

ORIGIN OF THE PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL SYSTEM

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WHILE perusing the diary of my great-uncle, Alexander H. Hood, Esq., which is in my possession, I was greatly interested in the following entry:

“March 19th, 1867. This day I published in the ‘Express’ my recollection of the Origin of the School System of Pennsylvania. I did it at the request of the State Superintendent (Dr. James Pyle Wickersham), who had heard of the Strasburg meeting from the son of Amos Gilbert, deceased. Perhaps it may be of some use in the world; at least, it may rescue the names of some of the originators from oblivion.”

As the week of April 1st to 7th, 1934, was determined upon for the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the free public schools in Pennsylvania, it seemed to be the most fitting time to present what I found in the files of the Lancaster “Express,” under the following heading, dated March 19th, 1867:

“ORIGIN OF THE PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL SYSTEM.

“To the Editors of the Express:

“Believing that the following facts may be of interest to the friends of education; and that, at any rate, they should be preserved, I ask a place for them in your widely circulated paper.

“Amos Gilbert, Alexander H. Hood, Benjamin Herr and Henry Spiehlman, met one evening in the early part of the winter 1830-31, at the store of George Hoffman, Esq., in Strasburg, Lancaster county. The conversation turning upon the qualifications of teachers, the mode in which the children of the poor were then admitted to the schools, and various other matters relating to education, Hoffman observed, ‘Why cannot we, in Pennsylvania, have a system of public schools as they have in Massachusetts and other Eastern states?’ Gilbert replied, ‘It is because the people are not prepared to receive such a system.’ Hood said, ‘It is not because

the people are not sufficiently educated to understand the value of a general system, but because their attention has never been directed to the subject.'

"In this, the others concurred; and it was finally agreed to hold a meeting at the Jackson Street school house on the Thursday evening of the following week, to give the matter further attention.

"The meeting was held. George Hoffman presided, and Amos Gilbert was secretary. Alexander H. Hood stated the object of the meeting, and was followed by Benjamin Herr, George Diffenbach, and others, in favor of the proposed measure. There were about forty persons present, the most of whom signed a petition drawn up by A. H. Hood, which was forwarded by him to a member of the Assembly from Lancaster county. George Hoffman, Amos Gilbert and James McPhail, Esq., were appointed a committee to write to Governor Wolf, and ask him to recommend the establishment of a general school system throughout the State. This was done by Hoffman, and produced the result desired—though not till two years afterwards.

"During the same week that the original meeting was held at Strasburg, a meeting, with the same object was held at some point in Delaware county and a petition praying for the same object, was sent to the member from that county. Both petitions, I believe, were presented at the same time. These meetings were held without concert, neither knowing till afterward that the other was about to act. The course the matter took in the Legislature is not now recalled, but it might be traced by an examination of the journals for that year. Suffice it to say, the result of the combined effort was the act of April 2nd, 1831, 'providing for the Establishment of a General System of Education,' by which a school fund was created, the interest of which, when it should amount to \$100,000, was to be appropriated to the maintenance of common schools, as might be directed by law. During the following three years, the friends of education throughout the State were not idle. By lectures, by correspondence, and by the use of the press, the subject was kept before the people till 1834, April 1st, the bill providing for the partial opening of the schools received the governor's signature.

"Scarcely had an attempt been made to put this act in operation, than all the little township politicians seized upon and sought to use it for their own dirty purposes. With the majority, it was claimed to be unjust, oppressive, tyrannical and extravagant. Berks county, the Democratic stronghold, went solidly against it, while many of the anti-Masons of the central and southern tier of counties opposed it just as fiercely.

"At the session of 1834-5 a most determined effort was made to repeal the law, both political parties, fearing to incur a crushing weight of odium should they say a word in its favor, combined to wipe the unpopular law from the statute book. To all minds, its fate seemed to be sealed forever. The vote, which was to roll Pennsylvania backward toward the dark ages, was about to be taken, when Thaddeus Stevens, then comparatively unknown, rose to speak against the repeal. It was perhaps his greatest effort. With a resistless torrent of eloquence, never surpassed, if ever equalled, he swept every objection out of sight and buried the opposition beneath it by the waves of his fiery eloquence forever and ever. When he closed, 'the tree of knowledge' was placed within the reach of every child in Pennsylvania for all coming time. Thaddeus Stevens still lives, like Saul, head and shoulders, intellectually, above all other men in the great Republic. Thousands to-day would crucify and put him to death. Pennsylvania, but a day since dishonored herself by refusing him the highest honor in her power to bestow. Thousands who would now stone him to death, will, when he dies, crown his sepulchre with garlands of choicest flowers.

"It is said, and circumstances seem to warrant its truth, though some have doubted, that Governor Wolf would have vetoed the repeal, had it passed both Houses. Be this as it may, the opportunity of placing this immortal crown upon his brow was never presented to him. That he was an earnest, sincere friend of the educational movement, the writer of this, from conversations had with him in the winter of 1834-5, is perfectly well satisfied.

"Such are my recollections of the matter, and I believe they are in every particular correct.

"A. H. H." (Alexander H. Hood.)

The struggle to establish Free Public Education in Pennsylvania was great, but all difficulties and obstacles were finally surmounted and the system was put into operation, with Hon. Thomas H. Burrowes, a native of Strasburg, Lancaster county, as its first State superintendent. Mr. Burrowes, although at first opposing the free school movement, and voting against it, became its strongest supporter, and is known as "the Father of the School System," while Thaddeus Stevens is considered by all as its saviour.

When Mr. Hood's article appeared in the Lancaster Express, the following paragraph was also published in the same issue of that paper and bears relative value to the subject of the origin of the Pennsylvania School System. It also shows how highly it was esteemed by other states, especially in the South.

"THE REVOLUTION IN THE SOUTH

"Professor Wickersham, State superintendent of common schools, has received during the past two months, numerous letters from prominent citizens in Virginia, North Carolina, Alabama, and a still larger number from Tennessee. These letters contain minute inquiries into the character and practical workings of the Pennsylvania Common School System, with a view to its introduction into the states named, excepting Tennessee, which has enacted quite a liberal and comprehensive school law, which embodies many of the best features of the Pennsylvania System. The professor is at great pains to answer all these letters in detail, and also forwards numerous printed documents. Public sentiment in the South is being changed in regard to schools and general intelligence."

While new light has been, and is being, added to early Pennsylvania school history, it is fitting that the foregoing account should be permanently recorded in the Proceedings of this Society.