

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: HIGH HOPES AND HIGH HURDLES: THE
EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE
WASHINGTON D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOL
SYSTEM, 1804-1862

Benjamin Hoffman, Master of Arts, 2010

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In this history, I investigate the early development of Washington D.C.'s public schools.

Between 1804 and 1862, the school system overcame a long period of failed hopes and underfunding to build a legitimate infrastructure for common schooling before the Civil

War. The unique context of Washington D.C. affected the public schools, but themes central to 19th century urban education across the country also surface in the District.

The progression of the system from charity schooling to universal education mirrored the development of other public school systems in the Northeast. The evolution of the language of educational advocacy in D.C., from calls for republican virtue to arguments for social reform, similarly correlated with national developments in public education.

Outside of these similarities, however, the Southern nature of the District, the presence of national politicians, and the symbolic importance of the national capital, distinguished the experience of Washington's pre-1862 public schools.

**HIGH HOPES AND HIGH HURDLES: THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE
WASHINGTON D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, 1804-1862**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Tables.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Historiography.....	6
Section 1: Historiography of pre-1862 Urban Public Schools.....	6
Section 2: Historiography of pre-1862 D.C. Public Schools.....	16
Section 3: Historiography of pre-1862 Washington D.C.....	21
Section 4: Conclusion.....	27
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	29
Chapter 4: Historical Narrative.....	36
Section 1: The Era of Aspiration: 1804-1816.....	39
Section 2: The Era of Stagnation: 1816-1844.....	51
Section 3: The Era of Expansion: 1844-1862.....	64
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	78
References.....	85
Section 1: Primary Sources.....	85
Subsection 1: Annual Reports.....	85
Subsection 2: Board Minutes.....	87
Subsection 3: Miscellaneous.....	87
Section 2: Secondary Sources.....	88

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Total Expenditures for D.C. Public Schools, 1845-1862.....64

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, I began a graduate program in Minority and Urban Education at the University of Maryland-College Park. Because I grew up in a small town in South Texas, basically a foreign country in comparison to Maryland, I knew I needed to make an effort to get to know my new environment. Friends and family in Texas had warned me that things moved more quickly in the Northeast, and that I would have to adapt my attitude to new societal norms. Upon reaching Reagan National Airport in Washington D.C., however, I was surprised, not by a different pace of life, but at the easy access of the public transportation system. Perhaps the faster pace Texans referred to only meant that I could get from one place to another more quickly in the Northeast. It only took a half hour ride and a couple of dollars to get me from the airport to my destination in College Park. In Texas, getting anywhere on a bus takes multiple transfers. The idea of an omnipresent metro system was mindboggling. I had no idea how easily I could travel to D.C. from my new school.

Since I had entered an education program, and since I wanted to get to know my new environment, I made it my business to look into the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). News of Michelle Rhee, the Chancellor of DCPS, came quickly to my attention, but my interest stretched back further than the school reforms of a newly appointed administrator. As an undergraduate, I studied history at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, while also gaining a secondary teaching certificate. My time in the college history classroom, and my time student teaching in the high school classroom, led me to look at the historical roots of D.C.'s public school system before judging it.

To my surprise, library catalog, database, and popular book sites yielded little to no information on the history of public schools in Washington D.C.¹ Even the contemporary DCPS website's explanation of "Who We Are" only gives an overview of the contemporary makeup of the District's schools and a forward looking explanation of administrative goals.² It seems counterintuitive for administrators to plan "Where We're Headed" without some idea of where we've been.³

After talking with my advisor, I realized that the history of Washington D.C.'s public schools provided fertile ground for my research in graduate school. Giddy with relief that I had found an interesting topic, I then moved on to how best to confront it within the framework of a Master's thesis. A broad survey course of historiography put me in contact with Voltaire as a historiographical commentator. In his writings he makes an argument for historians to take "a greater liking for the history of recent times, which is essential for us to know, than for ancient history, which only serves to satisfy our curiosity."⁴

Voltaire's argument makes sense because a more recent history leaves less room for an historian to misinterpret past events through their modern context. Also, recent history has a more direct application to the present, making it more accessible to a public often exasperated by archaic histories. While Voltaire makes a good point, his argument

¹ In this paper I use various terms to refer to the public schools of Washington in a historical context. Sources from the early years of the District use several terms for the public schools, all revolving around the names "City of Washington," "Washington D.C.," "District of Columbia," and "Public Schools." Because of this ambiguity in language, I will refer to the schools under various names in the paper, but I will not use DCPS as a historical moniker because the name implies the school system in its 21st century state, and was never used exclusively in the era I discuss.

² District of Columbia Public Schools, "Who We Are: A Broad Community Committed to a Greater Purpose," <<http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Who+We+Are>> (1 March 2010).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Voltaire, "On History: Advice to a Journalist," in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 36.

does not work for my situation. If I take Voltaire at his word, I would look at D.C.'s public schools exclusively in the latter half of the 20th century. I would face an immediate problem with this approach. The historiography of the early decades of D.C.'s public schools is unreliable and unsophisticated. Any modern history of the schools would work from a weak base. This problem would lead to misrepresentations and misconceptions about the origins of the contemporary school system, and lead to flawed conclusions about its nature.

Because most of my undergraduate classes focused on early America, I know the fallacy in Voltaire's argument. Contemporary readers can gain a broader understanding of contemporary subjects through a wider scope than the previous half century. Studying the origin of our nation and, more importantly, the origin of its people, continually informs my view of modern United States society. A wider historical perspective allows an interested party to see the development of societal structures over time, and lets contemporary audiences reassess the state of society with knowledge of its historical roots.

Following this argument, my investigation into the D.C. public school system begins by looking at its historical origins. This study stretches from the creation of the public school system in 1804, to the entrance of the Black population into the system on the heels of emancipation in 1862. Over this time period, Washington's public schools spent years in a rut of failed progressivism, and decades in a stagnant state of underfunding, before finally expanding into a viable system by the time of the Civil War.

Contrary to the perspective of current education historians, Washington D.C., as a Southern entity in the antebellum period, had laid down a substantial public education

infrastructure before the Civil War. Its expansion followed a similar trajectory to many Northeastern school districts. The schools began as charity institutions, early on implementing a cost-saving Lancasterian system. The language of public school advocacy shifted over the period from fruitless appeals for republican morality to social reform. In the fifteen years leading up to the Civil War, the equating of public schooling with the socialization of undesirable members of society led to positive gains in common school reform.

While Washington D.C.'s experience correlates with other urban areas of the early 19th century, its unique national position also created differences. The early leadership of Thomas Jefferson put the D.C. schools ideologically, if not realistically, ahead of their time. The political importance of the capital, specifically in the War of 1812, affected the development of the city's public schools. Even the nature of the District itself, created synthetically by a Congressional act, and developed under the supervision of a struggling federal government, left its mark on the city's schools. Most of all, the Southern nature of the local populace, and the undeveloped state of the city, separated it from the common school systems emerging in New York and Massachusetts.

Themes which arise in the early development of Washington D.C.'s public schools will interest historians of education, Washington D.C. school reformers, and national school reformers. This paper focuses primarily on how the populace of Washington D.C., the city corporation (local government), and the federal government worked together, or against each other, to develop a universal public school system in the decades leading up to the Civil War. The give and take between these interested parties, and the effect of each on the development of the public schools, still has contemporary

relevance because the same brokers jockey for power in modern schools.

Adding complexity to this theme, in the interest of historians of education in particular, I will consider the reception of the Washington population to progressive educational ideas found almost exclusively in the pre-Civil War Northeast.⁵ The beginnings of educational reform in the South before the Civil War, and the acceleration of reform after, have been credited to the influence of “non-southerners,” in the face of elite, and sometimes religious, opposition.⁶ Washington D.C. represents an interesting place to test this thesis, harboring a demographically Southern population, but with ample Northern influences, in the form of Congressional representatives, throughout the 19th century.⁷

Finally, I will consider how the development of Washington’s schools compared to other urban districts in the North and South. This exercise gives insight into the character of Washington D.C. itself, and provides another example for historians attempting to identify historical trends in educational development across United States urban school districts.

⁵ Joseph W. Newman, “Antebellum School Reform in the Port Cities of the Deep South,” in *Southern Cities, Southern Schools: Public Education in the Urban South*, ed. David D. Plank & Rick Ginsberg (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ While the nature of D.C.’s population is not immediately clear, the presence of slaves, and the relatively large Black population (at or around 20% for this period) correlated more closely with the South than the North: U.S. Census Bureau, “District of Columbia-Race and Hispanic Origin: 1800-1990,” 13 September 2002, < www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab23.pdf > (28 January 2010).

CHAPTER 2: HISTORIOGRAPHY

Three branches of historiography provide crucial background and thematic insight for an investigation into the early development of D.C. public schools. They are 1) the historiography of pre-1862 urban schools, 2) Washington D.C.'s pre-1862 public schools and 3) pre-1862 Washington D.C. in general. The following descriptions of these three branches reveal their contextual importance to my study.

Historiography of Pre-1862 Urban Public Schools

Histories of pre-Civil War urban school districts represent the strongest, and most readily available, of the three branches of historiography informing this study. The formal study of 19th century public schools in the United States began in earnest with the scholastic efforts of Ellwood Cubberley in the first two decades of the 20th century. Working at Stanford University, Cubberley wrote comprehensive works including *The History of Education*, an omnibus history of formal education in the Western Hemisphere, and *Public Education in the United States*, which limited his scope if not his ambition.⁸

The time of publication of *Public Education in the United States* (1919) affected Cubberley's historical perspective. Written in a time of social progressivism and American nativism, Cubberley approached the early public schools with a positive outlook. His work leans heavily on policy when chronicling the development of the

⁸ Ellwood Cubberley, *The History of Education: Educational Practice and Progress Considered as a Phase of the Development and Spread of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1920); Ellwood Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History: An Introductory Textbook Dealing with the Larger Problems of Present-Day Education in the Light of Their Historical Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1919).

schools, using the inclusion of education in various state constitutions as an important measure of the progression of public education in the U.S.⁹ In keeping with this emphasis on large-scale policy and influential political figures, Cubberley's discussion of individuals revolves around the political patriarchs of public education in the United States, including Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann.¹⁰

Public Education in the United States tells the story of the triumph of the public school in the face of the conservative population whose "petty local interests...too often prevailed, to the great detriment of the schools."¹¹ These successes of local interests, in Cubberley's telling, occur most often in areas outside the Northeast. He painted the South as adverse to education because their economy did not require it, and any progression in the West came as a spillover from the liberal-mindedness of the Northeast.¹² More often than not, Cubberley omits these regions of stunted educational development from his history in an apparent effort to keep the reader's eyes focused on the positive. Cubberley's decision to overlook the educational trials of the Black population entirely in his study may also have contributed to his positive view of early public school development in the United States.

Ellwood Cubberley's history sat as a mainstay in the U.S. educational historiography for decades before it came under fire from a new generation of historians. Lawrence Cremin led the charge, coming on to the scene in the 1960s. Cremin did not overlook the importance of Cubberley's work to the historiography of public education in the United States, but questioned his primary source work and offered a different vision

⁹ Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States*, 246.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 258 (Jefferson), 165 (Mann).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74-75.

of public education in the 19th century.¹³ One of Cremin's greatest contributions to educational history came from his expansion of the definition of education. He defined education "as the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, or sensibilities, as well as any learning that results from the effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended."¹⁴ This broad definition dramatically affected the nature of his studies, reflected in his three volumes on *American Education*. Of greatest interest to this study, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876*, looks beyond the classrooms of the formal schools as venues for learning by also considering the importance of other social institutions (including the church, the family, the press, and apprenticeship). Cremin's training as an historian also gave him a more critical eye on the subject as he widened his studies to include ethnicity, race, and gender.

Cremin also took time to consider the competing ideological justifications for common schooling. In the Early Republic (1783-1836), "they [American educational founders] urged the creation of a new republican character, rooted in American soil, steeped in American art, history, and law, and committed to the promise of an American culture."¹⁵ While this aim led to sluggish advancement towards more general educational opportunities in the early 19th century, it took a change in public rhetoric, and a change in national priorities, to push common schooling forward in the antebellum period (1837-1860). With the increase of immigration in the mid-19th century, arguments surfaced that immigrants "need to be properly instructed, even more vigorously than the native-born,

¹³ Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1965).

¹⁴ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1836* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), ix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

perhaps, since they would need to slough off the ways of the Old World before they could learn those of the New.”¹⁶ The “republican education” of the early United States was overshadowed by a new call for education as a form of social reform. This conceptualization of public education still had roots in republican values, but transformed from an agent meant to inform, to an agent meant to reform.

Cremin’s description of the national period did not demonize common schools. The power of *American Education* lay not in its ideological power but in its scope. Its pages literally overflow with educational themes in pre-Gilded Age United States education. While his investigation does not center on formal schooling, his discussion on the evolution of schools, from a haphazard mix of church and charity schools to increasingly centralized school systems, reflected a growing interest in the roots of school structure by “revisionist” historians.¹⁷

Cremin opened the door for historiographical change by looking at public schools in a different light, but the revisionist historians kicked the door off of its hinges. The beautiful vision of the enlightened school systems of the Northeast did not hold up for historians of urban education in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. As Michael Katz, one of the most important historians of this tradition, explains, “a simple narrative of the triumph of benevolence and democracy can no longer be offered or taken seriously by any scholar even marginally aware of their work.”¹⁸ The work of David Tyack, Carl Kaestle, Joel Spring, and Katz himself contributed to this 180° turn in historical perspective from the days of Ellwood Cubberley.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 388, 117.

¹⁸ Michael B. Katz, *Reconstructing American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 5.

While their perspective might have changed from Cubberley's, the importance of the context of their time did not. Historiographically, these writers wrote during the infancy of New Left history. Howard Schonberger, writing in 1974, described New Left historians as "presentists. They have searched for a vision of the past...that would enable them 'to remake the present and the future.' They write with the assumption that certain universal values that are basic to human life and proclaimed in the dominant ideologies of our time have been repressed ignored, or distorted."¹⁹ Born from the social turmoil of the 1960s, New Left history attempts to recast past events, considering the voices that have remained absent in the historical discourse.

Reflecting this change in wider historiography, revisionist historians reevaluated education in the 19th century, considering what answers the evolution of the common schools of the past had on the stratified state of the public schools of the present. Sol Cohen describes David Tyack's *The One Best System* as "the *summa* of American revisionist history of urban education."²⁰ Tyack focuses on the growing bureaucratization and centralization of urban school districts, as ward control slowly decreased in the face of calls for more efficiency and professionalism.²¹ Tyack's emphasis on school district structure, and the import of the phenomenon he describes, had a dramatic effect on revisionist historians.

Michael Katz's 1968 book *The Irony of Early School Reform*, a groundbreaking revisionist study of early schools in Massachusetts, used historical events from specific

¹⁹ Howard Schonberger, "Purposes and Ends in History: Presentism and the New Left," *The History Teacher* 7, no. 3 (May 1974): 449.

²⁰ Sol Cohen, "The History of Education in the United States: Historians of Education and their Discontents," in *Urban Education in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. D. A. Reeder (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1978), 122.

