

A Profile of School Teacher in American History

THE TEACHING PROFESSION in America is what it is today because of forces and circumstances which have been molding it since the establishment of the first school on the New England coast.

The Colonial Period

The colonial schoolmaster is unclassifiable. He was a God-fearing clergyman, he was an unmitigated rogue; he was amply paid, he was accorded a bare pittance; he made teaching a life career, he used it merely as a steppingstone; he was a classical scholar, he was all but illiterate; he was licensed by bishop or colonial governor, he was certified only by his own pretensions; he was a cultured gentleman, he was a crude-mannered yokel; he ranked with the cream of society, he was regarded as a menial. In short, he was neither a type nor a personality, but a statistical distribution represented by a skewed curve.

The schoolmasters of the colonial period may be roughly divided into three classes. There were a few men of scholarly preparation who made teaching the work of their lives, and kept up the best traditions of the free-school masters of Old England—of Mulcaster and Brinsley and Charles Hoole. Then there were young clergymen, and ministers of non-episcopalian denominations, recently from college, who taught school while waiting for a call to the pastoral office. Finally, there was a miscellaneous lot of adventurers, indented servants, educated rogues, and the like, all either mentally or morally incompetent, or both, who taught school only to keep from starving.

One writer of these early days, commenting on the abysmal ignorance of schoolmasters, said: "It is a general plague and complaint of the whole land that for one discreet and able teacher you shall find twenty ignorant and careless."

1830s: New York

I know of nothing in which this government is so deficient as it is in well qualified teachers for her elementary schools. The two great things which are wanting in this country, are, competent teachers, and a disposition on the part of parents to pay such teachers a suitable compensation. . . .

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1830s: The Old North West

“The pioneer teachers were generally adventurers from the east or from England, Scotland, or Ireland, who sought temporary employment during winter while waiting for an opening for business. Another class were men unsuccessful in trade, or who were lame or otherwise disabled. . . .”

The trustees whose duty it was to examine the teachers were, as a rule, incapable; the teacher himself was usually without education.

1830s: A Glimpse of A School Day in The Old North West

“. . . I once went to school to a retired liquor seller, who was very corpulent and sedentary in his habits. He was extraordinarily faithful in beginning early and ‘keeping’ late. School commenced at 7 in summer and 7:30 in winter. Recesses, morning and afternoon, were five minutes long, and we had one hour at noon. We were fully ten hours in school in summer. How scarcely endurable was that confinement! We had to sit on backless benches all those long days, and we wished—anxiously wished—recess or noon or night would come. Hours seemed like ages. May no generation ever be so punished again. But there was some silver lining to that cloud in my early school days. It is unreasonable to suppose that 250 pounds avoirdupois could sit in one corner of any house all day without getting sleepy. Peace to his memory. When the naps came there was relief to the school. We ever enjoyed these genial occasions, and dreaded to see the gentleman wake up. I never complained of his needed siestas.”

1850s: Rhode Island

Early in 1857 the editor of the *Rhode Island Schoolmaster* visited over one hundred schools in that state. He found twenty-eight “that were models of neatness and good order,” but he lamented the intolerable filth, tobacco spittle, and disorder that characterized some schoolrooms. He marveled over the skill and invention that had gone into the “marks, cuts, drawings, sketches, etchings, and designs” that covered the desks. The yards were littered with pieces of wood, stones, and wind-driven sweepings. The books were torn and dog-eared; the readers were minus covers and neighboring pages, arithmetics had lost half their problems, grammars had neither beginning nor end, and other books were ghosts of their original size. Yet the observant editor commended teachers and school committeemen and noted a great improvement since his previous observations.⁴

1856: Pennsylvania

Since public esteem has always been a vital factor in determining the attractiveness of a vocation, it could scarcely be expected that talented individuals would look toward education as their life career. Instead, the queer, the lazy, and the incompetent took to teaching for want of something better to do and, in spite of numerous exceptions, the schoolmasters of the early eighteen-hundreds were not so greatly respected as their colonial predecessors—and hence were not generously treated.

Not only were teachers youthful, inexperienced, and untrained, but the quality of their work was severely criticized both inside and outside of educational circles. The criticism was voiced in Pennsylvania by one educator that the services of 25 per cent of the teachers in forty-three counties (2005 out of 8035) in 1856 could better be dispensed with and that another 45 per cent was of average quality only.

