

“On the School Law” April 11, 1835

In the Pennsylvania House of Representatives

Mr. Speaker: I will briefly give you the reasons why I shall oppose the repeal of the school law. This law was passed at the last session of the Legislature with unexampled unanimity, but one member of this House voting against it. It has not yet come into operation, and none of its effects have been tested by experience in Pennsylvania. The passage of such a law is enjoined by the Constitution; and has been recommended by every Governor since its adoption. Much to his credit, it has been warmly urged by the present Executive in all his annual messages, delivered at the opening of the Legislature. To repeal it now, before its practical effects have been discovered, would argue that it contained some glaring and pernicious defect; and that the last Legislature acted under some strong and fatal delusion which blinded every man of them to the interests of the Commonwealth. I will attempt to show that the law is salutary, useful and important; and that, consequently, the last Legislator acted wisely in passing, and the present would act unwisely in repealing it. That instead of being oppressive to the people, it will lighten their burdens, while it elevates them in the scale of human intellect.

It would seem to be humiliating to be under the necessity, in the nineteenth century, of entering into a formal argument to prove the utility, and to free Governments, the absolute necessity of education. More than two thousand years ago the Deity, who presided over the intellectual endowments, ranked highest for dignity, chastity and virtue, among the goddesses worshipped by cultivated Pagans. And I will not insult this House or our constituents by supposing any course of reasoning necessary to convince them of its high importance. Such necessity would be degrading to a Christian age and a free Republic!

If then, education be of admitted importance to the people under all forms of Governments, and of unquestioned necessity when they govern themselves, it follows of course that its cultivation and diffusion is a matter of public concern and a duty which every Government owes to its people. In accordance with this principle, the ancient republics, who were most renowned for their wisdom and success, considered every child born subject to their control, as the property of the State, so far as its education was concerned; and during the proper period of instruction, they were withdrawn from the control of their parents, and placed under the guardianship of the Commonwealth. There all were instructed at the same school; all were placed on perfect equality, the rich and the poor man's sons, for all were deemed children of the same common parent – of the Commonwealth. Indeed, when all have the means of knowledge placed within their reach, and meet at common schools on equal terms, the forms of Government seem of less importance to the happiness of the people than is generally supposed; or rather, such a people are seldom in danger of having their rights invaded by their rulers. They would not long be invaded with impunity. Prussia, whose form of Government is absolute monarchy, extends the blessing of free schools to every corner of the kingdom – to the lowest and poorest of the people. With a population equal to our whole Union, she has not more than 20,000 children who do not enjoy its advantages. And the consequence is, that Prussia, although governed by an absolute monarch, enjoys more happiness, and the rights of the people are better respected than in any other Government in Europe.

If an elective Republic is to endure for any great length of time, every elector must have sufficient information, not only to accumulate wealth and take care of his pecuniary concerns, but to direct wisely the Legislatures, the ambassadors, and the Executive of the Nation – for some part of all these things, some agency in approving or disapproving of them, falls to every freeman. If, then, the permanency of our Government depends upon such knowledge, it is the duty of Government to see that the means of information be diffused to every citizen. This is a sufficient answer to those who deem education a private and not a public duty – who argue that they are willing to educate their own children, but not their neighbor's children.

But while but few are found ignorant and shameless enough to deny the advantages of general education, many are alarmed at its supposed burthensome operation. A little judicious reflection, or a single year's experience, would show that education, under the free school system, will cost more than one-half less, and afford better and more permanent instruction than the present

disgraceful plan pursued by Pennsylvania. Take a township six miles square and make the estimate; such townships, on an average, will contain about 200 children to be schooled. The present rate of tuition generally (in the country) is two dollars per quarter. If the children attend school two quarters each year, such township would pay \$800 per annum. Take the free school system – lay the township off into districts three miles square; the farthest scholar would then have one mile and a half to go, which would not be too far. It would require four schools. These will be taught, I presume, as in other States, three months in the winter by male, and three months in the summer by female teachers; good male teachers can be had at from sixteen to eighteen dollars per month and board themselves; females at \$9 per month. Take the highest price, eighteen dollars for three months would be \$54, and then for females at \$9 for three months, \$27, making each school cost \$81; four to a township would thus cost \$324. The price now paid for the same is \$800; there would thus be a saving for each township of six miles square of \$476 per annum.

