

What was the Common School Movement?

Dr. Gray Fitzsimons, January 22, 2014

Excerpts from *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* by Carl F. Kaestle.

The idea behind the Common School Movement was that schooling should stress unity, obedience, restraint, self-sacrifice, and the careful exercise of intelligence. The survival of the republic depended on the virtue of its citizens.... the moral quality of the society was therefore to be improved by improving the moral quality of individuals . The child uneducated in knowledge and virtue is educated in the school of depravity. And what is true of the individual is true of communities. P. 81

period while earlier it had failed, and the fact that it coincided with accelerating urbanization, industrialization and immigration, suggests that there were causal

[We] must look at the interrelated changes in the economic, demographic, cultural, and political characteristics of American society to assess the impact each may have on the

- From Dr. Gray Fitzsimons about Knowles: Knowles references the Irish school that the school committee established in 1830. One of the duties of school committee members in the antebellum era was to visit the schools and observe teachers and students. Knowles was recounting his visit to the Irish school the only publicly funded one at that time in 1830 which he and (Reverend) Edson, among others, supported. As far as I know, a teacher at this time especially one in a separate school for Irish Catholics had a great deal of leeway in the use of teaching material and in the curriculum. This continued into the Common School era, but one of the centralizing tendencies of local school committees and the state was associated with attempts to create a more standard curriculum and use more uniform sets of textbooks. The law on public instruction of youth, passed in 1827, forbade tax dollars being spent on sectarian [religious] texts. But teachers could still teach and did teach from the Bible and I have no doubt teachers in the publicly funded Irish Catholic schools used Catholic texts in their teaching, as evidently this particular schoolmaster, mentioned by Knowles, was doing.

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