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New England Academy Education in the Early Republic

Brian Cooke

Before the Revolutionary War, being educated in a school was more the exception than the rule. Most individuals were taught in the less structured environments of family, community, and church. Some elementary schools did exist, teaching fundamental reading and writing skills. But secondary schooling was largely restricted to individuals who were preparing for careers in the ministry or in public service. These scholars studied with private tutors or in grammar schools, before enrolling in a university.¹

The first New England Academies, including Phillips Andover (1778), Phillips Exeter (1780), Governor Dummer (1782), Derby (1784), Lawrence (1793), Deerfield (1797), and Milton (1798), were inspired both by dissatisfaction with late eighteenth century education and by enthusiasm for new republican priorities for instruction. Before the founding of these academies, there was little alternative for formal secondary education other than the grammar or district schools. At the time of the American Revolution, the grammar schools were in decline and the district schools offered little more than rudimentary instruction. The academies emerged to fill this void in New England secondary education.²

1. In Education and the Forming of American Society (1960), Bernard Bailyn described the "Old World" educational dependence on family, community, church, and apprenticeship. See p. 48. Lawrence Cremin emphasizes this distinction between school-centered education and other educational instruments, in his two-volume History of American Education (New York, 1980).

2. In The Age of the Academies (1964), TheodoreSizer argued that the grammar school's "narrow classical curriculum was simply out of step with the ideas of the this-worldly, optimistic American" of the early republican period (p. 9). Sizer suggests that the academy offered "a more flexible and useful course of study" than the grammar schools (p. 18). He describes academies as particularly appealing to

New England's grammar schools were primarily intended to prepare gentlemen who were interested in public office and scholars seeking admission to college. Boston Latin, the Massachusetts Bay Colony's first grammar school, was established in 1635, one year before Harvard College's inception. It was followed by schools at Charlestown (1636), Salem (1637), Dorchester (1639), and Cambridge (1640). As college preparatory institutions, grammar schools maintained the classical curriculum dictated by Harvard's admission requirements. Grammar school scholars studied Latin and Greek, the sole subjects required by a college that until the early nineteenth century did not recognize Arithmetic, Geography, Algebra, Geometry, or History among its admissions criteria.³

Grammar schools served only a select minority of colonial youth. Girls were excluded altogether, and to most boys the narrow curriculum was of limited interest and utility. In addition, grammar schools were not necessarily the best way to prepare for college. Many students preferred private instruction. As Emit Duncan Grizzell notes, "The list of Harvard Graduates from 1644 to 1700 suggests many scholars were alternately prepared by private tutors," while "some towns credited with grammar schools did not send a single student to the college," and "other towns even before their schools were established, sent students, evidently prepared by the ministers of the towns."⁴

rural communities which were less likely to support grammar schools, at least in part because they had more difficulty than cities did in retaining able schoolmasters. For further discussion of the ambiguity between the public and private domains in eighteenth century America, see Bernard Bailyn, "Education as a Discipline, Some Historical Notes," in John Walton and James L. Kuethe, eds., The Discipline of Education (1963), pp. 125-138. Bailyn describes the "academy" movement of the early republican period as more than just a transitional phase between the decline of grammar schools and the rise of the public school. See p. 137.

3. Otto F. Krauschaar, American Nonpublic Schools (1972), believes that grammar schools were "not so much intended to provide a general education as to prepare the few for admission to Harvard College or for public service or the life of a well-bred gentleman" (p. 58). He argues that academies evolved to fill the void created by a "paucity of secondary schools other than the dwindling Latin grammar schools."

4. James Alexander Inglis, The Rise of the High School in Massachusetts (New York, 1911), pp. 1-8 and 60-132; Joel Spring, The American School, 1642-1985 (New York, 1986), pp. 1-8; Emit Duncan Grizzell, Origin and Development of the High School in New England Before 1865 (New York, 1923), pp. 25-26.

District schools evolved in response to the demographic growth and geographic dispersal of the population. Establishing a convenient location for a common school was easier for a newly settled and relatively small village than for a rapidly expanding, increasingly scattered township. As communities grew and people moved further to the west, disagreements increased over the obligation to support and attend schools that many believed were too remote and inaccessible.