. . . the situation in Pennsylvania was in all likelihood rather typical of conditions in other states.

1866: The State of New York

If poor teachers must be supported at public expense I say do it, but keep them out of our schools. We cannot support them and spoil our children too. It would be better and cheaper to support them out of the schoolhouse than in it.‡

A great majority of our teachers are barely passable.§

Of 320 teachers (69 males and 251 females), 5 of the former and 15 of the latter follow teaching as a permanent employment.||

The proportion of male to female teachers is about 1 to 7, with only 20 professional teachers in 91 schools. Of 5 out of 6 it is said that while they give a very good rote illustration in figures and know well the relative geographical positions of this earth (?), they have no acquaintance with history or general literature, no thought beyond the frivolities of life; in short, they want that

thought, learning, and preparation which alone can fit them for their high trust.*

Of the 217 teachers employed during the year, 55 were males and 162 females. Twenty-eight of the 217 may be said to follow teaching as a profession. I have known a first-class teacher lose a situation because a young and inexperienced girl would serve for two shillings less per week.†

Of the teachers in this district last year, 74 per cent. were females. It is almost, not quite, literally true of them all, that the females teach until they can find husbands, the males till they can find some more profitable employment.‡

During last year I have refused twelve applications (for licenses). My observation during the past summer in visiting the schools, leads me to believe that it would have been better had I refused at least three times that number.§

Most of the teachers are young and inexperienced.||

In reading, more of them (the teachers) make bad readers than there are who teach to read well.¶

Nearly two-thirds of the female teachers are quite too young for the business. They teach only in the summer, and do the *cheap teaching* for the six month school.**

Teaching offered no rewards sufficient to attract men of education or capacity, and it sometimes seemed as if a master's chief reason for taking up teaching was inability to earn anything in any other way.

Clifton Johnson, Old-Time Schools and School-Books, NY: 1904.

1860s: "Are You the Schoolmaster?" (N.J.)

We call to mind a public school which we visited not many years ago in the south-eastern part of New Jersey. It was at the middle of a warm summer afternoon. The school building was very dirty, and was filled with that unwholesome, suffocating atmosphere which so many of our boys and girls are doomed to breathe. The teacher, a man of sixty perhaps (said to be a convert to Mormonism) was barefoot, and the legs of his pantaloons rolled up half way to the knees, exposing a surface unused to water. His whole appearance was slovenly and forbidding in the extreme, and what wonder that the group around him were dirty, ill-mannered, and ignorant.

* When Stouber, Pastor Oberlin's predecessor in the Ban de la Roche, first settled in that district he found the schoolhouse a miserable cottage, the scholars a number of ragged children, and the master an infirm, crippled old man. Entering the cottage, Stouber said:

"Are you the schoolmaster, my good friend?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what do you teach the children?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Nothing! How's that?"

"Because I know nothing myself."

"Why then are you put here as a schoolmaster?"

"Why, I had been taking care of the Walbach pigs for a great number of years, and when I became too old and infirm for that, they sent me here to take care of the children."

The 1900s

1919

WANTED—BARBERS AND TEACHERS

The want ads printed below were sent to the Field Secretary of the N. E. A. by an army officer stationed at Raleigh, N. C., with the following comment:

"I am sending you herewith a clipping from the January 13, 1919, issue of the "News and Observer," Josephus Daniel's organ in Raleigh, N. C. You will note that these two want ads appear in the same issue. What incentive is there for a person to prepare himself to teach in a high school when a colored barber in the same town, who very probably cannot sign his own name, can make as much in two weeks as a high school teacher can make in a month?"

WANTED—Colored barber for white trade in camp town; permanent position. We guarantee \$25 per week. Right man can make \$35 per week. Let us hear from you at once. Fleming & Elliott, 6 Market Square, Fayetteville, N. C. 11—3t.

WANTED—Teacher of Latin for the Lumberton High School, Lumberton, N. C. Salary \$70. W. H. Cale, Superintendent. 11—3t.

