

## Symposium

# Reappraisals of the Academy Movement

## Introduction

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The presence of academies in the United States spans roughly three centuries. Originating in the colonial era, academies spread across the country by mid-nineteenth century. Such institutions generally served students between the ages of eight and twenty-five, providing a relatively advanced form of schooling that was legally incorporated to ensure financial support beyond that available through tuition alone. According to one contemporary source, by 1850 more than 6,100 incorporated academies existed in the United States, with enrollments nine times greater than those of the nation's colleges.<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century supporters portrayed academies as exemplars of the nation's commitment to enlightenment and learning; opponents argued that they were harmful to the public interest. Those in favor of a large-scale system of public high schools dismissed academies as irrelevant and outmoded institutions.<sup>2</sup> The culmination of this controversy is well known, because it is reiterated in every secondary text on the history of American education. As a widespread system of public higher schooling supplanted the academies in the twentieth century, private and independent schools dropped out of the mainstream of American educational discourse. The following essays seek to recover something of the long history of academies in the United States and to reconsider the historical significance of these institutions in society.

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Nancy Beadie and Kim Tolley are collaborating on an edited book entitled *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States, 1727-1925* (New York: Routledge, *forthcoming*). They would like to thank Richard Altenbaugh and the anonymous reviewers of the *HEQ* for their critical readings of earlier drafts of these essays and for their suggestions for further research. They also wish to acknowledge the long-standing support and encouragement of Linda Eisenmann for this project.

<sup>1</sup>Henry Barnard, "Educational Statistics of the United States in 1850," *American Journal of Education*, 1 (1855): 368.

<sup>2</sup>This debate is recounted in William Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 23-29. For a contemporary example, see George S. Boutwell, "The Relative Merits of Public High Schools and Endowed Academies (1857), in Theodore Sizer, *The Age of the Academies* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964), 156.

The four contributors to this symposium contend that the academy is a significant institution in American history. We would press this point further by saying it was the *dominant institution of higher schooling from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century*. To date, the most common organizing principle found in published research is that which casts the academy as a predecessor of a later institution. A number of scholars have viewed the academy as an important antecedent to the public high school.<sup>3</sup> Other researchers have interpreted academies as forerunners of such institutions as women's colleges and normal schools.<sup>4</sup> The following essays propose an alternative paradigm, one that positions the academy as the prevailing institution of higher schooling in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America.

Today, a search of the library for a current secondary text on the academy movement yields very little. Most histories of American education devote a relatively small section to these institutions, and the only book solely focused on academies remains Theodore R.Sizer's 1964 volume. That book consists of a dozen primary documents produced by and about academies and a forty-eight page introductory essay in which Sizer described academies as a group and interpreted their historical significance. In this introductory essay, Sizer emphasized the distinct departure from previous institutions that academies represented, the quintessential characteristics of American optimism and pragmatism that they expressed, and the considerable impact they had on American cultural life, particularly in the small towns and rural counties of the antebellum countryside. Referring to the period extending roughly from the American Revolution to the Civil War, Sizer offered a progressive view of an educational revolution that he termed, in the title of his book, *The Age of the Academies*.<sup>5</sup>

Thirty-seven years have passed since the publication of Sizer's book. Meanwhile, a generation of scholars has been whittling away at all aspects of the historiographical corpus that Sizer's book presupposed. Historians have begun to mine the archives of academies that are far less known than

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<sup>3</sup>For example, Reese noted that academies and private schools were an important source of educational innovation in eighteenth-century Boston. When public high schools emerged in the nineteenth century, they continued to offer many of the pedagogical practices and subjects that had first appeared in these earlier institutions. See Reese, *The Origins of the American High School*, 5.

<sup>4</sup>For instance, in her investigation of the opportunities available to women in higher education, Barbara Solomon acknowledged that the academies played an important role in offering both liberal and vocational opportunities to a range of nineteenth-century women during a period when colleges and universities had not yet opened their doors to females. Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup>Theodore Sizer, *The Age of the Academies* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964).

the prestigious New England ones that formed the nucleus of Sizer's study.<sup>6</sup> Social historians have moved away from intellectualist traditions and toward the contextualization of problems and solutions in specific social, cultural, and economic contexts. They have called for additional research into such areas as student culture, teacher biography, and the dissemination of theory and practice through academy alumni. Focused increasingly on specialization and case study, historians of education have shown an impatience with conceptual vignettes and broadly brushstroked stories; instead, they have often targeted individual institutions, influential educators, specific geographic regions, religious groups, or the role of outside agencies.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the history of education as a subfield, more recent scholarship in the broader field of United States history in the antebellum and postbellum eras includes huge volumes of literature on such topics as the character and meaning of "republican culture," the structure and timing of the "market revolution," the origins and consequences of the Second Great

