas there was a second agreement made with the Indians for their full consent in their removing from Wannamoiset, and the value of fifteen pounds sterling to be paid them or thereabouts in several commodities: it was in several town meetings expounded that if any one man would that particular purchase, they should have that land.⁸²

Education was not available to Native Americans, as arrangements were made to remove them from the community.

Historical writing also suggests that certain community members in Rehoboth, such as Obadiah Holmes, might have been excommunicated by the Reverend Samuel Newman during this time. Other writing suggests that this was not the case rather Obadiah Holmes was censored by Newman.⁸³ Nonetheless, if certain community members were censored or excommunicated from the community of Rehoboth, then the idea of free public education in the town would have been questionable, since it would not have been available to and accepted by all, specifically to those of different religious backgrounds. Obadiah Holmes became the second minister of

⁸¹ Edwards and Richey, 13.

⁸² Bliss, 35.

⁸³ Gaustad, 12-21.

the first Baptist church in North America. Historical records suggest that Obadiah Holmes left Rehoboth, Massachusetts after a period of three years to reside in Newport, Rhode Island. He had difference of opinions with Samuel Newman with regard to church discipline. During this time, Newman's church became divided (between Samuel Newman and Obadiah Holmes) and some decided to follow Baptist pursuits. Indeed, the division and circumstances that surrounded this situation became so intense that they resulted in a court case between Newman and Holmes. This case suggests a lack of tolerance, and a parting of the idea of openness and acceptance of all, which would be needed for public education if one considers the term public to mean that it would be inclusive and tolerant in nature. Of interesting note, Obadiah Holmes later was publicly whipped in Lynn, Massachusetts when he tried to convert community members in that location to the Baptist religion.

The last term in free public education, which is "education," also poses challenge to Rehoboth's claim. During the colonial era the transmission of culture (Puritan religious ideals) and more formal schooling experiences largely overlapped. Both served similar purposes. Thus, Rehoboth's claim to be the birth of public education would stand only if one considers the meaning of education in the light that it was considered by the Puritans. It was not the education that typically is conceived in the contemporary context. Yet, though it was a very different type of education which was founded on religious ideals, it was interpreted as a birth of free public education in Rehoboth.

Notable educational historians compellingly have argued that free public schooling did not occur until the Common School Movement. The Common School Movement, started in the middle of the nineteenth century, was open to the rich and poor, boys and girls and eventually to children of different races and nationalities.⁸⁴ It also is documented that the Common School Movement held moral and religious underpinnings based on Christian doctrines.

Townspeople of Rehoboth, Massachusetts have asserted that the community is the birthplace of free schooling in the United States. On November 7, 1964, a small group of officials gathered in Rehoboth "to

⁸⁴ Murphy, 252-254.

make a small, though proud gesture toward their history.” Brief dedication ceremonies marked the erection of a sign, erected by the local Lions Club, on a main road describing the town as the birthplace of free education in America.⁸⁵ This sign continues to stand on the main road. The town’s web page also continues to describe the community as the birthplace of free schooling.

Throughout this paper, the claim of Rehoboth, Massachusetts to be the birthplace of public education has been examined, ultimately with the intent that information about early educational efforts, as well as some information about local characters, circumstances and ideologies would be learned. For a variety of reasons which are outlined in this article, it is difficult to prove that Rehoboth is the birthplace of free public education, though it is an old agricultural town with a long history of providing educational experiences, formal and informal, for children.

The 1643 law of Rehoboth suggests that prescription of minimum educational standards (religious in nature) was of significance to this particular community. Educational requirements were considered at the local level in Rehoboth, along with other affairs such as the appointment of deputies, constables and grand jury men and the general building of a community. Rehoboth’s claim shows that free public education was conceived and put into practice through taxation, but also met with challenges. These challenges are witnessed in the religious schisms that developed, for example between Samuel Newman and Obadiah Holmes. Likewise, other town records also indicate that not all community members in Rehoboth were diligent about supporting the church, which was directly connected with educational endeavors. Bliss, in review of town records, noted that at times community members were behind in their contributions. This would suggest tension in support of the local church which oversaw educational efforts.

July 13th, 1657. Voted, That all such persons, or any person that is behind in their accounts with Mr. Newman, for this year present, that they shall make up

⁸⁵ Burkhardt, 45.

their accounts with Mr. Newman by a month after Michaelmas; and in case it be neglected, then such townsmen as may be deputed, together with the deacons also, to go to such persons and labor to convince them of the neglect of their duty; in case they find them obstinate, the Court order is to be attended on.⁸⁶

The 1647 Old Deluder Satan Law, unlike Rehoboth's 1643 law, is more recognized for its bearing on educational practice and history. Capital Laws were more renowned, acknowledge and perhaps more influential. Indeed, Edwards and Richey wrote that "The Massachusetts Act of 1647 became the basis of legislation in other New England colonies. Connecticut adopted it practically verbatim in 1650."⁸⁷ In 1680, New Hampshire also adopted this Massachusetts law almost unchanged.⁸⁸ Education became the responsibility of the state, which was religious in nature during the colonial era. Yet, Rehoboth's 1643 law poses inquiry about how local occurrences connected with civil undertakings during this time, specifically with regard to education. In many aspects, authority rested with the local churches, around which communities functioned. Rehoboth's 1643 law shows some of the activity which preceded the more noted Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647.

When considering Rehoboth's claim, it ultimately is important to recognize that how this act was interpreted and celebrated differed from the original intentions of the Rehoboth proprietors. Ideas that were inherited by townspeople did not mesh fully with the original purposes of the Puritan founders. Indeed, in many respects, Rehoboth's 1643 law was the end result of the Puritan revolution in England, though it is viewed as a beginning (a birth) in New England by local community members. Rehoboth's claim is interesting because in addition to providing information about local activities and characters of the seventeenth century colonial era, it offers intriguing insight into the

⁸⁶ Bliss, 48.

⁸⁷ Edwards and Richey, 58.; Cubberley, 19.

⁸⁸ Cubberley, 20.

meanings attached to schooling in an old agricultural community in the decades that followed Puritan colonization. Educational historian David Tyack noted that Americans celebrate innovation. Education was seen (and continues to be seen) as an undertaking of great innovation, importance, faith, a visionary practice.⁸⁹ Thus, the idea that a community is the birthplace of public education would not be an unusual innovation to celebrate, which is precisely what Rehoboth has done. Though there are merited challenges to Rehoboth's claim, there is important information to be learned from its story.

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⁸⁹ David Tyack, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-5.