

Quaker School Life in Philadelphia Before 1800

A DIRECTIVE of 1796 to the youthful scholars of the Latin Grammar School in Philadelphia contained the following succinct advice: "*the Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom*—With this constantly before your Eyes much Advice will be unnecessary, and without it, none will be effectual. . . ."¹

That the overseers, those charged by William Penn in his Charter of 1711 with responsibility for conduct of the Quaker schools, nonetheless had believed from the earliest beginnings of the schools in Philadelphia that indeed "much advice" was necessary to assure the "beginning of wisdom" is evident from their records. To be sure, most of this advice seems to have been directed at making the scholars God fearing for, if one can judge by the frequency with which it is stressed in the Minutes, the responsibility that weighed most heavily upon the overseers was the religious training of their pupils. This appears repeatedly in concern for their attendance at the meetings, their behavior there, the necessity of their reading the Bible regularly, and their moral and spiritual improvement. Through the years, the scholars were expected to attend First Day meeting,² meetings on "fifth day mornings,"³ and "the meetings for worship held in the respective districts where [the] schools are kept, as well as the scholars and youths' meetings."⁴

Discipline among the pupils at the meetings was an early problem. Master John Kinsey, because of the "necessity of preventing the rudeness of boys in the New Gallery," was asked in 1699 "to fix a

¹ "Advice to the Scholars" (Feb. 11, 1796), William Penn Charter School Archives, Philadelphia.

² Minutes Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, Quaker Archives, 304 Arch Street, Philadelphia, 129 (Nov. 26, 1699); *ibid.*, 259 (Mar. 27, 1709); Overseers Minutes, I, 27 (Jan. 29, 1739), William Penn Charter School Archives.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 102 (Jan. 26, 1753), and II, 196 (Jan. 7, 1784).

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 62-63 (Dec. 10, 1795).

door on the partition of the Gallery intended for the Scholars, which divided into Equal parts, the Easterly End thereof . . . intended for the boys and the westerly end for the Girls, and that Locks or Bolts be also affixed for preventing other children from Intruding.”⁵

Several Friends were charged by the Monthly Meeting “to inform all parents of children & masters of families who frequent our meetings that . . . they should be more careful over the children and servants that are under their care, that they may behave themselves orderly, Especially at the meetings on first days.”⁶ That this was probably considered an onerous chore is suggested by a plaintive letter from Alexander Seaton to the overseers requesting that he be relieved of this duty, he having executed it faithfully during his ten years as master of the English School: “And also as I have diligently attended the Scholars from ye School House to Week-Day Meetings, and have sat with them in Meetings on first Days as well as on Week-Days, ever since ye Board has been pleased to employ me, being now advanced in Years and the same becoming more and more burthensome to my Mind, I request I may be excused from sitting in the Gallery [*sic*] with them on first Days and longer.”⁷

A large portion of the overseers’ meetings over the years was devoted to a consideration of the best ways and means of effecting moral and spiritual improvement in the scholars. Masters were urged to read them the Bible and other good works regularly.⁸ Consistently, the rules for the schools included a regulation about the reading of the Bible and other salutary works: “The holy scriptures, particularly the New Testament, are to be read daily in every school; and, at proper seasons, the works of William Penn, Robert Barclay, and such other books as the overseers may from time to time recommend.”⁹ There was concern, too, for preventing exposure to “improper books.” In 1769, John Wilson, an usher in the Latin School, had argued: “Is it not monstrous? That Christian Children intended to believe and relish the Truths of the Gospel should have their early and most retentive years imbued with the shocking Legends and

⁵ Minutes Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, 129 (Nov. 26, 1699).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 259 (Mar. 27, 1709).

⁷ Seaton to overseers, July 30, 1761, William Penn Charter School Archives.

⁸ Overseers Minutes, I, 87 (Mar. 30, 1751).

