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Star Of The Republic Museum

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"A CULTIVATED MIND":

Education in Nineteenth-Century Texas

"A cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy, and while guided and controlled by virtue, is the noblest attribute of man. It is the only dictator that freemen acknowledge and the only security that freemen desire."

Mirabeau B. Lamar
President, Republic of Texas

While the President of the Texas Republic strongly supported education, and the country's constitution enjoined Congress to "provide by law a general system of education," in the early nineteenth century, the education of Texas children was almost totally neglected by the government. For most Texas children, education was sporadic, and in 1850, only one child in five or six was "enrolled" in school. As in the rest of their lives, economics was a determining factor as to the extent of a child's formal education.

"As there was no school, mother made us study our lessons every day. At noon, we recited to Uncle James or Father."
Dilue Rose Harris

As a young boy, William Zuber was forced to work in the family farm, and so he resorted to "Sabbath-breaking." He recalled, "Each Sunday I retired to the shade of a red-haw thicket near our dwelling, where I sat and studied most of the day, often not returning home to dinner." He also read at night, and since his family did not have any beef tallow for candles, Zuber made a lamp from a saucer, holding rendered oil from raccoons. "For a wick I enfolded a metal button in a scrap of thin cotton cloth, the borders of which I drew together and tightly enwrapped with a cotton thread. The button held the wick in place in the saucer, and the enwrapped part of the wick stood up through the oil and its top was ignited."

In the early nineteenth century, schooling was a community matter, and parents generally believed in private or religious training. People of moderate means taught their children at home, or put them into a community or "cornfield" school, while the wealthy often employed tutors or sent their children back East.

As a young girl in the 1830's, Dilue Rose Harris remembered, "As there was no school, mother made us study our lessons every day. At noon, we recited to Uncle James or Father." There was obviously considerable family instruction in Texas. By 1850 illiteracy was only 12.2 percent of the population for white men over twenty years of age, and 20.2 per cent of the women of the same age class. Many families had private tutors for their children, and in the 1840's Mary Maverick of San Antonio hired Lucius W. Peck to tutor her sons Samuel and Louis.

Texas children were also enrolled in private schools. In 1835, Miss Francis Trask opened a private school for young ladies near Independence, Texas. She described her school as follows:

> My school is small, but profitable, as tuition is high, from $6.00 to $10.00 per quarter— I have but 7 boarders at $2.00 wk but my housekeeping expenses are trifling, *Corn bread* and *Bacon* being the chief items of our diet. As to furniture, no hermit's cell was ever more simply furnished, *two* chairs, a table, a few trunks, benches, and boxes, sundry articles of crockery, and my iron ware, compose all my household stuff, with the exception of my bedding, which consists of mattresses of my own making, and a decent supply of bed clothes.
>
> My buildings (for I have two) rank second to none in Texas. One is a frame building 15-20 ft. with two *glazed* windows on a side, and folding doors at each end. This answers for a schoolroom, parlor, bed chamber, and hall. The other, being a rugged black log house, is my kitchen. My domicile I presume you will think is quite a caricature of a boarding school— but I assure you my Dear Father, that with the Texas public that it not only ranks *respectable*, but quite *genteel*, for it is much better than some our Texas planters occupy with their twenty or thirty negroes.

Many Texas parents sent their children to boarding schools back East. One young girl wrote her father in San Augustine from a private school in New Jersey:

"I beg you to let me come home. We have no fire in our rooms and I tell you it is so cold we do not know what to do. The ice is on the windows where we breathe, and the water that we have to wash in is so cold that it makes our fingers ache. This a very lonesum place although there is so many girls but they will not go with us they think that they are too good. Pa, you must be sure and come after me. Just to think of home, that sweet place home pa, you do not know how much we suffer here, it is so hard for us to stay. You must excuse all mistakes and the bad writing."

The quaint little red brick school house was more typical of the later nineteenth century, and in the years before the Civil War, Texas school houses were generally not attractive, often being nothing more than an unused log building donated by the community. Dilue Rose Harris described her schoolhouse as a young girl in the 1830's — a former blacksmith's shop. "The floor was made of heavy hewed logs, called puncheons, and there were no windows nor any shutter to the door. Brother and I were the only children that could read and write. School commenced the first week of June. There were but few school books among the people. The teacher made the multiplication table upon pasteboard. Mother gave her bandbox for the purpose. Our school closed the last day of August. The young men and boys had to gather the crops. Cotton picking was the order of the day."