²¹ David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974).

educational venues to consider the roles that different segments of the population played in the development of school systems. His research showed a noted tendency for school reform to come as a result of elite initiative as a measure for social control, instead of growing out of the advocacy of the local populace.²²

In a later book, *Reconstructing American Education*, Katz suggests that four different modes of school structure developed in the 19th century. These structures include paternalistic voluntarism, democratic localism, corporate voluntarism, and incipient bureaucracy. Paternalistic voluntarism called for “free schooling for the very poor.”²³ Democratic localism made cities like rural areas, with autonomous districts under a board with limited powers.²⁴ Corporate voluntarism was “the conduct of single institutions as individual corporations operated by self-perpetuating boards of trustees and financed either wholly through endowment or through a combination of endowment and tuition.”²⁵ Incipient bureaucracy, aka as the centralized school structure that came out of the common school movement, represented only one option of many in the construction of formal education systems in the 1800s.

Carl Kaestle’s *The Evolution of an Early School System*, published in 1973, also put a priority on school structure when interpreting the development of formal education in New York from 1750-1850. Kaestle explains that “the system grew out of an attempt to provide free elementary schooling for poor children, and the intent was moral and cultural. It was an institutional response to the threat of social fragmentation arising from

²² Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts*, Reissued with a new introduction (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 15, 19.

²³ Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

population growth, poverty, and immigration, forces which were felt earliest and most intensely in our Eastern coastal cities.”²⁶ Like Katz, Kaestle credited the advancement of common schooling as a measure instituted for social control. He explains that “daily schooling is the most comprehensive means, short of complete institutionalization, by which one group can attempt to influence the socialization of another group’s children.”²⁷ Schooling provided an opportunity to socialize a heterogeneous population of young Americans into the mainstream culture.

At this point in the historiography of public education in the 19th century, the historians consistently lean towards the Northeast in their investigations. These authors either ignored the South completely, or included it as a sidebar. In *Pillars of the Republic*, Kaestle’s comprehensive history of common schools from 1780-1860, the South appears only in one chapter on regional difference in schooling.²⁸ The larger part of the book gives an overview of the revisionist perspective on common schooling. The evolution of educational advocacy from a language of republican values, to a language of social reform, provides a central theme. Similarly, the various school structures, and their functions, receive Kaestle’s focus. The South does not appear, however, because the infrastructure for common schooling did not exist until after the Civil War. Before then “the public purse provided elementary education only for poor whites. Others fended for themselves wholly on a fee basis.”²⁹ This investigation of Washington D.C. will challenge this omission of Southern cities from discussions of pre-Civil War

²⁶ Carl F. Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System: New York City, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), viii, ix.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁸ Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic, Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

common schools by showing the presence of an educational infrastructure before 1860.

This survey of major works in revisionist history in no way captures the breadth of their historical tradition. Their efforts accelerated the historiography of 19th century public schooling forward considerably. Works on early common schools started to appear fairly consistently. The importance these authors placed on investigating the power structures involved in the policies of early school districts rewrote the optimistic story of public school history given by Ellwood Cubberley.

Despite their success, however, the revisionist tradition did face competing contemporary interpretations. Their efforts made the evolution of urban school structure a crucial consideration for any study, but other historians challenged the view that the bureaucratization of school districts developed as a means for social control. Selwyn Troen, in his 1975 book on St. Louis public schools, saw the creation of a centralized bureaucracy as pragmatic and necessary, instead of a choice among many for how to structure a school district.³⁰ In his introduction, Troen sees case studies as important in breaking misconceptions and wide theories about the “social and political forces that shaped individual systems.” Looking at a school district in isolation allows an author to test the social and political trends offered by revisionist historians. Troen argued that “increased bureaucratization and professionalization did not result in the alienation of the public. Instead, the enlarged intersection of the schools with the lives of the young, parents, businesses, and the community engendered cooperation and hope rather than estrangement.”³¹ Troen’s argument, based on solid research, makes it important for contemporary historians to consider the ideological basis for bureaucratization before

³⁰ Selwyn K. Troen, *The Public and the Schools: Shaping the St. Louis System, 1838-1920* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

attributing their development as a measure for social control.

While historians like Troen have challenged the revisionist tradition, their interpretation still holds sway in the modern historiography of urban education in the 19th century. Although revisionist publications appeared in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, their findings remain the standards in studies of urban schools. The importance of centralization and bureaucratization, the idea of schooling as a means for social control, and their regional conclusions all persist in the modern historical discourse. In most ways, urban education historiography has stalled since this generation of historians. Studies appear less frequently, and interpretations have largely stagnated. While history does not necessarily have to advance, since theoretically an undeniable interpretation could be reached, this kind of historiographical perfection remains elusive in practice. At the least, case studies, like Troen's, have immense value to the field as a means for testing the conclusions of revisionist historians, and perhaps finding new ones.

Beyond the need for case studies in general, a need exists to widen the venues of study as well. Writing in 2005, William Reese reiterates Kaestle's conclusion that before the Civil War "Southern states meagerly attended to the education of their poorest white citizens and warned against cultural imposition from the North."³² Even if we take this statement as true, it does not mean that people in the South did not learn at all. The application of Cremin's more broad definition of education creates opportunities to understand how 19th century Southerners learned.

Cremin's methodology would change how historians look at the South, but I would argue that a closer investigation of the common schools in Southern cities might

³² William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to No Child Left Behind* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 43.

bring Kaestle's and Reese's generalization about the South into question. While Washington D.C. does not represent the South as a whole, and the educating of the poor stood as a central function of early education, a larger infrastructure for common schooling existed before the onset of the Civil War.

At the least, David D. Plank and Rick Ginsberg's *Southern Cities, Southern Schools*, shows that the South deserves more attention from education scholars. Joseph Newman's chapter on four major port cities in the South offers an intriguing story of competing class interests in the antebellum period. These interests mirror the revisionist narratives of Northeastern cities. As Newman concludes, "class and caste fueled the school crusades, for in the urban ports the commercial elites and middle classes looked to common schools for social uplift as well as social control."³³ While this theme of social control sounds familiar, the South did, in Newman's rendition, depend on non-southern intervention to move common schooling forward against resistance from a coalition of elites and Catholics.³⁴

Newman's article brings up important questions to consider when looking at D.C. Did the presence of non-southern politicians speed up the development of the common schools? Did supporters of the school see them as a tool for social control or social mobility? Who resisted the common schools? While *Southern Cities, Southern Schools* provides a step in the right direction for Southern education historians, more studies would help create a general picture of the South educationally on the eve of the Civil War.

The conclusions of past historians of pre-Civil War urban schooling provide

³³ Joseph W. Newman, "Antebellum School Reform in the Port Cities of the Deep South," 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19, 28.

important themes in need of investigation when approaching a case study of a city's schools. Revisionists have shown the importance of class as a variable when studying urban schools. The socioeconomic status of students and school reformers offer important insights into the ideological base of the school system. In addition, the development of the school system in general, from a policy standpoint, allows for the identification of trends, whether towards centralization or local control. Finally, a case study should consider the language of common school advocacy, and the efficacy of arguments for schools as an imparter of republican virtue, versus schools as a venue for social control.

Historiography of Pre-1862 D.C. Public Schools

In order to satisfy these reformers, however, I need to take the time to consider what other scholars have written about D.C. public schools before 1862. These histories act as both a guide for my study and an interpretive check. Initially, they provide me with a sense of what to expect in the primary sources on the schools, and what large themes will likely surface in my own archival investigation. As I move on to writing, their articles provide an interpretive base that I will attempt to add to or challenge depending on my own primary source research. Unfortunately, the dearth of literature on the subject, and the nature of the histories that do exist, left me with a very little historiographical base to work from.

Only two article length treatments of D.C.'s early schools surfaced in my review of the literature. Each of these histories appeared in annual reports of the schools, one local and one national, and both were published before 1900. Samuel Yorke At Lee published a "History of the Public Schools of Washington City...From August 1805, to

August 1875,” in the *First Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools of the District of Columbia, 1874-1875*.³⁵ Ormond Wilson wrote on “The First Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington, D.C.” in *The Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1894-95*.³⁶ While both of these histories use primary sources in their studies, neither represents a critical interpretation of the school system. Instead they read like a progression of facts without the necessary voice to shape the events into a coherent narrative.

At Lee’s history relies heavily on Board of Trustees minutes to construct the chronological narrative of the schools from 1805-1818. In order to illustrate the schools early development, At Lee quotes heavily from the Board minutes, focusing on changes in school structure, school expenditures, and the hiring and resignation of teachers.³⁷ His efforts illuminate the public schools’ struggle to achieve lofty administrative goals on a restricted budget in their early years.

At Lee shows research ingenuity in his construction of the history of the schools from 1818-1844.³⁸ With less primary sources available, At Lee located newspaper sources to develop a rough picture of the schools in this era. He looks primarily at the Western district after the school system split in 1816. His discussion includes mayoral speeches and enrollment data, but the overall detail of his description decreases due to the

³⁵ Samuel Yorke At Lee, “History of the Public Schools of Washington City, District of Columbia, from August 1805, to August 1875, Written, at Request and by Order of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, for the National Centennial Year, 1876,” in *First Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools of the District of Columbia, 1875-'75* (Washington D.C.: M’Gill & Witherow, Printers and Sterotypers, 1876).

³⁶ Ormond Wilson, “Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington D.C., 1805-1885,” in *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1894-95, vol. 2* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896).

³⁷ At Lee, “History of the Public Schools of Washington City,” 12-27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-35.

limits of his sources.³⁹ He did not use the Board minutes of the Eastern Free School, which will figure prominently into this narrative, but his findings on the Western School will help fill out the experience of the rest of the system after the 1816 split.

His description of the final years of interest for this study, 1844-1862, contains little detail, despite the explosive growth of the schools in this period. His yearly descriptions comprise only a few lines, as he briefly goes over the opening of new schools, changes in school policy, and the size of the annual appropriation to the schools.⁴⁰

The detail of At Lee's history makes it a valuable resource as a hole-filler in the historical narrative. The lack of interpretation in his history, however, minimizes his work's importance as an ideological check. In the conclusion of the essay, At Lee includes a brief interpretive piece, but it comes off as a glorification of the schools, placing them as a marvel of educational structure both nationally and internationally, without any solid, source-based, justification.⁴¹ The commissioning of the article by the Board of Trustees puts the objectivity of the author in question. Grandiose statements on the importance of the schools, without allusion to the actual text of the document, represent persuasive writing more than historical interpretation.

While At Lee's patron might bring his objectivity into question, the objectivity of Ormond Wilson, the second superintendent of the Washington D.C.'s public schools, is very suspicious. Wilson's history, published in a national educational report in 1895, reads more fluidly than At Lee's due to a larger thematic emphasis, and a less rigid chronology. Wilson separates the history of the schools into three eras, "The Initial

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35-36.

⁴¹ Ibid., 44-45.

Period—1805-1845,” “[The] Transitional Period—1845-1860,” and “The Developmental Period—1860-1885.”⁴² A caustic critic might question this periodization because he reserved the most glorious title, the Developmental Period, for the time he worked intimately with the public schools as a Trustee and a superintendant. Even if the reader chooses to overlook potential author bias, the choice to create an initial era almost twice as long as the other eras shows a marked emphasis in the narrative on the latter years (years beyond the scope of this history).

The content of Wilson’s narrative is reminiscent of At Lee’s. He includes major policy changes in the school system, names of teachers, and the location of schools. His history distinguishes itself from At Lee’s in the greater attention he pays to administrative leaders and the conduct of students in the classroom.⁴³ His emphasis on students brings interesting insights, particularly during the schools time under the Lancasterian system, when he describes the complex reward system instituted in the schools.⁴⁴

While Wilson’s close connection with the schools makes his history questionable, it also makes him a primary source of sorts, as his personal knowledge of the people involved give him insight not available in archival sources. For the latter decades of my study, Wilson not only included names of important historical actors, but often added brief biographical information. Beyond a source description at the beginning of the paper, Wilson does not discuss the derivation of his sources within the text. The reader must make the assumption that some of the details, more abundant in the later years of the narrative, come from Wilson’s own experience. While these personal insights

⁴² Wilson, “Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington D.C., 1805-1885,” 1674, 1679, 1681.

⁴³ His description of political and administrative leaders who worked for the restructuring of the schools in 1844 is particularly important: *Ibid.*, 1679.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1678.

deserve scrutiny, the absence of any other information on these events makes Wilson a potentially valuable resource.

Because interpretation does not figure prominently into either history, as even Wilson's history resembles a chronicle more than an interpretation, the overall utility of these sources remains low. Truthfully, these men will serve a contemporary narrative of D.C.'s public schools better as primary sources. Their studies gave me an opportunity to get into the head of the educational elites of the 19th century to understand what parts of the development of the schools drew their attention.

Two other historical pieces on D.C.'s early public schools deserve note. In 1923, John Proctor wrote an article for the *Records of the Columbian Historical Society, Washington D.C.* on the Lancasterian schools in Washington.⁴⁵ This system, developed by Joseph Lancaster in England, provided an inexpensive and efficient means to instruct large numbers of urban children. Proctor's article gives a background sketch of Lancaster himself, as well as the circumstances which led to the opening of a Lancasterian school in Washington in 1812. Proctor, while writing about D.C. schools, references sources about conditions within the schools themselves infrequently. Instead, he explains the pedagogy of Lancasterian education, and then speculates on its application in D.C. classrooms. The author's tone does not engender trust, with the continued inclusion of phrases like "for some reason or other," as the introduction to a statement.⁴⁶ Again, this source deserves scholarly scrutiny, but it does provide a base of speculation, at the least, on the fate of D.C. public schools under the Lancasterian system

⁴⁵ John Clagett Proctor, "Joseph Lancaster and the Lancasterian Schools in the District of Columbia, with Incidental School Notes," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 25 (1923): 1-35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

from 1812-1844.

In contrast to Proctor's article, which provides interpretation without context, Mark Richards timeline of school governance in D.C provides context without interpretation.⁴⁷ While Richards offers no interpretation of the events included on the timeline, seeing the changes in school structure sequenced chronologically allows the reader to identify a trend toward centralization of the city's schools over the course of the century. Both Proctor and Richards provide focused glimpses of specific aspects of D.C.'s public schools which compliment the comprehensive histories of At Lee and Wilson.

At Lee and Wilson created histories of the D.C. public schools which effectively absented their development from the events of the rest of the city. The addition of this crucial context in the creation of this narrative will help contemporary readers to better understand what local characteristics might have impacted the development of the city's public schools. Unlike histories of the schools specifically, multiple interpretive histories of the city of Washington do exist, painting a picture of the capital city in the decades leading up to the Civil War.

Historiography of pre-1862 Washington D.C.