One response to this problem was to establish a moving school, one that required the teacher to ride a circuit among each of the town's various enclaves. Another solution divided the township into several districts, each with a separate share of the town's general resources allocated for education. While such district schools helped quell a source of bitter local disagreement, they did little to improve the quality and extent of formal instruction. By dividing the town's modest monetary resources, the delegation of educational responsibility to multiple school districts often compounded the fiscal problem. District schools also increased the difficulty of finding and retaining qualified schoolmasters.

The record of colonial schools in Deerfield is representative of the development of local education in the Massachusetts Bay colony. The earliest instruction of Deerfield's youngsters was conducted informally in private residences by parents or "dames." Hannah Beaman maintained a dame school as early as 1694.⁵ The first record of town support of formal schooling appeared in 1698. The fiscal burden of maintaining this school became evident as early as 1700, when the town decided "to make null and void their former act of twenty pounds for twenty years towards a school." At that meeting, the town voted to decrease the subsidy of the school to "fifteen pounds in pay yearly for ye space of seven years." When that term neared its conclusion in 1707, the town voted to "sell the schoolhouse for five pounds." From that time until 1720, there was no record of any action by the town concerning schools; in 1720, Deerfield resumed financial support of a school. In 1722, the selectmen were authorized to rent a schoolhouse and hire a schoolmaster to

5. George Sheldon, A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts (Somersworth, N.H., 1972), I: 244 and 272.

teach reading, writing, and cyphering for half a year. In 1723, the Town voted "to build a school house forthwith."⁶

As Deerfield grew, residents settled to the north of the original Town Street at Green River and to the South at Wapping, Bars, and Muddy Brook. It was not long before these outlying communities petitioned the town for support of schools which would be closer to home. In 1744, Deerfield voted "to Green River sixty pounds from 1743-1744, for schooling and preaching to be divided and expended at their will." Similarly, Muddy Brook was allowed six pounds in 1767, and Wapping seventy-two pounds in 1779, to be used for the construction of a schoolhouse. The first record of a grammar school at Deerfield occurred near the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. In 1782, the town voted "to hire a Grammar schoolmaster in this town and two schoolmasters from the middle of October to the middle of April next." Within five years, Deerfield voted to support district schools in Town Street and Cheapside, Wapping and Bars, Great River, Muddy Brook, Mill River, and the west bank of the Deerfield River.⁷

By 1787, fifteen Deerfield townsmen were sufficiently dissatisfied with local grammar and district school education that they convened to organize a proprietary "New School."⁸ The details in this school's founding articles suggest that the school had been discussed previously and at great length. In fact, a schoolmaster's copybook dating to this period indicates that three of the "New School" proprietors had informally taught at least eighteen Deerfield children prior to 1787. Those classes met winter evenings in the homes of the volunteer schoolmasters.⁹

The inadequacy of Deerfield's schools beyond introducing children to elementary reading, writing, and cyphering was a likely catalyst for the organization of the "New School." The Deerfield schoolmaster's copybook illustrates the proprietors'

6. *Ibid.*, I: 273.

7. *Ibid.*, II: 841-842.

8. Deerfield Schools, "The New School, Articles of Agreement, 1787" and "Minutes of Proprietors Meetings, 1787-1792," mss. in Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Mass.

9. Deerfield Schools, "Schoolmaster's Copybook, 1785-1786," ms. in Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association; see also "The New School, Articles of Agreement," and George Sheldon, A History of Deerfield, vol. II, genealogical index.

insistence on a more sophisticated, utilitarian curriculum. The book included exercises for instruction in arithmetic, fractions, and decimals, barter, business, reading, and writing. The copybook lessons in arithmetic, fractions, and decimals began with straight-forward questions. An example was "What are the decimals of $16/6$?" The next lessons used realistic word problems to test basic mathematical reasoning: "If a Field will feed 18 Horses for 7 Weeks -- How long will it feed 42 Horses?"¹⁰