"We had to be on hand at sunrise, and sit on hard benches, with no backs, our eyes kept steadily on our books."
John Lockhart

The following year, there was no school at all. Dilue Rose Harris recalled, "Our school closed in September. The teacher said there was so much excitement that it affected the small children, and the young men could not be got back in school at all after the election in September. There was constant talk of war."

Another settler, John Lockhart, described a typical school day near Washington: "We had to be on hand at sunrise, and sit on hard benches, with no backs, our eyes kept steadily on our books and the only movement allowed was, if the benches were high enough, the swinging of our feet under them. In this position we had to sit until 12 o'clock. Two hours were then given for play time. At 2 o'clock, the master would walk to the door and cry out 'books' when all would resume their seats, there to remain until near sundown."

Discipline was strict in schools, and corporal punishment common. In the late 1830's, Mr. Dyas, an old Irish gentleman, taught school in Washington County. John C. Lockhart recalled that "he had an assortment of switches set in grim array over the great opening where the chimney was to be when the school house should be completed. On one side was the row for little boys, small and elastic, from a kind of tree which furnished Indians with arrows and the schoolmaster with switches at that time. The larger switches were graded, partly by the size of the boys and partly by the gravity of the offense, the gravest of which was an imperfect lesson. The third size of rods was of hickory; tough sticks, which he did not use on the little boys, but which he did use on the larger scholars. The fourth size of switches was of oak and would have been better called clubs."

"I wish my sons to be early taught an utter contempt for novels and light reading."
Sam Houston

In most rural areas during the nineteenth century, schools were not organized by any grade level, and children from kindergarten to college age were often crowded into one noisy room where reading and arithmetic were recited. An early Texas settler described a "country school where all the urchins studied 'out loud,' the principal text book being Webster's elementary spelling book." In this period students were expected to memorize and recite selections from readers and engage in "spelling bees" or chant geographies - all reflecting "the subordination of the written word to the spoken sociability of the community." Children were not expected to question, criticize, or interpret, and schools emphasized morality rather than intellectual development.

This apparently met with approval from parents. Sam Houston instructed his family, "My will is that my sons should receive a solid and useful education. I wish my sons to be early taught an utter contempt for novels and light reading. I wish particular regard to be paid to their morals, as well as the character and morals of those with whom they may be associated or by whom instructed." In July of 1852, nine-year-old Sam Houston, Jr., entered Baylor University at Independence. His father admonished him, "I hope my dear son, you will not let your love of drawing interfere with your studies." The elder Houston did not want his son to take courses in Latin and mathematics, since he felt that it would make the boy a "graduated fool."

In the early nineteenth century school supplies and even textbooks were scarce in rural areas; children used whatever was available. Dilue Rose Harris worked on a slate, as there was no paper available. School paper was often in a notebook which consisted of large sheets of paper folded and cut to make four or eight pages, sewn together and covered with coarse brown wrapping paper. Yet, apparently there was no shortage of textbooks in the larger cities. As early as the 1840's, Houston

S.J. Guy, *The Alphabet*

merchants Gazley and Robinson advertised for sale: "twelve hundred spellers, six hundred primers, six hundred Juvenile Libraries, and one hundred and twenty Practical Grammars." Students wrote with quill pens, or later on, ink pens. In this period a tremendous emphasis was placed on penmanship, and there were numerous "how to write" books published.

Throughout the nineteenth century, there was a belief in the power of schools not only to oversee the moral development of children, but also to nurture good citizens, and consequently

the text of children's literature became increasingly important for reinforcing this philosophy. The world of these school books was an ideal world where virtue was rewarded and vice punished; "bad children came to grief swiftly and surely; good children found rewards of happiness, approval, and worldly success."

Young William Zuber used Noah Webster's Spelling Book (the 1824 edition) for the first three months he attended school. Noah Webster's blue-back speller had about 150 lessons, including the alphabet, simple and complex words, and proper names of places and people. It also included introductory reading lessons that used proverbs and simple fables to teach phonics, pronunciation, and spelling. Interestingly, comprehension was not part of a reading lesson.

of six graded readers that came to dominate the textbook field, selling some 100,000,000 copies prior to World War I.

Books like Noah Webster's Speller with its "Fable I: Of The Boy That Stole Apples," and McGuffey's Fifth with Daniel Webster's quote: "Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, I give my hand and my heart to this vote," became what historian Henry Steele Commanger called a "common body of allusion" for nineteenth-century children, including those in Texas.

