

school which from its establishment in 1819 has been wholly governed, managed and controlled by the State of Virginia, was faced with the same problem that is before this Court today: The question of the constitutional limitation upon religious education in public schools. In his annual report as Rector, to the President and Directors of the Literary Fund, dated October 7, 1822, approved by the Visitors of the University of whom Mr. Madison was one, Mr. Jefferson set forth his views at some length. These suggestions of Mr. Jefferson were adopted and ch. II, 1, of the Regulations of the University of October 4, 1824, provided that:

‘Should the religious sects of this State, or any of them, according to the invitation held out to them, establish within, or adjacent to, the precincts of the University, schools for instruction in the religion of their sect, the students of the University will be free, and expected to attend religious worship at the establishment of their respective sects, in the morning, and in time to meet their school in the University at its stated hour.’ Thus, the ‘wall of separation between church and State’ that Mr. Jefferson built at the University which he founded did not exclude religious education from that school.”

### **Bible Reading in Public Schools...**

What is probably the single most popular religious right lie about Thomas Jefferson and public education is a lie about about schools that Jefferson had virtually nothing to do with – the first public schools in Washington D.C. There are several versions of this lie on the Christian American history websites, and it appears in some form in almost every religious right American history book.

According to William J. Federer, in his book *Americas God and Country*: “Thomas Jefferson,

while president (1801-1809), chaired the school board for the District of Columbia, where he authored the first plan of education adopted by the city of Washington. This plan used the Bible and Isaac Watts' Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, 1707, as the principle books for teaching reading to the students."

**D. James Kennedy claims that Jefferson: "Used the Bible and nondenominational religious instruction in the public schools. He was involved in three different school districts, and the plan in each required Bible reading."**

Kennedy's version, although not mentioning the city of Washington by name, is found in his list of claims about Jefferson borrowed from Mark Beliles, and the sources cited by Beliles are two books about the history of Washington D.C. Only the first sentence of Kennedy's claim actually appears in Beliles's list. Kennedy improved upon Beliles's lie, expanding it to three different school districts, and adding the claim that Bible reading was "*required*."

This myth about Jefferson and the Washington D.C. schools is based on two things. One is that, in 1805, Jefferson was elected president of the Board of Trustees of the Washington City Public Schools. The other is a report by the teacher of one of the city's early public schools, showing that the Bible and *Watts's Hymns* were used as reading texts in that school. The problem with the story is that the school that used these books didn't exist until several years after Jefferson left Washington.

The first public schools in Washington D.C. were funded partly by the city, but mostly by donations from about two hundred private contributors. When the Washington City school board was formed in 1805, it consisted of thirteen members. Seven of these were appointed by the City Council, and the other six were elected by the private contributors from among the private contributors. Thomas Jefferson, who had made one of the larger donations, was one of the six elected. At the first meeting of the board, Jefferson was elected board president. Jefferson was not present at either of these elections. He was

informed of his election by mail, and accepted the position by mail. It does not appear that Jefferson had much actual involvement with the school board. Other than his election as board president, the only other mention of Jefferson in the minutes of the school board had to do with appropriating public land as the site for a school. But, Jefferson's role in this was in his capacity of President of the United States, not president of the school board.

Between the years of 1806 and 1811, the Washington City school board attempted to establish and maintain two public schools in the city. The board's biggest problem was that they couldn't afford to pay high enough salaries to get and keep qualified teachers. Classes were held in rented buildings until enough money was raised through private donations to build two schoolhouses in 1807. By 1809, the City Council had cut the public funding for these schools nearly in half, and one of the two was closed. These first two schools were the only schools that existed at the time that Jefferson was president of the school board. Neither of these schools, however, is the school referred to in the lie about Jefferson requiring Bible reading. The school in the lie is the Lancasterian school that opened in Washington D.C. in 1812, three years after Jefferson left the presidency and returned to Virginia.

In 1811, the teacher of a Lancasterian school in Georgetown wrote a letter to the Washington City school board suggesting that they might have more success with this type of school. Lancasterian schools were developed by Joseph Lancaster in England as an economical way to educate large numbers of poor children. By using the older students to teach the younger ones, Lancaster's system allowed one teacher to oversee the education of hundreds of children. The school in Georgetown was teaching three hundred and fifty students in one room. In 1812, the Washington City school board decided to open a Lancasterian school. Henry Ould, a teacher trained by Lancaster in England, was brought over to run this school. This, of course, disproves William Federer's claim that Thomas Jefferson authored the plan of education for the public schools in Washington D.C.

Among the books used for reading lessons in Lancaster's schools in England were the Bible and *Watts's Hymns for Children*. These were also used in the Lancasterian school in Washington D.C. Ould's progress report to the school board in 1813 showed the number of children who were able to read from the Bible and *Watts's Hymns* to

demonstrate the school's success in teaching reading.

