THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF PENNSYLVANIA

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The significance of state and local history in the public schools of Pennsylvania may be considered from several different points of view, depending upon the speaker and the character of his audience. Of these points of view probably the first and most natural is that of the historic past of the state of Pennsylvania and of its various communities. A brief statement, however, offers no satisfactory opportunity to develop this point of view. A survey would contain little if anything not familiar to everyone. Items such as the Dutch and Swedes on the Delaware, the English conquest and occupation from 1664 to 1681, William Penn and the settlement of Pennsylvania, the social and economic features of colonial Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania fur trade and the westward movement, Pennsylvania in the French and Indian War, Pennsylvania and the American Revolution, agriculture, transportation and industry in the state of Pennsylvania, the establishment of public schools in Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania in the Civil War, sections and sectionalism in Pennsylvania, and the place of Pennsylvania in the nation today, political, economic and social, each calls for monographs or books rather than a survey.

Another and a very different consideration of the topic is that from the point of view of the actual utilization of state and local history in the curriculum and instruction of the public schools of Pennsylvania. An educationist, particularly the alleged scientific educationist with his emphasis upon fact-finding, would very probably handle the topic from this viewpoint. Questionnaires by the thousands might be sent out and an elaborate presentation of statistics be made. Possibly an audience composed mainly of teachers would greatly prefer such treatment of the subject. But this work can be done more easily by assistants in the Bureau
of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which happily may be able to meet the expense of such a study better than any single individual, particularly if he happens to be a graduate student or even merely a teacher and not an administrative officer with a high salary and a liberal maintenance and an expense account.

Yet no one should venture to speak on this subject without some examination of the curriculum and courses of study in the public schools. This examination can be made with very little trouble and expense and should be made by everyone interested in or teaching the history of the United States in a Pennsylvania educational institution whether public or private, lower or higher. The Courses of Study in the Social Studies for the different grades, both of the Department of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and of one's own local community, can be obtained with ease and little expense. A thorough examination of the Course of Study in Social Studies, Grades One and Two (Bulletin 70); Grades Three and Four (Bulletin 70A); Grades Five and Six (Bulletin 70B); and of the Course in Social Studies, Grades Seven and Eight (Bulletin 71); Grade Nine (Bulletin 71A), all published by the Department of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in 1932, will reveal much to be admired, not only in the inclusion in the proper grades of much work on Pennsylvania and local history, but in educational philosophy and methodology, in critical moderation and in scholarship. Professional historians are under obligations to the Department of Public Instruction for the establishment of such an excellent program for the study of history in these grades. Similar Courses of Study in the Social Studies for the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades of the public schools are needed. The Courses of Study in History and Social Science Grades VII-XII (Bulletin 18), published by the same agency, in 1927, merit much less praise. Evidently progress is being made in instruction in the social studies in Pennsylvania.

Some shortcomings in these Courses of Study in the Social Studies and in textbooks based largely upon them, to which attention will be given, suggest a third viewpoint in the consideration of the topic of the significance of state and local history in the public schools of Pennsylvania—the viewpoint of gen-
eral criteria or principles. To this viewpoint, as related to such courses of study and to textbooks, the remainder of this paper may well be devoted.

The first of these general criteria is that of the necessity of careful preparation of the teachers in the public schools to give instruction in state and local history. The situation looks like a vicious circle. It is impossible to have any considerable number of public school teachers equipped to teach state and local history until it is well taught in the public schools, while at the same time it is impossible to have it well taught in the public schools without a large number of teachers well equipped to give such instruction. This vicious circle in education was brilliantly set forth in an address before the sixth general session, Department of Superintendence, National Educational Association, Cleveland, Ohio, February 28, 1934, by the great Boston merchant, Edward A. Filene. Answering the possible accusation that business men have not been properly educated because “business men would not permit the schools to tackle the problem of human relations in the same bold experimental, fact-finding way in which they tackle the problems of chemistry and physics,” he said: “The schools have turned out graduates so densely ignorant of the things which most needed to be known that these graduates would not permit the schools to turn out a better product.”

