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Connecticut Education In The Revolutionary Era: "For God And Country"

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Introduction

THIS booklet describes the training of the young in Connecticut during the Revolutionary era from 1763 to 1800. In the eighteenth century, education was considered as the process by which the community instilled its value system into the young. Correct learning was not confined to reading books or attending classes. Parents and relatives, school and church, town and state shared the responsibility for guaranteeing the piety and morality of the next generation.

The struggle for independence that ended with the defeat of the British at Yorktown in 1781 began with tortuously complex expositions of political theory. The war came because the colonists and Parliament could not agree upon the legal privileges of British citizens living in America. There could have been no imbroglio over the rights of these citizens had the American people not possessed the capabilities to discuss and debate political ideology. The colonists themselves recognized that the Revolution occurred only because the commonality could read and write. Their theological system, which demanded a laity capable of abstruse reasoning, produced inhabitants who had long been accustomed to acting upon abstractions, and without an educated populace, equipped to appreciate political ideology, there would have been no revolution in Connecticut.

The Patriots, believing education determined the character of a people, recognized the crucial but indirect importance of morality in creating and sustaining the Revolution. The inhabitants saw the threat to their liberties from the British, but they also perceived the threat from libertinism. To the English, New Englanders appeared ungovernable. But in Connecticut, a mass revolution did not lead to upheavals against the power of state and local governments. Americans were thankful that they could perceive the difference between creeping authoritarianism and necessary order. Eighteenth-century men believed that anarchy in the state would lead to chaos in church and family. Parents, ministers, and magistrates should cooperate in instilling the right mixture of assertion and deference in each citizen. Education was the method by which a society could preserve what was most essential. School, church, and family worked together to inculcate correct attitudes towards God and country.

Connecticut entered into the revolutionary struggle determined to defend her traditional way of life. The Patriots' support of independence was not accompanied by a strong demand for fundamental shifts in the social structure. The colony had never experienced the close royal supervision of Virginia or Massachusetts, because the royal charter of 1662 permitted the election of Assembly, council, and gov-

ernor. Therefore, after repudiating the King's authority, the people simply revised the charter into a state constitution, and made the new government closely resemble the old ways. While the familiar description of the area as a "land of steady habits" is too simple, Connecticut—unlike Pennsylvania or Massachusetts—remained relatively placid from 1763 to 1800. Stability was not stagnation, for there were new ideas and discontent. Still, the political and ecclesiastical system in 1800 differed little from 1763. The ministers of the established Congregational Church still supported the magistrates and vice versa. The inhabitants elected the "better" people to office and accepted the clergy's wisdom on most matters. The prevailing temper remained conservative, and educational institutions reflected this orientation.

Historians describing the social life of the eighteenth century must generalize from scattered and incomplete information. For example, the absence of diaries of elementary school children and of detailed accounts of school life by either teachers or pupils means that there are important ingredients in education which escape purview. This booklet is based upon laws, textbooks, school records, treatises upon learning, and letters. While it is impossible to reconstruct the daily life of a schoolgirl, there are many important facets of elementary and secondary education which can be described. Such information will help us to assess the impact of education on the Revolution and of the Revolution on education.

In order to provide a background for a portrait of education in Connecticut, section one of this pamphlet begins with a sketch of the prevailing ideas about childhood and the relationship between learning and virtue. Theories were translated into laws which changed the schools. Section two discusses the role of the state, particularly in the funding of schools. Formal instruction took place in a multitude of institutions, and sections three and four contain descriptions of textbooks, methods of teaching, masters, and elementary and secondary schools. The final chapters will consider differences in training for each sex, focusing upon domestic life for girls and apprenticeship for boys.