An understanding of the political, social, and economic characteristics of Washington D.C. provides crucial context for investigating the nature of the public schools before 1862. Constance Green, who has looked at the history of Washington D.C. most substantively in the 19th century, explains the difficulties inherent in studying

⁴⁷ Mark David Richards, "Public School Governance in the District of Columbia: A Timeline," *Washington History* 16, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2004/2005): 23-25.

the capital city.⁴⁸ Green points out the “double role of national capital and city” as a particularly large hurdle to historians interested in the District.⁴⁹ Supposed histories of D.C. often use the name “Washington” synonymously with “the federal government,” leading to histories cataloguing the actions of presidential administrations on the national stage, while ignoring the city lying in the shadow of the capitol.⁵⁰

The histories that have focused on Washington D.C. itself reveal the unparalleled story of a town (and I call it a town purposely in this period) whose proximity to the federal government profoundly shaped its early development.⁵¹ Historical interest in the early years of the District began at the turn of the 20th century. The *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* began printing stories in 1900 on the nature of the city’s Black population. Created in 1894, the Columbia Historical Society’s mission encompassed “the collection, preservation, and diffusion of knowledge respecting the history and topography of the District of Columbia.”⁵² Although the exclusively White membership of the organization remained small in its early years, their efforts in publishing the *Records* has left contemporary historians with a treasure-trove of information on D.C.’s early history.

Walter C. Clephane wrote an article for the *Records* on the “Local Aspect of Slavery in the District of Columbia” which, beyond discussing the conditions of urban

⁴⁸ Constance McLaughlin Green, “Problems of Writing the History of the District of Columbia,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 51/52 (1951/1952): 120-133.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁰ For an example of this type of federal-centered history see: David D. Lewis, *District of Columbia: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1976); Rufus Rockwell Wilson, *Washington: The Capital City: And its Part in the History of the Nation*, vols. 1 & 2 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1901).

⁵¹ For an article on the designation of D.C. as a town or city see: C.M. Harris, “Washington’s ‘Federal City,’ Jefferson’s ‘Federal Town,’” *Washington History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 49-53.

⁵² The Historical Society of Washington, DC, “History of the Historical Society of Washington, DC,” <http://www.historydc.org/about/HSW_History.asp> (6 April 2010).

slavery in Washington, also cataloged the severe legal restrictions placed on the sizable free Black population in the District.⁵³ These restrictions, including payment for residency, endorsement requirements for residency, and legal requirements to obtain licenses for social events, severely dampened the socioeconomic development of the free Black population in the District.⁵⁴ These restrictions follow a trend in Southern governance policy towards free Blacks. As John Hope Franklin's study of free Blacks in North Carolina shows, the measures put in place against free Blacks in D.C. seem almost tame compared to the harsh policies of other Southern governments.⁵⁵

Writing in 1913, Page Milburn published a history on "The Emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia."⁵⁶ Because of D.C.'s position as the national capital, the issue of slavery became a contentious issue in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln proposed abolition in the District in 1849, citing the federal government's constitutional jurisdiction over Washington.⁵⁷ Lincoln's initial proposal failed, but in April of 1862, during his first term, Congress passed an act freeing the District's slaves, nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation.⁵⁸ Milburn points out that local sentiment of the voting population, as viewed through the city's newspapers, was against the bill.⁵⁹ Washington's position as a symbol of the Union overrode the views of the city's populace.

The Records of the Columbia Historical Society continued to print articles on the

⁵³ Walter C. Clephane, "The Local Aspect of Slavery in the District of Columbia," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 3 (1900): 224-256.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 230-232.

⁵⁵ John Hope Franklin, "The Enslavement of Free Negroes in North Carolina," *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no. 4 (1944): 401-428.

⁵⁶ Page Milburn, "The Emancipation of the Slaves in the District of Columbia," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 14 (1913): 96-119.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

early years of the District into the mid-1900s. Constance Green printed an article, as cited earlier, giving an overview of the difficulties inherent in studying the national capital.⁶⁰ Letitia W. Brown also wrote an interesting piece on the residency patterns of Blacks in the District from 1800-1860, providing a spatial context for the demographic layout of the city.⁶¹

Book length treatments of 19th century Washington in the early 1900s included a host of interesting facts, though a lack of documentation and organization lessen their contemporary importance. Rufus Rockwell Brown's *Washington the Capital City*, looks primarily at the federal government, but contains a fairly thorough treatment of the creation of the city.⁶² He gives an overview of the political maneuverings resulting in the decision to place the capital at the Potomac site, in which the South consented to the federal government paying off state debts (heaviest in the North), in return for the placement of the capital at a Southern site. Wilson also includes interesting facts about the purchase of lands in what would become the District of Columbia, and general statements about the overall state of the city, which he calls "a sparse-built, unsightly city and a comfortless place of residence."⁶³ While an interesting read, Wilson's loose chronology, hyperbolic language, and lack of documentation, makes it difficult for modern historians to authenticate his study.

Published about 30 years later, George Rothwell Brown's *Washington: A Not Too Serious History*, largely follows the trends set by Brown.⁶⁴ The book still lacks

⁶⁰ Green, "Problems of Writing the History of the District of Columbia," 120-133.

⁶¹ Letitia W. Brown, "Residence Patterns of Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1800-1860," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 69/70 (1969/1970): 66-79.

⁶² Rufus Rockwell Wilson, *Washington the Capital City*.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁴ George Rothwell Brown, *Washington: A Not too Serious History* (Baltimore: The Norman Publishing Co., 1930).

adequate documentation, and even more than *Washington the Capital City*, Brown's book includes a hodgepodge of interesting, if not well-organized, facts. Brown's study, however, focuses exclusively on the city itself, and thus has more value to this branch of historiography. Specifically, he takes more time to talk about the stunted economic development of the District, and the political peculiarity of the coexistence of a local and federal government. Brown gives the federal government credit for supplying the "entire capital of vision and money which has brought it [Washington] about."⁶⁵ At the same time, he laments the slow growth of the city's infrastructure, as no major advancements in local transportation came until after the Civil War.⁶⁶

While far from perfect, Brown's history progressed the city's historiography until Constance Green could take the handles in the mid-20th century. For the most well-researched and thorough history of the District through Reconstruction, historians should read Green's *Washington, Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, published in 1962.⁶⁷ In this two volume survey, Green writes deeply on the political, social, and economic characteristics of the District. Her footnotes reveal the depth of her research, and the beginning of a more scholarly treatment of the history of Washington. She talks about the undefined relationship between the young federal government and the struggling local government.⁶⁸ She also includes information on the different social institutions operating in the city, including the church and the schools. Economically, she portrays the District as slow-developing, unable to reach the dreams of the city's founders, to develop a

⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁷ For this era, the majority of material will be coming from volume I: Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 131.

manufacturing center.⁶⁹ Later historians have built on Green's narrative, but her book remains the standard for comprehensive histories.

Over the last 20 years, historians have continued to increase our understanding of the early history of D.C. through studies with narrower chronological and thematic focuses. Both Fergus Bordewich and Les Standiford have looked at different aspects of the making of the capital. Bordewich's study focuses on the political battle surrounding the proposed sites for the capital city.⁷⁰ Standiford moves forward with the story, describing the city planning of Charles L'Enfant and the trials and tribulations surrounding the construction of Washington's public buildings.⁷¹

While the histories described to this point have focused on the city's native and Black populations, Francine Curro Carry's *Urban Odyssey*, widens historian's cultural perspective of Washington. The edited volume includes chapters on the Native American roots of the territory that would become Washington, as well as a chapter on the city's increasing Irish population, whose contributions were important to the pre-Civil War D.C. economy.⁷²

Robert Manning's economic treatment of early Washington offers one possible explanation for the Black/native White binary in the historical discourse. In an edited book and an article, Manning forwards an argument that the peculiar demographic character of the District, housing a large free Black working class, stopped the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 32-36.

⁷⁰ Fergus M. Bordewich, *Washington: The Making of the American Capital* (New York: Amistad, 2008).

⁷¹ Les Standiford, *Washington Burning: How a Frenchman's Vision for Our Nation's Capital Survived Congress, the Founding Fathers, and the Invading British Army* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008).

⁷² William M. Gardner, "Native Americans: Early Encounters," in *Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, D.C.*, ed. Francine Curro Cary (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); H. McAleer, "The Green Streets of Washington," in *Urban Odyssey*, ed. Cary.

immigration of Europeans common in the Northeast.⁷³

The literature review above describes a branch of historiography with an arc of development far different than the ideological battles surrounding 19th century urban schooling historicism. Instead of a progression of argumentation, histories of Washington D.C. have progressed in specificity and scholastic responsibility. While histories of urban schooling have undoubtedly become more sophisticated, and source work continues to improve, ideology has factored far less into histories of early Washington D.C. Elwood Cubberley and Michael Katz have a decidedly different view of their historical subject, but I would argue that George Rothwell Brown and Constance Green do not. Our understanding of the history of Washington D.C. continues to grow in depth, as the scholarly investigation of new subjects adds to the emerging historical narrative.

Conclusion

These three historiographical branches will each provide important context for understanding the history of D.C. public schools from 1804-1862. The work of urban education historians allow me to make comparisons with other city's developing common schools. They also identify central themes in the wider story of early urban public schooling that I need to consider in this study.

The two histories of Washington D.C.'s public schools act as important secondary and primary sources. As secondary sources, they include information that could fill in

⁷³ Robert D. Manning, "Washington D.C.: The Changing Social Landscape of the International City," in *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America*, Sylvia Pedraza & Ruben Rumbaut, eds. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996), 374-375; Robert D. Manning, "Multicultural Washington, DC: The Changing Social and Economic Landscape of a Post-industrial Metropolis," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 330-331.

holes in my own historical narrative, as well as providing interpretations of the school's development that inform my own. As primary sources, because of the association of the authors with the city's schools, the narratives include information, particularly about individuals, possibly not available in other documents. Also, their choices in content shed light on what parts of schooling deserved emphasis for a 19th century audience.

The historiography of pre-1862 Washington D.C. will improve this study incalculably as I attempt to understand the contextual factors affecting the development of the public school system. When looking at the larger political economy surrounding urban schools, John Rury and Jeffrey Mirel explain that "considering the political economy...necessitates analysis of the larger urban social and economic context" affecting schooling.⁷⁴ In order to take a sophisticated look at the early development of Washington D.C.'s public schools, I must consider the wider urban landscape of the District, and its likely effect on the major actors involved in the city's public schools.

⁷⁴ John L. Rury and Jeffrey E. Mirel, "The Political Economy of Urban Education," *Review of Research in Education* 22 (1997): 49-110.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The meager historiography of D.C.'s public schools in the 19th century demonstrates the need for more extensive research. No trained historian has taken up the subject in recent years, and the narratives available lack proper source documentation. This study will take the next step by recounting a coherent narrative of the first sixty years of D.C.'s public schools, based, when possible, on primary sources.

I hope that this project provides a baseline understanding of the roots of D.C.'s public schools for interested parties. The primary sources I have found allow me to construct a narrative with no significant chronological holes, though places to add more context, more research, and more interpretation, abound. This project's significance, however, lies in its ability to provide enough of the skeleton of this narrative for later historians, including myself, to fill in the rest of the body. By the conclusion of this paper, interested scholars will have some sense of the themes they will confront in their own research. Historians of later eras in D.C. public school history will have a means to understand what sits at the roots of the system in their era of interest. This investigation will answer some questions on D.C.'s early public schools, but its greater long-term worth lies in the further questions its findings generate.

The majority of primary sources referenced in this paper come from the Charles Sumner School and Archives in Washington D.C. School board minutes give an in-depth look into the day-to-day activities of the schools. The Sumner School has minutes from the meetings of the Board of Trustees of the entire district from 1805-1818, of the Eastern Free School from 1816-1844, and of the general board governing the four districts in the city from 1860-1862. Because the schools, for the majority of the era under discussion (pre-1844), only enrolled a couple hundred students, Trustees worked more intimately

with the schools than in most modern urban districts. Receipts and discussion of matters as small as the purchase of a globe for the classroom appear in the first set of minutes (1805-1818).⁷⁵ In the Eastern Free School, the president of the Board even gave sermons to the class on Sundays, while a likely relative taught classes during the week.⁷⁶ While the use of Board minutes might generate a top-down view of the schools, the small scale of the early schools ensure that the view of the Board does not lie too far away from the activities of the classroom.

With the redistricting of the schools in 1844, and the corresponding increase of students and schools, more formal sources of information appear for the latter decades of this study. Beginning in 1845, the Board of Trustees began issuing annual reports.⁷⁷ These reports contain school-by-school overviews (albeit short overviews), but generally the degree of personal interaction between schools and Trustees decreases. Instead, the annual reports contain valuable quantitative data, including enrollment data, the number of schools in the district, and total expenditures. These numbers offer historians a way to chronicle the progress of the school system, and in the case of D.C., to see the explosive growth of the public schools on the eve of the Civil War. Also, reports from the President Ex-Officio of the district, the mayor at this point, to the City Council (the audience for these reports) offers a look into the development of the language of advocacy surrounding public schooling, as well as the troubles, both budgetary and structural, facing the schools in the 1840s, '50s, and '60s.

⁷⁵ *Record of the Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools of Washington City, District of Columbia from Aug. 5, 1805 to July 6, 1818*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

⁷⁶ *Journal of the Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of the Eastern Free School: Washington City, D.C. from Oct. 14, 1816 to June 26, 1844*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

⁷⁷ *Annual Report of Public Schools, 1845-1860.; Public Schools: District of Columbia, 1860-1866*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

The nature of the sources used for this project creates a view of the schools from the Board's perspective. The minutes contain fully copied letters from parents and teachers at various points, but the majority of material comes from the Trustees themselves. The subsequent policy emphasis in this study rankles against my own scholarly background in social history, but I am convinced that this choice best fits the historiographical needs of the subject. Due to my own time constraints in completing this project, and my aim to provide a coherent chronological narrative of the first sixty years of public school history in D.C., the use of the above sources provides the most viable route.

I confidently believe that social history will immeasurably increase our understanding of these schools, but in order to understand these sources, historians must first place them in the wider context of system policy.⁷⁸ The findings of social historians will give deeper insight into the motives behind school reform. By shifting the focus of future studies away from "social elites to the inarticulate masses," the wider framework of policy will be tempered by the actual experience of the public.⁷⁹ This policy-based study will aid in this endeavor by providing social historians with a general outline of what happened in Washington's pre-1862 public schools.

Secondary sources will also add to the study as a means for comparing the experience of D.C. with other urban school districts. The case studies of revisionist historians identify themes in other cities, mainly in the Northeast, providing an opportunity to consider the generalizability of the development of D.C.'s public

⁷⁸ For a good discussion of social history, including a chronological explanation of the evolution of social history from its Annales origins to its current state, see: Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis?: Recent Directions in Historiography*, 2nd edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

schools.⁸⁰ Themes of particular interest include the idea of schooling for social control, the changing of the language of common school advocacy over the century, and the justification for the centralization and bureaucratization of urban schools. A case study of Washington D.C.'s public schools offers another opportunity to view the deviation and uniformity of public school development across cities and regions.

The histories of Samuel Yorke At Lee and Ormond Wilson, while not scholastically rigorous, contain important information for consideration in the construction of this narrative.⁸¹ The time of publication of these histories indicate that the authors lived during the public schools' early years in D.C., and their personal histories confirm that they lived in the District.⁸² Wilson and At Lee's histories, constructed by men that lived in 19th century Washington D.C., provide potential insight into contextual factors affecting the development of the public school system that are not immediately apparent in other primary sources.