If the instruction of 200 scholars will save by the free school law \$476, the 500,000 children in Pennsylvania will save [\$]1,190,000! Very few men are aware of the immense amount of money which the present expensive and partial mode of education costs the people. Pennsylvania has half a million of children, who either do or ought to go to school six months in the year. If they do go, at two dollars per quarter, their schooling costs two millions of dollars per annum! If they do not go when they are able, their parents deserve to be held in disgrace. Where they are unable, if the State does not furnish the means, she is criminally negligent. But by the free school law, that same amount of education which would now cost two millions of dollars, could be supplied at less than one-third of this amount. The amendment, which is now proposed as a substitute for the school law of last session, is, in my opinion, of a most hateful and degrading character. It is a re-enactment of the pauper law of 1809. It proposes that the assessors shall take a census, and make a record of the poor. This shall be revised, and a new record made by the county commissioners, so that the names of those who have the misfortune to be poor men's children, shall be forever preserved, as a distinct class, in the archives of the county! The teacher, too, is to keep in his school a pauper book, and register the names and attendance of poor scholars; thus pointing out and recording their poverty in the midst of their companions. Sir, hereditary distinctions of rank are sufficiently odious; but that which is founded on poverty is infinitely more so. Such a law should be entitled "An act for branding

and marking the poor, so that they may be known from the rich and proud." Many complain of this tax, not so much on account of its amount, as because it is for the benefit of others and not themselves. This is a mistake; it is for their own benefit, inasmuch as it perpetuates the Government and ensures the due administration of the laws under which they live, and by which their lives and property are protected. Why do they not urge the same objection against all other taxes? The industrious, thrifty, rich farmer, pays a heavy county tax to support criminal courts, build jails, and pay sheriffs and jail keepers, and yet probably he never has, and never will have, any direct personal use of either. He never gets the worth of his money by being tried for a crime before the court, allowed the privilege of the jail on conviction or receiving an equivalent from the sheriff or his hangman officers! He cheerfully pays the tax which is necessary to support and punish convicts, but loudly complains of that which goes to prevent his fellow being from becoming a criminal, and to obviate the necessity of those humiliating institutions.

This law is often objected to, because its benefits are shared by the children of the profligate spendthrift equally with those of the most industrious and economical habits. It ought to be remembered that the benefit is bestowed, not upon the erring parents, but the innocent children. Carry out this objection and you punish children for the crimes or misfortunes of their parents. You virtually establish castes and grades, founded on no merit of the particular generation, but on the demerits of their ancestors; an aristocracy of the most odious and insolent kind – the aristocracy of wealth and pride.

It is said that its advantages will be unjustly and unequally enjoyed, because the industrious, money-making man, keeps his whole family constantly employed, and has but little time for them to spend at school; while the idle man has but little employment for his family, and they will constantly attend school. I know, sir, that there are some men, whose whole souls are so completely absorbed in the accumulation of wealth, and whose avarice so increases with success,

that they look upon their very children in no other light than as instruments of gain – that they, as well as the ox and the ass within their gates, are valuable only in proportion to their annual earnings. And, according to the present system, the children of such men are reduced almost to an intellectual level with their co-laborers of the brute creation. This law will be of vast advantage to the offspring of such misers. If they are compelled to pay their taxes to support schools, their very meanness will induce them to send their children to them to get the worth of their money. Thus it will extract good out of the very penuriousness of the miser. Surely a system which will work such wonders, ought to be as greedily sought for, and more highly prized, than that coveted alchemy which was to produce gold and silver out of the blood and entrails of vipers, lizards, and other filthy vermin!

Why, sir, are the colleges and literary institutions of Pennsylvania now, and ever have been, in a languishing and sickly condition? Why, with a fertile soil and genial climate, has she, in proportion to her population, scarcely one-third as many collegiate students, as cold, barren, New England? The answer is obvious: She has no free schools. Until she shall have, you may in vain endow college after college; they will never be filled, or filled only by students from other States. In New England free schools plant the seeds and the desire of knowledge in every mind, without regard to the wealth of the parent or the texture of the pupil's garments. When the seed,

