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Race, Childhood, and Native American Boarding Schools: A Case Study of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute

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Race, Childhood, and Native American Boarding Schools: A case study of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute

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ABSTRACT

Education is a powerful political tool that is consistently employed to manipulate youth in order to secure a desired future. This thesis project examines this broad theme through an examination of Native American assimilative education and a look at Thomas Jefferson's ideological impact on the American education system.

The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute began accepting Native American students in 1878 and represents one of the most influential schools in developing assimilative education tactics. This essay examines a published volume of records of graduate students to demonstrate the connections between Hampton's philosophy and nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of race and childhood. These connections mark the significance of education in the settler-colonial project.

Thomas Jefferson's brief correspondence with Andrew Alexander in 1801 serves as the basis for the second essay in this project. Jefferson's work on education in Virginia and his lasting legacy make him a necessary figure to consider when examining the foundations of American education. His vision of an education system that would sustain the American republic sheds light on the profound influence education has on the political makeup of the United States both historically and today. This paper also addresses the use of the memory of Jefferson as a rhetorical device in twenty first-century political discourse and suggests how his work on education should be employed in those efforts.
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Preface

The following essays were the result of an interest in the early iterations of American education and its role in the U.S. political system. In historical studies, schools as institutions can provide great insight into how culture evolves and can highlight prominent social and political issues. In my first essay, the Hampton Institute serves as a window into nineteenth-century race theory and reveals its profound affect on Native American communities. The second essay uses Thomas Jefferson's ideas to explore the centrality of education in the republican experiment. Together, these works demonstrate the utility of using schools as the focus of historical inquiries. In both works, I deal with race, culture, and assimilation. These broad terms are foundational to my understanding of the history of American education, and represent the underlying themes that bring depth to these stories.

The social construction of race can be approached from many different directions. Race is not only a component of identity formation, but it is also involved in the creation and maintenance of hegemony. It is deeply intertwined with concepts of identity, power, gender, and class, to name a few. For the purposes of this project, race as it functions under the wide umbrella of settler-colonialism is particularly significant. Although race is inseparable from gender, class, etc., the work on Native American boarding schools demonstrates the relationship between race and
childhood. My conclusions rest upon the influence of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Ann Laura Stoler. Stoler’s works take Foucault’s idea of biopolitics and apply it to specific histories and societies. The biopolitics of U.S. settler-colonialism are revealed through the ways in which Native American boarding schools racialized Native American children. As Stoler puts it, “the power and authority wielded by macropolitics are not lodged in abstract institutions but in their management of meanings, their construction of social categories, and their microsites of rule.”¹ For this project, race represents the means through which those in power managed meanings and constructed social categories. This was done through the colonial institution of boarding schools.

Closely related to this, culture factors heavily into the ideas underlying this project. Both pieces use culture as a means of connecting the politics of the United States and individual experiences of those under the influence of those politics. For instance, the first piece on Native American boarding schools uses culture to describe the factors that contributed to government policies and the situations those policies created. These factors mainly include common ideologies and beliefs and the daily practices associated with them. The second piece demonstrates how Jefferson’s political views dictated his vision of American education.

and thus the daily lives of Americans. In this sense, culture refers to the ideas and beliefs being taught, the practices that result from those ideas and beliefs, and the politics that motivated their implementation.

Assimilation serves as another crucial term for this project that brings together race and culture. During the nineteenth-century, culture and race were viewed as closely tied together. Race was often used as a marker for those in need of cultural assimilation. In this way, the term assimilation in one respect means an attempt to eliminate an undesirable race. In another respect, assimilation implies the elimination of the culture associated with that race. While there may appear to be a distinction between the two, in the context of the nineteenth-century, they are really one and the same. With this in mind, cultural assimilation can be viewed as an attempt to eliminate an undesired race without an outright admission of violent and malicious intent, even if that was occurring.

Race, culture, and assimilation are all bound together in this project. This look at American education hopes to scratch the surface on the ways in which race, childhood, and political thinking have shaped American culture. Building off the ideas of thinkers such as Stoler, this project attempts to use educational institutions as a lens for understanding the social dynamics of a given time in American history.
Race, Childhood, and Native American Boarding Schools: A case study of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute

Government run boarding schools for Native American children represent one chapter in the long and ongoing narrative of the subjugation of Native peoples in the United States. Decades of oppression and abuse characterize the histories of these institutions. Boarding schools not only affected individual children and their families, but also altered communities through forcing decisions that lead to systems of dependence. The choice to send children to boarding schools was often one of necessity for communities too impoverished to provide for their children. Required to abandon all evidence of their cultures, children were taught how to assimilate into white society—part of an effort to “kill the Indian to save the man.” Boarding schools were born from the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ (BIA) policy of assimilation. The decision to attempt to assimilate Native Americans through educating children directly connects to late nineteenth-century conceptions of race and childhood. Both the ideology and practice of assimilative education demonstrate this development.

Specifically, the Hampton Institute of Virginia is representative of both assimilative education and general thinking regarding Native Americans. Hampton began accepting Indian students under the

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leadership of Samuel Chapman Armstrong in 1878. The records entitled *Twenty-Two Years' Work of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute at Hampton, Virginia: Records of Negro and Indian Graduates and ex-Students* published by Hampton in 1893 is the primary focus of this case study. Hampton's approach to educating Native American children, as is revealed in part through these records, was driven by nineteenth-century ideas of race and childhood. An examination of these ideas, a look at some relevant scholarship on Native American boarding schools, and a brief analysis of how ideas of race and childhood operated in boarding schools across the nation provides the historical context within which Hampton's approach is understood.

The assimilation policies of the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) laid the foundation upon which the Hampton Institute was built. These policies, in turn were dictated by nineteenth-century definitions of race. The work of anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) demonstrates how whites viewed Native Americans during the advent of assimilation tactics. His work "provided scientific legitimation for the contention that Native Americans could be assimilated," thus giving the U.S. government justification for its perceived hegemony.3 Morgan's theory set up a civilization-savagism binary that placed different races on

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a scale beginning with savagery and progressing to civilization. Every race developed according to the same pattern, but at different times in history. According to Morgan, white populations had achieved civilization whereas Native Americans had not. However, in order for Native Americans to assimilate into white, civilized Americans, reformers needed a means for accelerating Native Americans’ progression. For the BIA, boarding schools became one of the answers to this “Indian problem.” The reason they turned to schools as a key mechanism in the “civilizing process” is connected to Victorian concepts of childhood.