In some ways, Wilson's period breakdown of the early decades of D.C. public schools mirrors my own. He names 1805-1845 "The Initial Period," for the simple reason that it occurs first.⁸³ He then deems 1845-1860 "The Transitional Period" as the structure of the school changed and the schools began to grow.⁸⁴ Finally, 1860-1885 falls under the name "The Developmental Period," as the city and the school's influence multiplied greatly following the Civil War.⁸⁵ As noted earlier, historians must scrutinize

⁸⁰ See historiography section and explanation of case studies by Michael Katz, Carl Kaestle, and Selwyn Troen.

⁸¹ Wilson, "Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington, 1805-1885"; At Lee, "History of the Public Schools of Washington City, District of Columbia, from August 1805, to August 1875."

⁸² Wilson's History was published as part of an annual report of the Commissioner of Education in 1896; At Lee's history was published in an annual report by the Board of Trustees of D.C. in 1876.

⁸³ Wilson, "Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington D.C., 1805-1885," 1674.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1679.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1681.

any glorification of the latter period due to Wilson's position as a Trustee and superintendent in D.C.'s public schools during this era.

Although the years of my eras somewhat correspond to Wilson's, I will change the dates moderately, and rename them to make their designations more informative. The first era in this study, "The Era of Aspiration," stretches from 1804-1816, when the schools existed under one Board of Trustees and the newness of the public school system spurred ambition in ideas, if not in reality. The second era, termed "The Era of Stagnation," comprises the years from 1816-1844, when the schools largely remained the same in size and structure, suffering under budgetary neglect and a lack of ideological growth. The final era, "The Era of Expansion," runs from 1844-1862, when the school system grew exponentially in size, both in students and schools.

The decision to portion these eras as stated makes sense for two reasons: first, because the narrative of the schools transitions significantly at the years referenced above, due to large changes in school district structure; and second, because the sources primarily referenced in this study roughly follow this chronology, and source changes will inevitably shift the voice of the narrative.⁸⁶

Board of Trustees minutes and annual reports will comprise the bulk of information used in the construction of this narrative. I have run across other sources, however, that historians might find useful for future studies. Student registers for the schools in various years of the 1850s and 60s (the archive does not have a complete run) contain important information. Organized by school, the registers include the names of all students enrolled in the District's public schools and their attendance record for the

⁸⁶ Although I am using board minutes in each of the first two eras, the city's schools shift into two districts in 1816, and the minutes used in the second era follow the Easter school, breaking up the continuity of ideas from the previous Board. For more explanation see the narrative section of this paper.

year. They also have marginal notes on student's content progress and reasons for absences. Also sections for enumeration of suspended students, and their justifications, appear for each school. Finally, a listing of the awards given to each class of students not only identifies scholastic achievement, but shows that most schools contained a progression of four to six classes in Primary School.⁸⁷

The cross-referencing of student names to city directories, admittedly a long process, could give researchers some idea of the socioeconomic status of the school's students in the 1850s, beyond the pronouncements of Trustees. The inclusion of marginal notes, explanations for suspensions, and attendance records provides a more intimate look into the schools not as readily available in annual reports.

City newspapers also make references to the public schools. Both the *National Intelligencer* and *The Baltimore Sun* contained pieces on D.C.'s schools.⁸⁸ While relevant to this subject, these articles contain only momentary glimpses of the schools, such as announcements of public examinations and recounting of policy changes already available in other sources. I have not gone through all of the papers for this entire period, however, so some deep mining might dig up more useful information. The *National Intelligencer* in particular, published by the 1840s mayor and persistent common school advocate William Winston Seaton, could provide important insights.

I also will not pull extensively from the minutes of the Board of Trustees for the

⁸⁷ These bibliographic notes were taken primarily from a reading of the student registers from 1850: "1850 Student Register," DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

⁸⁸ The *National Intelligencer* began printing in 1810 and ran for the rest of the era under discussion: The Library of Congress, "Eighteenth-Century American Newspaper in the Library of Congress: District of Columbia," 8 May 2009, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/18th/72.html>> (1 March 2010); *The Baltimore Sun* was founded in 1837, and continues to run today: *The Baltimore Sun* "About *The Baltimore Sun*," *The Baltimore Sun* online, <<http://www.baltimoresun.com/about/bal-about-baltsun.0.2763999.htmlstory>> (19 March 2010).

1860s.⁸⁹ Because of the scale of the schools at this point, the nature of the Board minutes change dramatically. Most of the reported minutes contain procedural information, not particularly useful for this project, elections, protocol for meetings and committee creation, etc. The annual reports provide a more concise overview for this study, but the Board minutes do offer an opportunity to extend the narrative.

I have included this note on sources for future research as an indication of my hope that historians will continue to expand on this topic in the future. While I intend to look more deeply at this era myself, I hope that the story of Washington D.C.'s public schools in the 19th and 20th century continues to receive scholarly attention. With this thesis laid down as groundwork, the door now lies open to add Washington D.C. as another site of comparison for scholars interested in gaining a broader understanding of the common school movement of the United States. A more thorough knowledge of the historical basis of public schooling in the 19th century helps contemporary audiences to consider the structural integrity of public school systems today.

⁸⁹ Observations taken from: *Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, 1860-1868*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

CHAPTER 4: HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Writing soon after the passing of major healthcare legislation in 2010, contemporary readers, and more importantly contemporary historians, should keep in mind the modest and fluid beginnings of the federal government in the 18th and 19th centuries. While the modern United States government remains limited by Western standards, its scope and power far exceeds its origins. In the Constitutional debate of 1787, on the heels of the civil unrest caused by Shay's Rebellion, the Founding Fathers weighed a fear of big government against recognition of their need for a strong central government to ensure economic stability.

The resulting Constitution granted the federal government increased powers, including power over foreign affairs, interstate commerce, national currency, the military, as well as the power to “collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States.”⁹⁰ Lesser known, but similarly important, the Constitution also called for the creation of a “District (not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the acceptance of Congress, become the Seat of the Government of the United States.”⁹¹

All of these enumerated powers seem grand, but negotiation of the true scope of federal power took time. The execution of federal responsibilities required an infrastructure not in place in 1787, and the defining of the limits of these constitutional powers resulted, and still results, from political debate and federal versus state wrangling (as we have seen in the above healthcare example). It follows therefore, that the 1790s

⁹⁰ “The United States Constitution,” U.S. Constitution Online, <<http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html>> (30 March 2010).

⁹¹ Ibid.

were a turbulent time for the federal government. The United States found itself a small fish swimming in the dangerous waters of the European sharks in foreign policy. Debate on financial policy wavered between the highs of Alexander Hamilton's plans for the federal assessment of state debt and a national bank, and the Southern call for a more minimalistic approach.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the location of the previously mentioned District came out of these early political debates. The national capital held considerable political weight. In the interim years, before choosing the site, the capital sat in New York City, effectively putting the North at the center of the Union.⁹² Southern states, whose interests and political leanings already varied from the North, sought a more stable power base in the emerging federal government. Two sites soon came to the fore in the discussion over the capital's location, Germantown, PA, and a site on the Potomac River between Virginia and Maryland.⁹³

George Washington advocated fiercely for the Potomac site. As Les Standiford explains, "It was Washington's personal belief that a site along the Potomac, on the dividing line between the industrialized North and the agricultural South, represented not only a philosophical but a practical compromise in the matter [of the capital's location]."⁹⁴ Washington might have seen the Potomac site as the ideological center of the Union, but his fellow politicians did not.⁹⁵ The site was located in slave territory, and its geographic location put it south of the Northern urban strongholds of New York and Philadelphia.

⁹² Bordewich, *Washington: The Making of the American Capital*, 13-14.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁴ Standiford, *Washington Burning*, 37.

⁹⁵ Bordewich, *Washington: The Making of the American Capital*, 22.

Because the debate over the capital occurred at the same time as the national debate over state debt, politicians soon bartered a compromise which landed the capital on the Potomac in exchange for the federal assessment of state debts (which came primarily from the North).⁹⁶ The signing of the Residence Act of 1790 set the stage for the creation of the District of Columbia, and the city of Washington, as the national seat of the government by the year 1800.⁹⁷

The Potomac site, while geographically desirable because of its economic potential as a Western trade route, laid undeveloped and only thinly populated in 1800. The census of 1800 placed the District's population at 8,144.⁹⁸ George Rothwell Brown gives a good description of the economic distribution of the District in 1790:

Georgetown was then a flourishing seaport town, Bladensburg was doing an important business in the export tobacco trade, and two settlements, Hamburg and Carrollsburg, on the river, the former just east of Georgetown and the latter on the Eastern Branch west of where the Navy Yard now is, completed the local urban picture...For the rest, where Washington has since grown to splendor, there were several farms...⁹⁹

In fact, the purchase of these farms became a major obstacle for the city's founders, at one point leading to the creation of a humorous contract resulting in the preservation of a rundown farmhouse in the city's center for over a century.¹⁰⁰

While the construction of public buildings in the District proceeded under the plan of Charles L'Enfant, aided substantially by slave labor, Washington's grandiose dreams

⁹⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁹⁷ For information on the Residency Act of 1790 see: Library of Congress, "Primary Document in American History: Residence Act," Library of Congress, 7 January 2010, <<http://www.loc.gov/r/program/bib/ourdocs/Residence.html>> (30 March 2010).

⁹⁸ In order to see the population size and racial breakdown of various states from 1790-1990 (1) go to: U.S. Census Bureau site, <<http://www.census.gov/>>, (2) search for: Name of state, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790-1990. (3) Click on link for pdf or excel spreadsheet for the state in question. For sample URL, see footnote 90. All spreadsheets were updated 13 September 2002.

⁹⁹ Brown, *Washington: A Not too Serious History*, 63.

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, *Washington the Capital City*, 19-20.

of creating a manufacturing center fell largely by the wayside.¹⁰¹ When the idea of public schools came to fruition in the city charter of 1804, D.C. had barely come out of the wilderness, and the local and federal government remained unsure of their respective roles in the administration of the new city.¹⁰²

The Era of Aspiration: 1804-1816

In 1804, the city charter of Washington D.C. called for the local corporation to establish “a permanent institution for the education of youth in the city of Washington.”¹⁰³ The governance of this new “institution” fell to a board made up of thirteen trustees, seven appointed by the city council and six selected by monetary contributors to the schools.¹⁰⁴ The support of these schools came from the execution of excise taxes on “slaves, on dogs, on licenses for carriages and hacks... taverns, for retailing of wines and spirituous liquors, for billiard tables, for theatrical and other amusements, for hawkers and peddlers.” These taxes resulted in a maximum appropriation of \$1,500 annually “for the education of the poor of the city.”¹⁰⁵ Taxation of various vices and entertainments mirrors today’s use of lottery dollars to fund public schools, though the irony of using taxes on slaves to enrich the minds of the poor cuts even sharper.

As the language of the law states, the public school system in its initial form

¹⁰¹ Bordewick, *Washington: The Making of the American Capital*, 8.

¹⁰² Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, vol. 1, 131.

¹⁰³ Willam J. Rhees, ed., “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools.: From 1804-1867.---Chronologically Arranged,” in , the *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington*. 1866. DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Record of the Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools of Washington City, District of Columbia from Aug. 5, 1805 to July 6, 1818*, 5 August 1805, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 4-5.

strove only to educate the “poor of the city,” leaving the higher classes of D.C. society to send their children to the increasingly present, and increasingly more prestigious, private schools in Washington D.C. The creation of a system of “charity schools” mirrors the public school development of other Northeastern cities in the early 19th century as described by Carl Kaestle.¹⁰⁶ If using Michael Katz’s framework of public school structures in the 19th century, D.C. in this era fits best into “paternalistic voluntarism,” or a system calling for “free schooling for the very poor.”¹⁰⁷

The letter of the law might have followed the trends of other cities, but the aspirations of the first Board of Trustees called for a new kind of public school system. The first President of the Board, Thomas Jefferson, has grown in stature as one of the pioneers of public education in the United States. His “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” in 1779 pushed for a tiered education system including an elementary school and a grammar school intended to prepare talented students for possible enrollment in “William and Mary College.”¹⁰⁸ The inclusion of provisions to advance talented poor students beyond the elementary level at public expense made the proposed plan revolutionary. The bill failed in Virginia, but the ideological bent of the bill appears again in the plan for the development of the D.C. public school system.

Under the plan of the Board of Trustees, as drafted at their second meeting on September 17, 1805, the new district would contain: “schools for teaching the rudiments of knowledge...; a college in which the higher branches might be taught; and a

¹⁰⁶ Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 31-39.

¹⁰⁷ Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Jefferson, “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, 1779,” in *The School in the United States: A Documentary History*, ed., James W. Fraser (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 19-27.

University in which the highest and most splendid attainments may be acquired.”¹⁰⁹ This plan draws major parallels with Jefferson’s original plan for Virginia, and his position as the President of the Board of Trustees in D.C. makes him a likely candidate for the construction of this plan. In fact, Ormond Wilson, in his history, speculates that Jefferson himself authored this plan based on the indicators mentioned above.¹¹⁰

Evidence does not exist to authenticate Wilson’s theory conclusively. Perusal of the minutes of the Board of Trustees during Thomas Jefferson’s presidency shows that he did not attend one meeting of the Board.¹¹¹ The minutes do contain a letter written by Jefferson graciously accepting his appointment as President of the Board, but any hands-on dealings with the local district in this era remains speculative. Despite the bounds of the evidence, it seems safe to assume that if Jefferson did not write the plan directly, the ideas contained in his bill in Virginia influenced the plans for the District of Columbia’s public schools.

While Jefferson might have finally notched a victory for his brand of educational reform in D.C., the financial situation for the city’s public schools made the reality far different than the plan. On the heels of outlining the proposed system, Board members called for a more conservative approach in the near future by establishing only the base of the educational pyramid, the elementary schools. Two schools, one in the East and West of the city, would teach “poor children...reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, such branches of the mathematicks as may gratify them for the profession they are

¹⁰⁹ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 5 August 1805, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington DC, 23.

¹¹⁰ Wilson, “Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington D.C., 1805-1885,” 1674-1675.

¹¹¹ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

intended to follow.”¹¹²

The school also admitted pay pupils, who, in return for paying tuition, also received lessons in the classic subjects of Latin and geography.¹¹³ The tuition money generally went to supplement the teacher’s modest \$500 salary. As Kaestle explains in his study of New York schools in this period, pay pupils did not make up a substantial amount of the early public school population, as the upper classes viewed the schools negatively as the “poor schools.”¹¹⁴ This attitude only increased over time and severely hampered attempts to extend public education to other classes of society in the mid-19th century.

It may seem illogical that a federal government led by an educationally progressive president, who also happened to be the president of the local school board, would underfund the schools of the national capital. While Jefferson might have had large plans for the city’s public schools, and some scholars might draw parallels with his views on slavery here, the local environment in Washington forced ideology to bend to reality. The federal government in this period remained largely divided so soon after the ascension of the Democratic Republicans, and its eyes remained focused on the domestic economy and foreign affairs.¹¹⁵ With these weighty matters, Washington D.C.’s need for better funding of its public schools fell by the wayside.

The responsibility for the establishment of schools, as stipulated in the 1804 charter, fell to the local corporation.¹¹⁶ Unfortunately, the local government in D.C. did

¹¹² Ibid., 17 September 1805, 24.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System*, 91-93.

¹¹⁵ The first decade of the 1800s was the height of the Napoleonic Wars, and while America did not participate militarily, its impact on the European continent was felt by the U.S.

