

GENEVA ACADEMY

KNIGHTLY NEWS

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THE CLASSICAL EDUCATION OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS

There is a reason that many parents are so interested in teaching our children about the men who founded the United States of America, and it goes beyond just becoming familiar with who they were and what they did. More than just teaching our children about these men through the histories and biographies that tell the story of their lives, many of us are interested in our children becoming more like them. The Founding Fathers possessed two characteristics that distinguished them from other men of their time—and from most men in any time: wisdom and virtue. It is these qualities that we admire most about them and that we would most like to see in our own children. But more important than just admiring them for these traits, we should strive to understand how they became this way.

THE CLASSICAL EDUCATION OF THE FOUNDERS

“Americans view the Founding Fathers in vacuo, isolated from the soil that nurtured them,” says Traci Lee Simmons in his book, *Climbing Parnassus: A New Apologia for Greek and Latin*. For the Founders, says Simmons, these virtues came principally from two places: “the pulpit and the schoolroom.” We are already fairly familiar with the explicitly Biblical influences on America’s founding, but we are far less familiar with the classical influences on the Founders—and how these two influences worked in concert to mold their education and their thinking.

It is a well-known fact that literacy was prevalent in colonial times. “A native of America who cannot read or write,” said John Adams, “is as rare an appearance...as a comet or an earthquake.” It is not nearly as well-known a fact, however, that early Americans with a formal education usually knew several other languages as well as their own.

The typical education of the time began in what we would call the 3rd Grade—at about age eight. Students who actually went to school were required to learn Latin and Greek grammar and, later, to read the Latin historians Tacitus and Livy, the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, and to translate the Latin poetry of Virgil and Horace. They were expected to know the language well

Winter/Spring 2011

FIELD TRIPS:

- ◆ Monday, February 28,
Local Field Trip
- ◆ Thursday, March 17,
Legislative Hall, Dover
Tentative

HOLIDAYS & VACATION

- ◆ **President’s Day**
February 21st,
Closed
- ◆ **Spring Break**
April 4– April 12th, Closed
- ◆ **Easter Break**
April 22 - April 25th,
Closed

NOTICES & REMINDERS

- ◆ **Spirit Week**
February 22-25
- ◆ **ERB Testing**
April 26-28th
- ◆ You can keep up to date
on your child’s progress
at **Engrade.com**



enough to translate from the original into English and back again to the original in another grammatical tense. Classical Education also stressed the seven liberal arts: Latin, logic, rhetoric (the “trivium”), as well as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (the “quadrivium”).



Thomas Jefferson received early training in Latin, Greek, and French from Reverend William Douglas, a Scottish clergyman. At the age of fourteen, Jefferson’s father died, and, at the express wish of his father, he continued his education with the Reverend James Maury, who ran a classical academy. After leaving Douglas’ academy, Jefferson attended the College of William and Mary, where his classical education continued along with his study of law.

“The study of Latin and Greek...was not something they learned in college, but something they were expected to know before they got there.”

When Alexander Hamilton entered King’s College (now Columbia University) in 1773, he was expected to have a mastery of Greek and Latin grammar, be able to read three orations from Cicero and Virgil’s Aeneid in the original Latin, and be able to translate the first ten chapters of the Gospel of John from Greek into Latin.

When James Madison applied at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), he was expected to be able to “write Latin prose, translate Virgil, Cicero, and the Greek gospels and [to have] a commensurate knowledge of Latin and Greek grammar.” Even before he entered, however, he had already read Vergil, Horace, Justinian, Nepos, Caesar, Tacitus, Lucretius, Eutropius, Phaedrus, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato.

Other key figures in the American founding received similar educations, including John Taylor of Caroline, John Tyler, and George Rogers Clark, all of whom studied classics under the Scottish preacher Donald Robertson.

It is interesting to note that the study of Latin and Greek, which is what the term “classical education” originally implied, was not something they learned in college, but something they were expected to know before they got there.