Victorian America idolized the child as symbol of innocence—a tabula rasa yet to be tainted by society. In this way, the child was malleable and completely subject to outside influences. In addition, Victorian rhetoric championed the child as the avenue through which authorities could craft the future of America. This placed the child in a valuable yet vulnerable position. Their innocence made them equally susceptible to good and evil, yet their potential was boundless. For Native American children, their blank slate status implied, for whites, their potential for either assimilating into white civilization or continued Indian savagery.

Morgan’s race logic was applied differently to children and to adults; for the latter, race was seen as a fixed status. For children, race
was flexible and could change with behavior. In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein argues that “by the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly.”

This innocence “was raced white” yet “[was] transferable to surrounding people and things, and that property made it politically usable.” This transferability of white childhood innocence is key to the ideology of assimilative education. Because society believed the Indian race had the potential to achieve civilization, Native American children were ideal recipients of this transfer of whiteness. This idea that Native American children could be rescued from savagery and advance their race toward civilization resulted in the boarding schools program.

Understanding these nineteenth-century perceptions of race, childhood, and civilization helps to explain the popularity of assimilative education. Once the BIA adopted the goal of assimilation—rather than eradicating Native populations altogether—the “Indian problem” became a mission to civilize, with assimilation tactics directed toward adult populations differing from those designed for children. For children, education quickly became the favored method of forced assimilation. From 1880 to 1900, federal funding for Native American education rose from

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6 Ibid., 6.
seventy-five thousand dollars to three million dollars and the attendance of Native American children in schools became mandatory.\textsuperscript{7}

Government efforts at “civilizing” adults often did not focus on cultural assimilation, but on manipulating Native communities into a position of forced subjugation. The results of these efforts instigated changes in Native communities that created their close yet problematic ties with boarding schools. For instance, the BIA established the reservation system as a part of their assimilation policy. Under the guise of giving Native communities their own lands the creation of reservations represented the codification of massive losses of land and sovereignty. The BIA forced Native cultures into a separate geographical and juridical space in order to push Native adults to the fringes of society without any intention of providing individualized assimilation efforts that would give them tools to succeed in white society.

Children, on the other hand, were the recipients of attempts at cultural assimilation via boarding schools. This demonstrates the flexibility with which the BIA perceived Native children’s racial identities. If education could make individual children advance beyond their race’s position, on Morgan’s scale, then a child’s cultural identity and racial identity were two separate categories. Ancestry did not necessarily predetermine a child’s race. Instead, any child could be rescued from his inferior racial background and enter a new category. However, the term

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 3.
“race” for adults, who were already engrained in a particular way of life, presupposed the culture commonly associated with their racial group.

This racial flexibility was approached differently by early creators of Native American boarding schools. Two of the more well-known boarding schools—the Carlisle Indian School of Pennsylvania and the Hampton Institute of Virginia—represent two schools of thought regarding the implications of flexible ideas about race. In each of their visions, assimilation meant the cultural integration of Native society as a whole, not of an individual. Richard Henry Pratt of the Carlisle School believed this process could occur for Native Americans within a generation.8 Therefore, the most effective schools would be far from reservations and completely cut ties between Native children and their culture. Pratt believed this would expedite the development of the individual and thus bring the race closer to a civilized status more quickly. On the other hand, Samuel Chapman Armstrong of the Hampton Institute believed that Native Americans were too far behind whites on the scale of civilization for assimilation to occur so rapidly. Instead, he believed that assimilation through education would be a multi-generational process. In order to guide this process, he envisioned schools on reservations that would encourage the methodical evolution of the Indian race over time. Either way, education as means of capitalizing on
children's undefined racial identity would ultimately lead to the full assimilation of Native Americans into white society.

In this way, both methods were designed to achieve the same result. Not only were schools meant to civilize individuals and populations, but also to use the youngest members of Native society to secure the future acquisition of their lands. The General Allotment Act, or Dawes Act, of 1887 demonstrates how this occurred. The process of land acquisition that resulted from this legislation perpetuated the paternalism between the American and Native governments through the use of the generations affected by boarding schools. In order to encourage the American practices of individual land ownership and agriculture, the Dawes Act divided reservation lands into allotments that the American government distributed to tribe members. As David Wallace Adams argues, the goals behind this legislation included “smash[ing] tribalism, transform[ing] hunters into farmers, and grant[ing] Indians U.S. citizenship.”

This, of course, was a forceful action designed to eliminate Native cultures from America. In addition, the title for each allotment would not officially become the property of Native Americans living on the land for a twenty five-year period. At this point, the children who attended boarding schools would theoretically have developed into Americanized citizens who could own and operate the land without regard to Native customs. This, in

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turn, explains why boarding schools emphasized “individualization and citizenship training.” In the end, however, the Dawes Act did not result in Native Americans owning and operating land in an Americanized fashion, but in the eventual selling of allotments to white settlers and thus the loss of reservation land. Educating Native Americans to become citizen farmers running allotted lands failed. Instead, Native American children did not become civilized in the way boarding schools desired, and Native American communities still struggle with the aftermath of allotment today.

As the Dawes Act demonstrates, boarding schools served as a means of maintaining the colonial nature of the relationship between the American and Native governments. Not only could the American government use their legal authority over reservations to require Native children to go to school, but they could also use that school in attempts to transform those children into citizen-farmers. In cases where this authority was not enforced, communities often felt boarding schools were the only solution to removing their children from the impoverished conditions the reservation system sustained. Indeed, the goal of boarding schools was to “civilize” Native children so that they could perpetuate the process of transforming Native communities from the colony-like status of a reservation to a culturally integrated community in the mother country.

10 Ibid., 18.
Both the broad historiography of Native American boarding schools and the case study of *Twenty-Two Years’ Work* demonstrate educational institutions went about achieving this goal. The memory of boarding schools remains fresh in many Native communities, as the rich and varied body of works on the topic suggests. The full effects of boarding schools are still being played out for Native Americans as communities continue to struggle with their relationships with the U.S. government. The historiography on boarding schools contains stories of oppression and resistance that both reveal the atrocities Native Americans were forced to endure and empower them in their reactions to those abuses. The following works represent a variety of approaches and methodologies for studying BIA boarding schools that, in combination, paint an informed understanding of the schools, their students, and the communities they interacted with.

