The Common School: 1770–1890

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In the aftermath of the Revolution, a newly independent America confronted one of its most daunting challenges: how to build a united nation out of thirteen disparate colonies. This program profiles the passionate crusade launched by Thomas Jefferson and continued by Noah Webster, Horace Mann, and others to create a common system of tax-supported schools that would mix people of different backgrounds and reinforce the bonds of democracy. A wealth of research illustrates how this noble experiment—the foundation of the young republic—was a radical idea opposed from the start by racial prejudice and fears of taxation.

Radical Idea of Free Education:

Besides conjuring memories from our childhood, our schools fight important battles for democracy itself. Free education for all Americans is not a built-in right granted by the Constitution.

Colonial Education:

In the pre-revolutionary colonies, the largest towns provide schools but elsewhere education is not free or public. Most people are educated just enough to read the Bible and the newspaper.

Building a Nation:

George Washington sets about building a nation out of the colonies. Noah Webster's "Blue Back Speller" establishes American language and emphasizes American history.

Thomas Jefferson:

Thomas Jefferson, convinced that the survival of democracy depends on education, fights for three years of free schooling for all children. People doubt this radical idea and are leery of taxation.

Horace Mann:

By 1840, Jefferson's dream of an educational system starts to become a reality. Horace Mann, the first Secretary of Education, rides horseback from district to district inspecting schools.

Need for Reform:

Observing dilapidated buildings, untrained teachers, inadequate books, and harsh discipline, Mann says, "The state takes better care of its livestock than its children." He takes on reform.

Common School:

Mann lobbies vigorously for a free, high quality system of education and standardizes all aspects of the Common School. He passionately believes in the equalization of all citizens through education.

Religious Conflict:

Irish Catholic immigrants find that the Protestant system is biased against them and refuse to send their children to school.

Separation of Church and State:

Great debates rage when Bishop John Hughes of New York demands proportionate city funding for Catholic schools. Books are edited for ethnic slights and elected officials sit on the school board.

Issue of Race:

Prior to the Civil War, it is a crime in the South for slaves to be educated. In the North, education is part of the freedom struggle as Frederick Douglas petitions for the end of separate schools.

Groundwork for Integration :

Robert Benjamin sues Boston for the integration of schools on behalf of his daughter, Sarah. In 1855, the first law abolishing segregation in schools is enacted by the Massachusetts' legislature.

Westward Expansion :

As Western states enter the Union, provision for free education is required in their constitutions. Education is a valuable commodity and settlers are attracted to communities with a school.

Women as Teachers:

Catherine Beecher lauds women as teachers and many young ladies make their way West. A new feminine ethic is brought to teaching along with the famous McGuffey Readers and moral stories.

Improvements and Potential :

By 1890 the United States is providing more schooling than any other country. Expanded curriculum and spelling bees are the standard but schools are still segregated.