

LITERACY LEVELS AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA 1729-1775

BY ALAN TULLY*

IN HIS recent book, *American Education: The Colonial Experience*, Lawrence Cremin has, with vivid strokes, set out a broad survey of cultural life in the American colonies. After describing the plantation beginnings of what the author calls an "overwhelmingly derivative" colonial culture, he moves on to discuss the changes that took place during the "increasingly creative" provincial years.¹ The single most important characteristic of colonial life in the eighteenth century was the process of growth and development that by 1776 produced a unique American culture. This maturing process was, to a large extent, the result of an increasingly active and meaningful participation in social, religious and political affairs by a growing proportion of the colonial populace. Such participation was encouraged not only by the assumption of inclusiveness that underlay most of the contemporary intellectual movements and by an unusually high degree of intellectual competence among the populace at large, but also by the spirited debates that accompanied the new religious ideas and modes, by the impact of the new utilitarian concepts of education, and by the general political and ideological conflict that preceded the Revolution.

In his treatment of the Revolution, Cremin makes his argument in its most forceful form. He suggests that the eighteenth-century colonial political culture included a powerful imperative that demanded an educated populace.² Liberty could find protection only where the body politic was genuinely attentive to public affairs and such concern involved more than mere partic-

*The author is a graduate student in the History Department at The Johns Hopkins University.

¹ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: the Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York, 1970), 253.

² *Ibid.*, 419-443.

ipation in practical politics: it demanded "systematic reflection on that experience to be derived from individual reading and study."³ The institutional foundations necessary for this ideal level of informed public participation in colonial affairs rapidly expanded to meet the need. "The number of schools and the extent of schooling increased markedly during the eighteenth century," and not just as a function of population growth.⁴ The availability of teachers increased significantly after 1745.⁵ Newspapers, churches, and colleges mutually supported each other as instruments for the dissemination of political ideas, reaching out and actively involving growing numbers of the colonial community in the pressing public problems of the day.⁶ As a political event, then, the Revolution was only one part of a much more broad and unified educational revolution. It was "the relatively expansive literacy" in combination with a "relatively inclusive politics" that produced a mature and unique American culture, one that "may well have achieved the highest intensity of popular interest and participation in politics that any western society had achieved to that time."⁷

In his discussion of literacy and the relationship of literacy rates to participation in public affairs, Cremin makes a very important distinction. He draws a line between "inert" or "technical" literacy ("minimal technical competence . . . combined with limited motivation, need, and opportunity") and "liberating" literacy ("the technical ability in interaction with a literary environment").⁸ Now, when Cremin discusses the increasing literacy of the eighteenth century, he refers to the latter type; the educational revolution was the increasing rate by which those who had achieved technical literacy were drawn into active, intelligent consideration of social and political affairs. Having made this distinction, he nonetheless asserts, with equal assurance, "that technical inevitably enhanced political literacy, and vice versa."⁹ By attributing a functional relationship to the two different types of literacy, Cremin supplies a

³ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 500.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 444-468.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 549-550.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 548-549.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 449.

very important premise, one that allows him to bolster his argument about the increasing liberating literacy levels by drawing on the more easily quantifiable evidence on technical literacy. Using the traditional signature-mark methodology he has analyzed legal documents in six sample areas. On the strength of these findings he has concluded that by 1775 relatively large numbers of Americans possessed basic literary skills and consequently were eligible for the liberating educational revolution.¹⁰ Since Cremin's argument embraces developments on two distinct yet interrelated levels—those of technical literacy and liberating literacy—his conclusions about both of these categories require careful consideration.