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 62–63 (Dec. 10, 1795).

abominable Romances of the worst of Heathens should be obliged to be Pimps to the detestable Lusts of Jupiter & Mars attend the thefts & Vilainy [*sic*] of Mercury or follow Aneas on his Murdering Progress. . . . Perhaps you may say they will get acquainted with the Latin Poets, those eldest Sons of Satan those High Priests of the Kingdom of Darkness will the Lacivious Ovid teach them Chastity the Epicurean Horace Sobriety the Impudent Juvenal Modesty or the atheistick Lucretion Devotion. . . ."¹⁰ No reply to these sentiments is recorded, but thirty years later there was still concern over "improper books," and it was suggested that by the exclusion of such "an improvement may be made in the Schools."¹¹

The Minutes regularly mention what was in 1779 referred to as "the contaminating influence of evil communications and examples."¹² Parents were admonished to keep their children away from "connexion with such whose Example & Conduct are injurious to their moral & religious education," and were warned against "rude Boys in the Streets."¹³ Two masters were urged to visit the parents of several girls in their schools who were "in the Practice of attending Plays and dancing Assemblys, to the ill Example & manifest Inconvenience of the Children of Members of our Society in that School. . . ."¹⁴ They were to advise the parents, "in a discreet Manner," that the children could remain in school only if they ceased attendance at such affairs. The overseers agreed that perhaps the safest solution to this kind of problem was to refuse to receive "into their Schools any but Children of our own religious Society or those who make Profession with us and attend our religious Meetings."¹⁵ Parents had earlier been reminded to "take due Care to bring up their Children, to some useful and necessary Employment that they may not spend their precious Time in Idleness which is of evil Example, and tends much to their hurt,"¹⁶ and were further cautioned that: "a godly Care and Concern should be upon [their] minds . . . to watch over

¹⁰ John Wilson to overseers, Dec. 28, 1769, William Penn Charter School Archives.

¹¹ Overseers Minutes, III, 93 (May 27, 1797).

¹² *Ibid.*, II, 103 (Sept. 23, 1779).

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, 194 (Jan. 7, 1784).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 441 (Jan. 12, 1792).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Minutes Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Quaker Archives, 270 (July 15-19, 1722).

their Children with supplication to the Lord, that they may not be drawn away from the innocency, Simplicity, and plainness of the way of Truth. . . ."¹⁷

In a set of aphorisms directed to the masters by the overseers, it was pointed out that the former should let no opportunity slip by to drive home the need for their charges' strict "observing of the social, moral and Christian Duties."¹⁸ And lest they give preference to their academic teaching, the masters were told, "All judicious parents will allow it is far more necessary and advantageous, that their Children be taught how to obtain the Favour of God and of good Men, than the Language or Sentiments of the most celebrated Poets and Historians."¹⁹

Rules and regulations, printed at intervals by the overseers, sought to control student behavior, not only at school but also outside. In 1748, the "Rules to be observed by the Scholars in the Latin School" were:

That they carefully observe to be at the School at the times appointed.

That no Boy shall presume to absent himself from the School without producing a note from one of his Parents, signifying the Cause of his absence.

That strict obedience shall be paid to the Monitors in the discharge of their office and that none shall take the Liberty of entering into any disputes with them, but if any Boy Conceives himself aggrieved, he shall make his complaint to the Master.

That in coming to School & returning home every one shall behave with Decency and Sobriety, without giving the least cause of Offence to any.

That in all their Conversation they shall use the plain Language, of the singular number to one person, & shall be careful never to utter any rude or uncivil Expression, nor to call their Schoolmates or others by any nickname or Term of Reproach.

That in their hours of Leisure, they shall avoid ranting Games & Diversions, & every occasion of Quarrelling with each other.

That none shall at any time play or keep Company with the rude Boys of the Town but shall converse, as much as they can, with their schoolfellows, & shall live in Harmony and Friendship together.

That no Boy of this School shall be allowed to go into the Back yard, during the School time, unless he be sent on an Errand by the Master.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁸ Overseers Minutes, III, 68 (Feb. 11, 1796).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

That they all shall come to school on ye fifth day Mornings, prepar'd to go to meeting.