The next section of the copybook, on barter and business, was clearly intended for the instruction of aspiring merchants: "A & B Barter. A hath 4 Tons of Brandy worth 37 . . . 16 pounds ready Money but in Barter he hath 56.1 pounds Per Ton and B giveth 21 pounds 11 of Ginger for the 4 Tons of Brandy. I defie to know how much B sold his Ginger in Barter per Ct. and how much it is worth really money?" At least one exercise reflected Deerfield's history as a notable frontier outpost: "Suppose 800 soldiers were besieged in a Town & they had no provisions for 6 months. How many must depart, that the remainder may have provision for 8 months?" Another exercise was appropriately lighthearted and directed toward adolescents: "If Sally can kiss Katy 15 times in one hour & $2/5$. How long will it take five persons of equal abilities to kiss her the same number of times?"¹¹

In addition to arithmetic and business, the copybook indicates that Deerfield's students received instruction in reading and orthography. One section of the copybook was devoted to copying and recopying the following proverbs in each student's own hand:

Opportunity negelected (sic) brings severe repentance.

Reason and Religion are Guides To Happiness.

Wise Men keep their Expences short of their Income.

The "Articles and Agreement" for the New School at Deerfield were concluded on March 31, 1788. Financed by private subscription, the institution was exclusive and independent of town support. Each of the fifteen Proprietors held an equal share, which entitled him to instruction of no more than two scholars. Therefore, "The School . . . shall at no time exceed the

10. Deerfield Schools, "Schoolmaster's Copybook."

11. Ibid.

number of Thirty." Each share was transferable, upon the consent of two thirds of the subscribers.¹²

On October 20, 1789, nearly a year after the New School's founding, the initial subscribers considered the possibility of opening the School to all of the youngsters of the town. Prompted in part by financial considerations, "the question was if the Proprietors will continue the School as a Proprietary School." The ensuing vote sustained the School's exclusivity, which continued as late as 1792, when Seth Nims paid "3 pounds for 1/15 part in common & undivided of a certain schoolhouse on the SW Corner of the Home-lot in which Joseph Stebbins now Dwells in said Deerfield."¹³

Colonial education in Massachusetts developed around the district and grammar schools. While the former provided elementary instruction, and the latter emphasized the narrow classical training necessary for admission to Harvard College, responsibility for teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic on a more advanced level was frequently assumed by private individuals. These individuals sometimes shared the teaching duties by organizing proprietary schools comparable to Deerfield's "New School." These proprietary schools later evolved into the formally incorporated academies of the late eighteenth century.

In 1785, Richard Williams began, at Deerfield's informal night school, to prepare for his studies at Phillips Andover Academy. Richard was the eldest son of John Williams, a prominent Deerfield merchant and a public official who played a vital role in the town's early schools. Richard's initials along with those of his brother, John Williams, Jr., are recorded in the Deerfield schoolmaster's copybook. The Williams brothers then attended Deerfield's "New School," which their father had helped to establish in 1788. In 1789, Richard Williams enrolled at Phillips Andover Academy, New England's first academy.¹⁴

The Williams family had a longstanding commitment to quality education. John Williams was a Harvard graduate (1769), as was his grandfather, Elihu Williams (1712), and his great-grandfather, the Reverend John Williams (1664). After graduating from Harvard, John studied law before returning to Deerfield to

12. Deerfield Schools, "Minutes of Proprietors Meetings, March 31, 1788.

13. *Ibid.*, October 20, 1789.

14. Sheldon, History of Deerfield, vol. II.

manufacture lumber, ship's masts, and barrel staves, and to trade ginseng, pot and pearl ashes, beef, corn, and flour. An earnest public official, John Williams served as Register of Deeds, Justice of the Peace, State Representative, and State Senator. John Williams was also a vigorous proponent of Deerfield schools, a subscriber to the "New School," and a charter trustee of Deerfield Academy.¹⁵

Richard Williams' hand-copied "Arithmetical Manuscriptum" indicates the utilitarian curriculum offered at Phillips Andover Academy. Because textbooks were often unavailable, the students were required to record their daily lessons in notebooks. The completed books were useful for review of previous lessons, and for references to the tables and formulas which were necessary for many business transactions. Richard Williams' "Manuscriptum" illustrates the emphasis of the early republican academies on practical education.¹⁶