Chester and Lancaster counties in Pennsylvania are suitable areas in which to test Cremin's conclusions about technical literacy. The residents of these two counties, as well as the other inhabitants of Pennsylvania, shared in the general colonial cultural life that Cremin describes. Local newspapers printed the same kinds of material that other colonial papers contained; political, economic, and religious ties with London, the hub of Empire, were deeply rooted; personal libraries of Pennsylvanians certainly included the works of Burgh, Molesworth, Coke, Locke, and Macauley. Such men as Benjamin Franklin and William Smith were powerful moulders of the provincial environment. Composing, as they did, the most important part of Philadelphia's hinterland, Chester and Lancaster were as much exposed to this liberating metropolitan influence as any comparable rural area could be. For many residents of Chester, proximity to Philadelphia meant that they could take advantage of the specific educational opportunities afforded by that city, while in the more southerly regions of the county the Nottingham, New London and Newark Academies and Samuel Blair's classical school had their own local influence. Lancaster, which lay to the west of Chester, was a frontier county founded in 1729, but for a back country area it was well developed. Parts of the county had been settled by 1720 and its rich agricultural land ensured its rapid maturation into a commercial farm economy. The social composition of Lancaster residents makes this area a particularly important case study for it was

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 517-543.

the home of a number of quietistic sects whose "concepts of guarded education" should have helped to keep technical literacy high.¹¹ Lastly, both Chester and Lancaster counties were inhabited by large numbers of people who belonged to different denominational groups. According to Cremin, the pressure of competing denominations usually stimulated the various religious groups quickly to provide their own schools.¹² Hence, technical literacy, at least, should have either stayed high or risen in the decades before the Revolution.

The results of the signature-mark literacy test for Chester and Lancaster counties appear in Table 1. From 1729 to 1774 the literacy rate for white adult males was approximately 72% in Chester and 63% in Lancaster; neither county showed more than a slight improvement over time. Table 2 presents the evidence from a similar examination of extant German wills in Lancaster county. Although the sample is too small to support independent conclusions, results do indicate that literacy rates for the German-speaking residents of the county were not radi-

TABLE 1¹³

SIGNATURE-MARK ANALYSIS OF CHESTER AND LANCASTER WILLS

	Men			Women			Combined		
	Signature	Mark	% Literate	Signature	Mark	% Literate	Signature	Mark	% Literate
A. CHESTER COUNTY									
1729-44	188	65	67.9	16	19	45.7	204	108	65.4
1745-54	207	78	72.6	8	35	18.6	215	113	65.5
1755-64	200	88	69.4	12	33	26.7	212	121	63.7
1765-74	248	90	73.4	33	42	44.0	281	132	68.0
B. LANCASTER COUNTY									
1729-44	59	34	63.4	0	7	0.0	59	4	59.0
1745-54	101	67	60.1	2	14	14.4	103	79	56.6
1755-64	168	92	64.6	2	13	15.4	170	103	62.3
1765-74	246	142	63.4	9	15	37.5	255	157	62.1

Source: Chester and Lancaster County Will Books

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹² *Ibid.*, 545.

¹³ The evidence in Table 1 is based on an analysis of all the wills probated in Lancaster and Chester counties between 1729 and 1774. The

cally different from the English. The tendencies shown in Table 1 may, therefore, be accepted as generally representative.

TABLE 2¹⁴

SIGNATURE-MARK ANALYSIS OF GERMAN WILLS IN LANCASTER COUNTY

	Men			Women			Combined		
	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>% Literate</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>% Literate</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>% Literate</i>
1729-64	48	32	60.0	0	4	0.0	48	36	57.0
1765-74	63	32	66.3	2	7	28.6	65	39	62.5

Source: Lancaster County Will Books

This evidence from Lancaster and Chester counties suggests that Cremin's samples of technical literacy rates may not be entirely representative. The six areas that he analyzed (two metropolitan, two old eastern, and two back country settlements) shared relatively high technical literacy rates by the 1760's and '70's. Of the sample groups of white male inhabitants in Dedham and Kent, 97 and 100 percent respectively could sign their names; in New York, Philadelphia and Elizabeth City, the figures were 88, 82 and 91 percent; in back country South Carolina, literacy rates did not fall "much below 80 percent for any substantial group of white male settlers and around 90

