Introduction

Explorations in Early American Education

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Nearly three decades ago, Bernard Bailyn issued his now famous plea for a broader and more comprehensive interpretation of early American education.1 Some of Bailyn’s particular interpretations of the origins of schooling in the New World have been challenged and discarded—particularly those that postulated the breakup of the stable, extended English family in the wilderness of the New World.2 Yet overall he succeeded in encouraging more critical and integrative studies of education than the more traditional and laudatory institutional work by earlier scholars such as Ellwood Cubberly. Historians have now explored a variety of interesting topics such as the increasing rates of male and female literacy, shifts in responsibility for educating the young from the father to the mother, and the changing role of the church in instructing its parishioners. Despite the increased sophistication of analyses of colonial education, surprisingly few scholars have chosen to specialize in this area so that much remains to be done.3

The four essays presented here as a special issue of the History of Education Quarterly represent a modest effort to stimulate additional work on early American education and to synthesize some of the existing findings. Naturally, due to the constraints of time and space, there is no pretense of even mentioning, let alone settling, many of the still unresolved debates and questions in colonial education. Yet the authors of these essays, most of whom represent the next generation of colonial educational historians, demonstrate the value of continued work in this field and the utility of heeding Bailyn’s call for a broader and more interdisci-

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plenary approach to the study of formal and informal schooling in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The first essay provides a timely synthesis and a somewhat provocative interpretation of female literacy, schools for girls, and teaching opportunities for women in New England from 1730 to 1820. It is coauthored by Joel Perlmann, Silvana Siddali, and Keith Whitescarver and exemplifies an effective and welcome collaboration between senior and junior scholars—something that unfortunately is less common among historians than among other social scientists.

More than twenty years ago, Kenneth Lockridge published a pathbreaking book on colonial New England mark-signature literacy which argued that while male literacy rose steadily in the eighteenth century, female literacy was relatively stagnant; more than half of the females still could not sign wills by the late eighteenth century.1 Perlmann and his colleagues, however, relying upon more recent studies of deeds and nineteenth-century manuscript censuses, suggest that female literacy rose rapidly in the eighteenth century and was nearly universal by the 1790s—thus raising some intriguing questions about previous interpretations that stressed the importance of the American Revolution in fostering female literacy.2

The authors then explore the institutional opportunities for girls’ education in colonial New England. Using information from earlier studies as well as their own work, they show how girls were gradually allowed to attend town-supported schools and how women were increasingly hired as schoolteachers in the summers. The authors speculate about the relationship between increased schooling opportunities for women and the rise in female literacy—though they do not discuss in any detail the still unresolved but important debate over the nature and extent of learning literacy at home in early America.3

This essay on female education provides a thoughtful overview and synthesis of the recent work on New England and reminds us of the importance and difficulty of making quantitative estimates of rates of literacy and schooling in the past. One eagerly awaits comparable work on other regions of colonial America where the rates of literacy were substantially lower than

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2Regarding those who emphasize the importance of the American Revolution for fostering the literacy of women, see Linda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980); Mary Beth Norton, Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800 (Boston, 1980).

in New England. Particularly intriguing is the recent scholarship from New France that suggests extremely low rates of male and female literacy and provides a startling but almost entirely neglected contrast to the educational developments in the English colonies.

As the first essay demonstrates, historians of colonial education have broadened the study of colonial schooling and produced important studies of educational changes in the general population. But much less attention has been paid to the development of particular educational institutions and how they may have affected the life course of their students. Fortunately, John Burton, in the second essay, provides an excellent investigation of a single educational institution, the Cambridge Grammar School, within the larger context of both the local community and nearby Harvard College.

Burton carefully reconstructs the establishment of the Cambridge Grammar School in Massachusetts in the mid-1640s and documents its frequent difficulties in recruiting and maintaining appropriate schoolmasters. Created as a mixed Latin and English institution, the Cambridge Grammar School had close formal and informal ties to members of Harvard College from the very beginning and provided in the seventeenth century approximately 10 percent of the total number of Harvard graduates.