M. Ould, teacher of the Lancasterian School, submitted the following report, dated February 10, 1813: GENTLEMEN: This day twelve months ago I had the pleasure of opening, under your auspices, the second genuine Lancasterian School in America. The system was set in operation, as far as the nature of the room would admit, in an inconvenient house opposite to the General Post Office; but, notwithstanding, there were 120 scholars entered on the list during the first three months. I was then under the necessity of delaying the admission of scholars, as the room would not accommodate more than 80 to 100 scholars. It now becomes my duty to lay before you an account of the improvement of the scholars placed under my direction: which I shall do in the following order: One hundred and thirty scholars have been admitted since February 10, 1812, 82 males and 48 females; out of which number 2 have died, and 37 have left the school for various employments, after passing through several grades of studies; leaving 91 on the list. Fifty-five have learned to read in the Old and New Testaments, 26 are now learning to read Dr. Watts's Hymns, and 10 are learning words of four or five letters. Out of 59 of the whole number admitted who did not know a single letter, 20 read in the Bible, 29 in Watts's Hymns, and 10 spell words of four and five letters. Fifty-five scholars are able to write on paper, many of them, also, in German text, who never attempted to form such characters before entering the school; 26 write words of two or three syllables on slates, and 10 are writing words of two or five letters. All the scholars who left the school could write a tolerable and many of them a capital hand. Twenty-six scholars are in Reduction, Single and Double Rule of Three, direct and practice, and 23 are rapidly progressing through the first four rules of Arithmetic, both simple and compound.<sup>78</sup>

78. Samuel Yorke At Lee, *History of the Public Schools of Washington City, D.C., from August, 1805, to August, 1875, written at request and published by order of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, for the National Centennial Year, 1876*, (Washington D.C.: McGill & Witherow, 1876), 11-12.

An interesting thing about this report is that the Bible and *Watts's Hymns* are the *only* books mentioned, although Lancaster's curriculum called for a variety of other reading texts. There is, however, a pretty likely explanation for this – the War of 1812. Virtually all children's books at this time, including all of the other books in Lancaster's curriculum, had to be imported from England. The few textbooks that had been printed in America, such as the first edition of Noah Webster's *Blue Back Speller*, did not contain enough reading passages to be useful as a reading text. As explained in Chapter One, all import duties were doubled in 1812 to fund the war. This would have made any imported books far too expensive for this school. The Bible and *Watts's Hymns*, however, were being printed in America, and printed in large enough editions to make them affordable. The progress reports from this same school from after the War of 1812 do not mention either of these books, indicating that they may just have been used out of necessity.

The best evidence, however, that there was no religious instruction in the early public schools of Washington D.C. are the repeated requests of the city's mayor, Samuel Smallwood, to add non-denominational Christian instruction to the curriculum. Obviously, if there had already been religious instruction in these schools, there would have been no reason for Smallwood to request that it be added. Smallwood's first request appeared in an 1819 message to the school board.

The schools for the poor need the fostering hand of the Council. Let us not forget that as this is the Metropolis of a great and rising nation, and ought to be the source from which correct principles should emanate, so ought it to be distinguished for the correct deportment of its inhabitants, and afford an example for imitation. This, then, cannot be aided in a better manner than by teaching the poor and indigent the principles of morality, and the knowledge of the goodness of our holy religion.<sup>79</sup>

79. Samuel Yorke At Lee, *History of the Public Schools of Washington City, D.C., from August, 1805, to August, 1875, written at request and published by order of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, for the National Centennial Year, 1876*, (Washington D.C.: McGill & Witherow, 1876), 17.

Five years later, in 1824, he tried again.

I conceive the maintenance of the Public Schools to be highly important. We should make them, by every means in our power, the instrument to improve the moral character of our fellow-men. It would have the best tendency to this purpose, if the Trustees of our schools would cause the children to assemble every Sunday morning, at the respective schoolhouses, before the hour of public worship in the churches, and there to lecture them on the principles of morality and religion. I presume that this might be done in such a manner as in no wise to give offense to any denomination of Christians; and the occasional attendance of the Council at these schools with the Trustees, in order to examine the pupils, would be of great advantage. I hope, too, that, before long, by a proper application, we may obtain from Congress some important aid for the laudable object of public instruction. It has been accomplished elsewhere, and why may it not be granted here?<sup>80</sup>

Smallwood's requests were ignored by both the school board and the City Council.

As already mentioned, D. James Kennedy upgrades the Washington D.C. schools claim in Mark Beliles's list to "*three different school districts.*" Kennedy gives no indication of what the other two school districts were, although one is certainly Jefferson's 1778 plan for public schools in Virginia. Beliles, elsewhere in his introduction, ends his story about Jefferson including the Bible in the plan he "*drafted*" for the schools in Washington D.C. with a claim that his "*educational proposals for Virginia were based on a similar plan.*"

No plan of education written by Thomas Jefferson ever included, let alone required, Bible reading. In fact, in his proposed plan for public schools in Virginia in 1778, he deliberately excluded Bible reading, specifying in his *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* the types of books to be used as reading texts.

80. Samuel Yorke At Lee, *History of the Public Schools of Washington City, D.C., from August, 1805, to August, 1875, written at request and published by order of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, for the National Centennial Year, 1876*, (Washington D.C.: McGill & Witherow, 1876), 17.

At every of these schools shall be taught reading, writing, and common arithmetick, and the books which shall be used therein for instructing the children to read shall be such as will at the time make them acquainted with Græcian, Roman, English, and American history.<sup>81</sup>

Describing this bill in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson made it clear that this was a deliberate exclusion of the Bible.

Instead therefore, of putting the Bible and Testament into the hands of the children at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious inquiries, their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European, and American history.<sup>82</sup>

There aren't many lies about Jefferson's plan for public schools in Virginia, probably because there nothing in his 1778 bill can be misquoted effectively. David Barton, however, gets around this problem by quoting something that had absolutely nothing to do with the plan for schools in Virginia.

**According to David Barton, in his book *Original Intent*: "...when Thomas Jefferson authored his plan of education in Virginia, he considered religious study an inseparable component in the study of law and political science. As he explained:**

**[I]n my catalogue, considering ethics, as well as religion, as supplements to law in the government of man, I had placed them in that sequence."**

What Barton is quoting here is a letter from Jefferson to Augustus Woodward regarding the best arrangement for a library catalog, written nearly fifty years after his plan for schools in Virginia. Woodward was

81. Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 528.

82. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2, (Washington D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 204.