

5-1-1985

The Mark of Horace Mann on Iowa Education

John A. Beineke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Beineke, John A. "The Mark of Horace Mann on Iowa Education." *The Palimpsest* 66 (1985), 101-105.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol66/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Mark of Horace Mann on Iowa Education

by John A. Beineke

The quality of the public and private educational institutions in the state of Iowa enjoys a highly regarded national reputation. The roots of this tradition can be traced to two prominent Easterners. One was a man whose influence was so notable that he has been given the designation "Father of American Education" — Horace Mann of Massachusetts. The other figure to give direction to early Iowa schools was a New Yorker, Amos Dean, who also served as the first president of the State University of Iowa.

In 1856 these two men were appointed by the Iowa General Assembly to serve as commissioners with the assignment of rendering suggestions for the revision of the state school laws. A third man, Judge F. E. Bissell of Dubuque, Iowa, was unable to serve. Therefore the nine-page report, submitted by Mann and Dean, lacked what they termed the "local knowledge so essential to all just and wise legislation." Although they wrote their report from a perspective outside the Iowa experience, the authors were certainly not strangers to education.

Horace Mann (1796-1859) was the brilliant attorney and legislator who had relinquished a promising career in politics to become the first secretary to the state board of education in Massachusetts. The position had all the earmarks of a step into obscurity. But for twelve years, beginning in 1837, Mann led a bold crusade on behalf of the state's public schools.

Taking to horseback, Mann sought to convince the parents, citizens, and taxpayers of his

state that the older and informal modes of learning were no longer adequate. His reforms, documented in his *Annual Reports* between 1838 and 1849, called for numerous changes. They included proposals for teacher seminaries, improved school buildings, more taxation to support education, and better textbooks for the classroom.

At the time he coauthored the Iowa report, Mann was serving as the first president of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. While in Ohio, he traveled to both Illinois and Indiana and vacationed on occasion in Michigan. It is doubtful, however, that he ever ventured as far west as Iowa.

Mann's collaborator, Amos Dean (1803-1868), had visited Iowa twice in connection with his position as chancellor (president) of the State University of Iowa. As a youth, Dean had been a village schoolmaster in Vermont before going on to college and a career as an attorney. His educational experiences included both the teaching of law and the writing of several volumes of history. Dean spent the summer of 1858 in Iowa during which time he and the board of trustees decided that the university should close for a year due to financial problems. In 1860 he resigned. This was due, in part, to the concern of some Iowans over a part-time president for their university.

Iowa schools in the 1850s, which Mann and Dean sought to improve, were indeed in an underdeveloped stage. The first Iowa territorial school law in 1839 authorized county school districts. But four years later John Chambers, governor of Iowa Territory, unhap-

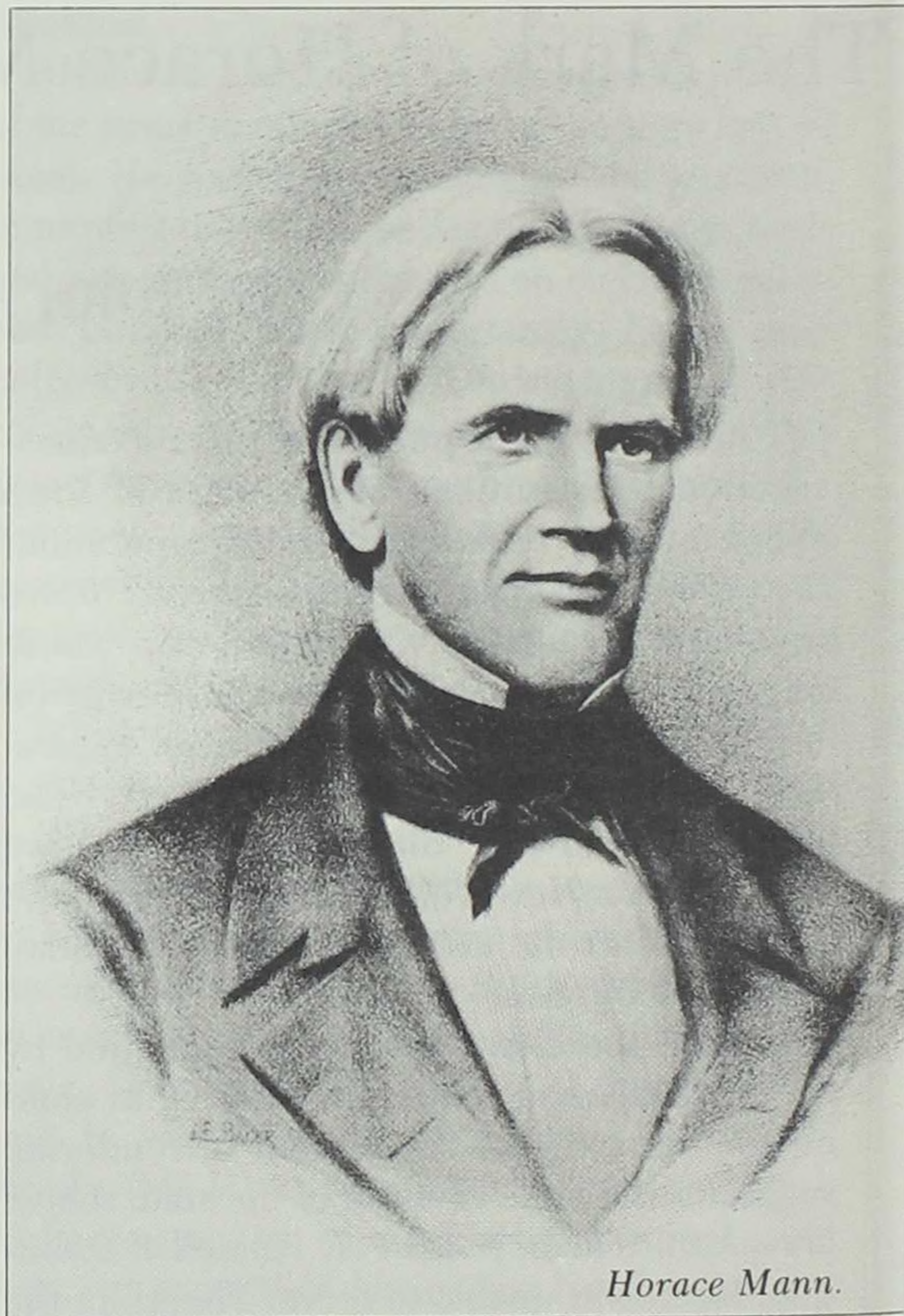
pily reported how "little interest the important subject of education excites among us."