The "Manuscriptum" begins with straightforward definitions of essential terms, then goes on to Arithmetic, Numeration, Addition, Subtraction, and Simple Multiplication. It continues with a "Multiplication and Division Table," and other Tables for conversion of different units of Currency, Weights, Cloth Measure, Long Measure, Time, Motion, Land or Square Measure, and Solid, Wine, Ale, and Beer Measure. Each Table is accompanied by an appropriate example and practice exercises. An example of a practice exercise is the following: "How many seconds [was there] between the commencement of the war [on] April 19th, 1775 and the Independence of the United States of America which took place on 4th Day of July 1776?"

After a unit on fractions, the "Manuscriptum" concludes with the essential applications of mathematics to business:

Fare and Frett are practical rules for deducing certain allowances, which are made by merchants and tradesmen in selling their goods by weight. Fare is an allowance made to the bearer, for the weight of the box, barrel, or bags and which contains the goods bought, and is either at so

15. Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College (Boston, 1937).

16. Richard Williams, "Arithmetical Manuscriptum, February 1791," in Williams Papers, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Historic Deerfield.

much per box etc. Frett is an allowance of _____ in every _____ for waste, dust, etc. *Brokerage* is an allowance of so much Per Cent to a person called a broker for assisting Merchants or Factors in purchasing or selling.

Policies of Insurance. Insurance is a security of assurance by means of a writ called a policy to indemnify the insured of such losses as shall be specified in the policy subscribed by the insurer, or insurers, by which the underwriters oblige themselves to make good and effectual the property insured, in consideration of a certain premium at a stipulated rate Percent (which varies according to the risque) to be immediately paid down or otherwise secured according to the tenor of the agreement.

Alligation is the method of mixing two or more samples of different qualities, so that the composition may be of a mean or middle quality.

When Richard Williams completed his studies at Phillips Andover in 1791 he moved to Stockbridge to study law. Little more is known of his abbreviated life, except that he died on October 15, 1796, at the age of twenty-one. Richard's brother, John Williams, Jr., had little better luck. After attending Charlestown Academy, in 1793 he entered Dartmouth College, where he studied until 1798. Then he worked briefly as an usher at Deerfield Academy before joining his father's mercantile enterprise. John later served as a mate and a captain in the East Indies trade. He died on the Isle of Bourbon in 1806, at the age of twenty-six.¹⁷

The Williams family's interest in education and their prominence among Connecticut River Valley merchants suggest the prospective rewards and practical necessity of quality instruction. The Williams' collective experience at Harvard, Dartmouth, Phillips Andover, and Charlestown Academy, and

17. Dartmouth College and Associated Schools General Catalogue, 1769-1940 (Hanover, N.H., 1940).

their support of Deerfield's earliest proprietary schools, contributed significantly to the founding of Deerfield Academy.

On March 1, 1797, Governor Samuel Adams approved "An Act for establishing an Academy in the Town of Deerfield by the name of Deerfield Academy." The Act listed the names of seventeen prominent men of the Pocumtuck Valley. These men were a distinguished, well-educated lot. Nine of the Academy's founders had received college instruction at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Dartmouth. Six held honorary degrees from Brown, Dartmouth, or Williams. Several Trustees who did not attend college had distinguished service as Deerfield public officials and as military officers at the revolutionary battles of Lexington, Bunker Hill, and Bennington.¹⁸

Deerfield's residents had much to celebrate on the eleventh anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Plans for construction of a handsome brick school-building were underway, and prospects were excellent for the winter opening of an Academy which was expected to rival New England's best secondary schools. In a sermon delivered at the nearby Greenfield celebration of American Independence, Rev. Roger Newton, a Deerfield Academy trustee, affirmed the national implications of this local educational endeavor:

The peace of our land, and the prosperity of our nation, we should seek . . . by training up those under our care to order and rule, and by giving that education which may inform the mind, direct the judgment, regulate the passions, and eventually lead to such behavior as may be of happy effect to the community where they dwell.¹⁹

The Academy building's cornerstone was laid on Tuesday, June 12, 1798. By October, with the building near

18. This biographical information is derived from Franklin Bowditch Dexter, Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History (New York, 1911); Dartmouth College Catalogue, 1769-1940; General Catalogue of the Officers, Graduates, and Non-Graduates of Williams College (Williamstown, 1930); Sheldon, History of Deerfield; and Shipton, Harvard Graduates.