Teachers Contract, Term 1923

This is an agreement between Miss _____ teacher,
and the Board of Education of the _____ School,
whereby Miss _____ agrees to teach in the
_____ School for a period of eight months,
beginning Sept, 1, 1923. The Board of Education agrees to pay
Miss _____ the sum of \$75 per month.
Miss _____ agrees:

1. Not to get married. This contract becomes null and void immediately if the teacher marries.
2. Not to keep company with men.
3. To be at home between the hours of 8 pm and 6 am unless in attendance at a school function.
4. Not to loiter downtown in ice-cream stores.
5. Not to leave town at any time without the permission of the Chairman of the Board of Trustees.
6. Not to smoke cigarettes. This contract becomes null and void immediately if the teacher is found smoking.
7. Not to drink beer, wine or whiskey. This contract becomes null and void immediately if the teacher is found drinking beer, wine or whiskey.
8. Not to ride in a carriage or automobile with any man except her brother or father.
9. Not to dress in bright colors.
10. Not to dye her hair.
11. To wear at least two petticoats.
12. Not to wear dresses more than two inches above the ankles.
13. To keep the schoolroom clean:
 - A. To sweep the classroom floor at least once daily.
 - B. To scrub the classroom floor with hot water and soap at least once weekly.
 - C. To clean the blackboard at least once daily.
 - D. To start the fire at 7:00 so the room will be warm at 8:00 am when the children arrive.
14. Not to use face powder, mascara or paint the lips.

1906, Superintendent Maxwell, New York School District

Again, lack of appreciation results from meagerness of pay and insecurity of tenure in office. Especially is this true in America, where commercialism holds far too wide a sway in every walk of life. A man with a very small salary will not as a rule wield any great amount of influence in the community, and particularly so when it is known that at the end of a year he may be "kicked out" by some one who knows nothing about teaching, in order to make room for a successor with no higher qualifications, but with a stronger "pull" than himself.

1960s

Too often it is assumed that solutions to our educational deficiencies lie in buildings, equipment, administration, or salaries.

But however important other factors may be, and whatever else may be done to effect improvement, the quality of education in this nation will never be better than the intellectual caliber of our teachers and the education they themselves receive in our colleges and universities.

The blunt fact is that many of our teachers are not properly qualified to handle the responsibility we have placed on them. This is our basic educational problem. Many of our teachers, for instance, lack native talent for teaching. It is a national scandal, moreover, that large numbers of them are inadequately prepared in the subject matter that they teach, as well as in the elements of a genuinely liberal education. This is, in my view, the major weakness of American Education.

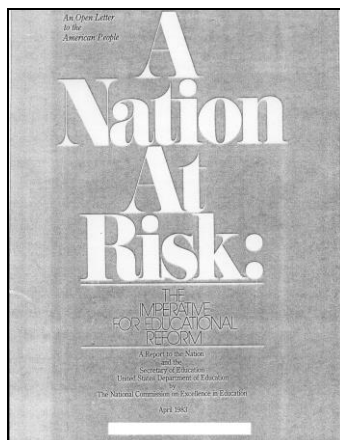
1980s

Ultimately, quality begins in the classroom; the teacher is the key. Unfortunately, we currently have severe shortages of qualified mathematics, science and technology teachers throughout the Nation, and many of today's teachers in these fields badly need retraining.

Many of the teachers in elementary schools are not qualified to teach mathematics and science for even 30 minutes a day. A significant fraction of our secondary school teachers are called upon to work in subjects for which they were never trained....

1983

"A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" **An Open Letter to the American People**



Findings Regarding Teaching

The Commission found that not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; that teacher preparation programs need substantial improvement; that the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exists in key fields.

- Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students.
- The teacher preparation curriculum is weighted heavily with courses in “educational methods” at the expense of courses in subjects to be taught. A survey of 1,350 institutions training teachers indicated that 41 percent of the time of elementary school teacher candidates is spent in education courses, which reduces the amount of time available for subject matter courses.
- The average salary after 12 years of teaching is only \$17,000 per year, and many teachers are required to supplement their income with part-time and summer employment. In addition, individual teachers have little influence in such critical professional decisions as, for example, textbook selection.
- Despite widespread publicity about an overpopulation of teachers, severe shortages of certain kinds of teachers exist: in the fields of mathematics, science, and foreign languages; and among specialists in education for gifted and talented, language minority, and handicapped students.
- The shortage of teachers in mathematics and science is particularly severe. A 1981 survey of 45 States revealed shortages of mathematics teachers in 43 States, critical shortages of earth sciences teachers in 33 States, and of physics teachers everywhere.
- Half of the newly employed mathematics, science, and English teachers are not qualified to teach these subjects; fewer than one-third of U.S. high schools offer physics taught by qualified teachers.

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