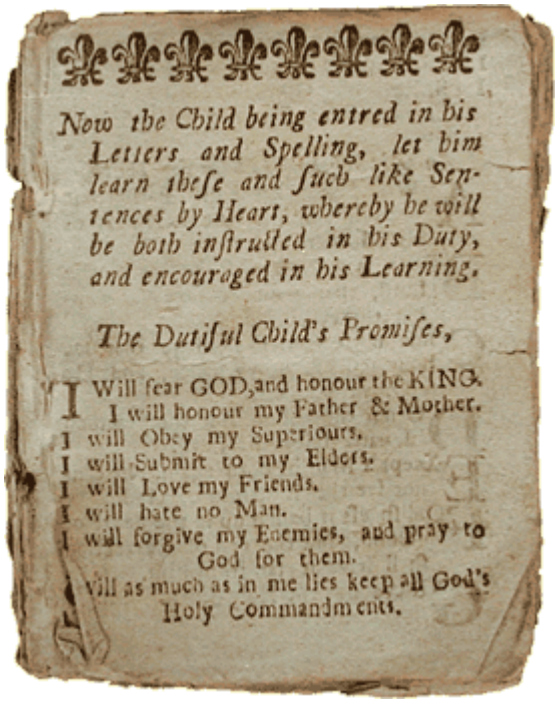
Literacy Then and Now



Now the Child being entred in his Letters and Spelling, let him learn these and such like Sentences by Heart, whereby he will be both instructed in his Duty, and encouraged in his Learning.

The Dutiful Child's Promises,

I Will fear GOD, and honour the KING.
I will honour my Father & Mother.
I will Obey my Superiours.
I will Submit to my Elders.
I will Love my Friends.
I will hate no Man.
I will forgive my Enemies, and pray to God for them.
I will as much as in me lies keep all God's Holy Commandments.

"Why are you in school?"

I posed this question to Michael Haynes's and Diana Maloziec's fifth-grade classes at Heninger Elementary School in Santa Ana, California. The ensuing discussions revealed that the students wanted to be in school. They felt that education would help them get good jobs and realize their ambitions. I pointed out that they were legally required to attend school until age sixteen. (Actually, I later learned, the legal age in California is eighteen.)

"So I can leave school when I turn sixteen?" asked a boy in Michael Haynes's class.

This was not my intended message. I was leading teams of college students into the portable classrooms in the yard at Heninger, a structurally small school that has over 1,100 students cycling through on a year-round schedule. We were all participants in Humanities Out There (HOT), an outreach program of the School of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine, and we hoped to help the two classes of fifth-graders develop the skills and inspiration to go on to college, particularly through exposure to the humanities. We were piloting a fifth-grade U.S. history curriculum that I am developing through a research assistantship; this was the second of five weekly visits to Heninger during fall 2001. HOT works exclusively with public schools in Santa Ana, which was described in a recent *New York Times* article as "among the poorest districts in the nation" and has a correspondingly low rate of college enrollment. In other words, these fifth-graders are statistically unlikely to achieve the material goals they seem to feel education should make attainable.

“Why do you think children went to school in early New England?”

The students imagined that early American children went to school for the same reasons they did, but I pointed to an early precedent for contemporary compulsory education laws: the so-called “Old Deluder Act” of 1647. The Massachusetts General Court called for every town to establish a grammar school in order to thwart “one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from knowledge of Scriptures . . .” I wrote this quote on the board, explaining the unfamiliar words. The “Old Deluder Act” suggests a different set of expectations of education and a vastly different curriculum.

I asked the students what kinds of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources we might look at to learn more about education in early America. A few, demonstrating a good understanding of the concept of primary research, suggested letters and journals. No one mentioned textbooks, but when I proposed to look at one they agreed it would be a good idea. At this point, we distributed excerpts from a 1727 edition of the *New England Primer* and broke up the thirty-plus students in each class into six groups. Each group was accompanied by an adult, either a UCI student or a classroom teacher.

The *New England Primer* was the ubiquitous schoolbook in eighteenth-century America, not only in New England but in the mid-Atlantic as well. The earliest extant edition is from 1727, but its origins, attributed to a zealous Protestant printer, Benjamin Harris, are in the late seventeenth century.

Our excerpt included the famous pictorial alphabet and the subsequent section, “The Dutiful Child’s Promises.” The twenty-four-letter alphabet (*I* and *V* are omitted) is illustrated with woodcut pictures and rhyming verses, beginning:

Fig. 1. A from the New England Primer, 1727. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

A may stand for the fall from grace, but the initial letter of the alphabet is also the first signpost on the road to redemption, to be gained by reading God’s word:

Fig. 2. B from the New England Primer, 1727. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

Diana Maloziec was excited by this literacy theme; she said it accorded perfectly with the historical novel she had been reading to her students, *The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple*, about a fictitious twelve-year-old passenger on the *Mayflower*.