Somewhere this vicious circle must be broken or at least broken into. Courses of Study are a splendid device for this. Certification of teachers, especially in advanced work, is another device. Provision of training in state and local history in state teachers colleges, teachers training schools, in schools and departments of education attached to universities and colleges and in all advanced academic education in preparation for the profession of teaching will aid in remedying the situation. The promotion of local historical societies and museums will produce results. The Pennsylvania Historical Association may well turn its efforts in this direction and be a significant agency in breaking the vicious circle. The program of this meeting indicates such a tendency.

Emphasis upon state and local history and the necessary preparation of teachers in such work in the public schools, may well increase the existing demand for the reorganization of the curricula of American schools all the way from the bottom to the top.

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1 School and Society, XXXIX (March 31, 1934), 393-400.
Larger amounts of history and other social studies will have to be included at the expense of other items in the curricula. This reorganization will not be easy. Opposition from other interests is inevitable, but circumstances and time seem to be working in favor of the social studies, of which state and local history is a vital feature.

A mere word in defense of state and local history will not be out of place in a discussion of the curriculum. There is good justification for the study and intelligent understanding of any part of history. There is much reason for the study and appreciation of our neighboring societies in the world with all their background if possible. But as has so often been said, a main purpose of history is to make the present more intelligible. The state and community in which one lives is certainly a part of the present to be understood. In a very easily realized sense the state and community in which a person lives is the focus of the evolution of the past so far as that person is concerned. From that focus, the past spread out into the dimness of pre-literary eras, may be traced whether backward from the present or from the beginning down to the present. Sneers at local history are illogical if local history be viewed as the focus of the past.

Akin to the general criterion of the necessity of trained and equipped teachers for instruction in state and local history in the public schools is the principle of the necessity of critical and up-to-date scholarship in printed courses of study, in textbooks and in instruction. This is not always found. Interest in curriculum making, in textbook writing and in pedagogy and methodology often results in failure to keep abreast of latest developments in scholarship in a given field. Many examples might be given. A few will be cited merely as illustrations. In the Course of Study in Social Studies, for grade five, mentioned above, pupils are to be taught in Unit III, “that the English were successful in making good their claims to North America chiefly because they were fighting for the preservation of their home while the French were fighting for Empire.” In grade six of this bulletin, the old interpretation of the battle of the Monitor and Merrimac is set forth, in spite of the already published findings of Baxter in his researches on naval history.

In Unit III of grade eight of the Course in Social Studies, Seventh and Eighth Grades (Bulletin 71, p. 33), the statement
is made that "State governments originated with the Declaration of Independence," which may be merely ambiguous English, but is certainly uncritical history in the light of the story of the state governments of Connecticut, Rhode Island and Virginia. In Unit IV of the same grades as outlined in the above document, the claim is made that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 made provision for public education, whereas the provision had already been made in the Survey Ordinance of 1785 and the later ordinance contains only a famous resolution. In the same unit it is asserted that the Federal Constitution served as a model for state constitutions made subsequent to 1787, a statement which at its best is only a partial truth.

In the matter of the criterion of critical scholarship it would be interesting to examine carefully a large number of official courses of study, syllabi, and public school textbooks in the history of the United States testing them by a prepared test of items such as: a false emphasis on the Turks in closing the medieval trade routes as an impetus in the age of discovery; the neglect of Prince Henry the Navigator in comparison with Christopher Columbus; an excessive glorification of Daniel Boone in the opening up of the West; the disputed if not unfounded claim that the Old Northwest was conquered by George Rogers Clark and thereby secured for the United States in the Treaty of 1783; the strange failure, especially in materials for instruction in state and local history in the public schools of Pennsylvania, to set forth the significance of Western Pennsylvania as the first English-speaking trans-Appalachian settlement; the uncritical as well as bombastic assertion that the American Revolution taught Great Britain a badly needed lesson and led to the remodeling of British imperial policy; the misinterpretation of the educational clauses in the Survey Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787; the belated repetition of the now exploded concept that the battle of the Merrimac and the Monitor was responsible for the introduction of ironclad ships in naval warfare; and many others, if time permitted a more complete list.