These men not only had to read classical authors in school, they read them in adult life for pleasure and profit. Hamilton apparently had a penchant for copying Plutarch (the Roman) and Demosthenes (the Greek). John Adams would copy long passages of Sallust, the Roman historian. If you look around on the Internet a little, you can find a manuscript of twelve lines for sale, in the original language, from the Greek historian Herodotus, in Adam’s hand. It will cost you a mere \$6,300.

The founders knew these writers and quoted them prolifically. Their letters, in particular, display a wide familiarity with classical authors. The correspondence between educated men of the time was commonly sprinkled with classical quotations, usually in the original Latin or Greek. It was not only prevalent, but apparently sometimes annoying to the recipient. Jefferson used so many Greek quotes in his letters to Adams (who liked Latin better than Greek) that, on one occasion, Adams complained to him about it.

It apparently wasn’t the first time Adams displayed reticence about classical languages. When he was young, it turns out, he wasn’t always the most enthusiastic scholar and resisted studying his Latin. His father had a remedy for that, however; he sent him out to dig ditches, an activity which quickly revived his enthusiasm. He later grew to love Latin, however, and insisted on the same classical education for his sons, John Quincy (who later became president like his father) and Charles.



Several of the founders, including Adams, attended Harvard. The sole academic requirements for admission to Harvard University in the 1640s were as follows: “When any scholar is able to read Tully [Cicero]

or such like classical Latin author ex tempore and make and speak true Latin in verse and prose suo (ut aiunt) Marte [by his own power, as they say], and decline perfectly the paradigms of nouns and verbs in the Greek tongue, then may he be admitted into the college, nor shall any claim admission before such qualification.”

No ACT or SAT scores. No application essays. No affirmative action. Just Latin and Greek.

Students were also expected in these early years, according to the Harvard College Laws, to be able to translate the Old and New Testaments from the original Greek and Hebrew into Latin.

Not only that, but listen to another Harvard requirement of the time: “The scholars shall never use their mother tongue, except that in public exercises of oratory or such like they be called to make them in English.” In other words, with limited exceptions, students were prohibited from using English in class or in class assignments.



Some of this undoubtedly changed by the time the founders would have attended, but not much. When it came to classical education in colleges of colonial times, they took no prisoners.

Of the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention, 30 of them were college graduates, an astounding number for the time. But what of those

who were not college graduates, such as George Washington? Were they influenced in any way by classical education? In Washington’s case, while he had little formal education, he admired classical thinkers greatly. There are records showing that he ordered busts of figures such as Cicero that were presumably put on display at his Mt. Vernon home. He also cared enough about classical culture to have Joseph Addison’s play about Cato the Younger (a famous Roman statesman) performed for his troops at Valley Forge. He also insisted on a classical education for his stepson.

Even many who had little formal education were often quite knowledgeable in classical subjects. The Virginian George Wythe, who later became known as the “Teacher of Liberty,” was educated at their backwoods home by his mother. His Greek was accounted by his contemporaries to have been perfect.

Classical influences were pervasive in the schoolroom, but it didn’t stop there. Even what Americans heard from the pulpit was imbued with classical references and allusions. Ministers of that time were much more highly educated than today and were the ones most likely in any community to have had a classical education.

Today it is not uncommon to hear some say that Christians should shy away from the pagan authors of antiquity. This is an idea the generation of the founders—including great Christian thinkers such as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards—would simply have considered preposterous. Not only was classical education conducted largely by ordained Christian ministers (or aspiring ones), but education in the classics was considered an essential element in the education of a Christian cleric. In fact, all of the great Christian theologians and thinkers of early America were soaked and steeped in the classics. Not only did they think a classical education was consistent with a Christian vocation, they considered it absolutely essential.

It was primarily religious skeptics and those who were more enamored with the possibilities of practical science of the time than spiritual realities who took a dim view of classical education—men such as Benjamin Franklin, who, while having become a deist later in life and finally a theist (but still not a Christian), considered classical languages an anachronism.