Read and approved at a meeting of the Overseers of the Publick School & sign'd on their behalf 29th: 10 mo: 1768 Isr.l Pemberton Jun.r: Clerk²⁰

The overseers visited the Latin School to make "an Enquiry into the Use made of the Rules of the School & how far the same are made to answer the end proposed by them."²¹ Later rules, repeating and sometimes elaborating on earlier ones, were expanded to include the hours and months that students must attend school, and warned the scholars that they must "pay a becoming respect to any teacher or usher," with the penalty of being reported to the overseers where "cases of refractory and incorrigible offenders occur."²² Further, it was decreed that the rules should be printed, distributed to the schools, and publicly read, "at least every three months, and as much oftener as fit occasion may present, and a printed copy thereof put up in a conspicuous place in each of the schools."²³

The masters were told that, should they have trouble with "stubborn and refractory Scholars," they would have the support of the overseers who would be "disposed to strengthen your hands and to give you such Assistance as may be requisite."²⁴ But the best discipline of all was thought to be established through the tie of love, and the overseers recommended that "the Children under your Care be governed, as much as possible thereby. This will make the Use of the Rod in a good Degree unnecessary, and will induce the Children to love & respect rather than to fear you."²⁵

The records show that some masters were humane and sympathetic, and did not resort to stern punishment to maintain discipline. In 1698, Thomas Makin received a letter from Israel Pemberton, a student in the Latin School, praising him for "thy Instructions [which] were so mild and gentle as that I never received one blow or stripe from thy hand during my stay there tho my dullness at times might have given thee occation. . . ."²⁶ Anthony Benezet, a master

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 102 (Oct. 29, 1748).

²¹ *Ibid.*, I, 182 (Aug. 30, 1759).

²² *Ibid.*, III, 62-63 (Dec. 10, 1795).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 68 (Feb. 11, 1796).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Marion D. Learned, *The Life of Francis Daniel Pastorius* (Philadelphia, 1908), 177.

for twelve years in the Latin School, is credited with introducing considerable reform in the methods of discipline of the time. He did not use force or corporal punishment, but instead appealed to the students' sense of honor and right through kindness.²⁷

However, not all masters used "the tie of love" to maintain control. Some believed in the rod. Israel Pemberton, the same who praised Makin, was taken out of school by his father because the master, "ffrancis Daniel Pastorius, . . . beate me very much with a thick stick upon my head. . . ." ²⁸ Then, too, there was John Todd, master of the Mathematical School for some years after 1763, on whose entrance into the school room "all shuffling of the feet, 'scrougeing,' hitting of elbows, and whispering disputes, were hastily adjusted, leaving a silence which might be felt, 'not a mouse stirring.' " ²⁹ After an hour or so of quiet, except for the master's voice, suddenly there would be "a brisk slap on the ear or face, for something or for nothing, [which] gave 'dreadful note' that an irruption of the lava was now about to take place—next thing to be seen was strap in full play, over the head and shoulders of Pilgarlic. The passion of the master growing by what it fed on, and wanting elbow room, the chair would be quickly thrust on one side, when, with sudden gripe [*sic*], he was to be seen dragging his struggling suppliant to the flogging ground, in the centre of the room. . . ." ³⁰

Ushers were sometimes charged with the responsibility for discipline. William Dickinson, hired as an usher for John Todd in 1764, was advised that one of his duties was to "endeavour to Suppress the Noise and Rude behaviour of the Scholars in & about the School House from Twelve O'Clock to two." ³¹ The mixing of students from the Latin and Mathematical schools was considered a cause of rowdiness and troubled the overseers. In 1783, they recommended that Robert Proud's Latin scholars be kept separated from "the Scholars of John Todd's & the other Schools." ³² Such separation would in the

²⁷ James Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Pa., 1886), 217; Mary S. Allen, *Quaker Biographies* (Philadelphia, 1912), III, 89.

²⁸ Learned, 176.

²⁹ John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1830), 249.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ William Dickinson's agreement with John Todd to serve as usher, Apr. 16, 1764, William Penn Charter School Archives.