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<sup>6</sup>Scholars interested in women's higher education in the nineteenth century have focused their attention on a wider range of academies. The earliest study to make extensive use of academy material was Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* (New York: Octagon Books, 1929). More recent texts include Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* [1980] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women* [1980] (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). In her study of the rhetoric of "women's sphere," Nancy Cott also devoted considerable attention to academies. See Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>For secondary sources that include some discussion of the role of academies in Catholic education in America, see Mary J. Oates, "Catholic Female Academies on the Frontier," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 12 (Fall 1994): 121-136; Michael F. Perko, ed., *Enlightening the Next Generation: Catholics and Their Schools: 1830-1980* (New York: Garland, 1988); Eileen Mary Brewer, *Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women, 1860-1920* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987); Harold A. Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit: The Story of Catholic Education in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); There are also scattered references to higher schools in Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996). For an analysis of the role of academies and boarding schools in the education of Native Americans, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995). A number of historians have concentrated on the role of one particular institution in the dissemination of religious or pedagogical values. For instance, see Anne Firor Scott, "The Ever-Widening Circle: The Diffusion of Feminist Values from the Troy Female Seminary, 1822-1872," *History of Education Quarterly* 19 (Spring 1979), 3-25; Amanda Porterfield, *Mary Lyon and the Mount Holyoke Missionaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Nybakken analyzes the influence of the Irish Presbyterian tradition in her article, "In the Irish Tradition: Pre-Revolutionary Academies in America," *History of Education Quarterly*, 37 (Summer 1997), 163-183. Other scholars have focused their attention on the academies established by individuals. For instance, see Maurice Whitehead, *The Academies of the Reverend Bartholomew Booth in Georgian England and Revolutionary America; Enlightening the Curriculum* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996). More recent attempts to include academies in studies of southern education include Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

Awakening, the formation of the middle class, the definition of “separate spheres,” the rise of a “culture of professionalism,” and “the search for order,” to cite just a few seminal works and ideas.<sup>8</sup> Given this great expansion of literature on the social and cultural context in which academies thrived, how do more recent studies of academies enrich or challenge the interpretation of academies that Sizer provided in 1964?

The following four essays are intended to address this question. In formulating our discussions we have used Theodore R. Sizer’s interpretive essay as a starting point. Sizer organized his interpretation of academies in six sections, the content of which can be briefly described as follows:

- I. The origins of academies and their departure from precedent;
- II. The prevalence of academies and the reasons for their growth and development;
- III. The organization of academies, including funding and governance;
- IV. The curricula of academies, including both academic and applied studies;
- V. Academy students, both male and female; and
- VI. The decline of academies and the reasons for their eclipse.

Each of the essays presented here addresses one or more of these areas of inquiry, providing an overview of recent research, the results of original investigation, suggestions for further scholarly inquiry, and reflections on recent historiography. Although there exists some overlap in the periods addressed by the four essays, they are presented chronologically.

The first essay analyzes the origins of academies and explains their expansion as a grassroots synthesis of academy structure and venture school entrepreneurialism. Kim Tolley argues that the development of academies in America occurred in two phases. The colonial phase of the academy movement lasted from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century. The second phase, representing the heyday of the movement, ran roughly from 1790 to the Civil War. During the colonial phase, denominational and sectarian groups founded academies to serve the professional needs of the ministry and the religious and educational needs of laypeople. Tolley notes that because religious denominations founded many of the colonial academies, it is important to qualify the view, often expressed in published

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<sup>8</sup>I.e., Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Mary Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976); and Richard Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

texts, that academies arose in response to a growing mercantile economy. American academies originally enjoyed close ties with religious groups, not only through institutional support, but also through curricula that often included some study of the classics to prepare young men for the ministry. The later phase of academy development evidenced a great deal of continuity with the colonial academies and with earlier venture schools established to meet the needs of a growing mercantile population. Like the venture schools, academies tailored their curricula to appeal to a local clientele interested in a relatively broad and practical education. However, unlike the earlier entrepreneurial schools, academies received some means of financial support from local patrons that ensured greater stability and potential longevity for the institution. During the heyday of the movement, such support came from denominational groups and from local townspeople, individual patrons, mercantile associations, and other sources. The rise of the academies was significant in heralding a new commitment on the part of local communities to provide funds in support of higher schooling for both sexes. In an era when freewheeling educational choice was the norm, the motivating factors for this educational shift included local civic boosterism and the perceived need for greater stability and accountability than venture institutions could provide.