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HOW THE CLASSICS INFLUENCED THE THINKING OF THE FOUNDERS

If the founders were steeped in the knowledge of classical thought, how did it affect their own thinking about the new nation? For one thing, it inculcated in them a respect for the lessons of history, lessons that were readily apparent in their writings and debates about how to construct the American Republic. “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided,” said Patrick Henry, “and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past.”



They combed the annals of the ancients for examples of governments that worked well—and for those that did not. They knew, well before the philosopher George Santayana was born to say it, that “those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it.”

“These men,” says Simmons, discussing the Philadelphia debates in 1787, “had read and digested Polybius, Aristotle, and Cicero, and they used the ancient luminaries to frame and illustrate their ideas before the assembly... These heated yet erudite debates, along with the Federalist Papers, fairly pullulate both with subtle classical allusions—with which Madison, Hamilton, and Jay assumed readers to be tolerably familiar—and direct references to the leagues—Amphictyonic, Achaean, Aetolian, Lycian—formed by the ancient Greeks in order to achieve political and physical security.”

Not only are the Federalist Papers replete with classical references, but the pseudonyms each of the writers chose for themselves were all taken from the writers of classical times.

CLASSICAL EDUCATION TODAY

To become inspired by the great deeds of great men is to obtain the motivation to do similar things. We become great partly by seeing what other great men did and being inspired to do such things ourselves. But while beholding the great deeds of others gives us the motivation to be like them, it doesn't equip us to achieve what they achieved. We can admire other men, but that won't necessarily make us more like them. In order to become like those we admire, we must not only admire them, we must do what they did. It is tempting to look back on the education of these great Americans and think that what they did is too difficult for the students of today. But that would be a grave mistake. Yes, they enjoyed some advantages over us, mostly in terms of having fewer distractions, but that is something we have the power to control. The fact is that we have advantages they didn't have. For example, the educational resources available to colonial children were not only harder to find, but of vastly inferior quality.

We can, moreover, say we lack their fortitude, but that is not something they brought to their education; rather, it is a benefit they received from it.

Education is the cultivation of wisdom and virtue. In deciding how to accomplish this with our own children, we would do well to see how it was done in a time when wisdom and virtue were more prevalent than in our own.

Martin Cothran is the author of *Traditional Logic I* and *Traditional Logic II*, as well as *Material Logic* and *Classical Rhetoric with Aristotle*. Taken from A.C.C.S Classis.



“Education is the cultivation of wisdom and virtue.”

GENEVA KNIGHTS

F • R • O • M T • H • E

Parable: The Unwise Chicken

There once was a starving coyote that stumbled upon a small chicken farm. So naturally he tried to eat the chickens, but the farmer scared him off. So that night the coyote went out to find a cotton field. When he finally found one, he made himself a sheep costume.

The next day, the fox went back to the farm in the sheep costume. The farmer spotted him and quickly caught him and put him in with the chickens. Most of the chickens stayed away, but one curious chicken stayed really close.

When the farmer was about to fall asleep he saw the coyote lead one of the chickens away from the group. When he woke up to count the chickens one was missing, as well as the sheep.
Looks are misleading.

Sixth Grader

Prayers at Geneva





I pray that You will help me to learn well and be a good student. That I will use my time wisely and remember everything that my teachers have taught me and are going to teach me. I pray that I will be able to use everything that I learn to glorify You. Amen.

Seventh Grader

*The staff and students at Geneva Academy ask you to remember us in your time of prayer. We desire to humble ourselves before God and give Him honor and praise for all that is accomplished daily at and through Geneva Academy. We want to implore His protection and guidance as we step into the future.
Please pray for us!*



GENEVA ACADEMY SPIRIT WEEK February

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|  <p>22 TUESDAY P.J. Day</p> |  <p>23 WEDNESDAY School Colors Day</p> |  <p>24 THURSDAY 80's Day</p> |  <p>25 FRIDAY Jeans Day</p> |
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