thus universally sown, happens to fall on fertile soil, it springs up and is fostered by a generous public, until it produces its glorious fruit. Those who have but scanty means, and are pursuing a collegiate education, find it necessary to spend a portion of the year in teaching common schools; thus imparting the knowledge which they acquire, they raise the dignity of the employment to the rank which it should always hold, honorable in proportion to the high qualifications necessary for its discharge. Thus devoting a portion of their time to acquiring the means of subsistence, industrious habits are forced upon them, and their minds and bodies become disciplined to a regularity and energy which is seldom the lot of the rich. It is no uncommon occurrence to see the poor man's son, thus encouraged by wise legislation, far outstrip and bear off the laurels from the less industrious heirs of wealth. Some of the ablest men of the present and past days never could have been educated except for that benevolent system. Not to mention any of the living, it is well known that the architect of an immortal name, who "plucked the lightings from heaven, and the scepter from tyrants," was the child of free schools. Why shall Pennsylvania now repudiate a system which is calculated to elevate her to that rank in the intellectual, which, by the blessing of Providence, she holds in the natural world? To be the key-stone of the arch, the "very first among her equals?" I am aware, sir, how difficult it is for the great mass of the people, who have never seen it in operation, to understand its advantages. But is it not wise to let it go into full operation, and learn its results from experience? Then, if it prove useless or burthensome, how easy to repeal it! I know how large a portion of the community can scarcely feel any sympathy with, or understand the necessities of, the poor; or appreciate the exquisite feelings which they enjoy when they see their children receiving the boon of education, and rising in intellectual superiority above the clogs which hereditary poverty had cast upon them. It is not wonderful that he whose fat acres have descended to him from father to son in unbroken succession, should never have become familiar with misery, and therefore should never have sought for the surest means of alleviating it. Sir, when I reflect how apt hereditary wealth, hereditary influence, and perhaps, as a consequence, hereditary pride are to close the avenues and steel the heart against the wants and the rights of the poor, I am induced to thank my Creator for having, from early life, bestowed upon me the blessing of poverty. Sir, it is a blessing – for if there be any human sensation more ethereal and divine than all others, it is that which feelingly sympathies with misfortune.

But we are told that this law is unpopular; that the people desire its repeal. Has it not always been so with every new reform in the condition of man? Old habits and old prejudices are hard to be removed from the mind. Every new improvement, which has been gradually leading man from the savage, through the civilized, up to a highly cultivated state, has required the most strenuous, and often perilous exertions of the wise and good. But, sir, much of its unpopularity is chargeable upon the vile arts of unprincipled demagogues. Instead of attempting to remove the honest misapprehensions of the people, they cater to their prejudices, and take advantage of them, to gain low, dirty, temporary, local triumphs. I do not charge this on any particular party.

Unfortunately, almost the only spot on which all parties meet in union, is this ground of common infamy! I have seen the present chief magistrate of this commonwealth violently assailed as the projector and father of this law. I am not the eulogist of that gentleman; he has been guilty of many deep political sins; but he deserves the undying gratitude of the people, for the steady, untiring zeal, which he has manifested in favor of common schools. I will not say that his exertions in that cause have covered all, but they have atoned for many of his errors. I trust that the people of this State will never be called on to choose between a supporter and an

opposer of free schools. But if it should come to that; if that should be made the turning point on which we are to cast our suffrages; if the opponent of education were my most intimate personal and political friend, and the free school candidate my most obnoxious enemy, I should deem it my duty as a patriot, at this moment in our intellectual crisis, to forget all other considerations and I should place myself unhesitatingly and cordially in the ranks of Him whose banners stream in light. I would not foster nor flatter ignorance to gain political victories; which, however they might profit individuals, must prove disastrous to our country. Let it not be supposed from these remarks, that because I deem this a paramount object, that I think less highly than heretofore of those great, important cardinal principles, which for years past have controlled my political action. They are, and every shall be, deeply cherished in my inmost heart. But I must be allowed to exercise my own judgment as to the best means of effecting that and every other object which I think beneficial to the community. And, according to that judgment, the light of general information will as surely counteract the pernicious influence of secret, oath-bound, murderous institutions, as the sun in heaven dispels the darkness and damp vapors of the night.

