This overview of the history of education in the United States, like so many others, identifies gaps in the literature. Some are substantive, others methodological, and still others are both, but few can be corrected mechanically. We may fill in the blanks, as it were, yet leave undisturbed basic errors of theory selection and application, design, sampling, and generalization that have led to omissions in the first place. A scholarly endeavor, research in the history of education begins, as all science must, by habitually resisting the siren bias of the uncurious. The path leads toward relevant theories, methods, and interpretations, pausing in progress to acknowledge familiar narratives and previous analyses while rejecting seductive centripetal influences. The aim cannot be to tell the story when accumulating evidence suggests grounds for multiple accounts and shifting methods. The latter seems a sensible way to proceed, but the field itself reveals periodic, often wide, deviations from the standard.

Histories of a History

Two broadly identified origins of the history of education can be tracked over time. One flowed from the pen of Henry Barnard, a typically sainted founder of American public schooling and life-long advocate of its history (MacMullen, 1991). Milton Gaither (2003) perceptively locates the beginning point much earlier, but these initial efforts tend to become more visible in conceptual light cast by Barnard in the mid-to-late 19th Century. He wanted to serve two vaguely related goals, one affirming the proposition that school teachers should be formally prepared for work in what later would be classified as elementary schools and the other aspiring to connect with the flowering of United States history, a formative development reaching for maturity at the time (U.S. Department of Education, 1985). Barnard thought both projects could find financial support among textbook publishers, with authors realizing monetary rewards along the way. Economies of scale appeared promising. Although that turned out to be the case, the proposed venture into U.S. history collided with two very different road blocks.

Echoing the sentiments of his contemporary advocates of common schools, Barnard believed earnestly in schooling as a national priority and requirement. Voting, jury service, moral behavior, and other duties of citizenship in the young republic meant that disseminating basic knowledge among youth could not be left to chance and definitely not to parental aversion to taxation. Coercion, if it came to that, should be the policy. As a general rule, enforcement proved unnecessary. School enrollments soared throughout the 19th Century, eventually reaching into the South and across Western settlements. Thus also spread an item in the emerging American creed that, as Horace Mann (Messerli, 1972) proclaimed, schools would function as the equalizers of aspiration and opportunity in the United States. That is not exactly what transpired, but the number of schools grew exponentially, in some states by factors of ten or more per decade. A parallel and equally momentous development accompanied the increase in the North and Midwest and eventually throughout the country, namely the organization of county and state agencies to monitor and supervise local schools. Anticipating success, Barnard, among others, turned his attention toward the teachers who would fill the schools and classrooms. Their formal preparation also constituted a requirement and hence a curriculum. One course they surely needed was the history of education, if only to inspire teachers’ pride in a tradition of accomplishment and honorable work.

Barnard never published a textbook to fill this bill. Pieces of the history appeared as articles in the American Journal of Education, which he edited, and as sections of his reports to Congress as U.S. Commissioner of Education. His comprehensive vision of the field remains filed in his personal unpublished
papers. It took the form of outlines, revised periodically over the second half of the 19th Century. Institutional forms, including elementary and high schools, kindergartens, teacher preparation programs in various settings, and colleges, occupied center stage, not surprisingly. Also given their due were museums, community libraries, state and federal agencies (pointedly, the U.S. Bureau of Education and the Smithsonian Institution), world fairs, and scientific advances (MacMullen, 1991). The outlines were so long and inclusive that one can understand why they never led to books.

Others stepped up to fill the void. Succeeding only partially, their works tended to be school histories addressed specifically to prospective teachers thought to need celebratory accounts (Cremin, 1965). The books were often reliably detailed, particularly with regard to developments in the author’s state, finding markets in teacher institutes and public and private normal schools (see, e.g., Boone, 1892). A trend established at the hands of others, Barnard’s plans for the field narrowed considerably. By the early 20th Century, encyclopedic chronicles of institutions and formal instruction become the norm. Then in 1919 Ellwood P. Cubberley published his monumental survey of public education in the United States for an apparently waiting audience.

It set the tone and scope of American history of education for more than a generation. Other authors followed in Cubberley’s wake. A few, like R. Freeman Butts (1950; 1978) of Teachers College, in one instance coauthoring a highly successful textbook with Lawrence Cremin (Butts & Cremin, 1953), and Merle Curti (1959) of the University of Wisconsin, moved with pioneering force into the molds of social and cultural history then roiling the waters of the parent discipline. In the heady social consciousness environment of Teachers College during the post-World War I and Depression eras, Butts introduced critical issues to the field, probing church-state, civil rights, and other nagging constitutional disputes. By the late 1960s, such inquiries turned sharply left, yet throughout these convolutions and continuing into the 21st Century, textbooks remained the primary vehicle for bringing the history of education to new generations of professional educators, fueled by the market economy Henry Barnard had anticipated. Even Michael Katz (1987) produced one, a systematic revisionist presentation rebutting the traditional narrative at virtually every turn. Carl Kaestle (1983) re-envisioned the history of the common school in a closely documented and contextualized account. Recent textbooks combine the sources and methods of cultural, intellectual, and social history, giving warranted attention to diverse perspectives and theories. Measured by sales, among the most successful have come from Wayne Urban and Jennings Wagoner, Jr. (2009), John Rury (2005), Joel Spring (2008), and Gerald Gutek (2006), and these authors too have delivered detailed, reliable histories.