Lack of critical and up-to-date, as well as profound scholarship is very likely to result merely in the inclusion of old and orthodox facts and events with much serious omission of other data. As an illustration in the field of state and local history of Pennsylvania, the Virginian influence and population in southwest Penn-
sylvania and the New England influence and population in the northern tier of counties of Pennsylvania may be left completely out of the picture in courses of study, syllabi and public school textbooks, with great injury to proper understanding of the state and its communities.

In fact the matter of the inclusion and omission of historical data is an extremely difficult problem and calls for peculiar attention and particular effort on the part of all concerned with history instruction in the public schools. A suggestion, heartily intended to be constructive, is that all official courses of study, syllabi and textbooks in the social studies before their adoption and distribution, be submitted widely to leading scholars, both those located in different parts of the state and those working on different features and periods of the history of Pennsylvania and its communities.

There is no sound reason why otherwise excellent syllabi, courses of study and textbooks should not be accurate and scholarly. If our school boards refused to use material which did not meet with the approval of a widely selected group of contemporary scholars, makers of such material would soon learn to submit them to such inspection and revision before trying to print them and distribute them for public use. For this revision no general facts can be established beforehand. Each new manuscript needs separate consideration. Book reviews are after the fact and too late. They are also, in the matter of textbooks, generally written by professional reviewers lacking critical scholarship.

Another general criterion in regard to state and local history in the public schools of Pennsylvania is that care is necessary in the matter of sound historical perspective. Official courses of study, syllabi and textbooks based upon them are likely to violate sound historical perspective. Such violation may be of at least two kinds, both of them very serious. The most obvious possible violation is that of proportion. Local history must be organized in its true proportions as a part of the history of Pennsylvania as a whole. Undue emphasis on one locality in the history of the state is unfair not only to other localities, but to the true history of the state as a whole. Somewhat similarly if Pennsylvania history is to be incorporated in the general history of the United States—the very wise program which now seems to be the aim of the Department of Public Instruction, especially
for the fifth and sixth grades—great effort is necessary to avoid injury to the real proportion of Pennsylvania history in that of the country as a whole. There is no reason to suppose that this balance of state and national proportion is impossible, but the task of attaining it is certainly not an easy one.

Perspective may also be injured if not almost destroyed by shortcomings in attention to chronology. There is of course an unavoidable conflict between the logical or topical treatment of history and the chronological treatment. Probably some violation of chronological perspective is necessary. Certainly the topical treatment has definite advantages. But the treatment of topics whether in Pennsylvania history or in the history of the United States should not be carried so far that the chronological perspective of the development of the state as a whole or of the United States as a whole is lost. It is of course the old dilemma of the trees versus the woods. Some of the parts of recent textbooks seems to indicate that their authors and publishers have ignored the general aspect of the woods in their attention to individual trees.

A final general criterion in regard to the study of state and local history in the public schools of Pennsylvania, is that the subject calls for considerable intellectual and educational maturity. Some of the instruction and study can properly be placed in the fifth and sixth grades. But much of it properly belongs in higher grades. Overemphasis on it in the fifth and sixth grades may have the unfortunate effect of preventing the necessary use of state and local data in more mature work in the eighth grade or in the secondary school. Unless the present depression is going to work still more havoc, there is little reason to suppose that pupils will drop out of school at the end of the sixth grade as they once did. They will probably not drop out at the end of the eighth grade. Emphasis on state and local history in the public schools of Pennsylvania might probably with profit be carried higher, from the fifth and sixth grades, to the eighth grade, or even into the eleventh grade of the high school.