From statehood in 1846 to the constitution of 1857 the legislature took some note of education, but did little to advance it. Only a few schools during the pioneer era in Iowa were graded. At best, schools met intermittently throughout the year. The minimum legal school year was twenty-four weeks. Local officials were allowed to extend that period if finances permitted.

A combination of home instruction and the one-room schoolhouse was the norm for much of Iowa. A cadre of teachers was formed from local preachers and young men and women from New England who journeyed west to teach on the frontier. A few private academies, usually associated with religious or ethnic groups, also made positive contributions to Iowa educational needs. By the mid-1850s the towns of Tipton and Muscatine claimed schools offering instruction beyond the eighth grade. A few private colleges had begun to appear by that time also.

But an increase in Iowa's population, from 192,214 in 1850 to 674,913 by the end of the decade, made alterations in the state's educational system necessary. An examination of the state's schools was an obvious first step in such a process. It was Iowa's good fortune to secure for this task the knowledge and counsel of the nation's foremost educational reformer — Horace Mann.

In the 1856 report of their findings, officially titled the *Report of the Commissioners of Revision of the School Laws*, Mann and Dean judiciously refrained from enumerating specific criticisms of Iowa's schools. In one sentence, though, they made the obvious comment that the state's school laws were fragmentary in character, lacking in general aims, and "entirely wanting in unity or completeness." They then commenced the *Report* on a positive note concerning Iowa's potential:



Horace Mann.

Here, for the first time, a great State, situated in the centre of a mighty Union, possessing exhaustless resources of agricultural and mineral wealth, binding together its various parts by a net-work of iron, demands a system of public instruction adequate to the full development of its great physical resources, and of the intellect and moral power of its people.

With this preface, Mann and Dean presented four underlying principles that had served as standards and had guided them in their work:

1. *Every Iowa youth was entitled to an education. The state would be the ultimate beneficiary of such training.*



Amos Dean.

2. *For education to be successful, it had to be considered a "distinct and separate pursuit and business." Therefore school laws and educational agencies should be established.*
3. *That adequate funding had to be provided for education since property and material wealth "owes its existence to the mind."*
4. *Three elements were necessary to perfect a system of education: the organizing, the financial, and the educational.*

Although coauthored, there were portions of the *Report* that could easily be traced to either Mann or Dean. Amos Dean, for example, suggested that financial support for Iowa schools be patterned on the property tax system of his

native New York. Teacher training institutes, one of Mann's successful innovations in Massachusetts, received special note and attention from him. In fact, both states were pointed to as stellar examples:

Your commissioners could not deem the educational system of any state complete without a liberal provision for Teachers, Institutes. This feature gives to the systems of Massachusetts and New York a decided superiority over those of other States, and from its highly beneficial effects as there displayed, every new State should be admonished of the propriety, nay, necessity of its adoption.

Another idea from the East Coast stressed in the *Report* was the establishment of high schools. These schools were referred to as "high, Academic, or Polytechnic." It was suggested that a high school be established in an Iowa county as soon as its population reached 20,000.

One of the largest segments of the *Report* was devoted to patterns of school organization. The authors' basic intention was to shift from a local or district school unit to something larger based on the township. They reasoned that such reorganization would require fewer school boards, create equalization of community support for facilities, and lead to larger schools. Instructional motives for enlarging district boundaries included the potential for more graded levels and also the possibility of attracting better teachers.