Many teachers regarded their position as nothing more than a temporary means of subsistence. There was no formal teacher training, and standards of recruiting were loose at best, with many being no more than "self-recommended itinerant teachers." William Zuber's teacher was from Connecticut and

The Early Settler Life Series, Bobbie Kalman

Another important nineteenth century textbook series was by Peter Parley. In the 1840's, as a young boy in Washington County, M.M. Kenny recalled, "Some of Peter Parley's new school books arrived: geography, astronomy, and what not. Mine was the National Reader, a compendium of extracts from notable modern authors, most of them American." Books such as these presented a kind of official, American interpretation of social, economic, and political realities. Geography books like Parley's taught children that "Anglo-Europeans were smarter and more civilized than other peoples."

Nineteenth-century Texas children also used the McGuffey Eclectic Readers series. William Holmes McGuffey had only sporadic backwoods schooling as a boy in Pennsylvania just before the War of 1812, yet by the age of thirteen he was teaching school on the Ohio frontier. He ultimately taught moral philosophy at the University of Virginia, and published a series

had been a druggist in New Orleans before coming to Texas. John Lockhart's teacher, Mr. Nash, was an old lawyer who had come to Texas seeking a man who owed him some money. Lockhart described the former lawyer as "one half vinegar and the balance cayenne pepper, ginger, and all the odds and ends of the hot things in nature." One budding poet wrote on a schoolhouse wall:

Lord of love, look down from above
And pity the poor scholars.
They hired a fool to teach this school
And paid him fifty dollars.

Still, there were dedicated educators, especially at the colleges, with remarkable qualifications for nineteenth-century Texas. The president of San Augustine University, the Reverend James Russell, held a Master of Arts Degree from Edinburgh University, Scotland. His lecture topics included "The Phenomena of Volcanic Eruptions" and "Astronomy."

There were no standards for institutions or any specific accreditation process in this period. Consequently, there were numerous "colleges" in Texas, most of which had visions of becoming the "Athens of the South," although many could hardly lay claim to the title. In the 1840's, Prince Solms of Germany called Rutersville College an "American elementary school." Most of the students at the school, located near La Grange, were from fourteen to sixteen years old, and one of the boys remembered that they "did little but hunt Indians while at school prior to 1842."

Founded in 1845, Baylor University, then located at Independence, was one of the earliest Texas colleges. Freshmen entering Baylor had to pass examinations in Latin and Greek

"Most of the students did little but hunt Indians while at school prior to 1842."

grammar, Caesar, Virgil, Cicero's Orations, and algebra. Not surprisingly, many of the freshmen failed, and were enrolled in what was called "the preparatory division." The college had a strict code of behavior, and the students were forbidden from using profane or obscene language; using "ardent spirits to treat others or to visit dram shops"; carrying "pistols, dirks or any other such weapons"; playing cards or "any game of hazard"; and engaging in "any nocturnal disorder or revelings."

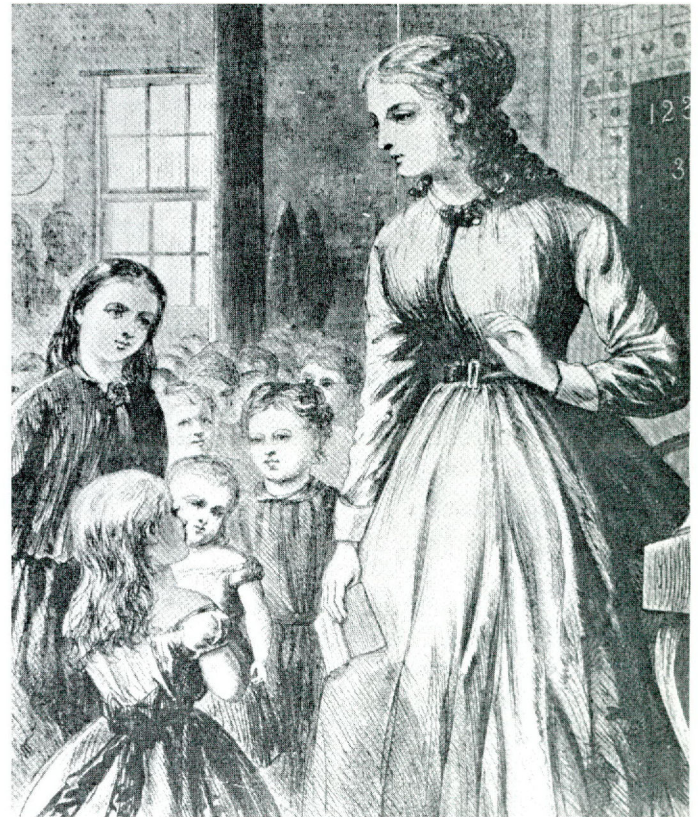
Baylor was a coeducational institution, and a mid-nineteenth century catalog stressed that a woman was "entitled equally with man to such mental culture as will discipline her mind." Baylor preserved discipline by separating the Male and Female Departments by a mile, and consequently the creek between them was often referred to as "the Jordan" because it separated the men from "the promised land."