signature-mark tabulation does not include witnesses of wills, thus avoiding the need for specific controls against repetition. The biases of the material are the obvious ones. Those who left wills were, on the average, about one and one-quarter to one and one-half times as wealthy as those who died intestate. Second, not every mature head of household left a will. In Chester wills represent, at best, 41% of the adult male deaths and at worst approximately 10%. In Lancaster, after about 1750 similar limits are applicable. On the average, however, it is likely that wills represent about 16% of the white adult males who died between 1729 and 1774 in these two counties. Such representation is heavily weighted towards those who were the most wealthy, the most prominent, and the most likely to live in those townships where educational opportunities were to be encountered. Under these circumstances optimistic estimates for literacy among white male inhabitants would be 40% in Lancaster and 55% in Chester. The wills may be found in the Chester and Lancaster County Court Houses.

¹⁴The above evidence and an impressionistic reading of the Lancaster probate records for the 1780's and '90's indicates that technical literacy rates for Germans were probably no more than marginally higher than those for the English and Scotch-Irish.

percent among the Germans." The rates for southeastern Pennsylvania, however, contrast sharply with these findings; the percentage of white male inhabitants who could sign their names ranged from eight to 18 percent below the Philadelphia rate.¹⁵

As Cremin has clearly pointed out, considerable difficulty attends any attempt to place technical literacy data in a meaningful comparative framework. But after considering the biases of the colonial legal records, he does conclude that the exceptionally high literacy rates from his six sample areas would in fact be "closer" to the lower but more accurate English levels.¹⁶ If, however, Cremin's American statistics are uncharacteristically high—and those from southeastern Pennsylvania indicate that they are—technical literacy rates for the colonists would certainly be no higher than those of the English. Thus, the number of colonists who were eligible for the liberating literacy were not as great as Cremin's figures imply. In comparative terms, there were probably no more and possibly less potentially liberated literates in America than in eighteenth century England.

Since Cremin predicates the distinctiveness of eighteenth century American culture on the popularization of education and the politicization of the populace, his central concern is the liberating educational revolution.¹⁷ Even if technical literacy rates were lower in America than in England, it is conceivable that a larger percentage of those colonists who possessed basic literacy skills were drawn into active and meaningful participa-

¹⁵ Cremin, *American History*, 517-543. Cremin's literacy figures for South Carolina are probably based on Robert L. Meriwether's evidence in *The Expansion of South Carolina, 1729-65* (Kingsport, Tenn., 1940), 177. Meriwether suggests that "a fair estimate" of illiteracy would be "between ten and twenty percent. The Germans made the best showing, the overland settlers from Virginia and the northern colonies the poorest." It is not clear if Meriwether allowed for repetition of names or took into account the biases of the probate records.

In Elizabeth City, Cremin's other southern example, conditions were such that one would expect an abnormally high literacy rate in comparison with other southern areas. Similarly, in the middle colonies, possibly New York and most certainly Philadelphia, had higher literacy rates than did surrounding rural settlements. In 1775, these two cities contained 13-14% of the population of New York and Pennsylvania. C. Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-76* (New York, 1955), 216; *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D. C., 1960), 756.

¹⁶ Cremin, *American Education*, 446. This generalization applies to white adult males. American Indians and Negroes are exempted.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 549-550, 561.

tion in public affairs. It is in his treatment of the colonial political culture, the press and formal schooling that Cremin presents his evidence on the relative dimensions of colonial America's liberating educational experience.