¹¹⁶ I will refer to the D.C. local government as the local corporation because this is the terminology used by the writers of the time.

not operate successfully in its early years. As George Rothwell Brown points out in his history, the true monetary and ideological capital for the creation of D.C. came from the federal government.¹¹⁷ While the charter placed certain obligations on the local government, it often could not meet these obligations, and it fell to the federal government to assume the administration of the city. In this period specifically, the relationship between the federal and local government in Washington D.C. was left largely undefined, to the detriment of the city's public institutions.¹¹⁸ As the rest of the narrative of this era will show, problems of school funding persisted for decades.

Despite their financial difficulties, the Trustees continued to plea for extra funds to create a college in D.C. The proposed college had a national foundation. Trustees touted the college as a place to develop “a new luster on the American name.”¹¹⁹ Similar to the arguments of Noah Webster, the proposed college would promote a uniquely American education.¹²⁰ The intent of the college echoed the views of another patriarch of American education, Benjamin Franklin, and his call for a more practical education for American students.¹²¹ Trustees of the D.C. schools proposed a college which, beyond the classic curriculum, emphasized the “application [of student's studies] to the useful purposes of life.”¹²²

The board envisioned a university with professors “drawn from most states of the

¹¹⁷ Brown, *Washington: A Not too Serious History*, 4.

¹¹⁸ Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, vol. 1, 131.

¹¹⁹ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 14 October 1805, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 36.

¹²⁰ Noah Webster, excerpt from *On the Education of Youth in America*, in ed., Fraser, *The School in the United States*, 35-46.

¹²¹ For an explanation of Franklin's views on American education read the brief history contained on the University of Pennsylvania's website: University of Pennsylvania, “Penn's Heritage,” <<http://www.upenn.edu/about/heritage.php>> (31 March 2010).

¹²² Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 14 October 1805, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 35.

union,” where students, away from their parents, could rely on their Congressmen as “a guardian and a friend.”¹²³ To a modern audience, the idea of relying on their Congressmen on a personal level to watch over their children seems ludicrous. The smaller scale of America’s population could hold some of the answers to why this plan seemed plausible, but a more likely explanation lies in a young nation still testing the limits of democracy.

The Trustees continued to push for the federal funding of a national college throughout its early decades, climaxing in the creation of Columbian College in 1821, “a private nonsectarian university,” which was later renamed The George Washington University.¹²⁴ Because Columbian College was private, and because its impact on the public school system was minimal, this study does not include its history extensively. It will appear again in the 1850s as a recipient of scholarship students.

This story of Board support for a national university demonstrates the beginning of an important theme in United States education, the evolution of the language of educational advocacy. David Labaree, in his 1997 book *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*, identifies three major goals in American education: democratic equality; social efficiency; and social mobility. The first, democratic equality, promotes education as “an expression of democratic political ideals and as a mechanism for preparing children to play constructive roles in a democratic society.”¹²⁵

The D.C. public schools, in the language of their support for a national university, set a democratic goal for education. They wanted to develop an American education, an

¹²³ Ibid., 37-38.

¹²⁴ The George Washington University, “History of the George Washington University,” <<http://www.gwu.edu/explore/aboutgw/history>> (31 March 2010).

¹²⁵ David Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 19.

education, in Thomas Jefferson's words, that "promotes the happiness of man."¹²⁶ As the rest of this narrative demonstrates, grandiose educational goals for the betterment of society and the polity did not sell. The development of Washington D.C.'s public schools from 1800-1830 shows that education for democratic equality did not gain support from men of economic and political influence. It took a change in the language of advocacy to jump-start the common school movement in the 1840s.

Now that the Trustees had set the systematic and ideological basis for the school system, the actual application of the plan began. The board hired two teachers, William Bentley for the Eastern Academy and Richard White of New York for the Western Academy, in December of 1805.¹²⁷ White's hometown marks a trend. All teachers with designated hometowns in the Board minutes in the Era of Aspiration either came from the North or England. Even before the educational impact of Horace Mann's ideas in Massachusetts, Northern educational influence began its march South.

The scale of the early schools remained small in the years immediately following their opening in 1806.¹²⁸ Board minutes do not give an exact count of students in the two academies, but specific mention of student applicants indicate that attendance in each school was low. Applicants were both male and female, and often orphans.¹²⁹

The schools continued to run in this pattern until the city funding of the public schools decreased dramatically in October of 1808. The city council repealed the appropriation of taxes on entertainments and luxuries to the schools. More importantly,

¹²⁶ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 17.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13 December 1805, 50.

¹²⁸ Wilson, "Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington," 1676.

¹²⁹ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 9 June 1806, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 65.

the council reduced the original annual funding maximum of \$1,500 to \$800.¹³⁰ The dramatic decrease in funding not only set back any ambitions to expand the base of the public schools, it forced the Board to conclude that “the institution can be supported only by uniting...[the] branches into one central academy.”¹³¹

The timing of this decrease in funding deserves consideration. In 1807, Thomas Jefferson signed a trade embargo into law to effectively isolate America from the Napoleonic War ravaging Europe. The youth of American industry made it difficult for the domestic economy to compensate for the decrease in available goods caused by the cessation of international trade.¹³² The embargo led the United States into a multi-year depression until its repeal in 1809.¹³³ Beyond economic policy, the end of 1808 also marked the election of James Madison as president, a presidency riddled with strife in foreign affairs (climaxing in the War of 1812), and economic difficulty. As mentioned before, the local corporation in D.C. depended heavily on the federal government in its initial years, thus the struggles of the federal government likely trickled down to the D.C. populace, as the emerging local infrastructure suffered under a lack of funding and governmental attention.

While talks of a college in D.C. and pleas for better funding persisted, the state of the schools remained consistent until a change in pedagogical structure in 1812.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ William J. Rhees, “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Council of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged,” 133.

¹³¹ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 13 February 1809, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 124-125.

¹³² Thayer Watkins, “The Depression of 1807-1814 in the U.S.,” San Jose State University Department of Economics, <<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/dep1807.htm>> (6 April 2010).

¹³³ George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, Brief Sixth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), 266-267.

¹³⁴ Information on an “Act to found a College in the City of Washington can be found in: Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 9 December 1809 DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School

Stymied by a lack of funding, and often not meeting for months due to either a lack of interest or a lack of discussion points, the Trustees turned their eyes to Georgetown as a model for an inexpensive and efficient form of urban schooling.

In October of 1811, Georgetown opened a school based on the Lancasterian model.¹³⁵ Joseph Lancaster, after viewing the sorry state of English urban schools in the late 18th century, proposed a new, more efficient, school program based on monitorial instruction. Having opened his own school in London, Lancaster soon found that he could not keep up with costs depending on donations.¹³⁶ Logically, he began relying on older students, termed monitors, to assist him in instruction, allowing for higher enrollment at lower costs.

Lancaster's use of monitors made up the base of his system, but his proposed curriculum extended further. His instruction techniques were systematic, calling for class rankings by subject, consistent assessment, strict forms of conduct, and positive and negative reinforcement. Foreshadowing the growing secularization in common schooling, Lancaster also promoted religious toleration of all branches of Christianity.¹³⁷

Outside of his use of monitors, Lancaster's extensive reward and discipline system has received attention from historians. David Hogan theorizes that the appeal of extrinsic motivation in the Lancasterian system reflected a larger trend of adapting

Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 141; One of many pleas for funding can be found in the same records on 6 August 1810, pg. 166.

¹³⁵ Proctor, "Joseph Lancaster and the Lancasterian Schools in the District of Columbia, with Incidental School Notes," 5.

¹³⁶ Carl F. Kaestle, ed., *Joseph Lancaster and the Monitorial School Movement: A Documentary History*, Classics in Education No. 47 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1973), 3.

¹³⁷ For a fuller description of the pedagogy of the Lancasterian system I would suggest reading: Joseph Lancaster, *Improvements in Education, as it Respects the Industrious Classes of the Community: Containing, a Short Account of its Present State, Hints Towards Its Improvement, and a Detail of Some Practical Experiments Conducive to that End* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1803).

schooling to the competitive demands of a capitalist economy.¹³⁸ Certainly the new method had appeal. As Carl Kaestle chronicles, Lancasterian schools stretched across the Northeast, appearing in New York City in 1806, before spreading throughout Pennsylvania, and even west to Detroit.¹³⁹ Interestingly, Kaestle does not mention the early opening of Lancasterian schools in Georgetown and Washington, demonstrating his tendency to overlook the South as a place of educational importance before the Civil War.

The Trustees sent an observer to the Georgetown Lancasterian school in 1811, and finding it to their liking, called for “one school in the City of Washington...to be conducted on the plan of...the forms observed in the Lancaster School.”¹⁴⁰ Later historians have conjectured, and a historical sketch in the 1850 Boards of Trustees annual report confirms, that the schools in Washington operated under the Lancasterian system until the drastic restructuring of the schools in 1844.¹⁴¹

The Central Academy in Washington, instituting the Lancasterian system, opened on February 10, 1812. “The Teacher’s First Annual Report,” as published in the minutes of the Board of Trustees, paints a picture of the first year of the new school. Due to the decreased cost of the plan, the school’s enrollment swelled to 130 “scholars” (a term used by Lancaster), 82 male and 48 female, under the oversight of an English instructor,

¹³⁸ David Hogan, “The Market Revolution and Disciplinary Power: Joseph Lancaster and the Psychology of the Early Classroom System,” *History of Education Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1989): 381-417.

¹³⁹ Kaestle, ed., *Joseph Lancaster and the Monitorial School Movement*, 34-40.

¹⁴⁰ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 11 November 1811, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 182-183.

¹⁴¹ Proctor, “Joseph Lancaster and the Lancasterian Schools in the District of Columbia, with Incidental School Notes,” 13; “Historical Sketch of the Public Schools of Washington,” in *Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington: August, 1850*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 41-43.

Newton Bradle[y?], trained and sent to D.C. by Lancaster himself.¹⁴²

Despite this change in structure, and the beginning of a more systematic pedagogical approach, the schools still suffered from underfunding. The Board continued their attempts to gain more funding from the city council, citing the fact that “In a republican government...education is deemed all important a plan to establish a public seminary.”¹⁴³ Again, proving the futility of this argument, eloquent ethos on political values did not result in a better-funded school system.

Perhaps authenticating the modern view of the Lancasterian system as overly strict and prone to harsh discipline, the first teacher to institute it in Washington, Newton Bradley, was fired in June of 1813 due to parent complaints of “extreme severity to, and improper treatment towards his pupils.”¹⁴⁴ The Trustees make no other reference to this intriguing incident, but possibly parents of the past generation were not willing to see their students instructed in a school placing high stakes on competitive success.

The stakes for the school, and the country, changed dramatically when the War of 1812 brought the British to Washington in 1814. In the latter months of the war, the British, facing little resistance, took Washington and burned almost all of the town’s public buildings in August of 1814.¹⁴⁵ American forces turned back the British soon after in Baltimore, leading to the signing of the Treaty of Ghent, but the war had a dramatic effect on Washington D.C.

The discussions of Trustees, during and after the war, shows the impact of the struggle against the British on the city’s public schools. In October of 1814, two months

¹⁴² Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 15 April 1813, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 204-206.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10 August 1812, 193-195.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2 June 1813, 209.

¹⁴⁵ Tindall & Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 274.

before the Treaty of Ghent, the Trustees released a statement claiming “that the occupation of the Lancasterian School House by the Military Guard is highly improper and altogether inadvisable.”¹⁴⁶ They went on to stipulate that “the Superintending Committee be directed to forbid the same [situation] in future.”¹⁴⁷ Judging from what’s known about the burning of Washington, a paucity of public accommodations for soldiers likely led the military to quarter soldiers in the public school house. Considering the sensitivity of early Americans to the unlawful quartering of soldiers, as seen in the inclusion of a Constitutional amendment to that effect, the war must have left the government in desperate straits.¹⁴⁸

This policy statement also shows that the Lancasterian school did not burn in the taking of Washington. During the rebuild after the war, however, the schools suffered another setback. In October of 1815, the Lancasterian school lost its premises, and its 113 scholars, and effectively the public school system as a whole, was suspended until the major restructuring of the schools in April of 1816.¹⁴⁹ The records of the Board do not offer the reasons for the loss of the schoolhouse and the subsequent suspension of schooling, but occurring on the heels of the War of 1812, one could assume that the needs of a fledgling school suffered from the immediate needs of the local and federal government.

As the above story indicates, D.C.’s public schools during the Era of Aspiration existed as a pet project instead of the important social institution that the language of the

¹⁴⁶ Board of Trustees Minutes 1805-1818, 24 October 1814, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 225.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ I am referring to the third amendment which states that: “No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.” Quoted from: “The United States Constitution,” U.S. Constitution Online, <<http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am3>> (1 April 2010).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 9 October 1815, 237.

Charter of 1804 defined. The application of the progressive educational ideas of Thomas Jefferson put the D.C. public schools ideologically ahead of their time. The presence of forward thinking men even put in place a cutting-edge Lancasterian system of instruction earlier than most school districts in the Northeast and Midwest.

The turbulence of the first two decades of the 19th century, both economically and politically, left the aspirations of school reformers fading in the pages of school board minutes. Articulation of the importance of a public seminary to a republican form of government never gained the proper backing to develop an institution capable of educating the city's poor. Persuasive notes sent to the federal and local governments led only to a decrease in appropriations over the era, and left the schools as beggars, depending on individual contributions and public lotteries to maintain a minimal presence in the community.¹⁵⁰

The Era of Stagnation, as its name implies, does not mark an upward trend in public school development in Washington D.C., but a time devoid of major progress in ideology or reality. In 1816, the Board of Trustees proposed, and passed, a change in the school's governance which leads our narrative into its next phase.

The Era of Stagnation: 1816-1844

Beginning with the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the expansion of slavery became the most divisive issue in the United States. The Compromise marked the first of many disputes over the coming forty years. The expansionist policies of James K. Polk, the Compromise of 1850, the bloody results of popular sovereignty in Kansas and Nebraska, and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, deepened the divide between

¹⁵⁰ Wilson, "Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington—1805-1885," 1676.

slave and free states. When a territory acquired the population necessary for statehood, the status of slavery in the new state again opened the wounds of the sectional rivalry between the North and South, deepening the division with every compromise. The extent of domestic difficulty, compounded by an economic crisis in the late 1830s, left the federal government experimenting, changing (with the emergence of new parties), and, more than anything, reeling during the antebellum period.¹⁵¹

Washington D.C. represents an interesting case in the growing regional rivalry between the North and South. As the political center of the Union, the debates over the future fate of slavery in the United States occurred in the public buildings of the city. In the years before and during the Civil War, D.C.'s symbolic importance would lead to its inclusion in the Compromise of 1850, as well as the emancipation of its slaves in April of 1862, six months before the Emancipation Proclamation.¹⁵²

Washington's national symbolism often overrode the views of its voting populace. Demographically and politically, Washington D.C. was Southern before the Civil War. Its close ties to the federal government made its experience unique, however, and the political leanings of the local public often gave way to national concerns. The importance of the federal government to the story of Washington can easily obscure the reality of the conditions on the ground in the city. The story of Washington D.C.'s public schools in the decades leading up to the Civil War offers an opportunity to see the city looking up from the streets of the city, instead of down from the capitol.