To oversee the townships the commissioners suggested that the position of county superintendent be created. Endowed with numerous duties, these powerful officers were deemed important components in the whole new scheme of school organization. It was even suggested that the larger the county, the greater the financial remuneration for the superintendent. A state superintendent of public instruc-

tion was to be at the apex of the organizational pyramid with the understanding, however, that the actual authority for school supervision would reside with the county superintendents.

Mann and Dean made their strongest appeal on behalf of higher teacher salaries. They believed excellence in teaching was directly related to the level of compensation provided by the community. In no uncertain terms they stated their case:

No common school system can ever succeed, where the compensation is so meagre as to encourage only those of the most ordinary talents and attainments to embark in it. Although the teacher should have higher aims and objects than mere pecuniary recompense, yet it must be obvious that the grade of compensation is not only important as furnishing a means of living, but also as indicating the high or low estimate which a community places upon the character of the service.

An active and participatory role in the schools by those in control of the schools was also deemed essential. The "visitorial power" was strongly endorsed not only as a way to expose and detect problems, but to provide an "approving smile" when outstanding educational achievements were evident. Annual meetings involving several school districts at which directors might compare experiences were also encouraged.

Mann and Dean concluded the *Report* with an emotional flourish:

They desire to send into every family of Iowa, now, and through all future time, a spirit-stirring impulse, an animating principle, which shall penetrate the depths of every young heart, and arouse the latent energies of every young spirit, and thus carry forward the common school system into the fullest and com-

pletest realization of its glorious mission. They submit that the young State of Iowa owes it to herself, after having rejected the clog of human servitude, and banished the evils of intemperance, to adopt such an educational system as will develop in harmonious proportions, and push to their extremest limits, both the intellect and the moral power of each coming generation.

And as if to convey their own commitment to the task that Iowans would undertake, they closed by saying,

Your Commissioners now feel that their task is ended. In the spirit of their recommendation to enlist in this great cause the unpaid services of others, they beg to present this result of their labors free of all charge, except for necessary expenses. It only remains for them to await, with no small solicitude, that legislative action upon which, in their judgment, hang such important consequences for the future.

While not all issues of educational importance were included in the *Report*, it is of interest to note which topics were left unmentioned. Although Mann and Dean commented on moral, ethical, and social issues such as slavery, temperance, and the perfectability of man, they did not take up such questions as the role of private schools or the place of religion in the educational system. The phrase "education of young men" appeared, but no similar reference to females was ever made. Agriculture, an essential aspect of Iowa society, received only scant attention.

Nor did the authors of the *Report* refer to the subject of phrenology. Phrenology was a nineteenth century psycho-physiological phenomenon that attempted to explain human behavior and mental development by measuring various parts of the cranium. Horace Mann

and Amos Dean were both devoted adherents of phrenology, but neither the study of the bumps and knobs on the head of mankind, nor the use of such a science in education — or any other specific educational method — found its way into the *Report*.

The impact of the *Report* on subsequent school legislation is difficult to assess. Mann's proposal for teacher training was given serious consideration by the Iowa General Assembly, but no positive action was taken. Preparation for a career in teaching continued to be undertaken in the state's private colleges and academies. Within a decade after the Civil War, however, the General Assembly made a commitment to a state teacher training institution. Located near Cedar Falls and opened in 1876, it was first known as the Iowa State Normal School and later as the Iowa State Teachers College. Today it is the University of Northern Iowa.

Other suggestions in the *Report* were adopted in due time. The constitution of 1857 did create a state board of education which functioned well, although briefly, until it was abolished in 1864. The commissioners' concept of a county superintendent found its way into law and remained a part of the Iowa education system well into the twentieth century.

But the consolidation of school districts, as envisioned by Mann and Dean, was to be a slow and protracted process. For years the one-room schoolhouse remained the norm except

in larger cities and towns. Yet, in 1870, Iowa had the lowest rate of illiteracy in the nation.

At such a distance in time it is difficult to identify the direct impact of the 1856 document. Certain changes, as noted, did take place. But the most significant feature of the report may have been the simple fact that Iowa sought out the nation's foremost educator for advice, counsel, and direction when it became apparent that the state's educational patterns had to be altered. The choice of Horace Mann demonstrated clearly the high priority Iowans placed on their schools.

Horace Mann died in 1859, three years after the completion of the *Report*. A month before his death he gave his final commencement address at Antioch College. In that speech he issued his famous challenge to the students, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." This was his charge to all Americans. His zeal touched Iowa education almost at the outset and its citizens have continued to cherish that legacy. □

Note on Sources

The most important source for the preparation of this article was the 1856 *Report of the Commissioners of Revision of the School Laws*. Two issues of the *Palimpsest* dating from the early 1930s provided information about pre-Civil War Iowa schools. The biographical information on Horace Mann was drawn from a chapter in the author's manuscript about famous educators, currently in progress. Material about Amos Dean was drawn, in part, from an *Iowa Historical Record* article published in 1895. Several general Iowa histories were used to sketch out the educational setting in Iowa's pioneer school era.