In *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families 1900-1940* (1998), Brenda Child tells the story of how government run boarding schools affected Native individuals, families, and communities. Breaking away from previous scholars’ emphasis on former students’ recollections, Child uses letters written by American Indians both during and after their time at boarding schools to construct a history from their point of view. She focuses mainly on Ojibwe students, but does so as a case study of Native communities’ relationships with boarding schools on a larger
scale. Her work brings to light the multifaceted nature of boarding schools’ impact on Native American individuals and communities. She describes how harsh conditions on reservations forced many families to send children they could not afford to feed to boarding schools. This, in turn, reworked the fabric of Ojibwe culture by disrupting the tradition of absorbing orphans into family networks. She discusses the severe psychological affect assimilation policies had on individual students, telling stories of students becoming ashamed of or embarrassed by their culture, even their Native names. The devastating loss of life that occurred at some schools also comprises part of Child’s history. She always keeps her study focused on reservation communities and she explains the anxiety surrounding the rampant diseases in boarding schools. Overall Child’s study provides a comprehensive look at early twentieth-century boarding schools. The emphasis on the Ojibwe nation in particular proves useful in demonstrating how specific practices affected different Native cultures in diverse ways.

Amelia Katanski’s *Learning to Write “Indian:” The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature* (2005) provides a nuanced analysis of the relationships between language, literature, identity, and culture and how boarding schools affected these in Native individuals and communities. Her work looks at written representations of boarding school students through memoirs, autobiographies, and contemporary
works to demonstrate how boarding school students used the English they were forced to learn in conjunction with their Native languages to create new identities. Katanski focuses on the philosophy of Richard Henry Pratt and the Carlisle school to portray the nature of boarding schools at the turn of the century. She argues that Pratt’s goals of eliminating tribal identity through forcing children to abandon their native language failed. She uses representations of Carlisle students produced by the school alongside accounts written by students to demonstrate how students found ways subvert oppression. She uses works of former students to provide specific examples of ways in which they reinvented their identities in a way that both preserved their Native roots and did not deny their experiences at school. She concludes with a look at contemporary works by Native authors published from the early 1970s to the late 1990s. Katanski posits that these works demonstrate that boarding schools spurred an increase in tribal nationalism, a stronger sense of Pan-Indian identity, and greater desires for sovereignty. Her work uses literary criticism in a way that looks at an oppressive assimilation strategy – the forced loss of language – and uses it to situate boarding schools both in Native American history and current Native American identity.

K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa McCarty’s collaborative work “To Remain an Indian:” Lessons in Democracy From a Century of Native American Education (2006) provides a basic history of Native American
education in the twentieth century. Their work provides an excellent example of a work that connects the historical past to current issues. The book opens with a clarifying chapter that addresses key terms and concepts needed to understand their history and candidly lays out their framework and scholarly perspectives. Employing a Pan-Indian scope, the evidence comes from various tribes and experiences. The authors seek to overturn the stereotype of the Native American as a one-dimensional learner and challenge the western assumption that formal education is better than informal education. Examinations of how education played a role in Native communities both in conjunction with and apart from federal schools provide a unique contextualization of boarding schools. They portray an evolution of federal schooling over time and argue that the inconsistencies in the progression away from oppressive policies indicate a perpetuating fear of Indians. They see the Meriam Report of 1928 as a turning point for Native American education. According to the authors, this marked the rise of bilingual and bicultural education. However, they take issue with current efforts to regulate Native education and emphasize the necessity for further social change.

Adrea Lawrence’s Lessons From an Indian Day School: Negotiating Colonization in Northern New Mexico, 1902-1907 (2011) provides an example of another methodological approach. As a region-based microhistory, Lawrence’s work focuses on Office of Indian Affairs (OIA)
educators in New Mexico and their Pueblo students. Her work breaks from recent historiography in drawing her primary evidence from correspondence between Clara True, a teacher at an Indian day school in Santa Clara, and Clinton Crandall, the superintendent of the Santa Fe Indian School. According to Lawrence, this focus is due to a lack of Pueblo resources. However, she manages to keep the Pueblo people the central subjects of her study and gives them full agency despite the limitations of her sources. She discusses the geographic and cultural makeup of the Santa Clara Reservation, the relationship between Pueblos and the American government, and the colonizing effect of OIA institutions. This history is in part drawn from True and Crandall’s correspondence and culminates in the author’s conclusion that the term “education” changed in meaning to reflect historical contingencies.

These works reveal the context of abuse and resistance that characterized many Native American boarding schools, including Hampton. The ways in which nineteenth-century ideas of race and childhood are manifest in boarding school policies are manifold. The ultimate goal of these policies, as previously demonstrated, was to make the Native child more white. This goal, and the strategies employed to achieve it, is revealed both at Hampton and elsewhere. The evidence from Twenty-Two Years’ Work provides a comprehensive look at the inner
workings of one of the more prominent Native American boarding schools, and its evidence is corroborated by evidence from other schools as well.

Reports from Hampton graduates reveal the linkage between teaching strategies and goals of assimilation. For instance, after returning to his community upon his graduation in 1882, Hampton graduate Thomas J. Alford helped a U.S. Special Agent in the process of allotting lands, serving as the head of a surveying crew. In reporting his experience to Hampton, Alford said of his tribe, “They are as much ‘land hungry’ now as their white brethren across the line in Oklahoma.”11 The Hampton report identifies this as a sign of progress. Charles Doxson, a graduate of the class of 1889, is lauded as another success story by Hampton’s standards. In his record, Doxson expresses the wish that “the New York Indians could avail themselves of the advantages of the Dawse Bill.”12 The work that graduates like Alford and Doxson did in their communities represents how the assimilation tactics of allotment and education worked together in the effort to eliminate Native cultures in America. This cultural assimilation was provided by the mother government’s education system and meant to serve as the stepping-stone to full governmental authority of Native lands and communities. In order to do this, Native American schools employed strategies aimed at eliminating all aspects of

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12 Ibid., 281.
Native identity from their students’ lives and designed an environment of complete cultural isolation. The methods they employed link directly to the ideologies of race and childhood that instigated assimilative education.

According to the memoirs of Edwin L. Chalcraft, the superintendent of a boarding school on the Chehalis Reservation from 1883 to 1889, the strategy of educating Native American children “was to give the younger generations academic and industrial instruction, to fit them for life as individual citizens in any community.” Older students, however, “whose native ideals and habits were too fully entrenched in their lives to be changed,” did not receive such instruction. The education in boarding schools served two main purposes: cultural isolation via academic teaching, and preparing students for citizenship via industrial training. “Citizenship” in this instance refers to the government’s goal of developing land-owning farmers. An analysis of the specifics of this educational strategy demonstrates the extreme lengths to which boarding schools felt they had to go to rescue the Native child from his or her racial limitations. In order to inculcate students with whiteness, educators focused on eliminating aspects of Native culture tied to personal identity—such as language, physical appearance, and diet—and forcing daily practices that mirrored the positions Natives would ideally take in white society.