Following the devastating effect of the War of 1812 on the public schools, the

¹⁵¹ This paragraph offers an overview of the social, economic, and political tensions building in the U.S. in the decades before the Civil War. For a more extensive treatment of the subject see: Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 289-606.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 491.

Board of Trustees regrouped and reorganized with the creation of a new two district structure in June of 1816. The City Council voted to divide the city into a western and eastern district. The First District, located in the west, had nine total Trustees, six appointed by the council and three “elected by contributors [to the schools] of over \$10.” The Second District, in the east, had seven total Trustees, all appointed by the city council.¹⁵³

The new system reduced the importance of economic influence in the election of Trustees by decreasing the positions chosen by contributors to the schools. This influence instead moved to the political elite, as the city council now directly appointed 13 of the city’s 16 Trustees. The importance of elite power to the direction of the school system remained, but the shift towards political power put more influence in the hands of the local voting population who directly elected the members of the city council.

In their histories of this era, Samuel Yorke At Lee and Ormond Wilson give only a cursory view of the city’s schools. At Lee, suffering from a lack of sources, relied on patchy newspaper references to the schools in the construction of his narrative.¹⁵⁴ Wilson’s history provides no further insight, relying heavily on At Lee’s research in the construction of his own narrative.¹⁵⁵ The inclusion of the Board minutes of the Eastern Free School in the history of the public schools from 1816-1844 enlarges the current history.¹⁵⁶

Ormond Wilson, as early as 1806, notes that the western portion of the city took

¹⁵³ Rhees, “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged.,” 135.

¹⁵⁴ At Lee, “History of the Public Schools of Washington City,” 23-35.

¹⁵⁵ Wilson, “Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington—1805 to 1885,” 1679-1681.

¹⁵⁶ *Journal of the Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of the Eastern Free School: Washington City, D.C.: From Oct. 14, 1816 to June 26, 1844.* DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

the lead in public schooling in Washington D.C.¹⁵⁷ This assertion, perhaps, explains the choice of the city council to appropriate \$1,000 to the public schools of the First District versus only \$600 to the Second.¹⁵⁸ Mayoral reports to the city council on the state of the schools in these years indicate that the Western school generally had a higher enrollment, explaining the unequal distribution of funds.¹⁵⁹

In its early years, suffering from low funding and the guidance of a new Board, the Eastern Free School floundered. The Board minutes show spans of time as long as six months without any recorded meetings. Outside of a perfunctory petition by the Trustees to the city council “to increase the salary of the teacher and such other objects as they may think proper,” any major advocacy or policy-making does not appear until 1820.¹⁶⁰

On October of 1820, the city council passed legislation forbidding Trustees “to receive any *pay* pupils.”¹⁶¹ This legislation ended 15 years under the tuition/free system, and moved the focus of the public schools completely away from the higher classes of the city. The decision also made it more difficult to institute a common school system in the 1840s by creating a view of the public schools as “poor schools.”

Having lost their pay pupils, and suffering from low funding in general, the Eastern Free School tightened their purse strings. In June of 1822, the Board dismissed six students, a sizable number considering the school served between 100 and 150

¹⁵⁷ Wilson, “Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington—1805 to 1885,” 1676.

¹⁵⁸ Rhees, “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged.,” 136.

¹⁵⁹ At Lee, “History of the Public Schools of Washington City,” 23-35.

¹⁶⁰ Eastern Free School Board Minutes, 1816-1844, 18 July 1820, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁶¹ Rhees, “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged.,” 136.

students throughout this era, claiming they had been “sufficiently instructed.”¹⁶² The oddity of this situation in the Board minutes indicates that this dismissal did not come as a form of graduation, but as a way to open more slots. Student attendance rules tightened as well. The school dismissed students missing four or more consecutive days without an excuse.¹⁶³ The Eastern school did not have a monopoly on financial difficulties either, in 1821 the Western school moved premises to a stable formerly occupied by Thomas Jefferson’s horses.¹⁶⁴

As the nature of this portion of the narrative shows, the idealism of the previous era had fallen to dust, crushed by a continued lack of governmental support. Policies based on financial survival replaced speeches by school leaders on the importance of instilling republican values. This descent into survival-mode did not grow from a deficiency in interest from the city’s poor. In fact, the dismissal of students, and attendance rates at the limits of the resources of the Board, show that public interest stayed consistently high. Unfortunately, without the support of the city’s elite, both political and economic, the schools were stuck in a rut of inactivity.

Logically, the city of Washington, having existed for over 20 years at this point, would have a solid basis to begin putting more money into local social institutions. The total population of the District of Columbia rose steadily from 8,114 residents in 1800, to 23,336 residents in 1820.¹⁶⁵ Though not near the population size of the urban centers of the North, a near tripling of the population in 20 years is still considerable. This increase

¹⁶² Eastern Free School Board Minutes, 1816-1844, 20 June 1822, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11 November 1822.

¹⁶⁴ Wilson, “Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington—1805 to 1885,” 1677.

¹⁶⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. “Resident Population: District of Columbia,” 3 January 2001, <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/resapport/states/districtofcolumbia.pdf> (3 April 2010).

in population made the continued low enrollment in public schools an even larger issue, as a greater number of impoverished children did not receive a basic education. This problem continued to grow over the rest of the Era of Stagnation, as Washington's total population continued to increase to 51,687 by 1850, while the enrollment of the schools remained close to the same.¹⁶⁶

The burning of Washington, the continuing uncertainty over whether the city would remain the national capitol, and an overall lack of forward-thinking federal and local capital investment had left the city one step from the wilderness. George Rothwell Brown describes the lack of spending on transportation which forced national representatives to struggle to reach Washington decades after its founding.¹⁶⁷ As late as the 1840s, Charles Dickens was shocked by the deplorable state of the capital city.¹⁶⁸ With all of the challenges facing the young city, the continued neglect of the public schools comes as little surprise.

Despite funding obstacles, the Eastern Free School did benefit from a consistency in leadership beginning in 1825. The Reverend A. J. McCormick continued to hold the Board's presidency, while a likely relative, Hugh McCormick, became the school's primary teacher. Until Reverend McCormick's death in 1841, these two men set the course for the public schools of the Second District. Because the school now operated under the leadership of a reverend, and because this era encompassed the height of the Second Great Awakening, religion began to creep more noticeably into school policy. Sometimes posed as a reaction to the changing socioeconomic climate, the Second Great Awakening championed a new "populist" Protestantism as Christianity was taken to the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ George Rothwell Brown, *Washington: A Not too Serious History*, 75.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 149.

frontier. Spreading like wildfire to the South, the message of the Great Awakening instilled a belief that “salvation was available to everyone.”¹⁶⁹ It makes sense then, that an interest in moral behavior and Christian principles would increase in the country’s schools.

While proponents of the common school movement like Horace Mann, whom Barbara Finkelstein shows had a personal aversion to Christian fundamentalism, moved to secularize public education, religion still factored significantly into mid-19th century schools.¹⁷⁰ Following the religious fervor of the Great Awakening, Lawrence Cremin argues that “by the 1840s and 1850s, a generalized Protestant piety had become an integral part of the American vernacular, and the responsibility for teaching that piety to all Americans had become the central task of a newly constructed configuration of educative institutions.”¹⁷¹

It should come as little surprise then, that the President of the local school board might lecture students on Christian morality. In 1824, in the infancy of Reverend McCormick’s Presidency, the Board “resolved that the President of the Board be requested to attend the school every Sabbath morning and lecture the pupils of said school on their moral and religious duties.”¹⁷² This direct approach to teaching Christian principles comes after an earlier duty placed on the teacher “to have prayers every morning and to instruct the scholars under his care in the principals of the Christian religion without reference to sects.”¹⁷³ These actions follow from the general religious

¹⁶⁹ Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 383.

¹⁷⁰ Barbara Finkelstein, “Perfecting Childhood: Horace Mann and the Origins of Public Education in the United States,” in *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1990): 8-12.

¹⁷¹ Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience*, 18.

¹⁷² Eastern Free School Board Minutes, 1816-1844, 15 July 1824, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11 November 1822.

tone of the nation, but also foreshadow the national debate which continues to exist over the role of religion in the public school classroom.

On a secular level, the leadership of the McCormick's led to the Board taking a more personal interest in the operation of the school, including conducting private and public examinations. Students who distinguished themselves at these public examinations, examinations advertised in the *National Intelligencer*, received awards, first clothes (giving some insight into the material state of the students) and later books and medals.¹⁷⁴ Board descriptions of these examinations also provide insight into the increasingly separate spheres of male and female education, as young girls received dresses as rewards for needlework. Overall, attendance in the school grew under the tutelage of the McCormicks, the prior maximum of 100 increasing to 150 in May of 1830.¹⁷⁵

The attention of the McCormicks could only go so far, however, as the school continued to tighten rules on proof of poverty for admission and requirements for consistency of attendance. The union of the two city Boards of Trustees to compose a plea for more funds from the city council demonstrates the severity of the budgetary problems.¹⁷⁶ Beginning in 1830, the two schools began receiving the same annual appropriation, but the initial amount of \$966.97 per district decreased over the decade, dropping to \$875 at the time of their joint letter to the council in 1836.¹⁷⁷ The city council did invest \$40,000 in "six per cent stocks" for the public schools in 1826, but the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 7 June 1825.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 5 May 1830.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 9 November 1836.

¹⁷⁷ Rhees, "A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged.," 137-138.

benefit of this largesse did not reach the schools during the Era of Stagnation.¹⁷⁸

The private schools of the District somewhat filled the vacuum in educational opportunity left by the struggles of the public schools, but the majority of White children in the city did not have access to formal education. An 1839 survey in Washington found that of the 5,200 White children of educable age in the city, 900 attended private schools.¹⁷⁹ Since the public schools only enrolled 293 students at this time, some 4,000 White youth in the city grew up without formal schooling.¹⁸⁰ The large percentage of uneducated children in the city increasingly concerned local politicians in the 1840s.

The story of the Eastern Free School takes an interesting twist at this point in the story as the reasons for declining student admittance briefly shifts from economic to social considerations. Thus far in the narrative of the city's public schools, race has not been a factor. Washington D.C.'s location in the social and political South, and the presence of slavery in the District, led to the complete exclusion of Black students from the public schools. Despite the large free Black population in the city, the voting population never questioned their exclusion from the public schools. As early as 1820, 38.8% of the city's Black population was free. By 1860 that percentage swelled to 77.8%.¹⁸¹

By no means did this sizable free Black population go wholly uneducated. As early as 1807, private schools for free Blacks existed in the District, and operated persistently up to, and following, emancipation. The component part of the *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Improvement of Public Schools in the*

¹⁷⁸ "Historical Sketch of the Public Schools of Washington," 41.

¹⁷⁹ Green, *Washington Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, vol. 1, 140.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Robert D. Manning, "Multicultural Washington, DC," 331.

District of Columbia, 1871 on the “History of Schools for the Colored Population,” reveals the diversity and abundance of these institutions.¹⁸²

As the experience of the Eastern Free School during the Era of Stagnation shows, not even the exclusionary D.C. public schools could completely alleviate race as a factor in education. The self-determination of Blacks in shaping their own education, chronicled so ably by James Anderson in the years after the Civil War, showed its antebellum roots in the attempt, or maybe perceived attempt, of two Black children to covertly enroll in Washington D.C.’s public schools.¹⁸³

On January 19, 1837, the Chairman of the Committee on Public Schools (a city council position), P. M. Pearson, wrote a letter to Hugh McCormick outlining a council inquiry into the parentage of a student named Samuel Houston. In the inquiry, the council asked Mr. McCormick to “report to this Board whether there is now, or had been, a colored or mulatto child or children instructed in the public schools, at the expense of the Corporation.”¹⁸⁴ This inquiry came out of the council’s claim that Samuel Houston was “the son of a colored woman.”¹⁸⁵

Buying time, the Board of Trustees, after getting wind of the letter, instructed Hugh McCormick to reply that “no evidence exists to the best of our knowledge and belief, that there is now, or that there has been taught any colored or mulatto child or

¹⁸² The copy of this report used for this study was a reprint of the original 1871 report: United States Office of Education, *History of Schools for the Colored Population*, The American Negro: His History and Literature (1871; reprint, New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969).

¹⁸³ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); For a good work on the efforts of the Black population to secure an education during the antebellum period see: Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

¹⁸⁴ Eastern Free School Board Minutes, 1816-1844, 19 January 1837, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

children in the Eastern Free School.”¹⁸⁶ They go on to add that “should sufficient evidence be furnished to satisfy the trustees...they will forthwith have any such child or children dismissed.”¹⁸⁷

P.M. Pearson sent a reply, giving evidence claiming that Houston’s mother was married to a colored man (with authorization from the city) by Reverend McCormick himself, “who certainly would not marry a white woman to a Black man.”¹⁸⁸ That the Black man had to get authorization to marry follows the theme of restrictive laws affecting the social sphere of free Black life in the city as described in the history of Walter C. Clephane.¹⁸⁹ Pearson’s reference to Reverend McCormick comes as more of a shock. The scenario that Pearson lays down makes it clear that McCormick either had knowledge that Samuel’s mother was Black, or he conducted an interracial marriage against local law.

The council’s reticence to dismiss Houston out of hand upon receiving Pearson’s initial letter shows a slight resistance, and possibly obstinacy from Reverend McCormick. With the general neglect of the schools by the local corporation, perhaps Reverend and Hugh McCormick thought they could place a racially questionable student, with personal connections, into the public schools. Any resistance aside, the offering of evidence which could possibly incriminate Reverend McCormick led to the quick dismissal of Houston thereafter.¹⁹⁰

Another similar incident occurred in October of 1839, though the investigation of a possible Black child in the school, surnamed Sutherland, happened entirely within the

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 10 February 1837.

¹⁸⁹ Clephane, “The Local Aspect of Slavery in the District of Columbia,” 230-232.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

Board of Trustees, not reaching the ears of the city council.¹⁹¹ The result of the investigation was the same, culminating in the dismissal of Sutherland. It seems that the strong-armed tactics of P. M. Pearson in implicating Reverend McCormick as possibly complicit in the earlier case led to the more aggressive investigation of students' racial backgrounds from then on.

Soon after this second incident, in 1841, Reverend McCormick died. He served as President of the Board for almost 20 years, a difficult two decades in the history of D.C.'s public schools. At the time of his death, however, a new mayor had taken office in the city, and his advocacy would take the charity school system of the 1820s and 30s and reorient and expand it into the plan of the common school movement.

Before the election of William Winston Seaton as mayor of D.C. in 1840, the public school system had wallowed without vision or funding for the previous 20+ years. The language of education advocacy had changed, moving from the political principles of republicanism to the spiritual principles of morality. As Mayor Smallwood stated in June of 1819, the city "should make them [the public schools]...the instrument to improve the moral character of our fellow-men." The growing religiosity of America left its imprint on the local nature of the schools, as seen in the experience of the Second District in Washington.

The principles of general morality still did not lead to the better funding, or expansion of functions, of the "poor schools" of the city, but it does represent one more step in the evolution of the language of advocacy from education for republicanism, to education for social reform. As Carl Kaestle explains in *Pillars of the Republic*, "there

¹⁹¹ Eastern Free School Board Minutes, 1816-1844, 9 October 1839, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

were causal connections between educational reform and social change in the years from 1830-1860.”¹⁹² The goals of education had shifted from the need to develop a sophisticated polity, to the need to socialize an increasingly heterogeneous, and perceived criminal, young population in the industrializing urban areas of mid-19th century America. Or, to use Labaree’s terms, the goal of education had shifted from democratic equality to social efficiency, as common school proponents touted education as the way to fit youth into American society.¹⁹³

Mayor William Winston Seaton pushed for New England-style common schools in the United States capital throughout his administration. Ormond Wilson identifies Seaton as one of the primary proponents of public schooling in the city.¹⁹⁴ His advocacy led to the dramatic restructuring of the public schools in 1844, dividing the schools into four districts, charging a low set tuition, and building two new schools, leading Washington’s public schools into a new Era of Expansion.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 64.

¹⁹³ Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*, 19-36.

¹⁹⁴ Wilson, “Eighty Years of the Public Schools of Washington—1805-1885,” 1679.

¹⁹⁵ Rhees, “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged.,” 138-139.

The Era of Expansion: 1844-1862

Table 1: Total Expenditures for D.C. Public Schools, 1845-1862¹⁹⁶

<u>Year</u>	<u>Expenditures (\$)</u>	<u>Surplus Revenue (\$)</u>
1845	4,906.50	N/A
1846	4071.59*	N/A
1847	3,756.87	0
1848	3,716.07	0
1849	8,674.64	0
1850	11,728.36	54.01
1851	14,147.52	526.35
1852	14,343.12	225.14
1853	15,596.14	17.63
1854	18,067.63	100
1855	20,516.66	29.59
1856	22,854.06	370.48
1857	18,132.14	27.17
1858	20,079.17	32.58
1859	27,144.33	0
1860	29,820.93	180.11
1861	30,055.05	5.17
1862	20,817.69	N/A

*-The data for 1846 represents the appropriation of the local government, as chronicled by William Rhees, in the absence of expenditure data

The increase in total expenditures over the Era of Expansion, as viewed in Table 1, shows the concrete growth of D.C.'s public schools from 1845-1862. For the majority of the previous era, the city council appropriated less than \$1,000 annually to each of the city's school districts, never exceeding a total of \$1,933.94 in a calendar year. By 1861, school expenditures had increased over 15 times since 1830. Beyond dollars and cents,

¹⁹⁶ This data was compiled from two sources: *Annual Report of Public Schools 1845-1860*; and *Public Schools: District of Columbia, 1860-66*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC.

the number of schools in the system grew from two in 1844, to 50 by 1862.

The dramatic increase in Washington's public schools occurred at the same time as the acceleration of the common school movement in the Northeast and Midwest. Horace Mann published his twelve annual reports to the Massachusetts Board of Education between 1837 and 1848.¹⁹⁷ His attention to detail, extensive notes on the poor state of school houses, and systematic approach to extending public education, put Massachusetts at the vanguard of the movement to extend public education to all strata of society. His efforts resulted in the passage of the first compulsory attendance law titled "An Act Concerning the Attendance of Children at School," in Massachusetts in 1852.¹⁹⁸

In an annual report to the city council in 1842, Mayor, and soon to be President Ex-Officio of Washington D.C.'s public schools under the reorganization, W. W. Seaton, "urged reform" and called for the "immediate adoption of the Massachusetts school system."¹⁹⁹ Seaton's membership in the Whig Party explains his acceptance of Northeastern-style social reform. Born in the political turbulence of the mid-1830s, the Whig Party brought together politicians discontented with the operation of the federal government during the presidential administration of Andrew Jackson.²⁰⁰ Jackson's opposition to the re-chartering of the National Bank alienated segments of the dominant Democratic Party. The Whigs offered a liberal alternative to the Jacksonian Democrats, centered on their push for a national economy. The Whigs main constituents "were active

¹⁹⁷ Fraser, ed., *The School in the United States*, 52.

¹⁹⁸ For an electronic copy of the Act go to: Massachusetts Home Learning Association, "Massachusetts Compulsory Attendance Statutes from 1852-1913," <<http://www.mhla.org/information/massdocuments/mglhistory.htm>> (2 April 2010).

¹⁹⁹ Josephine Seaton, *William Winston Seaton of the "National Intelligencer.": A Biographical Sketch.: With Passing Notes of His Associates and Friends*. (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1871), 276.

²⁰⁰ Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 336.

in promoting social reforms.”²⁰¹ The Whig Party had a short life, but its members built the foundation for the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln.

Led by a socially progressive mayor, the public schools in Washington D.C. took a large step forward in 1844. The new system contained four districts, with three Trustees representing each district in a system-wide Board. The city council appointed all of the Trustees, moving the power of school leadership more securely into the hands of the political elite. The public schools charged students a low monthly tuition “not to exceed fifty cents a month,” excepting the “children of indigent parents [who] may be taught and supplied with books free of charge.”²⁰² The 1844 law also called for the erection of two new school houses, and set down more precise rules for the administration of the schools.²⁰³

The annual expenditures for public education increased modestly following the act, but it took a more substantial increase in the city council’s appropriation in 1848 to jump-start the school system. A lack of facilities and funding forced the public schools to continue to “refuse the means of instruction to large numbers of the children of the city,” in the years immediately following the school reorganization.²⁰⁴

Because of the continued tight budget, school leaders looked to female teachers as a cost-effective way to improve the schools. In 1835, Catherine Beecher wrote “An Essay on the Education of Female Teachers for the United States.” In this essay, Beecher outlined her argument for the feminization of teaching, arguing that the “most important

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Rhees, “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged.,” 139.

²⁰³ Ibid., 138-139.

²⁰⁴ *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, to the City Council, August 24, 1846*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC., 3.

and peculiar duties of the female sex...[lie in] the physical, intellectual, and moral education of children.”²⁰⁵ Beecher’s ideas caught fire, not necessarily because of a belief in the “peculiar” ability of women to teach, but because of the cheaper salary they required.

The D.C. school leadership used Beecher’s argument as a justification for hiring female teachers, but also emphasized the financial benefits of their employment. While the Trustees admitted the “peculiar talents” and “gentle and refined manners-purer morals” of females, they also mentioned that they could be “employed at half the compensation actually paid to male teachers.”²⁰⁶

Beyond financial difficulties, Washington D.C.’s public schools also faced negative public sentiment in the years following their reorganization. The old schoolhouses “were so long open only to the indigent poor, that there existed in the minds of many parents a prejudice against them as charity establishments.”²⁰⁷ Because the city council passed a resolution expelling all pay pupils in 1820, the public schools of Washington had catered to the poor exclusively for 24 years. Other urban areas with similar public school development to D.C. felt a comparable burden of negative public attitudes. Joseph Newman’s history on the public schools of four major Southern port cities also noted a social stigma of poverty surrounding the schools, which impeded common school development.²⁰⁸ The institution of a Massachusetts-style common school system in Washington required winning over the city council for funds, and the

²⁰⁵ Catherine E. Beecher, “An Essay on the Education of Female Teachers for the United States, 1835,” in Fraser, *The School in the United States*, 61.

²⁰⁶ *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, to the City Council, August 24, 1846*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC., 6.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰⁸ Newman, “Antebellum School Reform in the Port Cities of the Deep South,” 18.

public for students.

To acquire funds from the city council, the Trustees constructed an argument based on the importance of education for “all classes of society.” Alluding to Horace Mann, they claimed that the “perpetuity of free institutions...the interest of humanity...[and] the fulfillment of the promise of the reign of peace on earth” depended on the “mental and moral elevation of the young.”²⁰⁹ More pragmatically, in the case of the public, they called for the erection of new schoolhouses as a way to alleviate the social stigma surrounding the old academies.

Similar to the previous era, rhetoric on the moral and intellectual importance of the schools did not sell with the city council. Annual school expenditures remained fairly constant from 1845-1848. The large jump in appropriations in 1849 (see Table 1) came as a result of a new source of funding for the schools, and a change in the Board of Trustees’ language of advocacy. In the 1848 *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees*, the school leadership provided a new justification for common schools to add to their old message of republican morality. The Trustees argued that public schooling “is the cheapest and most effective instrumentality society can put in operation for the prevention of crime.”²¹⁰ This change in strategy follows Carl Kaestle’s reflection when looking at New York’s schools that “daily schooling is the most comprehensive means, short of complete institutionalization, by which one group can attempt to influence the socialization of another group’s children.”²¹¹

²⁰⁹ *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, to the City Councils, August 24, 1846*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 23.

²¹⁰ *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, to the City Councils, Washington, August 7, 1848*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 6.

²¹¹ Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System*, 80.

In the same year that the Trustees equated education with social reform, the city council passed a law changing the funding source for the schools. Beginning in 1848, a “school tax of one dollar [was placed] on every free white male citizen over twenty-one...collected in same manner as taxes on personal property,” and the schools were made universally free.²¹² In 1849, the city council’s appropriation to the public schools rose to \$10,250, over \$6,000 more than the previous year.²¹³ The increase in funding kicked-off a trend of rapid development for the city’s schools. In 1849 alone, the system opened 10 new schools and enrolled “nearly one thousand additional pupils.”²¹⁴

Evidence does not exist to fully substantiate the theory that this shift in city policy came as a result of a change in the language of educational advocacy. The emergence of this language at a time of unprecedented change in the public schools, however, suggests some link. The people in immediate control of the school, the political elite of the city council and the appointed Trustees, are the most likely groups to latch on to a message championing education as a way to socialize the lower classes of society.

The possible resonance of a call for schooling as social reform deserves further consideration in the context of Washington D.C. As Robert Manning explained in his economic investigation of D.C., the city did not attract European immigrants due to the entrenchment of a large free Black population filling working class jobs.²¹⁵ Other historians have brought this exclusion of immigration into question, but overall

²¹² Rhees, “A Compendium of the Laws and Resolutions of the City Councils of Washington, Relative to Public Schools. From 1804-1867.—Chronologically Arranged.,” 138-139.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ *Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington: August 13, 1849.* DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC., 3.

²¹⁵ Robert D. Manning, “Washington D.C.: The Changing Social Landscape of the International City,” 374.

Washington did not see the large-scale immigration of Northern cities like New York.²¹⁶

In the North, the popularization of education as a socializing agent rose from the presence of a heterogeneous youth population. To bring these ethnic groups into the mainstream, Lawrence Cremin explained that, in the view of the city elite, “they [immigrants] would need to be properly instructed, even more vigorously than the native-born, perhaps, since they would need to slough off the ways of the Old World before they could learn those of the New.”²¹⁷

Without the presence of a large immigrant population in D.C., the importance of education as a social reformer came out of a classist, not a nativist, ideology. The youth in D.C. identified by the Trustees as requiring socialization into American society, came, not from ethnic groups with foreign traditions, but from underprivileged youth walking the streets uneducated. Whether school reform evolved from a classist ideology or not, the change in school structure in 1844, and the funding derived from the tax instituted in 1848, combined to put Washington D.C.’s public schools on the road to a system-wide expansion unimaginable before the mayoral administration of W. W. Seaton.

The overall structure of the school system changed in 1849 with the creation of four District Schools. Students at the District Schools received a higher level of instruction than the primary grades, though still not comparable to a mid-19th century High School. While the District Schools included male and female students (in separate departments), the Board added another layer to the district structure with the advent of

²¹⁶ Margaret McAleer’s chapter in *Urban Odyssey* particular points out the significant Irish presence in the city: McAleer, “The Green Streets of Washington”; For an example of the explosive increase in immigration during the mid-19th century see: Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 110.

²¹⁷ Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1836*, 8.

four “Male Primary” schools in 1851. These schools, instructing only male students, acted “as a kind of intermediate school between the Primary Schools already established, and the District Schools.”²¹⁸ The number of primary schools in the city grew to 26 by 1862 (more if you separate male and female departments), but the Primary, Male Primary, District, hierarchy of schools did not change for the rest of the investigated era.

Even though calls to the federal government for public school support continued to go unheard, the system progressed steadily over the 1850s with the backing of the local corporation.²¹⁹ Expenditures, enrollment, and the total number of schools increased. The Trustees even claimed that the socioeconomic stigma surrounding the schools had dissipated with the opening of new schoolhouses and the expansion of the system.²²⁰

Though the public schools had improved incalculably from their pre-1844 years, the Trustees still had worries about the system. During the 1850s, and into the ‘60s, they recommended “the appointment of a ‘Superintendent of Public Schools’,” as a logical measure.²²¹ They hoped this officer could take a full-time role in the schools, conducting regular observations, and working to increase the overall efficiency of the system. In *Managers of Virtue*, David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot identify the hiring of superintendents as a major trend in urban centers in the mid-19th century.²²² Despite high expectations they usually functioned as puppets of the Board in this time period,

²¹⁸ *Seventh Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington, September 1, 1851*. DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 5.

²¹⁹ *Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington, August, 1850*. DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 5.

²²⁰ *Seventh Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington, September 1, 1851*. DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 7.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²²² David Tyack & Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980* (New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1982), 95-96.

wielding very little autonomy.²²³ Ineffective or not, in D.C. the public schools did not appoint a superintendent until after the Civil War.

The Board also recommended the creation of a High School to top the almost completed pyramid of the D.C. public school system. The Trustees lamented the fact that the system's District Schools could provide their pupils with "no higher reward...than a thorough acquaintance with the elementary branches of an English education."²²⁴ In the end, the means for the creation of a High School never surfaced during the Age of Expansion, though a scholarship program to Columbian College developed as a substitute for a few talented students.²²⁵

With increased funding and a clearer vision, the failure of these recommendations comes as a surprise. The results of an extensive study conducted by the Board of Trustees in 1855 on the condition of public schoolhouses offers an explanation for the city council's hesitancy for more radical expansion. The study report contains innumerable allusions to overcrowded schools, including one District School with 118 students packed into a schoolhouse fitted to accommodate only 60.²²⁶ Questions of health also arose due to the location of multiple schools in the damp basements of churches.²²⁷ While school reformers pushed for continued expansion, the city council and Board of Trustees needed to consolidate their gains, and ensure the health of their students, before contemplating the systematic or bureaucratic expansion of the school

²²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²²⁴ *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington* (1861), DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 9.

²²⁵ *Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington, October, 1855*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 11.

²²⁶ "Report of the Trustees of the Public Schools," 19 March 1855, in *Annual Report of Public Schools, 1845-1860.; Public Schools: District of Columbia, 1860-1866*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 5.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

system.

Conditions of schoolhouses and failed recommendations aside, the city's public schools had come a long way in the 10 or so years since the 1844 reorganization. The 1857 special census of Washington D.C. provides important data for considering the relative importance of the city's public schools to the education of youth in the city. The results of the census indicated that 10,697 children in the city were of an educable age (5-18). Of those children, 5,328 participated in formal schooling. The strong private school system of the city enrolled a combined 3,328 children, versus the 2,400 attending public schools.²²⁸ These numbers do have a bias because the dataset includes students up to 18, and the public school system did not have a High School catering to older students. The Trustees did not mention the potential bias in the data, but their application of the data to a petition for funds to increase enrollment explains their motives in distorting the numbers.

Despite the grounds for a rivalry between the public and private schools of the city, both striving to entice the youth of the city, the records of the Board of Trustees do not take a competitive stance towards private schools. In fact, during the Era of Stagnation, the Board diverted public funds to students with "bright and active minds" so they could attend "private schools of a higher grade."²²⁹ The Board's interest in the data of the 1857 census revolved around the 5,069 students not attending school. Continuing their equating of schooling and crime, the Trustees warned that "the above facts [the census data]...sends its warning voice through all ranks of society, foretelling...the black

²²⁸ *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington, August, 1857*, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 21.

²²⁹ "Historical Sketch of the Public Schools of Washington," 41.

catalogue of crime which ignorance will surely bring on the city.”²³⁰

Outside of hyperbolic language on the impending doom of American society, the findings of the 1857 census show that, while the schools of the city had grown dramatically, they still had a long way to go to truly provide a “common” education for the population. The enrollment of less than 25% of the city’s population seems low by today’s standards, but the D.C. public school system had laid down a substantial infrastructure for a growing school system before the onset of the Civil War in 1861. Growing pains abounded, including the instruction of students in the type of schoolhouses Horace Mann wrote ghost stories about, but the public schools of Washington had grown infinitely more solid than the days when the abandonment of two schools would have meant the end of the entire system.

No conflict could have tested the vitality of a school system as severely as the Civil War. Washington stayed in the Union during the war, but the continued existence of slavery in the District put it in the unique ranks of the Border States.²³¹ The presence of slavery might have engendered sympathy for the secessionists of the South, but the vast majority of Washingtonians opposed secession, realizing that leaving the Union “would spell far more than economic reverses; it would mean virtual annihilation.”²³² While part of the Union, the local population still had a decidedly Southern character, including a substantial Black population.²³³ As discussed later, the use of D.C. as the

²³⁰ *Fourteenth Annual report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington*, 1858, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 21.

²³¹ The border states, slave states that stayed in the Union, included Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia: Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 519-520.

²³² Green, *Washington Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, 232.

²³³ Even though the Black population dropped below 20% for the first time in 1860, their percentage of the population still remained substantially higher than in Northern States. See: U.S. Census Bureau, “District of Columbia-Race and Hispanic Origin: 1800-1990,” 13 September 2002, <www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab23.pdf> (3 April 2010).

symbol of a predominantly Northern Union led to the adoption of policies contrary to the will of the local voting population.

Direct allusions to the Civil War do not occur in the annual reports of the Board of Trustees in 1861 and 1862, but events at the schools show the war had an impact. Enrollment of older male students decreased as they sought employment “at the Navy Yard and Arsenal.”²³⁴ The Board also reported “numerous withdrawals caused by parents leaving the city.”²³⁵ This development reflects the Southern emigration of a large part of the D.C. population during the war, moving to fight for the Confederacy.²³⁶ The loss of a stable population hurt the District Schools in particular because admittance came as a result of satisfactory completion of the primary grades. The transient population could enroll students in the Primary Schools, but it took stability to advance to the District Schools.

Aside from overall enrollment, the biggest impact of the early years of the war came as a result of the emancipation of the District’s slaves in April of 1862. As mentioned in the historiography section of this paper, proposals for abolition of the District’s slaves had a long history. The federal government had already banned the slave trade in Washington D.C. as an appeasement to the North as part of the Compromise of 1850.²³⁷ Abraham Lincoln first proposed the total emancipation of the District’s slaves in 1849, citing the federal government’s ultimate power over the capital as stipulated in the Constitution as justification.²³⁸ His plan failed, but the idea surfaced

²³⁴ *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington*, 1861, DC Public School Records, Charles Sumner School Museum & Archives, Washington, DC, 11.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ For information on the attitudes of Washingtonians towards the Civil War see: Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, vol. 1, 272-290.

²³⁷ Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 491.

²³⁸ Mliburn, “The Emancipation of the Slaves in the District of Columbia,” 112-113.

again during Lincoln's presidency.

On April 16, 1862, Lincoln signed into law the "District of Columbia Emancipation Act." The federal government passed the act 8 ½ months before the Emancipation Proclamation. It not only freed the slaves residing in the District, swelled by recent runaways from Maryland and Virginia, but also provided up to \$300 in compensation per slave to local slave owners.²³⁹ The act passed despite local resistance, again showing the overarching political importance of Washington as a national symbol, to the detriment of the political views of the voting populace.²⁴⁰

For D.C.'s public schools, the emancipation of the city's slaves meant the entrance of a new group of free people, and soon to be citizens, into Washington D.C. In response to this change in the social dynamic of the city, Congress passed an act "providing for the education of the colored children of the District" on July 11, 1862.²⁴¹ The act called for a 10% tax on all "Negro-owned property" for the creation of Black schools under the power of a separate Board of Trustees.²⁴² The rare instance of federal intervention in public education solidifies the view of Page Milburn that the local population opposed emancipation.²⁴³ Resistance or not, the act, though not funded properly, opened a new chapter in the history of D.C.'s public schools. The first colored school opened in 1864, ending the six decade exclusion of Blacks from Washington D.C.'s public schools.

In 1805, the public schools of Washington D.C. opened with only two primary

²³⁹ National Archives and Records Administration, "The District of Columbia Emancipation Act," <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/dc_emancipation_act/index.html> (3 April 2010).

²⁴⁰ Mliburn, "The Emancipation of the Slaves in the District of Columbia," 103.

²⁴¹ At Lee, "History of the Public Schools of Washington City," 36.

²⁴² Richards, "Public School Governance in the District of Columbia: A Timeline," 23.

²⁴³ Mliburn, "The Emancipation of the Slaves in the District of Columbia," 103.

schools in operation. For a large portion of the 1810's only one school or, at one point, no schools operated in the city. As late as 1844 only two primary level public schools conducted classes. The advocacy of Mayor W. W. Seaton, the reorganization of the system in 1844, and the consistent increase in funding over the course of the 1850s and '60s, transformed the public schools into a viable social institution. The new system moved from a small footnote in the social context of the city, to a major institution responsible for the formal education of one quarter of school-age Washingtonians. Funding difficulties did not end, and policies for reform and expansion still faced resistance, but D.C.'s public schools took a definite step towards developing an educational system for the whole city during the Era of Expansion.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this conclusion, I face a conflict in field perspective between education and history. Education studies usually discuss the significance of their study to current schooling practice at the conclusion of their papers. Historians, in general, shirk away from the idea of drawing contemporary importance from their studies. They feel that choosing to identify short-term significance cheapens the long-term value of their history by making it only relevant to a specific generation of readers.²⁴⁴

The historian's choice in foregoing discussion of contemporary significance puts a high priority on reader interpretation. In theory, historians do solid research, give their interpretation of an historical subject, and leave it up to the reader to draw contemporary conclusions. I believe that education scholars, the likely audience for this study, have the ability to pick out themes of interest from this history to apply to their own educational perspective. So, while I will not attempt to make explicit connections to the current state of public schooling, I will restate some of the narratives central themes which might interest today's readers. You can call this a Socratic approach to drawing contemporary relevance.

By the end of the Era of Expansion in 1862, the District of Columbia developed a public school infrastructure for the formal education of the youth of the District. While the school system served a lower percentage of children than urban systems in the Northeast, the strides taken in the 1840s, '50s, and '60s set up a viable foundation for

²⁴⁴ For a good discussion of this dilemma, as well as other issues facing historians working in colleges of education, see: Rubén Donato and Marvin Lazerson, "New Directions in American Educational History: Problems and Prospects," *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 8 (2000): 4-15.

universal public schooling in Washington D.C.²⁴⁵

Over the course of this study, Washington D.C.'s public schools faced a multitude of hurdles. The condition of the antebellum federal government, distracted by domestic and foreign crises, shut off a potential monetary and ideological source for the public schools. A local corporation, working to bring Washington D.C. out of the wilderness, could provide only enough funds for the city's schools to survive as a minor player in the District during their first four decades. Without sufficient economic and political commitment, the public school system fought an uphill battle in the years leading up to the Civil War.

While omnipresent hurdles retarded the potential growth of the public schools, the high hopes of school leaders contributed to the resilience of the system, and the eventual adoption of universal public education in the city. From the beginning, the plan set out by the First Board of Trustees in 1805, operating under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson, outlined ambitious goals for the public schools that subsequent Boards strove to fulfill. The growing belief in the importance of common schools to the social well-being of the District, as articulated by William Winston Seaton in the 1840s, accelerated public school growth out of the mire of political indifference, and set up the massive growth of the system during the Era of Expansion. The evolution of Washington D.C.'s public schools was not smooth. The battle waged between the hurdle of inconsistent governmental support and the hopes of public school advocates resulted in the development of a public school system providing educational services to one quarter of the city's youth by 1857, and poised to advance further after the Civil War.

²⁴⁵ For comparative quantitative data from Northeastern public school systems see: Carl F. Kaestle and Maris A. Vinovskis, *Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 9-45.

At the onset of this paper, I identified the federal government, the local corporation, and the local populace as the three major players in this historical narrative. Appeals by the Board of Trustees to the federal government persisted through all eras of my study, and in all eras met with little success. Congress dealt with the trials of building a strong political base in Washington during these years, made more difficult by the myriad of foreign and domestic issues facing the young United States. Unsurprisingly, the pleas of the local schools for funds went largely unnoticed by Congress.

Struggling with their responsibilities to keep the peace and provide public services, the local government left the public school system in a state of survival for their first forty years.²⁴⁶ It took the persistent advocacy of Mayor and *National Intelligencer* editor W. W. Seaton in the early 1840s to push the city council to provide the necessary funds for the creation of a true infrastructure for universal schooling in the District. After the reorganization of the schools in 1844, school expenditures and school openings rose steadily until the Civil War.

The sources I used for this study made the public the hardest group to access. The consistent claims of Trustees that the public school system operated to, and often beyond, capacity, represents a steady demand for public schooling from the local populace. Realistically, however, the small scale of the schools in the years before 1844 makes it unlikely that they factored in as a visible social institution in the city. After the reorganization in 1844, and the subsequent taxation of the voting population in 1848, the public appeared to take more notice of the schools. Nearly a quarter of school-age children attended the public schools by 1857, and the support of local representatives implies at least a tacit acceptance of the school's expansion by their constituents. Despite

²⁴⁶ Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878*, vol. 1, 31.

increased attendance, the structure of the city's public school system relied more on elite support and administration than public attitudes.

For historians of education in particular, this history provides an example of a public school system outside of the Northeast which built an infrastructure for common schooling before the Civil War. I do not argue that this infrastructure matched the public school system in Massachusetts, because it certainly did not. I do argue, however, that the size and structure of D.C.'s public school system by 1862 was substantial and entrenched. Washington D.C., at the least, does not fit into the current historiographical trend of footnoting Southern educational systems before the Civil War as insignificant.

The development of the goals of public education, another major concern for education historians and scholars, appears throughout the narrative of D.C.'s early public schools. The language of educational advocacy, as articulated by the school's Trustees, progressed from a call for republican values, to a passionate cry for general morality, before finally evolving into a sobering argument for schooling as a type of social reform. Although the two earlier goals continued to appear in the writing of the Trustees, the final call for schooling as a way to socialize an increasingly "criminal" population in the 1840s and '50s met with the most success in securing funding. Washington's call for social reform deviated from Northeastern cities, however, because socialization did not come from nativist attitudes toward immigrant populations, but classist attitudes targeting the growing youth population unable to afford private schooling. In Washington D.C., it took an argument for "social efficiency," not "democratic equality," to accelerate the development of the public school system.²⁴⁷

The overall structure of the D.C. public school system began to show glimmers of

²⁴⁷ Terms taken from: Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*, 19-36.

bureaucratization and centralization during the Era of Expansion. City council procedural rules for the public schools, including policies for selecting principal teachers and textbooks, marked a growing uniformity in the administration of the system. By breaking the city's schools into four districts, and expanding the number of schools in operation from two to fifty, the city council left the Board of Trustees administratively treading water in the 1850s and '60s. Their repeated call for the appointment of a superintendent, a centralizing recommendation, reflects their inability to keep up with the explosive growth of the overall system. Similarly, the state of disrepair of various schoolhouses signaled a lack of administrative presence in the schools. While major centralization and bureaucratization did not occur during the time of this study, the pleas of the Trustees and the condition of the schools foreshadowed their logical emergence in the near future. The promotion of system centralization in D.C., similar to Troen's study in St. Louis, came out of a pragmatic need for standardization in a school system feeling acute growing pains.

The importance of religion in the public schools, particularly in the Era of Stagnation, also emerges as a major theme in the narrative. The Eastern Free School's policy was to tolerate all branches of Christianity, but the inclusion of teacher-led prayer before school, and Board President-led sermons on Sunday mornings, created a continual presence of spirituality in the classroom. As Lawrence Cremin explained in his investigation of education in the National Period, Protestant piety was instrumental to American society in the mid-19th century, and this piety bled into public school instruction.²⁴⁸ The President of the Board of Trustees principal occupation as a reverend, active in the spiritual guidance of the class, brings into question the actual level of

²⁴⁸ Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience*, 18.

religious tolerance in the Eastern Free School. While not surprising in a time when schools used the Bible as their principal reading text, the extent of the mixing of public schooling and religion in the Second District of Washington D.C. showed the loose application of freedom of religion in the public schools of the early 19th century.

Another important theme in the development of the city's public schools revolved around the peculiar position of Washington D.C. in the Union. While generally placed in the South by historians, pre-Civil War Washington operated under unique circumstances. The presence of national political leaders, particularly Thomas Jefferson, led to the adoption of ambitious goals for the school system, goals not necessarily attainable for a struggling local government.

D.C.'s position at the ideological crossroads of the United States continued to affect it throughout the early republican and antebellum periods. News of common school reforms in Massachusetts spread quickly to D.C. The presence of men like Horace Mann in the national legislature, provided access to progressive educational ideas to common school advocates like Whig Mayor W. W. Seaton. Warnings "against cultural imposition from the North" through schooling did not appear in Washington.²⁴⁹ The nature of the federal government, as a meeting place of ideas from across the nation, dulled the political regional radicalism present in other Southern cities.

Finally, Washington's significance in times of war, first as a battlefield in 1812, and second as a symbol during the Civil War, had a dramatic and singular effect on the public school system. The War of 1812 stunted the system's early growth after the burning of the city's public buildings, while the emancipation of the District's slaves led the schools into a new phase after 1862. Historians cannot consider the development of

²⁴⁹ Reese, *America's Public Schools*, 43

D.C.'s public schools without placing them in their local context.

While race did not play a large role in this history, the Board minutes of the Second District in the 1830s included intriguing stories describing the expulsion of two presumed “colored” students from the Eastern Free School based on race. If given more time, I would like to have investigated the personal history of Reverend A. J. McCormick further. The circumstances surrounding the expulsion of Samuel Houston suggests some reticence on his part to the restriction of public schooling to Black children.

The entrance of the Black population of the city into the public education system in 1862 provides a launching point for future historical studies of formal schooling in the District. James Anderson has demonstrated the rich historical subject provided by Black schooling during Reconstruction (though in his case based on philanthropy instead of public funding).²⁵⁰ The next era of public school history in D.C. includes a major shift in the demographic makeup of the system, confronted during a turbulent time in American history.

²⁵⁰ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*.

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