³² Overseers Minutes, II, 181 (Oct. 10, 1783).

future prevent the "Rudeness & unbecoming Behaviour [which] has been evident by their intermixing with each other. . . ." ³³

The teaching of girls did not present the same disciplinary problems, and some masters were frank to admit their preference. An applicant for a teaching post in 1793 wrote to his overseer cousin as follows: "I should prefer a Girls' School, on account of the governmental part of the business being rendered easier amongst them than boys: . . . the docility of Female dispositions in general suits my temper of mind, and Constitution of body better than a School of boys, my health being sensibly affected, when my Mind becomes ruffled, with untoward dispositions. . . ." ³⁴

As a last resort, students were expelled. Concern for the growing negligence of some of the free scholars regarding their attendance in school resulted in the discharge of several students by the overseers, their places to be filled by other students "more deserving." So that scholars and masters alike could observe and be impressed by the policy, the clerk of the overseers was asked to furnish copies of the minutes "to be put up in a public part of each School." ³⁵

The overseers used other devices short of expulsion, however, to try to foster discipline and learning. Surely, if boys were kept busy, they would have less time for mischief. Thus the overseers thought that homework, added to the work of the long school day, would be "advantageous." Such "Lesson or Version assign'd every night to be ready every morning upon their first appearing in School," would no doubt keep the scholars occupied and "conduce to wean them from so eager a desire for unprofitable Amusements." ³⁶

As an extra incentive for scholarship, it was customary to give "premiums" or awards. Philosophically, the Quakers did not consider prizes and rewards appropriate inducements for young people and John Woolman wrote that such prizes "tend to divert their minds from true humility," and seemed to him "to savour of the wisdom of the world." ³⁷ Nonetheless, the policy of rewards was ap-

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Jesse Waterman to John Pemberton, Nov. 18, 1793, William Penn Charter School Archives.

³⁵ Overseers Minutes, I, 283 (Dec. 27, 1764).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 105 (Apr. 26, 1753).

³⁷ Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Education in Theory and Practice* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet Number Nine, Wallingford, Pa., 1940), 76.

proved by the overseers, and ways and means to accumulate funds for these purposes were sought. In 1755, the overseers penalized themselves for failure to attend meetings, with fines of two shillings, "the Fines to be appropriated to purchase good Books or some thing else proper to be given as Premiums to such Boys whose industry entitles them to some particular mark of regard. . . ." ³⁸ The fines were also paid to the master of the Latin School, who, in consultation with the school committee, was "allowed to lay the same out in Premiums for the Scholars at such times and in such proportions as he may judge Convenient. . . ." ³⁹ How prevalent was the practice of awarding premiums is not known, but Thomas Woody thought it was quite general in the Friends' schools in Philadelphia, judging by the periodic presentation to the overseers of bills for "premiums." ⁴⁰ Recommended as a particular reward for students' diligence or "extraordinary performance at their Books," was "their relaxation from Study," rather than "too frequent play days." ⁴¹ Play days themselves, although evidently permitted, were certainly not wholeheartedly approved by the overseers: "for reasons Obvious to every sober minded person that hath observed, the many disorderly Companies that are strolling about at such times, both in Town & Country: which Children will be too apt to mix with, & be in danger to imitate." ⁴²

Despite the many rules and regulations, and the constant efforts of the overseers and masters "to wean the boys from so eager a desire for unprofitable Amusements," they managed to carry on a life of their own which gave vent to their energy and ebullient spirits. Hazing was a common practice and past and future hazings were considered sufficiently important events to warrant notice in the student magazines. An invitation to initiation ceremonies for a new boy was issued to all of the scholars in the Latin School through the following announcement: "A Gentleman having Enter'd himself as a Student in the P. L. [*Public Latin*] School all Freeholders are requested to meet and initiate him by the Performance of the Cere-

³⁸ Overseers Minutes, I, 137 (Dec. 25, 1755).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 150 (Dec. 30, 1756).

⁴⁰ Thomas Woody, *Early Quaker Education in Pennsylvania* (New York, 1920), 186.

⁴¹ Overseers Minutes, I, 104 (Jan. 26, 1753).