14 Ibid., 20.
Practices that targeted personal identity were often very traumatic for Native children. Their academic education focused on language, as Native languages were seen as one of the strongest means of maintaining cultural ties between children and their communities. As early as 1868, the BIA put forth efforts to eliminate Native languages entirely from schools.\textsuperscript{15} Through the act of speaking their families’ languages, students could engage with the lives they had in their own societies. The experience of speaking their native tongue was often one “of the last symbols of home.”\textsuperscript{16} Through forbidding Native languages, schools thought they could disrupt any potential communication between or melding of cultures and prevented the child’s return to savagery after their schooling.

At the Hampton Institute, language was one of the key means of charting the progress of students and evaluating the effectiveness of the institution. A bulletin about Hampton produced by the Department of the Interior in 1923, demonstrates the intent behind forcing students to abandon their Native languages. The thinking this publication subscribes to reflects the special role of the child in the civilization project:

\begin{quote}
A white boy who has been in school until he is perhaps 20, and in that time has had to master, in addition to the usual studies, a new language, and accept an entirely strange system of living, is not expected to raise the standards of his home community to any very great extent: the Indian is.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Curiel, “Social Theory and Disjuncture,” 225.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{17} Walton C. John, \textit{Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute: It’s evolution and contribution to education as a federal land-grant college} (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1923), 92.
This publication identifies language as key to this responsibility to civilize a community. According to the Bureau of Education, the Hampton Institute failed if it produced graduates who could not

speak English well enough to act as interpreter, understand the Bible, and teach in Sunday school, as well as be prepared to advise in the councils of his people regarding various phases of their legal standing and land questions.\(^\text{18}\)

This demonstrates the centrality of language in land acquisition. Despite the manifold factors that contributed to the loss of reservation land, the Department of the Interior claims in this document that as a result of Hampton graduates employing English skills as interpreters and legal advisors, “English is becoming an intertribal language, reservations are being broken up, and the sales of land bring white neighbors into every community.”\(^\text{19}\)

As one means of eliminating Native language, children were forced to abandon their names in exchange for randomly selected English ones at Hampton and other schools. Not only did names carry different meaning in Native cultures (for example, in Lakota and Dakota communities, names were often earned), but they also represented a way for children to identify themselves as Native Americans. Through stripping children of their names, schools tried to take away the child's ability to articulate his or her cultural

\(^{18}\) Ibid.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
background. If they gave them English names, the thinking was that children would be forced to re-evaluate their own identity in relation to the world around them. On the other hand, this opened the door for resistance. If a student chose to continue using their Native name in private, they undermined one of the key strategies of their oppressors.

Language as well as other cultural areas of concern were clearly reflected in *Twenty Two Years' Work* and its reports of Hampton graduates. Referring to graduates by English names only, each report focuses on their contributions to their communities. For the most part, this meant noting how much land and livestock they owned or their work as teachers. Their standards of evaluation measured the amount of agricultural production or white American cultural production graduates were involved in. For teachers, this implied religious as well as linguistic teaching. Beyond teaching Sunday school specifically, religious messages were inherent in the work graduates ideally did, while speaking English, in their communities. Josephine Barnaby of the class of 1887 wrote that her aim was to teach “above all, that God cares for them and is their friend.” Only rarely did graduates describe teaching experiences without mentioning their work in Sunday schools. In Hampton’s

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20 Ibid., 225.
21 Ludlow, *Twenty-Two Years’ Work*, 245.
depiction of their institution’s success, an adoption of Christianity in lieu of Native religious beliefs and English as opposed to Native languages appears throughout the report.

Beyond focusing on essential elements of Native culture, such as language, names, and religious beliefs, boarding schools targeted all aspects of the individual that could allow students to maintain a Native American personal identity. As Chalcraft’s words demonstrate, this needed to occur early in life to be successful. The racial limbo of the child allowed cultural isolation to bring the child out of the savage constrictions of his or her race. Hampton, like all schools, emphasized personal appearance. Excellent evidence of this emphasis comes from the photographs of Tom Torlino, a Navajo student at the Carlisle Indian School. They demonstrate how detail-oriented the elimination of Native American culture could be in boarding schools:22

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The first photograph was taken upon Torlino’s matriculation at Carlisle and the second upon his departure. In these we can see the forced shift in a few of the main cultural elements that James A. Curiel lays out as crucial to the personal identity of Native Americans in the late nineteenth century.

The first physical element of identity that Curiel mentions is hairstyle. He explains that “for ‘white men’ short hair was a symbol of modern civilization” and explains how for different tribes, hairstyle often represented national identity.23 For instance, for Torlino, his long hair would have distinguished him as a Navajo, rather than from another tribe that traditionally kept their hair shorter. In the second photograph, this distinction is lost.

The act of cutting hair was also tied to cultural practices and often was symbolic of grief or humiliation. Therefore, when a child had their hair cut at boarding school, not only did they look less like they would have in their Native community, but they also may have been experiencing something that had social meaning beyond outward appearance. Not only did the cutting of hair separate them from Native culture visually, but it did so emotionally as well.

Forced changed in diet served as another means of affecting the physical and cultural existence of Native American children at school. The food children received at boarding schools was so different to them that their diet often had adverse effects on their health. In addition to forced physical labor and overcrowding, malnutrition lead to high mortality rates in Indian schools. Many Native communities were accustomed to high protein diets that consisted of various types of meat and localized produce. At boarding schools, however, highly processed foods and foods high in carbohydrates and sugars constituted their typical diet. The lack of nutrients in this diet, in combination with the limited amount some schools allowed students, sometimes lead to deathly illness or starvation. Beyond these physical effects, the forced change in diet also represented yet another form of cultural isolation. Children were forced to abandon their “primitive” diet and their malnutrition was often blamed on their dislike for the food provided for them.

