

Samuel Breck and The Shaping of Public Education in Pennsylvania

By Dorothy B. Gerlach

Because time and history tend to treat people differently, a once honored person may, at the present time, be an unsung hero. A search of old records sometimes reveals this fact. Samuel Breck seems to fall into this category.

Breck, a patriotic and intelligent citizen, had personally known many historic figures such as George Washington, Lafayette, Alexander Hamilton, John Paul Jones, and Daniel Webster.

Born into one of Boston's best families before the American Revolution, he was raised in luxury, refinement, and elegance. He was educated in New England's best schools and studied at one of the best in France.

As a result, he spoke French with the familiarity of English. He had been trained as a merchant, so he had wide connections in commerce and trade. A March 1921 *Pennsylvania School Journal* article refers to Breck as a millionaire who eventually left Boston to live in Philadelphia.

A man of high character and liberal culture, he had ample means at his command. At the same time, he was considered the best type of public spirited citizen. Breck possessed a rare combination of common sense and personal charm with the ability to present a matter in a cordial way.

At age sixty-three, in 1833, Samuel Breck went to Harrisburg as a member of the Senate, from Philadelphia. He had been appointed Chairman of a Joint Committee on Education with the task of writing an education bill, which we now know was enacted into the Free School Act of 1834. Breck was specially appointed for the purpose of digesting (summarizing, condensing, and arranging according to some system) a general system of public education for Pennsylvania.

The matter of public education had been for a long time the subject

of much discussion. Many citizens had pondered the difficult problem with a hope of doing something about its solution.

Governors, editors, clergymen, merchants, lawyers, teachers, and others had been calling for better schools for a long time. Many were demanding that the State take the initiative in a bold and decisive way. Previously there had been some experimenting with the so-called "pauper schools," but these schools were not satisfactory.

People now wanted something better, so the time was ripe for Senator Samuel Breck and the Joint Committee on Education. He had been a member of the Pennsylvania Legislature from 1817 to 1821 and had also served in the Eighteenth United States Congress, where he was acquainted with Daniel Webster. The Free School Act of 1834, written by Breck himself, was supported by almost the entire membership of the Pennsylvania Legislature. Later, unfortunately, this law which had been passed with such great unanimity built up to what one account called "a blind frenzy of opposition."

Much has already been written about Lancaster's Thaddeus Stevens in relation to the law. In an article in the *Lancaster New Era* in April, 1992, Charles H. Kessler pointed out how Stevens, in 1835, used his extraordinary oratorical skills to help keep this legislation intact on the statute books. Stevens himself often thought his speech in defense of the law was the best speech of his life.

Kessler also wrote, "Almost single handed Stevens managed to rescue the free public school system in Pennsylvania. This feat brought him national attention and led other states to follow Pennsylvania's example."

The combined efforts of Breck and Stevens were successful in defeating the enemies of free public education in Pennsylvania in 1834 and 1835.

The intent of this writing is to provide a portrait of a now almost forgotten early patriotic, public spirited man. Concerned more with the public good than with private advantage, he was willing to leave his individual work to spend a limited time in government and then return home.

Not unlike others who had also made their contributions for the general good, Breck left Harrisburg for his home in Philadelphia at the close of the 1833-1834 session.

Unusual as it may seem, the *Pennsylvania School Journal* article also points out that Breck was somewhat indifferent to the honor of having written and secured the enactment of the 1834 School Law. After the session and his return home, there appears to be no other record that he tried to influence school legislation or the common school work of the state after this time. One earlier writer suggested that Breck may have followed the old adage, "Do good and forget it!"

Not too unlike other early legislators, and some present day ones as well, one account includes the fact that Samuel Breck kept a journal or diary. In it he gave an account of the preparation and passage of the Free School Act that made the 1834 session a memorable one.

During his long life he jotted down bits of personal experiences and reflections on things seen or heard and upon passing events of more than usual interest. The entries occupied nearly a dozen closely written volumes. "The

legatee of these manuscripts was enjoined by him to examine these diaries and expunge from them everything that might give pain to others."

Breck's success in 1834 does not lessen in any way the work of other enterprising and public spirited citizens. As early as 1829 and 1830, and even before, there were organized movements to secure free public schools in the state.

Nor did the work in 1834 eliminate the need for revisions and amendments for following legislative sessions and additional legislative enactments in order to provide a sound public school system in the state.

Likewise, in spite of the unanimity of the legislative body in enacting the 1834 law, this spirit was not present in all areas. The earlier used phrase "a blind frenzy of opposition" to describe the opposition to the passage of the Act of 1834 is well documented. Not everyone, by any means, favored public education of the masses. Some even felt education was unnecessary, depending on one's work.

An anti-public funded education feeling prevailed in Lancaster County as well as in other areas. A writing concerning this opposition is currently under way.

Samuel Breck died on September 1, 1862, at the age of ninety-two. He had lived long enough to have heard the guns of Washington bombarding Boston while he was just a boy and to have learned of the bombardment of Fort Sumter in 1861—nearly eighty-eight years later.

Breck had always been a man of deep religious conviction, always active in his church and his community. "He was a man of broad view and distinct and resolute purpose, who knew the right and stood by it and toiled for it unceasingly."

The physician and friends who were with him to the last said that the confidence of his religious faith and the ardor of his patriotism were evident to the end.

As J. P. McCaskey wrote, "It is good to know of such a man; better still to know him as a near friend; best of all, to be such a man, leaving behind a long life of good work done, and the fragrant memory of that life which, from youth to patriarchal age, was ever blessing and blest." This was Samuel Breck! His work at a critical time in Pennsylvania education helped establish the common schools from which so many have benefited.

SOURCES

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