A legacy from the Hopkins Trust to both Harvard College and the Cambridge Grammar School in the late 1720s expanded and formalized the ties between the two institutions. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence, Burton shows how the Cambridge Grammar School continued to supply a sizable number of students for Harvard College in the eighteenth century. Particularly noteworthy is Burton’s effort to ascertain the occupational origins and subsequent social mobility of the Hopkins scholars from the Cambridge Grammar School. The Cambridge Grammar School students entering Harvard were more likely to come from middle-class backgrounds than the others whose parents were even more privileged; and while the Cambridge students did not fare as well as their Harvard counterparts afterward, once their class origins were taken into consideration it appears that considerable social mobility was

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possible in colonial New England for those attending institutions of higher education.9

The close ties between Harvard College and the Cambridge Grammar School diminished in the nineteenth century. As Burton points out, some of this was due to the changing characteristics of the members of the Harvard Corporation (increasingly they were not faculty members and lived outside of Cambridge). As members of the Harvard Corporation lost interest and contact with students at the Cambridge Grammar School, the local selectmen assumed some of their oversight activities; however, the Cambridge selectmen did not have the same ties or orientation toward Harvard as the earlier members of the Harvard Corporation. The close and effective working partnership between Harvard College and the Cambridge Grammar School came to an end and exemplifies the unfortunate general separation between institutions of higher education and k–12 education in America.

The third essay, by Elizabeth Nybakken, nicely shifts the focus of attention from New England to Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware—an area that has not received as much attention from educational historians. Nybakken asks the provocative question of where most mid-eighteenth-century religious and political leaders received their classical education since there were only six colleges in existence at that time—all but one of them situated along the northeastern seacoast. She argues that many of these colonial elites, especially those in the mid-Atlantic or southern colonies, received their advanced training in small academies created and run by schoolmasters trained in Ireland and Scotland.10

Nybakken provides a fascinating portrait of the role and operation of the Irish Presbyterian academies in Ireland and North America. This is a difficult task as the Anglican Church in Ireland tried to suppress these institutions; therefore, they had to operate clandestinely and left few

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records. Yet the Irish Presbyterian academies managed to train several generations of aspiring ministers and had close ties with the Scottish universities. She shows how the migration of the Irish Presbyterians to America led to the creation of similar academies in the colonies and helped to spread Scots-Irish Enlightenment ideas. Future revolutionary leaders such as Benjamin Rush received much of their formal academic training in such institutions. With the creation of several additional colleges after the American Revolution, much of the need for these collegiate academies disappeared.

This imaginative study of the Irish Presbyterian academies in the middle Atlantic colonies before the American Revolution demonstrates how much important and interesting work still remains. Nybakken has done an excellent job of showing the importance of studying the complex Atlantic intellectual exchanges in the eighteenth century. While most historians today focus almost exclusively on developments in the American colonies, many eighteenth-century educators were involved in intellectual discourses and institution building that spanned the Atlantic Ocean.

David Kling has written the final essay on the education of New Divinity ministers in New England from 1750 to 1825. While some scholars have studied eighteenth-century ministerial education and lives, they usually have not appreciated the extent or nature of post-college training. As clergymen and their congregations divided themselves over the Great Awakening in the 1740s, those who espoused a more evangelical ministry were frustrated that institutions such as Harvard and Yale did not provide adequate training for New Light ministers. As a result, many evangelical clergymen gradually used the traditional apprenticeship experience following college graduation as an opportunity to study with ministers who were more sympathetic to their particular religious convictions. Kling carefully documents and analyzes the emergence of this new, informal training network for New Divinity ministers. Based upon a prosopography of established eighteenth-century New Light ministers and their apprentices, he discovered that over five hundred clerical aspirants received such instruction between 1750 and 1825. He demonstrates how this informal apprenticeship system led not only to closer religious ties among the participants, but also created substantial, informal social and family net-

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11On the educational background of the American Revolutionary leaders, see Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (Lawrence, Kans., 1993).

works. Moreover, the cross-generational aspects of the training may have fostered significant intellectual and emotional ties between ministers participating in the First and Second Great Awakenings. Only with the establishment of several New England divinity schools in the early nineteenth century was this informal ministerial training system gradually abandoned.

Kling’s thoughtful investigation of the emergence and then decline of the ministerial apprenticeship system again shows us the dynamics of educational institutional arrangements as they respond to changing cultural and social needs and circumstances. It also reminds us that much of early American education involved apprenticeship—even for those few individuals who completed college and then sought additional training in preparation for a professional career. This complex interplay between the life course of individuals and the constantly evolving institutional educational opportunities available to them helps to make the study of early American education a particularly fascinating subject.

All four of these essays have pointed to important new directions that the study of early American education might take. They have also provided some useful models of how such undertakings might be initiated and how the results might be presented to a broader audience. Only time will tell whether future scholars will pursue more vigorously and intelligently the study of colonial education as Bailyn had urged. Given the high quality and substantial number of essays that were submitted for this special issue, grounds exist for cautious optimism.