24 Dejong, “Unless They Are Kept Alive.”
At Hampton, the health issues caused by diet and unsanitary conditions were attributed to Native racial and cultural inferiority. Hampton applied their perceptions of Native Americans as a savage race in order to account for the results of their own abusive practices. In *Twenty-Two Years’ Work*, the resident physician Martha Waldron espoused this belief. She notes the overall improvement of health conditions at Hampton since its founding but attributes this partly to “the fact that blanket Indians are now seldom brought” to the school.25 (The term “blanket Indian” was a derogatory descriptor for Native Americans who exemplified their tribal cultures.) Furthermore, she blames health and cleanliness issues to cultural practices and innate savagery:

> It is easy to forget how great a problem to the Indian, common, every-day matters, which are second nature to us, may be. To learn to eat, drink, and sleep correctly, to wear clothes, and learn to adapt them to changing seasons, seems at first a simple matter; but it ceases to seem so when we have seen an Indian eat enough at one meal to last him all day, . . . to sleep in a room admitting little air as its construction will permit.”26

She continues listing what she perceives as unhealthy practices, identifying only one practice in the long list as “not a natural, but an acquired one.”27 Furthermore, when describing children with fatal

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25 Ludlow, *Twenty-Two Years’ Work*, 494.
26 Ibid., 495.
27 Ibid.
diseases, she claims that “the Indian does not cling to life” and thus are more likely to succumb to illness because of racial inferiority.  

In addition to these physical and emotional changes, the Hampton Institute’s founder, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, believed industrial and agricultural training was one of the most effective ways to assimilate Native children into white society. Armstrong’s vision and Hampton’s mission can be summed up by this axiom Armstrong espoused in 1872:

The temporal salvation of the colored race for some time to come is to be won out of the ground. Skillful agriculturists and mechanics are needed rather than poets and orators.

At many schools, this meant “work about the school and farm” for boys. Girls were taught to “mend clothing and make new garments” and “[attend] to other domestic affairs.” This attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was intended to work against female leadership in Native communities through teaching young girls to function in a patrilineal society even though many Native communities were matrilineal.

Especially after the Dawes Act, agricultural work became the main focus of vocational training in boarding schools. Children had physical labor scheduled into their highly regimented, military-like days. Schools believed that in order to achieve assimilation, Native children had to

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28 Ibid., 496.
endure these extreme circumstances that sometimes led to high mortality rates. In the Victorian mind, this was necessary to prevent Native American children from continuing the “savagery” of their race. As Bernstein notes, childhood “innocence was not a literal state of being unraced but was, rather, the performance of not-noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories.”31 Through forcing children to practice white culture, boarding schools believed they were giving Native children the innocence of white children.

Despite the intentions of Victorian-inspired reformers, many scholars have pointed out the failures of boarding schools to break the ties between Native American children and their cultural practices. Although days were fully structured and behaviors strictly scripted, children found ways to subvert authority and maintain familiarity with their Native culture. The most apparent way in which children maintained their cultural heritage was through trips home. These trips were regulated, rare, and by no means universal, but the act of returning to their community gave some children the opportunity to create concrete ties with their families.

Children also practiced elements of their Native culture when the school’s authorities could not see and punish them. For instance, Chalcraft remembered children maintaining their proficiency in their Native language:

31 Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 6.
"We noticed the pupils were using the Indian language almost exclusively while playing and at other times when they thought none of the employees could hear them, notwithstanding they were urged to use the language they were learning in the school-rooms."32

Despite the efforts of their educators, children worked to maintain this linguistic tie with home. John Troutman’s study in Indian Blues: Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879-1934 explains another aspect of culture that children used to maintain a connection with home. He notes that behind closed doors, children often used dance to communicate with one another in a different way. Children could maintain their knowledge of dance while at school and use that as a way to reintegrate with their communities upon returning home. Furthermore, students from different tribes would teach one another new dances with new meanings, adding yet another layer of rebellion to their actions. Not only were they maintaining their own cultural ties, but they were also helping others do so while learning of new “uncivilized” practices.33 In any private space children found, outside of the classroom where they were forced to speak English or the cafeteria where they were forced to change their diet, students could make their own choices about the culture they practiced.

Twenty Two Years’ Work specifically analyzes the success rates of its graduates, giving a peek into their lives after Hampton. This gives an impression of how effectively they executed their goals, and how much

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32 Ibid., 25.
graduates chose to practice their Native cultures. In their official evaluation of 460 graduates, Hampton produced the following figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfactory, 408</th>
<th>Excellent, 98</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good, 219</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair, 91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointing, 52</td>
<td>Poor, 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad, 17</td>
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*Excellent:* “those who have had exceptional advantages and used them faithfully, or those who by great earnestness and pluck have won an equally wide and telling influence for good.”

*Good:* “those who have done their best and exerted a decidedly good influence, even though it may not have been very wide. They have married legally, have been honest, industrious and temperate”

*Fair:* “the sick and unfortunate, those who have had few advantages and from whom no better could be expected.”

*Poor:* “those who have not done as well as they should; have married after the Indian custom while knowing better; have fallen from weakness rather than from vice; and some who are recovering themselves after more serious falls.”

*Bad:* “those who have done wrong while knowing better, yet, with few exceptions, those from whom no better was expected.”

By these metrics, even the “sick and unfortunate” are labeled as having satisfactory success. The descriptions of the fifty-two “disappointing” students refer to those who were judged to have relapsed into Native cultural traditions or practices. Though these numbers do not indicate the quality of life of Poor and Bad graduates, it is possible that these are the

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34 Ludlow, *Twenty-Two Years' Work*, 487.
individuals who most successfully reintegrated in their Native communities. Those *Fair* graduates who are characterized by terms associated with poverty are deemed successful because of the amount of white American attributes they exhibit.

Had an evaluation from the perspective of the graduates themselves or members of their Native communities been done, the numbers would likely be different. The available evidence, however, indicates a wide range of cultural decisions made by Hampton graduates. Recent scholarship supports this through demonstrating how attempts to transform the child from savage to civilized often resulted in creating adults with no place in the world. As the Hampton records suggest, after experiencing boarding schools, some had difficulty fitting in with their old communities. On the other hand, racial prejudice made it challenging to find a place in white society, despite the fact that this was exactly the schools’ goal. For example, in his analysis of students from the Thomas Indian School, Keith R. Burich asserts the following conclusion: “At best, they returned to homes where they were neither comfortable nor welcome. At worst, they died alone in distant places, all in the name of the misguided and destructive policy of assimilation.”35 His work confronts the contemporary effects of federal boarding schools through discussing graduates’ difficulties in finding a place in society.

