A Process of Establishing American Public Education

—by historical approach—

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It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the origin of the public school in the growing industrialization and urbanization of American life, especially in the nineteenth century known as the era of Jacksonian Democracy. During the period from 1830 to 1860, great progress was made in American education. State after state appointed a superintendent of education. After long struggles, and under pressure from the newly enfranchised common man, state after state in North abandoned its partial system of schooling, discarded the idea of education as charity for the poor or a parental problem for those able to pay, and established a system of free, public, tax-supported primary education.

One of the most interesting phases of the early development of public schools to be discussed is found in the means used to popularize the idea of public education. Here, the roles played by such individuals as Horace Mann, Henry Barnard and William T. Harris were of outstanding significance. These men analyzed the faults and needs of American education. They studied European school systems. They aroused public opinion. They campaigned for funds, converted reluctant taxpayers, and stormed legislatures for appropriations. They realized the importance of planning of expert supervision, and of trained officials. They recognized the importance of well-qualified teachers and professional attitudes, and they founded normal schools to create a trained teaching profession. By improving the quality of both schools and teachers, these educational reformers of the mid-century performed the groundwork without which no superstructure of freedom for teachers could have been erected.