⁴² *Ibid.*

monies made use of on that Occasion.”⁴³ At another time, it was announced, rather wistfully, that “the usual rites and Ceremonies commonly used to New Scholars were dispensed with,” because the two “new” boys were only old students returning after an absence.⁴⁴

Games were played in the schoolyard, and some became very popular indeed. The game of chuckers was the rage at the school for a time, for it was noted in the school magazine that “the boys of this School as in antien [*sic*] times are entirely taken up with Chuckers.”⁴⁵ Several years earlier, perhaps the “antien times” referred to above, the magazine reported that “there seems to be very little news stirring unless we were to mention the deep playing at Chuckers which diversion is continually pursued with much eagerness in the School Yard.”⁴⁶

The “unprofitable Amusements” which the overseers feared undoubtedly included a goodly number of pranks, some of which were recorded. In 1753, the boys, who were required to walk two by two behind their master to weekday meeting, managed on one occasion to acquire wooden guns and a little flag. Jonah Thompson, the master “of good military port and aspect,” led this soldierly looking line of young Quakers to meeting, unaware of what they were doing behind him for he did not deign “to look back on their array.”⁴⁷ Another story tells of the boys boring a hole through the classroom ceiling through which they extended a long cord and hook. On this they hoisted aloft the curled grey wig of Robert Proud, leaving it suspended from the ceiling and Proud obviously discomfited.⁴⁸ One night, they bent their efforts to the disassembling of a country wagon, the parts of which they carried to the top of a chimney wall then under construction. There it was put together, awning and all, and daylight revealed it, “to the astonishment of the owner and the diversion of the populace.”⁴⁹

⁴³ “Students Gazette,” Nov. 19, 1777, Norris of Fairhill Manuscripts, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. This collection is the source for subsequent references to student journals.

⁴⁴ “Public School Gazetteer,” 1776.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “Universal Magazine and Literary Museum,” October, 1774.

⁴⁷ Watson, 243.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 243, 541.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

Although there is little evidence to indicate official support or fostering of student activities in the Latin School, the students themselves initiated activities of a nature more formal than those just mentioned. Their journalistic interests resulted in a series of magazines and newspapers, most of which seem to have been short-lived, but all of which were entered upon with enthusiasm and hope. The formats copied those of newspapers of the day, and usually included mottoes in Latin. They were all handwritten, mostly on fourfold sheets. It is obvious that new scribes were required to relieve tired hands, for the writing often changed from page to page and ink blots occasionally marred legibility.

Samuel L. Wharton entered upon his limited stint as editor of "The Monthly Magazine and Literary Museum" in August, 1774, with seemly diffidence in his prefatory remarks: "We would not be imagined to insinuate that there never was a magazine published before, or that the novelty of ours consisted in its being superior to all of them. But an attempt to establish a magazine in so confined a limit as a School—the design entered into so suddenly—half the month expired—unassured of assistance from any Gentleman in the literary way, & quite unacquainted with the business, to make an attempt attended with all these difficulties was certainly bold & equally *new* as few in our situation would have done it. . . ." ⁵⁰ Although there was not much room left in this edition for other offerings, because of the length of the preface, the editor promised to provide more varied fare next time. Indeed, a provocative feature, Cadwalader Crabsticks Conundrums, appeared in the following issue and provided at least a momentary diversion for the boys:

"Why is a good adviser like a lighted lamp?
Why is a leaky barrel like a coward?
Why is a book like a fruit tree in Spring?
Why is a woman's tongue like a good deed?
And why is thy hat, reader like a butcher shop?" ⁵¹

If the reader was unable to solve the conundrums, apparently he was required to consult with the editor, for the answers did not

⁵⁰ "Monthly Magazine and Literary Museum," August, 1774, 1-2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1774, 23.

appear in later editions. After four months, this journal met its demise; several subsequent efforts had little better success. Not daunted, the new "Public School Intelligencer" took note of these abortive efforts in its maiden edition in December, 1776, and hopefully wished for a better fate: "Many attempts have lately been made to carry on periodical Publication in the School which have made a Noise for some time, but most of them have presently fell through and disappeared like the sudden Blaze of a Meteor notwithstanding the boasting Promises and pompous Declarations of their publishers. . . . They hope notwithstanding the Many Difficulties attending that the Public School Intelligencer will not meet with the same Fate as many Publications of a like Nature which have not been carried above the third Number. . . ." ⁵² Since there are records of two other journalistic ventures which appeared in 1777, it can be assumed that the "Public School Intelligencer" too, "fell through like a Meteor."