This ostracizing affect in part came from the common impression among Native American parents that they “abdicated their parental rights” when their children went to boarding schools. In these cases, not only did children have little hope of returning to their Native communities, but they also lacked any familial ties that could keep them connected to their Native culture while at school. Without the benefit of family, many students of boarding schools experienced turbulent emotional development that made it difficult for them to function in society. For example, Burich tells the story of one woman’s struggle with her isolation from her Native family while at Thomas:

“Upon marrying and having a family of her own, Freda attempted to raise her children according to the routines at Thomas, because that was the only life she knew. Even more heartbreaking was her confession that she did not know how to show affection to her own children, not having experienced it at home and certainly not at Thomas.”

Other students encountered difficulties in addition to these emotional struggles. The Indian Office did not provide any help for graduates seeking employment. While many found life in the Army or Navy a logical path from the regimented life of boarding school, others were unable to find a job. The Hampton records reveal few occupational opportunities beyond teaching English or Sunday school in Native communities. For some, the trades they learned in school, such as blacksmithing or shoe repair, were outdated. Brenda Child notes that “scores of Indian boarding

36 Ibid., 98.
37 Ibid., 105.
school graduates were chronically unemployed before the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{38} For this reason, Native Americans who attended boarding schools in the early twentieth century became known as a “lost generation of Indians.” In many cases, they had difficulty finding employment and a place in society both on and off the reservation.

The failures of boarding schools are also seen in the success of graduates. Rejecting the teaching that pushed them toward white culture, many who were able to procure jobs and live successful lives sometimes did so in their Native communities. For instance, Daniel Raincloud went from the Wahpeton boarding school to become a medicine man in his Ojibwe community. August Keniew King went from Fort Trotten to become a chief of the Red Lakes.\textsuperscript{39} Others were able to pass Native cultural traditions on to their children despite the government’s attempts to eliminate these practices from their lives. Although the general effects of the boarding school system were extensive and destructive to Native communities, they failed in assimilating these groups into white American society.

All of the efforts of boarding schools, regardless of their successes or failures, speak to the Victorian notion that children had an innocence that transcended divisions of race. Even though adult Native Americans were seen as savage and the race as a whole was seen as developmentally


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 99.
behind whites, Victorian logic suggested that children could learn to exist separately from their race in order to accelerate the advancement of their people. Because of this racial flexibility in children, the government believed that assimilation could be achieved through education. However, despite the sometimes harsh tactics of boarding schools, some of these children still maintained their Native identities.
A Government of Intellectuals: Jefferson and Education

Thomas Jefferson’s passion for learning reached beyond his personal life and into his political ideology and vision for America. Throughout his life, Jefferson often emphasized the necessity of a learned citizenry and educated legislators. His contribution to the Library of Congress demonstrated his belief that senators and congressmen should seek knowledge in science and philosophy; not just law. In his brief exchange with Andrew Alexander, a representative of the Virginia House of Delegates, Jefferson offered a glimpse of exactly why he considered public education a crucial component of an American republic. What Jefferson explained to Alexander supported his notion that the ideal American government would consist of intellectual and highly educated officials drawn from among the people through public education. The letter’s history and material condition account for its lack of representation in Jefferson scholarship. The content of the letter that can be deciphered illuminates Jefferson’s passion and commitment to education and explains his view for the role of education in Republicanism. An explanation of Jefferson’s broader vision contextualizes the words he wrote to Alexander.

Jefferson sent his brief letter in which he discussed education to Andrew Alexander on January 5, 1801. At this time, the presidential election of 1800 had placed Jefferson in the closely contested race that
resulted in his election. As the young government attempted to transfer power from the Federalists to their rivals, the Democratic-Republicans, the issue of public education was certainly far from the most immediate political concern. Nevertheless, educational systems were evolving in America, and Andrew Alexander brought Jefferson’s attention to the state of schools in his native Virginia.

On December 17, 1800, Andrew Alexander sent a letter requesting Jefferson’s aid in procuring a loan for a Virginia academy “for the purpose of purchasing some necessary books and philosophical apparatus, and discharging some debts heretofore contracted.”\(^{40}\) In his letter, Alexander explained to Jefferson that George Washington donated “one hundred shares in the James river canal company” to the Liberty Hall Academy. This school, chartered in 1782, changed its name to Washington Academy as a result of the gift and eventually developed into Washington and Lee University. In 1801, however, Washington’s shares of stock did “not as yet yield income,” and therefore Alexander, as a representative in the House of Delegates, was tasked with finding temporary funds.\(^{41}\) Alexander, despite having never met Jefferson, wrote to inquire about money that “Mr. Short” lent to the James River Company and that Jefferson

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\(^{41}\) Ibid.
controlled. Alexander hoped that Jefferson could loan this money to the Washington Academy until their latent funds became accessible.\footnote{Ibid.}

Unfortunately for the academy, Jefferson explained to Alexander that Mr. Short had already allocated the money “to be invested in a particular way.”\footnote{Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Alexander, January 5, 1801, \textit{The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition}, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, \url{http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-32-02-0284} (accessed April 17, 2013).} In what followed, Jefferson expressed his broader opinions regarding education. The letter itself, however, has decayed, making it difficult to decipher Jefferson’s exact phrasing in places. The text fills one full page with Jefferson’s signature visible on the bottom right corner. The right and bottom edges of the page are significantly tattered, leaving words and sentences with missing pieces or rendering them illegible. The last three lines of text are almost entirely disintegrated and the last six have several words eaten away. The rest of the page, while in much better condition, still has a few small holes that have eliminated minute information. All in all, this letter was not well preserved. However, luckily, the majority of the content can still be analyzed and Jefferson’s overall message is clear.\footnote{Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Alexander, January 5, 1801, \url{http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib009562} (accessed April 17, 2013).} The letter currently resides in the Library of Congress and is transcribed as a part of the Thomas Jefferson papers project. Few historians seem to have highlighted
this letter, perhaps because of a lack of attention to Jefferson’s views on education.

The content of the letter that remains readable reveals how strongly Jefferson connected education to the survival of the republic. Jefferson described to Alexander his concerns that Federalists had infiltrated the education system, thus threatening the future of the nation. Specifically, he states, “no one wishes more sincerely than I do . . . to see that our youth [are not] put under the tuition of persons hostile to the republican principles of our government; of persons who wish to transfer all the powers of the states to [the general] government & all the powers of that government to its executive.” Here Jefferson lets Alexander know how powerful he perceived the threat of Federalist rhetoric to republicanism. Furthermore, Jefferson saw Federalist educators as the means for perpetuating support for a strong federal government and executive branch. Not only did Jefferson fear that this political philosophy would threaten the American republic, but he also saw public schools as an arena in which Federalist ideas posed a great threat.