These latest offerings have benefited from Bernard Bailyn’s (1960) advice. The absence of setting was his chief criticism of educational history when he surveyed the literature in the late 1950s. Cubberley had gone looking for public schools and found their roots and initial manifestations in the early colonial period. Briefly put, his history rested on an anachronistic error, in Bailyn’s telling phrase a reading of the past as “the present writ small” (p. 9). Other errors followed, an exclusionary focus on formal institutions and instruction, a relentless celebratory tone, and in general the skimming of context. Educational history lacked history, he concluded. In Bailyn’s view the two fields had parted company around the turn of the 20th Century as the science of education gained advocates in universities across the country. Faculty in schools and departments of education led the charge. Emerging emphases on psychology, a discipline beginning to stretch its wings, gave rise to a new specialization—educational psychology—that in turn moved to the fore in shaping teacher preparation curricula. Historians of education joined the reform movement belatedly, but join it they did. Bailyn viewed the teacher education setting as indicative of a field pushed astray from the history discipline, which should have been its intellectual home. In Gaither’s (2003) critique, Bailyn’s analysis smacked of a morality tale, an artifice meant to make a point, a negative one, about the quality of the literature he was reviewing. The problem was that U.S. history at the turn of the 20th Century, particularly the textbook genre, mimicked the same deficiencies Bailyn found in the history of education. In tone and emphases, Cubberley was more or less a historian of his own times, which Gaither viewed as a judgment not to be taken as high praise.

Bailyn’s essential assumption called for “a broader definition of education and a different notion of historical relevance” (p. 14). It echoed like a thunderclap across the field of educational history. Drawing on the colonial period as a testing ground, he proposed education “as the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across the generations …” (p. 14). To get the story right, historians assume “that the past was not incidentally but essentially different from the present …” (p. 14). Five years later, Lawrence Cremin (1965) turned Bailyn’s hypothetical history into a fully realized, if brief, critique of educational historiography, applying and extending Bailyn’s assumptions. He then spent the rest of his life producing the three volumes of American Education, proving, Sol Cohen (1999) lamented, that a comprehensive history of education so defined could not be systemically conceptualized or written. Henry Barnard’s problem recurred. The breadth and depth of the scholarship
supporting Cremin’s (see, e.g., 1980) project remained its legacy. Critics and reviewers cited the bibliographic essays accompanying the three volumes as unmatched then and arguably unmatchable well into the future.

As Bailyn and Cremin acknowledged, their expansive view of education rested on precedents that pointed to the field’s second set of origins. Thomas Jefferson (2002) applied a comparable conception in describing the accumulated learning that resulted among black and white children from their observations and interactions within Virginia’s slave society. Henry Adams (1990) claimed that his entire life, and by extension the life of the nation, could be classified as an educational process, but not for that reason a progressive one, shaping character and explaining turning points. W. E. B. Du Bois (2003) and Horace Mann Bond (1950) identified race relations and demands of people of color for equal opportunity as powerful engines driving and distorting education in America (see also Manuel, 1930; Gallegos, 1992; Perez, 2009). The antecedents did not constitute a trend. Bailyn and Cremin sought improvements in educational and general history. The former should replicate the norms of the latter, which view of education rested on precedents that pointed to

The point was to begin in the past, letting its conditions, institutions, supporting Cremin’s (see, e.g., 1980) project remained its legacy. Critics and reviewers cited the bibliographic essays accompanying the three volumes as unmatched then and arguably unmatchable well into the future.

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intellectual dynamics, and people reveal the formative practices they pursued and modified. Looking back, we can understand Cremin's subsequent fascination with the problem of definition and with producing an expansive history of education. Richard Storr (1961), however, worried about setting off on the wrong foot. Judging the proposed boundaries as nonetheless pre-emptive, he feared they would lead to omissions that could distort analyses and render them superficial.