In the second essay, Margaret A. Nash examines the curricula of academies during the Early Republican era. She argues that female education in academies during this period was more similar to that of male education than has been previously believed. According to Nash, the core curricular subjects offered to males and females in the early academies were virtually identical with the exception of a small proportion of courses related to vocation. Her essay draws from such primary sources as published contemporary writings, public addresses, and private correspondence. A number of scholars in the history of women's education have cited the work of Thomas Woody, who argued that the curricula in female schools tended to emphasize such "ornamental" subjects as embroidery, music, and art, and was thus qualitatively different and academically inferior to that of males. This view has persisted in the literature, although Sizer noted that there were more similarities than differences. In dismantling this pervasive misconception, Nash points out that the term "ornamental," so often interpreted by modern scholars to denote a nonacademic subject, was used in various ways in the Early Republican period. The "ornaments" were not necessarily gender-specific subjects in the late eighteenth century, and sometimes educators applied the term "ornamental" to subjects we today consider academic, such as literature, rhetoric, or language. Second, she demonstrates that academy educators held the same pedagogical goals for both sexes: to encourage academic competition and teach mental discipline and powers of discernment.

In the third essay, Nancy Beadie analyzes the social demography of academy students and the conditions that contributed to the growth and development of academies in the antebellum era. Her work is based on data for over 500 academies in New York State and the documentary materials of a number of individual institutions, teachers, and students. To discover the social conditions and contexts that supported academy expansion, Beadie examines their small-town settings, the gender and social class backgrounds of students, and the meaning of academy attendance in the lives of diverse students. Beadie's essay challenges the assumptions that academy students were not serious about their educations and that they attended academies primarily for practical or instrumental reasons. She also places the history of the academy into the context of larger historical literatures on social class formation and education in the antebellum era, presenting a new interpretation of the significance of the antebellum academy.

In the concluding essay, Bruce Leslie explores the decline of the academies. He seeks to answer the central question: Why did communities come to see tax-based high schools, rather than academies, to be in their best interest? Drawing on recent scholarship, he identifies four benchmarks for analyzing the academy's decline during the last half of the nineteenth century: 1) shifting economic parameters, 2) changes in political structure and culture, 3) the civic and cultural role of higher schooling in American society, and 4) the influence of the education profession. In this speculative essay, Leslie synthesizes research from a variety of fields to broaden our understanding of the academy's demise. Many historians have followed Sizer in portraying the academy as a casualty of urbanization. Others have viewed the public high school as a part of the increasing "democratization" of a postcolonial society. Instead, Leslie argues that the academy suited the needs of a variety of nonurban communities throughout much of the nineteenth century. The high school was an institution that modernization and the development of an education profession eventually made relevant.

Overall, the essays here reinforce and enlarge Sizer's claims about the impact and importance of academies, even as they modify and challenge some of his more specific descriptive and analytical statements. The "Age of the Academies" did represent a significant development in the organization of higher schooling, although the origins of that development are somewhat different than Sizer suggested. Similarly, the impact of academies on the cultural life of small-town America was considerable, even if the content of that culture is somewhat different than Sizer described.

What difference does it make if we recognize the academy as the dominant institution of higher study in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? For one thing, that recognition calls into question the chronology of some of the stories we tell in the history of education. From the perspective of higher schooling, the pivotal point in the formation of the educational sys-

tem that we take for granted occurred not in the 1830s but in the 1880s. Until that time, the number of incorporated academies and academy students exceeded the number of high schools and high school students in the United States. This shift in chronology challenges our sense of regionalism in the history of education. From the perspective of academies, the culture of higher schooling seems to have been more uniform than different from North to South.

A focus on academies changes the emphasis in the history of religion and education in the United States. Until the end of the nineteenth century, at least, denominational and sectarian academies were not an exception to the overall structure of schooling in the United States but one illustration of a more general rule. Denominational academies provided local communities with a means of ensuring higher schooling for their youth while preserving their own culture and religious beliefs. In some instances, denominational academies provided higher schooling for minority groups barred by legislation from enrolling their children in public school systems.

Placing the academy at center stage in the history of higher schooling restores our capacity to appreciate the alternatives to the "one best system" that eventually achieved dominance in the twentieth century. Academies and independent schools allowed some ethnic minorities to preserve their own cultural values or religious beliefs while successfully assimilating their constituents into the larger society. For example, Catholic parishes established academies as a buffer against what Catholics perceived as the cultural onslaught of the public schools, protecting immigrants' religion and providing bilingual instruction in many neighborhoods. Focusing on the academy thus highlights issues of class, culture, and race in the history of American education.