The medium of exchange among the scholars was paper, a scarce but necessary commodity. It cost one quarter of a sheet to put an advertisement in the magazine, and one could subscribe at the price of one sheet of paper a week. Student Thomas Lloyd, on leaving school, gave his friends seventeen sheets, a present of such generous moment that it was noted in the magazine: "We have the pleasure to inform the Public that the worthy Mr. Lloyd who has lately departed this State has made a generous Donation of 17 sheets of Paper to this State as the last Testimony he was capable of given [*sic*] us of his continued Regard." ⁵³

The boys were prone to lose their books and the magazines were a handy though expensive means of announcing such losses, for, in addition to the initial cost of the advertisement, the loser usually offered a reward. The return of Coles' *Dictionary* was worth two sheets of paper to its owner, but the return of "A Greek Grammar" warranted the proffer of only one half a sheet of paper as a reward by its reluctant or perhaps less affluent owner. ⁵⁴ The journals also advertised other opportunities. Offered for sale was "a pack of

⁵² "Public School Intelligencer," Dec. 21, 1776, in "Public School Gazetteer, Latonia, 1777-1778."

⁵³ "Students Gazette," Dec. 3, 1777.

⁵⁴ "Public School Gazetteer, Latonia, 1777-1778," Oct. 21, 1776.

Geographical or Historical Cards," while a ready buyer awaited the availability of "a good Ink Pot."⁵⁵

During the Revolutionary period, there is evidence that the boys of the Latin School carried on clandestine battles with boys of other Quaker schools. Affected by the general spirit of the times, they called themselves Freeholders, inhabitants of the state of Latonia, and referred to their "enemies" as "Toddites," and "Smithites," apparently after John Todd and George Smith who were teachers in the Mathematical and English Quaker schools at the time.⁵⁶

Reported by the Latonians were numerous skirmishes and clashes between these forces, with themselves, of course, emerging victorious. Sometimes a master would interrupt a battle which prevented "a compleat Victory" for the Latonians, but, for the most part, the Toddites were pictured as inferior beings, subject to ignominious experiences: "On Tuesday Evening last the Toddites our most inveterate Enemies were Exercising themselves the Master opening the Window they all flew like a pack of Sheep and Captn. Whiteyer among the rest flew to the Necessary House the old rendezvous [*sic*] & Place of Refuge."⁵⁷

It would appear that a moratorium between the "inveterate enemies," was required on December 24, 1777, for "two Companies of Militia took Possession of our School so that all public Business for the Present is suspended."⁵⁸ To make way for these British forces, the boys had to "evacuate their State," and "removed their own Effects to places of Safety and assisted in depositing the most valuable Moveables belonging to the said State in Carpenters Hall there to remain until the Latonians are at Liberty to return to their own Habitations or till removed to some more convenient Place."⁵⁹

The scholars of the Quaker schools received much advice from masters and overseers, yet they managed to enjoy "profitable Amusements." Whether they were imbued with "the Fear of the Lord" and thus found "the Beginning of Wisdom" is not recorded.

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⁵⁵ "Weekly Intelligencer," July 6, 1777, in "Public School Gazetteer, Latonia, 1777-1778;" "Students Gazette," June 3, 1778.

⁵⁶ Norris of Fairhill Manuscripts, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁵⁷ "Public School Gazetteer, Latonia, 1777-1778," Oct. 21, 1776.

⁵⁸ "Public School Intelligencer," Dec. 21, 1776.

⁵⁹ "Students Gazette," Dec. 24, 1777.