The political culture that unified the American colonies occupies a central place in Cremin's discussion for in the context of a "relatively inclusive politics" the citizen had an obligation to acquire a liberal education and to participate intelligently in political affairs.¹⁸ But the impact of these ideas on the colonists was unlikely, in itself, to raise educational standards to unique levels for the political culture that the North American colonies supported was a shared Anglo-American one. The writings of Locke, Sidney, Trenchard and Gordon and other Whigs constituted a large segment of public thought in England as well as in America. On the practical level of direct political involvement, participation in elections was widespread in both countries. Although Cremin mentions that the franchise was wider in America than in England, this is of marginal significance for the point at issue is the nature of that political participation, an issue which cannot be resolved by appeals to political theory or the legal limits of enfranchisement.¹⁹ Important as the educational and participatory imperatives of the colonial political culture were, the actual extent to which they could be acknowledged depended directly on the availability of specific educational institutions. In Cremin's eyes, the most important agencies in the spreading of the liberating literacy were the free press and the school.²⁰

Undoubtedly, the press was a principal means of politicization in America and certainly the amount of material that the colonial printers made available did increase in the eighteenth century. But despite the growing number of newspapers and despite the highly charged political atmosphere that hung over the colonies in the decade prior to the Revolution, by 1775 newspaper circulation still compared unfavorably with English levels. Ac-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 419-443.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 445-446; J. H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675-1725*. (London, 1967.)

²⁰ Cremin, *American Education*, 519. A third agency that played a role in the liberating American experience was the church. Because the growth in numbers of congregations failed to keep pace with the increase in population, Cremin admits the church could not have played a crucial role in the educational revolution. *Ibid.*, 491-493.

cording to Cremin's own figures, the ratio of subscriptions to population was 1 to 64 in England, while in America it was only 1 to 70.²¹ Apparently it was in England rather than in America where newspapers were most widely distributed.

In the absence of a superior rate of newspaper circulation, the evidence in favor of America's relatively high level of liberating literacy finally comes down to the extent of formal schooling. Not surprisingly, Cremin makes his most sweeping claims on behalf of the provincial schools. In the American colonies "popularization . . . with respect to access, substance, and control became early and decisively the single most characteristic commitment of American education."²² In a society where schools founded at a greater rate than population growth, the "chief" distinguishing feature of provincial education was the "prevalence of schooling," and it was "via the schools" that the colonists could most easily "develop a liberating literacy."²³

Despite these assurances about the nature of colonial education, Cremin never does directly compare American schooling facilities with those in England. Certainly the provincial residents began the eighteenth century with less schools per capita than did the English; whether the colonists merely closed the gap, had come to equal, or had actually surpassed the English is not clear. One of Cremin's own admissions, that the household—"the single most fundamental unit of social organization" in the colonies—was still fulfilling important educational functions by the Revolution, does suggest that comparatively formal schooling had not obtained such peculiar and impressive dimensions.²⁴ Neither does it appear that the record of school establishment in all of the colonies lives up to the strong claims that Cremin makes. Pennsylvania is a case in point.

Traditionally, the Quakers of William Penn's colony have been judged harshly when measured by their efforts to found educational institutions.²⁵ In order to lay to rest this old notion, Cremin has drawn heavily on the findings of Thomas Woody who, in a monograph, *Early Quaker Education in Pennsylvania*, concluded that of the fifty particular meetings existing in 1750

²¹ *Ibid.*, 547.

²² *Ibid.*, 561.

²³ *Ibid.*, 500, 544, 549.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 480-481, 519.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 305-310.

forty-one "had schools then, or established them in the period following 1750, in which the increased activity and interest of the Yearly Meeting brought the subject more fully to their notice."²⁶ In the process of making his argument, Cremin has construed Woody's summary in the most favorable possible way, arguing that of the fifty Quaker meetings that were active by the mid-eighteenth century "a goodly majority—possibly as many as forty—were conducting schools."²⁷ Even assuming that Cremin is right about this (and a close reading of Woody's evidence suggests that he is not), Woody adds that under these circumstances large numbers of Quaker children would have been forced to seek education in "mixed" or "neighborhood" schools.²⁸ There is little evidence to suggest that institutions of this type existed in sufficient numbers to fulfill the requisite needs.