He offered instead a kind of launching pad that “those who deal with education historically” might find useful, “the education of history.” They should cast at the outset an even larger but finely meshed net, looking for traces of relevance “in the same sense that a biographer sorts through masses of material on America before 1865 to find the Lincoln of history as distinct from the Lincoln of poetry, drama, and oratory” (p. 124). The proposal opened doors to uncharted territory. So long as the history of education focused on formal institutions or even on the informal teaching missions of museums or newspapers, recognizable institutional terrain lay ahead. Not by accident, Storr’s approach blurred accepted definitions. Did it matter initially what precisely historians of education meant by “education”? He thought not. Nor should we worry prematurely about scholastic distinctions among socialization, acculturation, assimilation, and education. In addition to self-declared institutions, agencies, and their leading actors, he wanted the concept of education stretched to encompass certain qualities of experience, as John Dewey had argued. Could it be that a school or even a family organized and conducted itself in ways that subverted education, whatever the declared aims? Unwilling to answer the questions precipitously, Storr proposed inductive raids on the definitional problem: Search the past for events and ideas that augured turning points, vibrant cultures, or troubled ones; stay alert for phenomena that seemed to reveal places where learning had occurred; look too for explanations and, since learning changed things, probe for consequences, even buried ones. The findings of such nested inquiries could expose more detailed and varied instances of processes legitimately classified as educational. Granted, the new boundaries would be porous, moving targets, riddled with ambiguities. They might also—and here was an enticing promise—set in sharper relief the nuanced contexts, rationales, outcomes, and relative significance of formal, intentional education.

Following are selected historiographical sketches that adapt Storr’s inductive approach. The examples are synthetic in that they integrate a variety of published and unpublished materials. If the history of education has followed dysfunctional patterns, which seems to have been the case, Storr’s advice may lead toward novel, liberating work to be done.

America’s Slave Culture

George M. Fredrickson (2002), the eminent historian of slavery and racism, concludes that new investigations place study in his specialization among the most vital being undertaken by historians of the United States. Over the past two decades alone the research has accumulated at a rapid pace, spurred by the discovery of slave-authored reminiscences, financial records of plantations and foundries, and family archives (see, e.g., Dew, 1994; Clarke, 2005; Staples, 2005). The materials have led to other discoveries and permitted fresh readings of previously misinterpreted documents. We now know much more about the origins of black African slavery in the late Middle Ages, the perspectives of American slaves on their lives, and the pervasiveness of the institution. We can also trace more confidently its effects on American life after Emancipation. An itemized research agenda is emerging (Ball, 1998; Berlin, 2003; Gates, 2002; Hahn, 2003; Kennedy, 2004).

“Virtually all historians now agree,” Fredrickson (2004) observes, “that sectional differences on the slavery issue caused the Civil War” (p. 34). The consensus stands in sharp contrast to the findings of previous generations of United States historians, who have long debated what led to the conflict. The war itself was the bloodiest and most destructive of the nation’s military engagements. North and South, families had their memories cornered by wartime experiences (Faust, 2008). Literally a watershed event, the Civil War, recalled Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who was wounded three times, changed the way Americans thought, punctured as a fantasy the antebellum moral certitudes of deductive science, and made crystal clear that the founding fathers’ “American experiment” was precisely that. Experiments can fail, Louis Menand (2001) cautions in The Metaphysical Club, and when they do, which is one way to read the meaning of the Civil War, costs can soar beyond control. If all this horror and upheaval led from slavery’s door, the evidence is also clear that well before war erupted, slavery was not a regional problem but a national one, infecting legal structures, including the U.S. Constitution, political culture, and economic conditions. Among slavery’s most enduring bequests were a code for black–white relations and the rationale for skin-color inequity framed to justify it (Du Bois, 1962; 2003; Gordon-Reed, 2008).

If the dominant themes pursued by historians of education since Henry Barnard’s time can be taken as instructive, slavery and the Civil War had little direct bearing on their principal interests. Operating at the margins or temporarily, Freedman’s Bureau schools in the South, support for teachers sent to the former confederacy by philanthropic agents and missionary societies, reported experiences of these teachers, and actions by reconstructed southern state governments
to establish public school systems where few had functioned in the antebellum period all warranted attention by educational historians and have received it. This more recent research documents secret efforts by slaves to teach each other and their children to read and write, risky strategies that moved into the open after Emancipation (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005). From these histories, we learn that against dangerous odds and contrary to common sense some slaves—we can never know how many—retained and exerted what our generation labels “agency” (Webber, 1978). Yet these educational initiatives, admittedly heroic, have qualified most often as footnotes to the central plot line of U.S. history. Until recently, it was educational historians who treated them in detail while giving a pass to the impact of the culture of slavery on black and white American society. If this is an example of how the field has been tailored to fit within a pre-established jurisdiction of institutions, processes, and ideas, it suggests the history of education has cast itself to the margins of historical significance. We deal with the obvious educational topics, a long, growing list, but in the grand scheme of things such subjects at best have achieved penultimate status.