He hinted at this even further to Alexander. For Jefferson, educators had the power to influence individuals and thus the government. The material taught in schools had the power to mold

citizens into accepting political philosophies that would potentially undermine republicanism. Referring to the dangers of keeping “the public authority as far removed as possible [from] the control of the people,” Jefferson told Alexander, “with such principles, the more learned, the […] ingenious] a tutor is, the more able is he to [debauch] the political [principles] of his pupils, and the most unlettered ignorance will make a better citizen than his perverted learning.” 46 Despite the gaps the condition of the document leaves, Jefferson’s message is clear. Here he claims that a teacher biased against the tenets of republicanism possessed the ability to corrupt his students into blindly following a way of thinking that would prove dangerous to the survival of American government. Furthermore, teacher bias undermined Jefferson’s vision for a well-informed and knowledgeable citizenry through preventing students from understanding a variety of opinions.

In Empire of Liberty (2009), Gordon Wood argued that the leaders of the Revolution, Jefferson included, relied upon educated citizens in their vision of Republicanism. Referencing Jefferson’s “Bill for a More General Diffusion of Knowledge” as evidence, Wood posited that the founders believed that among Americans “only a few were liberally educated and cosmopolitan enough to have the breadth of perspective to comprehend all the different interests of the society; and only a few were independent and unbiased enough to adjudicate among these different

46 Ibid.
interests and advance the public rather than a private good." It was the job of the education system to identify and elevate these individuals. Jefferson’s letter to Alexander demonstrates his commitment to a government dependent on its educational system. In Jefferson’s view, the few who possessed the ability to retain a wide breadth of knowledge and apply it to legislating in an unbiased way had to be cultivated from the masses via the public education system. Therefore, as he expressed to Alexander, educators had to be evenhanded in their approach, so as not to corrupt future leaders.

Jefferson’s basic concept of the role of education in a republic that he shared with Alexander was deeply rooted in his philosophy. Jefferson held many more specific beliefs regarding American education. Understanding these helps more clearly contextualize his letter to Alexander and explain why he reacted to Alexander’s request for a loan with a passionate description of his concerns for education in Virginia. Furthermore, an exploration of his core philosophy on education offers an interesting perspective on issues America has yet to solve. Throughout his career, Jefferson laid out his views on the relationship between the government and education, the role of religion in education, and the goals that an American education should achieve.

Jefferson, along with many of his contemporaries, supported a strong relationship between the government and a system of education. He laid out the specifics of his vision in his “Bill for a More General Diffusion of Knowledge.” Jefferson first presented this bill to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1778 as a delegate and again in 1780 while Governor of Virginia. A revised version of the bill was passed in 1796 while Jefferson was in Paris as Minister to France. In Jefferson’s system, local government had the responsibility of ensuring that all children had access to proper education. Every year, each county would elect an Alderman responsible for managing education. His first responsibility was to divide the county into “hundreds.” Each hundred would contain the proper amount of children to fill a school and the Alderman would adjust these divisions to reflect changes in population. Beneath the Alderman in Jefferson’s structure, an overseer would be appointed for every ten schools and carry the bulk of managerial responsibilities, including hiring teachers and selecting school locations. Each overseer would receive funds from the public treasury to build and operate his schools. Throughout Jefferson’s description of this system in the “Bill for a More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” the convenience of schools to “the youth in every part of the commonwealth” is stressed.48 However, it is important to note

that the ideas Jefferson espoused regarding public education applied only to white boys. Although he saw a place for the education of women, Jefferson separated their education from his larger plan. He valued the education of women in reading, foreign language, and domestic activities, but did not see their education as closely tied to the sustenance of the republic. For white boys, he supported state funded schools paid for with taxes for all small children.

Beyond elementary education, Jefferson envisioned the most successful young students advancing to grammar schools. In his bill, Jefferson lays out a highly competitive system that would allow only “the best in genius and disposition” to receive funds to continue their education. Overseers would choose the “best and most promising” students whose families could not afford tuition. These students would receive public funds to continue their education. After their first year of study, one third of those students would be “discontinued as public foundationers.” The following year, all but one of the remaining students would lose their funding and the final student would continue for another four years. A system in which the government provided funds for those who could not afford schooling represents a liberal policy for Jefferson and his time. Furthermore, suggesting that education belonged in the realm of the government and not the home was also a progressive thought. By

placing education in the public sphere, Jefferson entrusted government with the responsibility of training its own successors.49

This element proved crucial when considering the wish he expressed to Alexander that “our youth [are not] put under the tuition of persons hostile to the republican principles of our government.”50 This suggested that Jefferson believed a republican government required a republican education. Education held the privilege of influencing future citizens and therefore needed to consider how its teachings would affect how those citizens behaved in society and politics. In order for the republican experiment of the United States to succeed, children needed an education system that would teach them to trust and understand the basic principles that underlay republicanism. If the government controlled education and influenced Americans from childhood to adulthood, the education system would cultivate a society that could support and sustain that government. For Jefferson, what he labeled the principles of the American government were fundamental for the preservation of individual freedom and thus needed to be the basis for the education of all future citizens. Therefore, the government and a public system of education needed to be intimately connected.

When considering this issue, Jefferson’s thoughts still have relevance today. The way in which the public education system and federal and state governments interact is still a hot topic of political discourse. The use of the figure of Jefferson as a tool in political rhetoric necessitates a consideration of how his views can be responsibly employed. Using Jefferson’s and his contemporaries’ words outside of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contexts is a common occurrence that can prove counterproductive. However, focusing on his basic principles can help contrast current issues with Jefferson’s original vision. For instance, the controversy over government-funded vouchers for private schools comes to mind. It is safe to assume that Jefferson’s vision for education translated to the twenty-first century would entail an egalitarian public school system without the pitfalls of inequality that history has created. Taking this into consideration, Jefferson would view our current system with grave criticism, which should encourage Americans to re-examine it. Jefferson’s message should drive our current political objectives to achieve the fundamentals of his original vision. The task of determining whether that means focusing political funds and efforts on repairing our public school system, or using that money to provide low-income students with opportunities in private schools belongs to today’s legislators and voters.
Jefferson vision of the relationship between government and education fit well with his views on the relationship between religion and education. Jefferson’s own intellect relied heavily on logic and empiricism, rather than religious faith. He saw a separation between academics and religion. As he often expressed during his lifetime, Jefferson perceived religion as a highly personal matter that belonged to the individual. Any church, therefore, should have no place in government or education. In this way, Jefferson’s desire to separate religion and education went hand in hand with his desire to tie it to government. The establishment of what Jefferson would later deem a separation between church and state combined with a government-funded education system would ensure a division of education and religion. Jefferson believed religious teaching was for the home, and, as demonstrated above, Jefferson supported education in the public sphere of American life.