19. Rev. Roger Newton, A Discourse Delivered on the Anniversary of American Independence, 1797 (Greenfield, 1797).

completion, the Trustees resolved "to procure a Preceptor, drafted a school calendar based on a quarterly schedule, and set tuition at "two Dollars a Quarter, for each Scholar who shall be instructed in Reading, Writing, and English Grammar, and Two Dollars and Fifty Cents, for each Scholar, instructed in any other branches of Literature."²⁰

Deerfield Academy planned to offer instruction both to boys and to girls, as confirmed by an advertisement of the Academy's opening which was printed in the *Greenfield Gazette* in mid-November:

The Trustees of Deerfield Academy feel themselves happy in being able to announce to the Public, that they shall be preparing to open said Academy on the first day of January next. Having erected a convenient building for the accommodation of Youth of both sexes, and having provided a Preceptor who comes under the ample recommendation of the President and Professor of Philosophy of Yale College and of Dr. Dana of New Haven -- It is expected that Youth of both Sexes will be instructed in the best manner; in all the various branches of Academic Learning.²¹

The academy's commitment to teaching boys and girls, "provided they are found in a degree capable of reading and writing," was formally delineated in the Fourth Article of its initial Code of By-Laws. The school's By-Laws also affirmed the Academy's emphasis on "teaching the Arts and Sciences." Both emphases indicate the urgency of educating successful entrepreneurs and worthy mothers in the early American republic.²²

On Thanksgiving, 1798, Reverend John Taylor, an Academy trustee, delivered a sermon that compared the success of early republican America with "the present state of Europe," where, amidst French revolutionary terror, "the Storm is gathering thicker -- clouds blacken -- the earthquake increases -- the

20. Trustees Minute Book, October 9, 1798.

21. *Greenfield Gazette*, November 19, 1798.

22. "Code of ByLaws adopted 31 December 1798," in Trustees Minute Book.

murder of war is beginning to shake a great number of nations." Taylor, like many of his contemporaries, associated governmental stability and personal liberty with proper education. He attributed the disparity between the American republican success and the French Revolutionary failure to the different emphasis each nation placed on proper instruction:

A general diffusion of knowledge and virtue, must be the support of a free government in America. That nation must always be barbarous, and in slavery, where education is not encouraged. Ignorance and tyranny are nearly allied. So are knowledge and liberty.²³

In this threatening global context, Reverend Taylor believed that all efforts supporting advanced learning increased the prospects for perpetuating republican order and liberty:

We have a number of Colleges; many Academies; and schools of instruction without number. Light is diffused, and knowledge acquired, not only in public places, but in obscure corners. Happy America! Blessed be God for his great care of us in this respect.

Taylor concluded his sermon with specific praise for Deerfield Academy's generous benefactors.

When the Academy opened on the first day of January, 1799, the *Greenfield Gazette* noted the "fair prospect of its being a seat of useful knowledge and improvement." On the first Wednesday of the new year, forty-seven first-quarter scholars assembled in the two-story brick Academy building, "an elegant Edifice having on the lower floor, four rooms, one for the English School, one for the Latin and Greek School, the Preceptor's Room, and a room for the Museum and Library." The school building's undivided upper room was used for examinations and exhibitions.²⁴

23. Rev. John Taylor, An Oration Delivered on the Day of Public Thanksgiving, 1798 (Greenfield, 1798).

24. Greenfield Gazette, January 7, 1799.

Enrollment in early republican New England academies varied by quarter, and Deerfield was no exception. This variation in quarterly attendance reflected the rhythms of climate and the attendant seasonal tasks of planting and harvesting. Although winter was typically considered to be too harsh for young girls to weather the brisk walk or ride to and from school, as well as to endure the minimal warmth of the schoolhouse itself, nine girls enrolled at Deerfield Academy for its first winter quarter. This represents nearly twenty percent of the first term scholars, a percentage which decreased in successive winters until in 1803 girls no longer enrolled for winter study. The Summer quarter was by far the most popular for girls. In its first summer quarter, Deerfield's enrollment grew to 81, 31 of whom were girls. By 1804, 46 of the 61 summer scholars, 75 percent of the class, were girls. In all, at least 194 different scholars attended Deerfield Academy during the first year, 134 boys and 60 girls.²⁵