By the late 1740's and early '50's there certainly was a growing interest in education among members of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, an interest that appeared to be inspired by the relative dearth of schooling facilities. The Yearly Meeting reminded the subordinate meetings that they should "encourage and assist each other" in the settling and support of schools and in 1753 Quarterly Meetings were asked to appoint committees "to inspect and examine the amounts of all monies which had been given to charitable uses" and might relate to the settling of schools.²⁹ But even if an agreement was made to finance a school, the serious problem of finding a teacher remained to be faced. In 1754 John Smith wrote to Samuel Fothergill that "if any Friend qualified to teach a grammar school inclines to come over into this country, there are several places not above 20 or 30 miles from the city where they would be glad to receive such a one and would find him his board and 40£ per annum this currency."³⁰

²⁶ Thomas Woody, *Early Quaker Education in Pennsylvania* (New York, 1920), 270.

²⁷ Cremin, *American Education*, 307.

²⁸ Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 271.

²⁹ Minutes, *Philadelphia Yearly Meeting*, 1746, 45; 1750, 18; 1751, 25; 1753, 37; 1755, 70; *Minutes, Concord Quarterly Meeting*, 1754, 218. The meeting minutes are on microfilm at the Friends' Library in Swarthmore. An increasing number of wills probated in Chester County during the 1740's and early '50's contained specific provisions for the education of dependent children.

³⁰ John Smith to Samuel Fothergill, February 3, 1754. Correspondence of John Smith, 1740-70, HSP.

In the back country the state of educational institutions was no better. Writing in the late '40's to Count Zinzendorf, Bishop John Christopher Frederick Cammerhoff listed the seven schools the Moravians could support and reported that despite pleas from mixed groups in Lancaster and Borough and from some Mennonites near Donegal, they had found it "impossible to start new schools for strangers."³¹ Despite Cammerhoff's pessimism, the Moravians did manage to sponsor more teachers, and by 1755 twenty schools had been established. Of the various organizations concerned with educational needs during the fifteen years prior to the outbreak of the French and Indian War, the Moravians were undoubtedly the most creative group. They maintained an open admissions policy, taught Scotch-Irish and English as well as Germans and tried, with some success, to provide bi-lingual teachers. By 1755, however, the days of expansion had come to an end and the numbers of pupils accepted by the schools had stabilized.³²

The German Reformed and Lutheran church schools in Pennsylvania displayed a more even pattern of growth. The Reformed Church had five schools by 1741, eighteen by 1750, thirty-five by 1760, and sixty-three by 1775. It must be born in mind, however, that in 1760 there were still forty-nine congregations without schools and in 1775 exactly half (63) of the 126 churches had made no provision for formal educational instruction.³³ The Lutherans were even weaker in their efforts; by 1750 approximately twenty schools existed. In the next twenty-five years this number had merely doubled. Following the advice of their influential spokesman, the Reverend Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, German Lutherans were particularly receptive to the Charity School movement but since only a dozen of these schools actually opened, the impact that they had was not substantial.³⁴

³¹ Bishop John Christopher Frederick Cammerhoff to Count Zinzendorf, August 29, 1748, March 23, 1747, May 24, 1747, Bishop John Christopher Frederick Cammerhoff Letters, 1747-48 (translated and excerpted by John W. Jordan), HSP.

³² Mabel Haller, *Early Moravian Education in Pennsylvania* (Nazareth, Pa., 1953), 191-192, 354.

³³ Frederick George Livinggood, *Eighteenth Century Reformed Church Schools* (Norristown, Pa., 1930), 189-195, 199.

