

THE BIBLE IN EARLY AMERICAN SCHOOLS

The first American schools were in homes and churches. Parents taught their children some, and when there was no school available, they hired a tutor when they could find one, often a minister, sometimes a doctor or lawyer. One tutor might find several homes in which he could tutor children. Some preachers and doctors started academies in their homes. Many Puritan, Presbyterian, and other denominational preachers taught students in their homes and church buildings to supplant meager preaching incomes. In these schools they used the Bible to teach pupils how to read and do sums. Abc's were learned by attaching them to Bible names. A is for Abel, B is for Bethel, C is for Cain, etc.



Anglican (“Established”) ministers in Virginia and Presbyterian ministers in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and western Virginia taught such academies (Thorp, 667). The colonists placed a high value on education which they needed in order to read and study the Bible, for which they had profound reverence. In addition to academies, there were some “Dame Schools” run by single women or widows, and young children spent much of their time there memorizing Bible passages and reciting them to the dame as she worked at her sewing or knitting (Kalaman, 8).

Besides academies, the colonies had church schools, boarding schools, and city schools. Church schools were in or by church buildings, and where a school building was built before a church, church services were held in the classroom. Ministers often served as both teachers and preachers. When schools were not available, “some parents sent their children to the nearest town to board at the home of a doctor or minister. These professionals made extra money by teaching the children after they had finished their regular work.

Thomas and Alexander Campbell and other preachers are said in *The Fool of God* by Louis Cochran and in *The Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* by Robert Richardson to have taught school in their homes. Campbell used their home [now called Campbell Mansion] to house boarding students in what would become Bethany College while he moved his family to the basement, the dampness of which may have contributed to his wife Margaret's getting tuberculosis. Thomas Campbell had in Washington, Pennsylvania, taught young students in his house. Town authorities often built a school building or used a church building and hired a teacher (sometimes a minister) to teach the town's children. In such settings it is easy to see how the Bible came to be used as a textbook in schools.

Public schools in the colonies and states began as extensions of city schools into larger areas. In 1706 Anglican school teachers employed by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel were told that their primary objective was “instructing and disposing Children to believe and live as Christians” (Barr, 12). Schools reflected the religion of their colony.

Puritans or Congregationalists “originated in England during the 1560's, when many people began to see a need to reform, or purify, the Church of England. The Puritans emphasized individual belief and personal discipline overelaborate church ritual and the power of bishops (Thorp, 8.626-627). Puritans or Pilgrims came to Massachusetts on the Mayflower, arriving November, 1620. Many came to New England from the 1630's on, and eventually all of New England except Rhode Island revolved around Puritan ideals. Early Massachusetts law state[d] that only church members could vote and hold office (Thorp, 8.626).

Puritans gained a reputation for being grim, humorless people who were unable to enjoy life apart from drawing moral lessons. Puritans started Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth; they emphasized hard work and education. A Puritanism was not a democratic and welcoming faith, however. Only people who had experienced a spiritual rebirth, called "visible saints", could join the church. Their schools taught their doctrine, including a suspicion of hierarchy in church and government” (Thorp, 8.626).

About one fourth of all early American colleges, including Princeton, in New Jersey, in 1746 were started by Presbyterians, who did have a hierarchy but shared Calvinism with Puritans and were somewhat like them, though they were more government minded, more interested in community, and more welcoming of others (Thorp, 625). These groups were strongly committed to the Bible and to Calvinism, and they taught both in their schools and churches.

In the earliest schools and colleges in America, the Bible played a very prominent role; it thereby influenced our culture and the development of our government, including the founding of our nation and our constitution.

Charles Aebi