It is said that some gentlemen here owe their election to their hostility to general education. That it was placed distinctly on that ground and that others lost their election by being in favor of it; and that they consented to supersede the regularly nominated candidates of their own party, who had voted for this law – may be so. I believe that two highly respectable members of the last Legislature, from Union county, who voted for the school law, did fail of re-election on that ground only. They were summoned before a county meeting, and requested to pledge themselves to vote for its repeal as the price of their re-election. But they were too high-minded and honorable men to consent to such degradation. The people, incapable for the moment of appreciating their worth, dismissed them from their service. But I venture to predict that they have passed them by only for the moment. Those gentlemen have earned the approbation of all good and intelligent men more effectually by their retirement, than they could ever have done by retaining popular favor at the expense of self-humiliation. They fell, it is true, in this great struggle between the powers of light and darkness; but they fell, as every Roman mother wished her sons to fall, facing the enemy with all their wounds in front. True it is, also, that two other gentlemen, and I believe two only, lost their election on account of their vote on that question. I refer to the late members from Berks, who were candidates for re-election; and I regret that gentlemen whom I so highly respect, and whom I take pleasure in ranking among my personal friends, had not possessed a little more nerve to enable them to withstand the assaults which were made upon them; or if they must be overpowered, to wrap their mantles gracefully around them and yield with dignity. But this, I am aware, requires a high degree of fortitude; and those respected gentlemen, distracted and faltering between the dictates of conscience and the clamor of the populace, at length turned and fled; but duty had detained them so long that they fled too late; and the shaft which had already been winged by ignorance, overtook and pierced them from behind. I am happy to say, sir, that a more fortunate fate awaited our friends from York. Possessing a keener insight into futurity, and a sharper instinct of danger, they saw the peril at a greater distance, and retreated in time to escape the fury of the storm, and can now safely boast that “discretion is the better part of valor, and that “they fought and run away,” “and live to fight – on ‘t other side.”

Sir, it is to be regretted that any gentleman should have consented to place his election on hostility to general education. If honest ambition were his object, he will ere long lament that he

attempted to raise his monument of glory on so muddy a foundation. But, if it be so, that they were placed here to obstruct the diffusion of knowledge, it is but justice to say that they fitly and faithfully represent the spirit which sent them here, when they attempt to sacrifice this law on the altars which, at home, among their constituents, they have raised and consecrated to intellectual darkness; and on which they are pouring out oblations to send forth their fetid and noxious odors over the ten miles square of their ambition! But will this Legislature – will the wise guardians of the dearest interests of a great commonwealth, consent to surrender the high advantages and brilliant prospects which this law promises, because it is desired by worthy gentlemen, who, in a moment of causeless panic and popular delusion, sailed into power on a Tartarean flood? A flood of ignorance, darker, and, to the intelligent mind, more dreadful than that accursed Stygian pool at which mortals and immortals tremble! Sir, it seems to me that the liberal and enlightened proceedings of the last Legislature, have aroused the demon of ignorance from its slumber; and maddened at the threatened loss of his murky empire, his discordant howlings are heard in every part of our land!

Gentlemen will hardly contend for the doctrine of cherishing and obeying the prejudices and errors of their constituents. Instead of prophesying smooth things, and flattering the people with the belief of their present perfection, and thus retarding the mind of its onward progress, it is the duty of faithful legislators to create and sustain such laws and institutions as shall teach us our wants, foster our cravings after knowledge, and urge us forward in the march of intellect. The barbarous and disgraceful cry which we hear abroad in some parts of our land, “that learning makes us worse – that education makes men rogues,” should find no echo within these walls. Those who hold such doctrines anywhere would be the objects of bitter detestation, if they were not rather pitiable objects of commiseration; for even voluntary fools require our compassion as well as natural idiots!

Those who would repeal this law because it is obnoxious to a portion of the people, would seem to found their justification on a desire of popularity. That is not an unworthy object, when they seek that enduring fame which is constructed of imperishable materials. But have these gentlemen looked back and consulted the history of their race, to learn on what foundation, and on what materials that popularity is built which outlives its possessor – which is not buried in the same grave which covers his mortal remains? Sir, I believe that kind of fame may be acquired either by deep learning, or even the love of it, by mild philanthropy or unconquerable courage. And it seems to me, that in the present state of feeling in Pennsylvania, those who will heartily and successfully support the cause of general education, can acquire at least some portion of the honor of all these qualities combined; while those who oppose it will be remembered without pleasure and soon pass away with the things that perish. In giving this law to posterity you act the part of the philanthropist, by bestowing upon the poor as well as the rich, the greatest earthly boon which they are capable of receiving; you act the part of the philosopher by pointing, if you do not lead them, up the hill of science; you act the part of the hero, if it be true, as they say, that popular vengeance follows close upon your footsteps. Here, then, if you wish true popularity, is a theatre on which you may acquire it. What renders the name of Socrates immortal but his love of the human family, exhibited under all circumstances and in contempt of every danger? But courage, even with but little benevolence, may confer lasting renown. It is this which makes us bow with involuntary respect at the names of Napoleon, of Caesar, and of Richard the Lion Heart. But what earthly glory is there equal in luster and duration to that conferred by education? What else could have bestowed such renown