³⁴ Charles Lewis Maurer, *Early Lutheran Education in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1932), 182-215. The chief problem the Germans faced was not a shortage of possible schoolmasters but the dispersed pattern of settle-

The above data demonstrate that Cremin's observations are not entirely without point. There was a creative period of educational advancement during the 1740's and '50's; of equal significance, however, was the backdrop against which this movement took place. Before these years, educational institutions were virtually nonexistent, and most of the constructive energy and high-minded zeal expended during this period was burned up in the battle against past neglect and present inertia. The educational movement in Pennsylvania was a heroic effort to prevent the gradual deterioration of educational ideals and standards that the colonists had brought with them from Europe. Only after the educational deficiencies that characterized colonial society had been removed would concrete evidence of that peculiar American dedication to popular education begin to appear.³⁵

But the problems in rural Pennsylvania were so great that the educational revolution never did really get off the ground. Men continued to disperse over wide areas; the French and Indian War brought widespread social disruption as well as heavier tax burdens; charities like the Pennsylvania Hospital and Friendly Association competed for available funds; the most promising educational leaders, the Moravians, lost their vitality and turned inward. Certainly the numbers of schools increased and undoubtedly old rural areas like Chester County, where the Quaker efforts began to pay dividends, provided increased educational opportunity.³⁶ But overall, in rural Pennsylvania the scene was not so encouraging. At best, it would appear, the rate of school establishment in the '60's and '70's did no more than equal the pace of population growth.³⁷

ment. Children could be expected to walk no more than five or six miles and within that radius it was not possible to find enough students to pay the teacher an acceptable wage. Parents were unable or unwilling to compensate for the small number of students by paying higher fees. Henry Harbaugh, *The Life of Michael Schlatter* (Philadelphia, 1887), 205; William J. Hinkle, *The Life and Letters of the Reverend John Philip Boehme* (Philadelphia, 1916), 282.

³⁵ The first generation of settlers in Pennsylvania probably had a higher technical literacy rate than their children but it is very difficult to measure the extent of the change because of the difficulties in determining the exact biases of the early records.

³⁶ Sydney V. James, "Quaker Meetings and Education in the Eighteenth Century," *Quaker History*, 51 (1962), 87-102.

³⁷ The population of Pennsylvania increased by approximately two and one-half times between 1750 and 1775. *Historical Statistics of the United*

Pennsylvania's experience, of course, may have been a singular one. The low and unimproving technical literacy rates and the slow pace of school development might be explained by a unique set of circumstances. The anti-intellectualism of the Quakers and like-minded sects could have had a considerable effect there. It is possible, too, that real advancements in education were effectively obscured by a disproportionately large and rapid rate of immigration. Many of the newcomers, particularly among the Scotch-Irish, may not have been literate. Conceivable, too, is the possibility that economic opportunity was so widely shared that there was no sharp and obvious connection between the possession of basic educational skills and the successful management of a small plantation; hence, economic incentives to gain technical literacy might not have been that great.

But the case of rural Pennsylvania may not have been so peculiar, and other non-urban areas in the middle colonies, at least, may have shared similar characteristics. If further investigations prove this to have been the case, then Cremin's claim that the American educational experience of the eighteenth century was distinguished by a highly significant and unique level of participation in a liberating, literary environment is open to serious objections. The American political revolution may not have been so popular, the emerging literary culture may not have been so vital, and the general educational revolution may have been neither so all pervasive nor so crucial to colonial development as his analysis suggests.

States, Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, D. C., 1960), 756. It is certainly true that increased literacy rates resulting from better schooling in the 1760's and '70's would not be immediately reflected in the record of signatures on probate records. But if educational levels did rise significantly among the province's youth in these years, they were too young to have had much influence in the traditional agricultural society of rural Pennsylvania. Those who were heads of families and community leaders during the ferment of the Revolution were of an older generation. In his study of the local revolutionary committees of Philadelphia, R. A. Ryerson has found that between 69 and 95 percent of the members on the eight major revolutionary committees (1765-78) were men in their 30's and 40's. If 40 is accepted as a median age for this, the largest group of active revolutionary leaders, then it is most likely that they received their basic education between 1735 and 1750. This was certainly before the educational revolution had gained much momentum. R. A. Ryerson, "Opportunity and Obligation in Crisis Politics: The Local Revolutionary Committees of Philadelphia, 1765-1776," unpublished seminar paper, The Johns Hopkins University.