A number of issues remain to be addressed by further research. Both Tolley and Leslie refer to the religious affiliation of some academies, and the extent to which those affiliations played a role in the decline of these institutions has yet to be fully explored. Although a few state legislatures provided various forms of financial support to the early academies, this model did not continue into the twentieth century. Leslie theorizes that distinctions in education between public/private and religious/secular solidified after the Civil War, while the increasing number of Catholic academies may have fueled the issue emotionally and politically. Tolley points out that the historical roots of the academy in the United States had always had some association with religion. Proponents of the public high school clearly attempted to establish that institution on more neutral ground, but the question of how the politics of that attempt played out within and among localities is worthy of further study. In the postbellum period, different forms of higher schooling came into intense competition with each other, including nondenominational and denominational academies, coed and sin-

gle-sex high schools and colleges, state and independent normal schools, and proprietary institutions devoted to everything from commerce to art. Historians, like public school reformers themselves, have tended to portray the defenders of academies and independent schools in this context as self-interested sectarians, but more complex stories of religious, ethnic, and class conflict may also have been at play.<sup>9</sup>

Before we can achieve greater complexity in analyzing the competition that occurred among institutions and constituencies, however, we need more studies of the range and variation among academies and independent schools. For example, although studies of Catholic academies exist and increasingly pay attention to the contexts in which such institutions operated, few attempts have been made to compare directly Catholic and Protestant institutions or to integrate the story of Catholic education with accounts of other forms of schooling in the same location.<sup>10</sup> Much the same can be said about the study of academies outside the northeast region of the United States. A literature on southern academies exists but is only rarely analyzed in relation to the larger literature on academies in the northeast. Meanwhile, studies of midwestern and western institutions are almost non-existent.

Much more attention to the diversity of student populations and to academies serving specific ethnic communities is needed. We still know little about the students who studied in academies and venture schools and the teachers who worked in them. Nor can we assume that experiences and purposes of academy teaching and attendance were common among different students, even within the same institution. It is clear, for example, that African-American communities and teachers often organized and supported academies and independent schools in the absence of other opportunities for higher schooling, as a means of educating future community leaders and as a way of creating work as teachers for educated community

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<sup>9</sup>A recently published case study, for example, shows that proponents of one consolidated public high school enlisted the Ku Klux Klan to overcome Catholic opposition. David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999). Other recent studies of the role of anti-Catholicism in public school reforms of this period include William M. McAfee, *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1998) and Stephen Provasnik, "Compulsory Schooling, From Idea to Institution: A Case Study of the Development of Compulsory Attendance in Illinois, 1857-1907" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>One recent study of Catholic institutions that pays excellent attention to context and that includes some comparative reference to non-Catholic institutions in the same locality is JoEllen McNergney Vinyard, *For Faith and Fortune: The Education of Catholic Immigrants in Detroit, 1805-1925* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). Comparisons of Catholic and non-Catholic schools, though not specifically at the level of higher schooling, are also made in D.W. Galenson, "Ethnic Differences in Neighborhood Effects on the School Attendance of Boys in Early Chicago," *History of Education Quarterly* 38 (Spring 1998): 17-35.

members. Some Native-American tribes also founded academies under their own control for these purposes. Moreover, in the context of segregated, unequal, and oppressive school provisions, academies and independent schools remained an important strategy for some communities after the rise of the public high school and into the mid-twentieth century. Further studies of such institutions and the communities and students they served may reveal that the institutional form of the academy has remained an important precedent and model even as its context and purposes have varied and changed over time and place.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Some of the issues and questions raised here will be addressed in our edited book, *Chartered Schools: 1727-1925*. The book includes: studies of academies in different regions of the country and serving different ethnic and religious communities; analysis of teacher and student experience in diverse academies based on diaries, letters, and student work; and comparisons between academies and other kinds of institutions such as venture schools, public high schools, and normal schools. Examples of existing published work on independent African-American and Native American academies include Linda M. Perkins, *Fanny Jackson Coppin and the Institute for Colored Youth, 1865-1902* (New York: Garland, 1987), idem., "The History of Blacks in Teaching: Growth and Decline within the Profession," in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work* ed. Donald Warren (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1989): 3434-549; and Devon Mihesuah, *Cultivating the Rosebuds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).