In these beliefs, Jefferson departed from the norm of American society. At this time, many primary schools focused mainly on moral education. Instead, Jefferson desired a curriculum focused on the classics, enlightenment philosophy, arithmetic, and science. This demonstrates that Jefferson’s definition of an ideal citizen went beyond a person’s moral character and into their intellectual capacity. The style of moral education in curriculum was closely tied to Protestant beliefs and signified the melding of religious and academic education. Instead, Jefferson wanted an
education system that focused more on teaching people how to think empirically, rather than how to behave in a way that followed Protestant morals.

Jefferson’s staunch belief in the separation of religion from education represents another area in which Jefferson’s thoughts can shed light on the historical background of a current situation and provide fuller understanding. The question of the role of religion in public schools is a constant cause for debate in American communities. Whether the issue is the Texas state legislature deciding to eliminate Jefferson from discussions of the separation of church and state, or the constitutionality of having children recite “under God” every day in the Pledge of Allegiance, the decision of where to draw the line between public schools and religion constantly comes into question. In this instance, the fundamentals of Jefferson’s way of thinking remain controversial. Because of the persistence of the general debate over the role of religion in education, Jefferson’s opinions are still useful for their ideological perspective. In this way, an incorporation of Jefferson’s thoughts could ensure that arguments focus on the issue at hand rather than snowballing into partisan political mayhem.

The third element comprising a basic overview of Jefferson’s conception of American education regards its overall purpose. Jefferson had specific ideas on how to best go about cultivating the next generation
of elected American leaders. He demonstrated how much he valued this idea to Alexander, stating, "it is labor lost, if the rising generation, to whom we are to deliver the government, are prepared by ourselves to pervert its principles."\textsuperscript{51} To Jefferson, the information students were exposed to during their education was not only influential for the individual but also carried weight for society as a whole. As was evidenced by the variety of subjects in the selections he made when contributing to the Library of Congress, Jefferson valued many topics of academic study. He believed that all future citizens should receive an education in the sciences and humanities. Familiarity with great philosophers was on par with understanding law. In order to be one of the intellectual elite that would govern America, an eclectic and thorough scholarly background was crucial.

The opposing side to Jefferson's emphasis on academic knowledge was the preference for a more utilitarian mode of education. Benjamin Franklin, for instance, envisioned the masses learning practical skills and trades in lieu of reading great literature and learning arithmetic.\textsuperscript{52} This, however, would not serve the goals of Jefferson's desired system. For Jefferson's vision of the American republic to come to fruition, the masses must be exposed to enlightenment thinkers, the latest science, and learn to apply logic. Exposing everyone to these subjects would allow anyone

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Rippa, \textit{Education in a Free Society}. 
proficient in them to distinguish themselves and eventually rise to their
full potential as leaders of American government. In this way, Jefferson’s
view for the curriculum of schools constituted part of his answer to the
question of how to sustain a republic.

In the instance of the purpose and curriculum of education, Jefferson’s thoughts should remain an inspiration to educators and education policy makers. Keeping in mind Jefferson’s commitment to the spread of knowledge amongst all Americans, it is not difficult to imagine the disappointment he would feel with the current state of American education. Jefferson envisioned a nation run by intellectuals who were elected by an educated population. In Jefferson’s ideal world, the American education system would create the most academically advanced nation in the world. However, in 2012, studies have ranked the United States in the teens for overall education and in the twenties for math and science compared to the rest of the world.\(^5^3\) When viewing this as a means to interpret the United States’ international status, Jefferson’s correlations between education and the wellbeing of the republic still seem relevant. Jefferson believed in every male child’s right to an accessible, well-rounded education and the government’s responsibility in


providing this. Today, this concept should be expanded to all children and serve as motivation to bring America up to the standards Jefferson hoped for. Furthermore, Jefferson’s example of connecting the success of a democracy and the education of its citizenry should encourage Americans today to consider the education system in their evaluations of American democracy.

Jefferson’s letter to Alexander raises a series of issues about the role of education in America. Jefferson received a simple request for funds that he was not at liberty to give. In response, however, he did not simply apologize for this, but embarked on a passionate rant regarding education in Virginia. Jefferson was kind and encouraging to Alexander personally, but also expressed great concern for other American schools:

“I hazard these sentiments, not with a view to the seminary in which yourself & Colo. Moore have a direction, [which] I have no doubt you have duly attended to there, but with a view to the [...]ation of the United States in this respect, wherein it will be found [that] with a few exceptions only, the public institutions of science are in the hands [of] men unfriendly to those principles the establishment & the recovery of [which] have cost so much.”

Here Jefferson clearly associates public institutions of education with the ideas that sparked the revolution and provided the foundation for American government. Without the harmony of education and republican principles, the United States faced a challenge to its success.

In the conclusion of his letter, Jefferson politely apologized for his unrequested pedagogical outburst. However, unfortunately, most of his final thoughts are illegible. From what is decipherable, it seems that Jefferson ended his letter with an explanation of his personal fervor for this topic and his sentiments on having to deny Alexander’s request:

“I ask pardon for permitting myself to go into these [...] in truth [no] circumstance in our situation gives me [so] much [pain] [...] [the neglect?] of principles in the public [...] give me the education of you [399] youth & I will [...] whatever [...] of government you please [...] you can [...] [of the majority]”55

Although it is difficult to tell for sure, Jefferson seems to be lamenting the lack of principles among the people and that the solution to this problem lies in government-provided education.

Although this letter is brief and offers little regarding Jefferson’s specific layout for American education, it serves an important purpose in explaining Jefferson’s views on the matter. Though unprompted and written to a stranger, Jefferson put his passion and conviction into his writing of this message. Through this exchange, Jefferson demonstrates the pedestal upon which he places education. As he explains to Alexander, the persistence of the American experiment relies on the cultivation of an educated citizenry ensured by an egalitarian public system of education.

55 Ibid.
Bibliography

Preface:


Race, Childhood, and Native American Boarding Schools:


Jefferson and Education:


