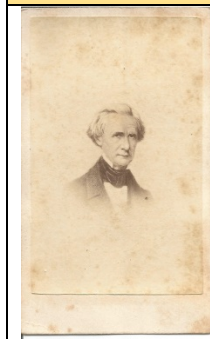


## Chapter 121h -- Major Strides Are Taken In Education



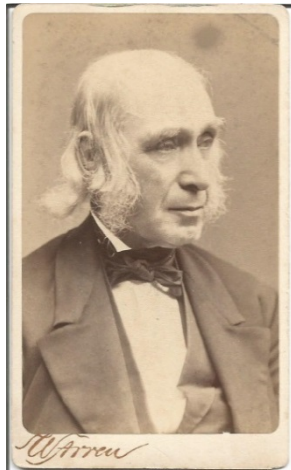
**Dates:**  
1840

**Sections:**

- Bronson Alcott Challenges Orthodox Teaching Methods
- Horace Mann Becomes Board Of Education Secretary In Massachusetts
- Mann Lays Out Plans To Improve Public Schools
- Emma Willard And Catharine Beecher Advance Education For Women
- Mary Mason Lyon Founds Mount Holyoke Female Seminary

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### Bronson Alcott Challenges Orthodox Teaching Methods



Bronson Alcott (1799-1888)

By the 1820's America is recognizing that advances in education are required if the young nation is to outpace Europe both economically and culturally. In turn, the movement is on to experiment with new teaching methods and to provide a formal education to many more students. Much of the work here is concentrated among a band of intellectuals living in New England.

One of the early leaders in this regard is Amos Bronson Alcott, born in 1799 in Connecticut and largely self-educated, who enters the education arena after starting out as a traveling salesman.

Alcott's educational approach is influenced by an 1801 book, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, written by the Swiss reformer, Johann Pestalozzi. It focuses on preparing students to think and to question, rather than simply to

memorize material. To accomplish this, Alcott engages in "conversations" about the student's experiences and beliefs, often related to their spiritual development. For many parents this crosses a forbidden line, and attendance evaporates at Alcott's early schools.

In 1828 Alcott finds a supporter in the Unitarian minister, Dr. William Ellery Channing (uncle of the Transcendentalist poet, Ellery Channing), and in 1834 opens the Temple School at a Masonic Lodge in Boston. His assistants include Elizabeth Peabody, a pioneer in early childhood learning, and the women's right advocate, Margaret Fuller. Alcott decorates his classroom with paintings and sculpture, artifacts to prompt the Socratic dialogue he seeks. But it too fails by 1837, due to his controversial methods, along with his outspoken personal stances in favor of abolition, and his admission of a black student.

In later years, Alcott will join the inner circle of the Cambridge Transcendentalists, befriending Emerson, Thoreau, Theodore Parker, Nathaniel Hawthorne and others, and his daughter, Louisa May Alcott will become famous with the 1868 publication of her novel, *Little Women*. He sets up a Utopian community in 1843 called The Fruitlands, which disbands after seven months.

Bronson Alcott will live until 1888, advocating against the Fugitive Slave Law, in favor of women’s rights, in search of “moral perfection.” While many of his organizational schemes end in failure, he plays an important role in challenging the orthodox teaching methods of his time.

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### **Horace Mann Becomes Board Of Education Secretary In Massachusetts**



Horace Mann (1796-1859)

While Alcott is experimenting with upscale students, others in Massachusetts hope to establish a system of common (or public) schools that will benefit the masses.

The most prominent force behind this idea is Horace Mann, born May 4, 1796 on a modest farm in the town of Franklin, Massachusetts. His life tells the classical American tale of achievement and advancement through the power of education.

Horace is raised in a strict Calvinist household, with a mother who insists on “proper behavior...and narrow-path conduct,” and a father who instills in him a “reverence for learned men.” But his sudden death in 1853 leaves the family in dire financial straits and, at age thirteen, the boy is forced to focus on farm work rather than attending one of the “free schools” that have existed in Massachusetts since 1647.

To satisfy his natural inquisitiveness, he spends his free time at the local library reading a collection of books donated by founding father Benjamin Franklin, for whom the town is named. His persistence here pays off in 1816, when he is admitted to Brown University and goes on to graduate at the top of his class three years later.

His next four years find him teaching Greek and Latin at Brown and studying the law, eventually at the Tapping Read Law School in Litchfield, Connecticut, famous for graduates such as John C. Calhoun, Aaron Burr and a host of other national politicians and court justices.

He begins his law practice in 1823 and is elected to the state legislature from the town of Dedham in 1827, and then from Boston, in 1833. His work on behalf of education, religious liberty, public charities and temperance is recognized by John Quincy Adams, and he becomes President of the State Senate in 1836.

One year later, in June 1837, Mann is elected to the position which will secure his legacy as the “father of the common school movement” in America – Secretary of the Massachusetts’s Board of Education.

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## Mann Lays Out Plans To Improve Public Schools



A Typical Teacher And Her Students

Mann's position as Board Secretary represents the first attempt by any state to recognize the importance of education to the nation's future. The legislation which creates his office defines his duty to "investigate the moral and material conditions of the schools and discover the best methods for improving them."

Thirty years later he recalls his initial findings, gleaned from riding on horseback across the state and observing operations of both public and private schools:

- Statewide there were roughly 3,000 common schools serving 165,000 students.
- Another 12,000 upper class students were attending private schools.
- The gap in educational quality between the private and public schools was obvious.
- Pedagogy in common schools was marked by rote memorization, enforced by the rod.
- Calling out individual letters and then saying the word aloud was the norm exercise.
- But the vast majority of students were unable to explain the meaning of words memorized.

Mann set out to shift the way reading was taught by bringing the words to life in associated pictures and in conversations where they were converted into sentences related to everyday life experiences. This one methodological change alone had a huge effect on reading comprehension and on everyday fluency.

Throughout his travels, he records the "best practices" observed in classrooms and compiles these into teaching guides that he shares at conferences around the state. The tenacity of purpose Mann evidenced as a youth takes hold of his life as Education Secretary, and he foregoes all other legal and business practices in favor of the new mission.

In 1838 he launches *The Common School Journal* where he proposes a series of principles that will underlie the development of public education in America:

- The nation is well served morally and economically by a truly educated general public.
- Common schools should be paid for from public funds.
- Attendance should include children from all backgrounds and economic situations.
- Well-trained professional teachers are necessary to quality education.
- The curriculum should be broadened beyond the 3R's.
- Content should be secular in character, while inculcating Christian moral standards.
- Harsh corporal punishment should be abandoned.

- All children (both sexes) should stay in school up to the age of sixteen.
- School buildings should be upgraded along with teacher pay.

Resistance to these principles tend to come from those who feel that parents, not schools, should inculcate “values,” and from veteran teachers inclined toward “spare the rod and spoil the child.”

In 1843 Mann’s search for educational advances takes him to Europe, where he embraces the so-called “Prussian model,” which starts with mandatory kindergarten and progresses to eight grades of Volksschule, four of Hauptschule (for 14-17 year olds) and then, for top students, universities.

After a decade of service as Education Secretary, Horace Mann is elected to the U.S. House, upon the death of JQ Adams, and serves from 1848 to 1853. Once there he becomes a vigorous critic of slavery, arguing in favor of the Wilmot Amendment which would ban its expansion into the western territories. His words in this regard are unequivocal:

*I consider no evil as great as slavery. Interference with (it) will excite civil commotion in the South. But it is best to interfere. Now is the time to see whether the Union is a rope of sand or a band of steel.*

In 1853 he becomes the first President of Antioch College in Ohio, continuing his lifelong dedication to advancing the cause of education. He serves there until his passing in 1859, soon after delivering his famous commencement address admonishing students to:

*Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.*

As more northern jobs rely on brainpower rather than physicality, the value of a formal education grows in importance. Pioneering research in teaching methods, undertaken by Horace Mann, Emma Willard, Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon, begins to reshape K-12 schooling in Massachusetts and New York. Their work also opens up teaching as a second “suitable career path for women,” to go along with nursing, and provokes more early debates about female roles and rights in society.

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### **Emma Willard And Catharine Beecher Advance Education For Women**

While Mann is busy strengthening the public schools, three women in particular are making conspicuous efforts to support higher education for females.

Emma Willard is one. She is a precocious child, sixteenth in line among her farming family in Berlin, Connecticut. In 1802, at age fifteen, she finally enrolls in a formal school, tears through the curriculum, and is hired as a teacher there at seventeen. After a short stint as principal of a female seminary in Vermont, where she meets and marries her doctor husband, Willard opens a boarding school of her own in 1814. From then on her goal is to offer women students the same kind of rigorous educational experiences historically limited to men. As she later says:

*We too are primary existences...not the satellites of men.*

Her efforts to receive public funding for such a venture are met by resistance from legislators who argue that women don't need higher education to perform their allotted role in society. But Willard persists and finally discovers a supporter in New York Governor DeWitt Clinton, a transformative political figure, who also sponsors the controversial Erie Canal after losing a bid for the Presidency in 1812.

In September 1821, Emma Willard opens her Troy Female Seminary, the first school in America to offer a higher education degree to women. By 1831 the college is thriving, with some 300 students, mostly from wealthier families. Willard is also a prolific author, publishing books that range from American history to biology, geography and poetry. She turns leadership of Troy over to her son and his wife in 1838 and spends the rest of her life traveling, writing and speaking on behalf of education for women. After her death in 1870, Troy will be renamed The Emma Willard School in her honor.

Unlike Willard, Catharine Beecher grows up in a prominent and highly educated family. Her father is Lyman Beecher, graduate of Yale Divinity School, and the fiery Calvinist minister of a Congregationalist church in Litchfield, Connecticut, where Catharine, her sister, Harriet Beecher (Stowe), and twelve other siblings, grow up.

As a youth she attends a private school until her mother dies in 1816, at which time she is called upon, at age sixteen, to take over domestic duties for her family. From her early experience she concludes that to accomplish their God-given role as homemakers, women must become better educated themselves so they can, in turn, educate their children. As she says:

*Woman's great mission is to train immature, weak, and ignorant creatures to obey the laws of God; the physical, the intellectual, the social, and the moral.*

When her fiancée, a Yale professor, dies at sea, she throws herself into founding a series of academies to educate women. She constructs a curriculum that emphasizes mastery of mathematics, theology and philosophy, and develops her own textbooks and materials for use in the classroom.

Her focus soon shifts to studying how children learn and translating her insights into training programs to develop superior teachers. In the 1850's she relocates to Ohio and works tirelessly to upgrade the education of women, teachers and children across the emerging western states. She founds the American Women's Educational Association and promotes the idea that females by nature make the best teachers.

Owing in large part to her efforts, young women are henceforth able to add teaching to nursing as a viable path to enjoying a paid career.

Unlike her more controversial siblings – the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the firebrand abolitionist preacher, Henry Ward Beecher and the suffragette, Isabella Beecher Hooker – Catharine Beecher's heart is forever devoted to a woman's role within the home. In 1869 she joins Harriet in co-authoring a widely read book, *The American Woman's Home*, offering advice to homemakers on raising children, physical fitness, proper dieting, budgeting and other family duties. She dies in 1878.

A third contemporary to Willard and Beecher in the cause of women's education is Mary Lyon.

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Time: 1797-1849

### **Mary Mason Lyon Founds Mount Holyoke Female Seminary**

Mary Lyon's youth mirrors that of Horace Mann in many ways. She is born in 1797 on a small farm in Massachusetts. She is only five when her father dies and thirteen when her mother remarries and moves away. Rather than attending school her early years are devoted to helping her brother work the land in order to survive.

But she is drawn to learning and makes her way to Byfield Seminary, where she experiences her wish for disciplined study embedded in an intensely Christian ethos. During this period her Baptist roots give way to the Congregationalist beliefs of the Puritan, Jonathan Edwards.

Henceforth she dedicates her life to educating young women, especially those held back by poverty. She teaches at a series of academies before being recruited by one Laban Wheaton to start up a seminary in Norton, Massachusetts. She creates the curriculum for the Wheaton Female Seminary and sees it open before moving on at age forty to fulfill her own destiny, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.

Mount Holyoke admits its first class of fifty young women on November 8, 1837. From there, Mary Lyon crafts a university that reflects her core educational principles:

- Intellectual pursuits should be aligned with moral purpose.
- Tuition must be affordable to those with modest means.
- To help defray costs, students will work to maintain the campus.
- Daily exercise will be mandatory to build healthy bodies as well as minds.
- The academic curriculum will rival that offered at universities for men.
- Seven courses in science and mathematics will be required for graduation.
- Science study will include hands-on laboratory experimentation.

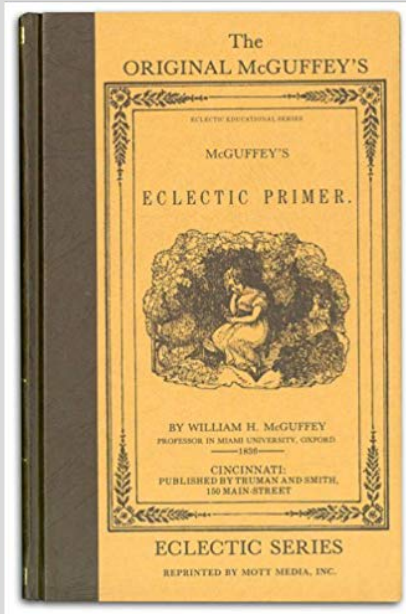
Mount Holyoke sets a new standard for female seminaries springing up in her time. Its purpose goes far beyond that of "finishing schools," with their emphasis on manners and marriage and managing a household. Instead, Mary Lyon is intent on offering women the same intellectual challenges and knowledge reserved historically for men and then sending them off into the world to achieve the good works and reforms being touted by her revivalist contemporaries.

The model she sets in motion with Mount Holyoke will become the norm at other destined to be renowned women's colleges such as The Western College For Women (1855), Vassar (1861) and Wellesley (1870).

Mary Lyons oversees her academy for twelve years, before succumbing to a strep throat infection probably contracted while caring for a sick student.

## Sidebar: McGuffey's Reader

Starting in 1836 and lasting for more than a century, schoolchildren across America achieve literacy with the aid of a series of six graded textbooks known as “McGuffey’s Readers.”



The principal author of these works is William Holmes McGuffey, second of eleven children, born in 1800 to a deeply religious Scottish family living on a farm along the southwestern edge of Pennsylvania.

From early youth onward McGuffey is drawn to education, and at age fourteen earns a certificate to act as a “roving teacher.” He begins in Calcutta, Ohio, where he works eleven hours a day, six days a week, in the winter, trying to cram basic literacy skills into 48 students from 6 to 21 years old, before they depart for their summer farming chores.

The frustrations he experiences with this first job convince him to seek more formal training for himself, and he eventually enrolls at Washington College, graduating in 1826. But intermingled with his own studies are further ventures into hands-on teaching, most notably in Paris, Kentucky. There his classes are held in a retired smokehouse, using the Bible as his primary textbook.

For McGuffey, however, the choice of the Bible is not merely a matter of availability. Instead it reflects his deep roots as a Presbyterian Calvinist and his conviction that the driving purpose behind learning to read is to be able to explore the Scriptures and embrace the values they profess.

His reputation as a teacher wins him an invitation to join the faculty of Miami University in Ohio. It is there that he marries, preaches in church, is ordained a minister, and approached in 1835 by the Truman & Smith publishing company to author the six soon to be famous “Readers” that bear his name. He is accompanied in this effort by his brother, Theodore, who completes the Levels five and six works.

What McGuffey has learned from his teaching experience is that young children are drawn into reading through exposure to stories which fascinate them and follow-up questions that engage their intellects.

Thus his Level 1 “Eclectic Primer” offers simple tales that a teacher reads out loud and then breaks down into letters, sounds and words, all associated with pictures. After this establishes a primitive vocabulary – “boy, girl, farm, hen, run...” – the stories graduate into greater complexity, up to Level 6 which includes poems, essays and other narratives, often drawn from authors such as Milton, Byron and other famous men. The narratives are also accompanied by suggested “discussion guides” for teachers, aimed at stimulating lively discussions and debate.

But, true to his greater purpose, McGuffey draws the bulk of the content in the Readers from the Bible and its moral admonitions.

As in the final story from the Level 1 Primer which reminds the pupils that:

*God sees and knows all things. He sees me when I rise from my bed. He sees me when I go out to work or play, and when I lie down to sleep. If God sees me, and knows all that I do, He must hear what I say. Oh, let me speak no bad words, nor do any bad act; for God does not like bad words or bad acts.*

And elsewhere:

*All who take care of you and help you were sent by God. He sent His Son to show you His will, and to die for your sake...Never forget, before you leave your room, to thank God for His kindness.... If you are not diligent in the improvement of your time, it is one of the surest evidences that your heart is not right with God.. You are placed in this world to use your time well. In youth you must be preparing for future usefulness. If you do not improve the advantages you enjoy, you sin against your Maker.*

While this didacticism fits with America's roots in Christianity, it is tempered in revised additions that become more secular and civil and less theological in nature. But still, for many decades to follow, reading and religious instruction will go hand in glove in primary schools across the nation, thanks to McGuffey.

After ten years at Miami, his conservative brand of Calvinism is out of step with his more reform-minded colleagues and he move on to become president of Cincinnati College, Ohio University and the Woodward Free Grammar School before closing out his career at the University of Virginia, dying there in 1873. Records show that his Readers have sold over 122 million copies and still counting to the present.