In the nineteenth century, women were encouraged to get an education, although the reasons had more to do with their future role as mothers than their intellectual development as individuals. One Texas writer noted, "The early education of the daughter ought to be more thorough than the education of the son, because the daughter early in life becomes a wife and mother, retires from the world to her own peculiar empire — her home." The daughter must "learn early in life or never learn."

Education for Texas women in this period was "both solid and ornamental." In addition to the basics, young ladies learned "natural, mental, and moral philosophy," with an emphasis on the "female arts" of ornamental needlework, music, drawing, and painting. During the 1850's, at Live Oak Female Seminary in Independence, the young ladies were taught the standard operas in English, French, and Italian, in addition to crayon, charcoal, oil painting, water coloring, decorative art, and china painting.

Examinations from college were commonly public and oral, conducted by a committee from the Board of Trustees. In the mid-nineteenth century, John Lockhart described such an occasion at the local school in Chappell Hill. "The annual examination at school was a large event. The church was used as an auditorium. A platform was built the full width of the church. People came for miles around. Three pianos would be on the stage at one time. Oral examinations would be held during the day, and concerts at night. One day would given to Chappell Hill Female College, the next to Soule University. On the last day long tables would be set for a banquet. Cakes of seven and eight layers would appear. Colonel Browning furnished roasted peacock one year. However, no dancing was permitted. The Methodists, who controlled the country around, did not approve of dancing."

The Civil War proved extremely disruptive to the Texas educational system, but by 1875 a state system was re-established, with free schooling for students from the ages of eight to fourteen. That same year the first public high school was built in Brenham. Black children, who had not been allowed to go to school before the Civil War, now had "separate but equal" schools. Increasingly in the nineteenth century authority began to be transferred from the family to the government. More women were becoming teachers and there were more educational artifacts. Schools became the child's interpreter of life. Many states were enacting child labor restrictions and enforcing truancy laws. Yet, Texas did not have compulsory school attendance laws until the twentieth century — 1915.



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Star of the Republic Museum Collection

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"A Cultivated Mind" examines only one aspect of the major new exhibition, "As a Twig is Bent: Childhood in Texas, 1800-1900," which will open on Sunday, March 6, 1988, in association with the Texas Independence Day celebration. The exhibit will contain numerous artifacts including children's toys, clothing, and furniture, from "Frozen Charlotte Dolls" to a "death bust" of a young child sculptured by Elisabet Ney. "As a Twig is Bent" will remain on view through October, 1988.

On Sunday, March 6, 1988, Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historical Park will officially celebrate the signing of the Texas Declaration of Independence. In addition to the opening of the exhibit, "As a Twig is Bent," a full day of events is planned for the Park. At 2:00 p.m. there will be a free concert by the Houston Pops Orchestra. Conductor, Ned Battista, will perform music traced to the Alamo and the Battle of San Jacinto along with other patriotic Texas tunes. The performance will be narrated by Dr. Allen Commander, who portrayed Sam Houston in the movie, "Independence."

In addition to the concert, throughout the day there will be numerous other activities occurring in the Park. At 12:00 p.m., the awards ceremony for the Republic of Texas Art Contest will be held in the Museum theater. Reenactment groups, including the "Texas Army" and the "Brazoria Militia," will be dressed in period costumes while demonstrating military skills, early firearm techniques, and portraying historic events. Additional music will be provided by the Blinn College Concert Band and the Brenham High School Band. There will be traditional art and craft demonstrations with quilters, spinners, and cloggers. Hot cornbread and black-eyed peas will be served at the Anson Jones Home by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, and there will certainly be a Texas-size birthday cake. You are welcome to join us as we wish Texas a Happy Birthday.

This spring there will be a series of "April Folk Weekends" at the Museum. Every Saturday and Sunday afternoon in April, the Museum will have traditional folk art or craft demonstrations, from weaving and lace-making to Republic period music. Do come out and join us for a weekend of bluebonnets, folk life, and nineteenth-century Texas children.

Front page illustration: Winslow Homer, *The Country School.*

A portion of the Museum's general operating funds has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services.

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE
"As A Twig Is Bent"
March 6, 1988 - October, 1988

MUSEUM SCHEDULE
Open Daily
10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m

Administered by Blinn College, Brenham, Texas

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