It was difficult to avoid getting caught up explicating all the biblical allusions in the alphabet. The students are mostly immigrants from Mexico or the children of immigrants; most are Catholic, some of them churchgoers. While they were unfamiliar with the doctrine of original sin, they knew who Adam and Eve were. Zacheus, however, was a complete stranger (and the *s*'s that look like *f*'s confused everyone).


Fig. 3. Z from the New England Primer, 1727. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

"Is it true," asked Rocio, "that the Devil used to be an Angel?"

"Yes," I said, "according to the Bible." She laughed, because I was qualifying nearly every statement with "according to the Bible." I felt uncomfortable talking about Bible stories in a public-school classroom (just as it had felt quite odd, in writing the "Old Deluder" quote on the board, to spell out S-A-T-A-N). Yet the incongruity of this material was precisely what I hoped to bring out, to illustrate the radical difference between the experience of a ten-year old in eighteenth-century New England and one in twenty-first-century California.

As the literary scholar David Watters points out, the course from *Adam*'s fall to *Zacheus*'s climb is ultimately redemptive and hopeful. The stations in between, however, are sufficiently stern and morbid. From *F*, the students could infer that the Puritan schoolmasters were hardly indulgent.


Fig. 4. F from the New England Primer, 1727. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

G, *R*, *T*, *X*, and *Y* are all reminders of imminent death. *Y*, with the specter's arrow pointing to a little girl, is particularly haunting. The *New England Primer* emerged from, in David E. Stannard's phrase, "a world in which the presence of early death was everywhere." The progress toward conversion could be construed as a race against time.


Fig. 5. Y from the New England Primer, 1727. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

"The Dutiful Child's Promises" offer a glimpse of eighteenth-century pedagogy, with its emphasis on rote learning. It illustrates a culture in which a child's guiding principle was obedience:


Fig. 6. “The Dutiful Child’s Promises” from the New England Primer, 1727. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

We concluded the hour-long lesson by having the students work on their own alphabet, with verses and pencil drawings in the style of woodcuts. The *Santa Ana Primer* would be as revealing about the present-day as the *New England Primer* is of the eighteenth century.

It proved to be a difficult assignment. I had to relinquish my idea of having each group produce a section of the alphabet, so as to have a complete alphabet from each class; instead I let the students choose their own single letters. As it was, they had some difficulty coming up with verses. “What values are important to us today?” I asked. “Who are your heroes?”


Fig. 7 Student Image

Fig. 8 student image

Several students drew pictures of flags and wrote verses about freedom. Others echoed the *New England Primer’s* emphasis on literacy:


Fig. 9. H from the New England Primer, 1727. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

Fig. 10. Student image

The original readers of the *New England Primer* began their studies with the prospect of heaven ahead and hellfire behind and on both sides. The creators of the *Santa Ana Primer* wouldn’t define the stakes so dramatically, but they are nonetheless invested in their education.


Fig. 11. Student image

Fig. 12. Student image

Further Reading: The *New York Times* citation is from Jacques Steinberg, “Economy Puts Schools in Tough Position,” 26 November 2001. The groundbreaking study on the *Primer* is Paul Leicester Ford’s *The New England Primer: A History of its Origin and Development* (New York, 1962), which includes a facsimile of

the New York Public Library's 1727 edition. Ford's introduction would be especially useful for teachers interested in showing the fascinating and historically significant changes in the alphabet poem over the publication history of the *Primer*. See also Gillian Avery's "Origins and English Predecessors of the *New England Primer*," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 108:1 (1998) 33-61. The images used here are from the other existing 1727 edition of the *Primer*, owned by the American Antiquarian Society; see Marcus A. McCorison, "American Bibliographical Notes: *The New England Primer Enlarged*," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 108:1 (1998) 63-66. David H. Watters presents an intriguing literary reading in "'I Spake as a Child': Authority, Metaphor and *The New-England Primer*," *Early American Literature* 20:3 (winter 1985-86) 193-213. The citation from David E. Stannard is from his "Death and the Puritan Child," *American Quarterly* 26:5 (December 1974) 456-76. *The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple* is written by Kathryn Lasky (New York, 1996).

An online facsimile of an 1805 *Primer* is available on Colonial America Resources run by Timothy Shannon of Gettysburg College. For information on Humanities Out There, please visit their Website.

This article originally appeared in issue 2.3 (April, 2002).

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