From its inception, Deerfield Academy was a successful college preparatory school. Of the sixty-two boys enrolled during 1799 for whom there is biographical information, at least twenty-one attended college after leaving the Academy. Twelve attended Williams, while eight went to Dartmouth, and one to Yale. Deerfield also prepared its scholars for a variety of distinguished professions. Seven of the Academy's earliest scholars practiced law, including Moses Hayden, who served both as a Judge and a New York State Senator. Five of those students became physicians, four became ministers, and two became sea captains.²⁶

Rudolphus Dickinson was perhaps the most illustrious of Deerfield Academy's first scholars. After leaving Deerfield, Dickinson attended Williams College for two years before transferring to Yale, where he graduated in 1805. Returning home, he studied law with Major John Taylor, of the Harvard Class of 1786, and was admitted to the Bar of Hampshire County in 1808. Dickinson's vocational interests ranged from the law, to

25. This enrollment summary is derived from the "Register of Students and Tuitions, 1799-1819," ms. in Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Historic Deerfield.

26. This biographical information is derived from the following sources: Dexter, Graduates of Yale; Dartmouth College Catalogue, 1769-1940; General catalogue of Williams College; Sheldon, History of Deerfield; and Shipton, Harvard Graduates.

publishing, to the ministry. A prolific writer, he produced at least twelve published works, including two intended as schoolbooks.²⁷

Two of Dickinson's texts are reminiscent of the works of Jedidiah Morse and Noah Webster. Dickinson's *Elements of Geography* (1813) was intended as a shorter and more affordable version of Jedidiah Morse's acclaimed *Universal Geography*. Dickinson's interest in geography was prompted as much by entrepreneurial opportunity as by pedagogical duty. But Dickinson realized only moderate success in law and turned his attention to religion. Dickinson's most popular published work, *A Compendium of the Religious Doctrines, Religious and Moral Precepts, and Historical and Descriptive Beauties of the Bible*, went through six editions. It was followed by *A Companion for the Altar, or an Office For the Holy Communion* and *A New and Corrected Version of the New Testament*.²⁸

Ordained a Deacon in 1819, the same year he was appointed as Clerk of Courts of Franklin County, Dickinson wrote on topics ranging from "The Christian and Miscellaneous Portfolio" to "A Digest of the Common Law, the Statute Laws of Massachusetts and of the United States, and the Decisions of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts." Both a lawyer and a minister, Rudolphus Dickinson epitomized Deerfield Academy's dual commitment to teaching knowledge and virtue.

America's private academies originated in the revolutionary and early national context. These academies evolved from growing dissatisfaction with the district and grammar schools then in existence. Academies also reflected heightened American republican and commercial aspirations. While the colonial district schools provided rudimentary instruction in reading and writing, and the grammar schools taught a narrow classical curriculum to boys exclusively, academies developed a broader, more practical course of study, for boys and girls, that included arithmetic, science, and business.

Deerfield's proprietary New School and the subsequent founding of Deerfield Academy suggest the vigorous interest that well-educated and reasonably affluent gentlemen took in local education. Richard Williams' Phillips Andover "Manuscriptum" and the Deerfield New School schoolmaster's copybook further

27. Dexter, Graduates of Yale.

28. Rudolphus Dickinson, Elements of Geography (Boston, 1813).

demonstrate the extent and the specifics of curricular reform initiated by the early republic's private schools.

Although academies are often dismissed as relatively insignificant to the larger development of American schooling, they were, in fact, crucial both in their own right and as antecedents of the first public high schools. In the early national period, local authorities and private individuals like the Williams family assumed responsibility for providing educational opportunities for young men and women. At the same time, public interest in education was limited, as was the willingness to use tax money for education. The academies, then, played an important role in the history of American education.