upon the philosophers, the poets, the statesmen and orators of antiquity? What else could have conferred such undisputed applause upon Aristotle, Demosthenes and Homer; on Virgil, Horace and Cicero? And is learning less interesting and important now than it was in centuries past, when those statesmen and orators charmed and ruled empires with their eloquence?

Sir, let it not be thought that these great men acquired a higher fame than is within the reach of the present age. Pennsylvania's sons possess as high native talents as any other nation of ancient or modern time! Many of the poorest of her children possess as bright intellectual gems, if they were as highly polished, as did the proudest scholars of Greece or Rome. But too long, too disgracefully long, has coward, trembling, procrastinating legislation, permitted them to lie buried in "dark, unfathomed caves."

If you wish to acquire popularity, how often have you been admonished to build not your monuments of brass or marble, but make them of ever-living mind! Although the period of yours, or your children's renown, cannot be as long as that of the ancients, because you start from a later period, yet it may be no less brilliant. Equal attention to the same learning; equal ardor in pursuing the same arts and liberal studies, which has rescued their names from the rest of corroding time, and handed them down to us untarnished from remote antiquity, would transmit the names of your children and your children's children in the green undying fame down through the long vista of succeeding ages, until time shall mingle with eternity. Let all, therefore, who would sustain the character of the philosopher or philanthropist, sustain this law. Those who would add thereto the glory of the hero can acquire it here; for, in the present state of feeling in Pennsylvania, I am willing to admit that but little less dangerous to the public man is the war-club and battle-axe of savage ignorance, than to the Lion-hearted Richard was the keen scimitar of the Saracen. He who would oppose it, either through inability to comprehend the advantages of general education or from unwillingness to bestow them on all his fellow citizens, even to the lowest and the poorest, or from dread of popular vengeance, seems to me to want either the head of the philosopher, the heart of the philanthropist, or the nerve of the hero.

All these things would be easily admitted by almost every man, were it not for supposed cost. I have endeavored to show that it is not expensive; but, admit that it were somewhat so, why do you cling so closely to your gold? The trophies which it can purchase, the idols which it sets up, will scarcely survive their purchaser. No name, no honor can long be perpetuated by mere matter. Of this Egypt furnishes melancholy proof. Look at her stupendous pyramids, which were raised at such immense expense of toil and treasure! As mere masses of matter they seem as durable as the everlasting hills, yet the deeds and the names they were intended to perpetuate are no longer known on earth. That ingenious people attempted to give immortality to matter, by embalming their great men and monarchs. Instead of doing deeds worthy to be recorded in history, their very names are unknown, and nothing is left to posterity but their disgusting mortal frames for idle curiosity to stare at. What rational being can view such soulless, material perpetuation, with pleasure? If you can enjoy it, go, sir, to the foot of Vesuvius; to Herculaneum and Pompeii, those eternal monuments of human weakness. There, if you set such value on material monuments of riches, may you see all the glory of art, the magnificence of wealth, the gold of Ophir, and the rubies of the East, preserved in indestructible lava, along with their haughty wearers, the cold, smooth, petrified, lifeless beauties of the "Cities of the Dead." Who would not shudder at the idea of such prolonged material identity? Who would not rather do one living deed than to have his ashes forever enshrined in ever-burnished gold. Sir, I trust that when

we come to act on this question, we shall all take lofty ground – look beyond the narrow space which now circumscribes our vision – beyond the passing, fleeting point of time on which we stand; and so cast our votes that the blessing of education shall be conferred on every son of Pennsylvania – shall be carried home to the poorest child of the poorest inhabitant of the meanest hut of your mountains, so that even he may be prepared to act well his part in this land of freemen, and lay on earth a broad and solid foundation for that enduring knowledge which goes on increasing through increasing eternity.