Applied to slavery studies, the inductive approach suggested by Richard Storr (1961) releases historians of education from definitional constraints. The search is for what the novelist Edward P. Jones (2003) calls, with reference to 19th-Century black-white relations, the “peculiarities” of the United States and its people, their “curiosities,” “oddities,” and ways of thinking and acting (pp. 105–106). Or as Storr put it, the search is for evidence of learning. So oriented, we find pointers to unusual, even terrifying, possibilities that the essential character of slavery grew from the learning it disseminated (Wills, 2003, pp. 139, 251). This educational history is not a marginal, albeit poignant, story of limited agency, but rather it becomes the central theme of slavery, the trajectory of an educational institution. The study of slavery constructed from this slant functions like a prism, refracting light across the detailed formation of pre-20th-Century American society. It invites skepticism about the meaning of learning at the time and inquiries on guard for perverse social and cultural effects. Recent histories of slavery and the Civil War suggest that some educational outcomes have survived only at subterranean levels as vaguely empirical but nonetheless intrusive and distorting phenomena. Historians of education, if mindful, insistent, and thoroughly familiar with the new research literature, can be uniquely prepared to pick up the trail.

Our angle of perspective also can enable us to contribute to the analyses of issues left hanging in the latest research. One of these problems has to do with the unresolved dilemma posed by studies of slave life. The evidence of unexpected agency central among the findings of these studies runs the risk of discounting, however unintentionally, the conditions against which slaves struggled. Somehow they managed to retain dignity and human potential; formed, protected, and reunited their families; and in short made lives for themselves (Berlin, 2003; Hahn, 2003). Education, understood as both literacy and cultural formation, emerges in the accounts as an intentional, robust priority of slaves (Webber, 1978; Williams, 2005). To assess the heroism, historians must appreciate the odds against its success. Mortality rates among the children of slaves were high, adult life expectancy was low, and violence, wrenching physical labor, degradation, and threats to sever family units were conditions of daily slave existence. As Fredrickson (2004) put it, “it may be that the newer emphasis on culture and community … does not pay enough attention to [the] more desperate and violent conditions of bondage” (p. 36). An exit from this dilemma opens when both sides of it are examined for their educational content. Among historians, historians of education may be particularly adept in searches for learning that for good or for ill flowered profusely from slavery and for asking pointedly whether and to what extent its poisonous seeds have survived (Blackmon, 2008). Take the subject of the Ku Klux Klan. Any historian searching for the education of history will be safely within his or her expanding interests to settle on an investigation of the Klan. Imagine then that historian’s surprise in coming upon a direct connection to formal education along the way. It turns out, in Indiana for one, that during the post-World War I period, when the Klan experienced swelling rosters and political resurgence, a frequent occupation of members’ wives who worked outside their homes was public school teaching (Blee, 1991, pp. 133, 143–145). The clue hoists a red flag that educational historians ought to be uniquely ready to notice, pursue, and contextualize.

Note that a previous generation of historians also wrote about the educational effects of slavery, applying a definition of education as cultural and social development, not merely school-based or academic knowledge. Recent work pays more attention to slaves’ political defiance and their inventive flights to freedom as indicative of educational attainments; the older work emphasizes socialization to slave status as an educational goal set by whites. In short the approaches are both alike and sharply different. With educational concepts and predispositions in play, nevertheless only a few educational historians have joined the advancing inquiries (Anderson, 1988; Angulo, 2005; Butchart, 1988; Cornelius, 1991; Williams, 2005).

In offering “a southern exposure” on the history of education, Wayne Urban (1981) sought to stimulate broader interest, meaning to fashion a corrective lens for “Massachusetts Myopia” and “New York Near-sightedness” (pp. 133, 136). Given the themes and
methods dominating American education historiography at the time, his challenge ran counter to an apparent consensus on the priority of urban and progressive education (Karier et al., 1972; Katz, 2001; Tyack, 1974). Through two examples, the South’s rural character and its commitment to fundamentalist Christianity, he demonstrated why the northeast bias in charting a one-way flow of social formation left southern educational development unexplained. (As Urban observed, similar defects have marred the history of rural education generally.) He also wanted to explore southern exceptionalism. Here he was poised on the verge of a slippery slope. Other, less capable, historians have plunged headlong into the waiting morass of southern romanticism and pretension (e.g., Phillips, 1930). His aims, rather, were to expose nuances and ambiguities, and to follow the evidence, the latter not to be simplified in quantitative explanations alone. He called for filling the southern gaps in American educational history and, more crucially, for using southern educational experience to shed light on developments in other regions. Bluntly put, he suspected that southern exceptionalism might not have been all that special. Still, there were regional differences. Consider the particular mores, economies, and political traditions of the South. In unearthing the details and explaining them truthfully, Urban argued, historians of education may need to resort to methods more attuned to southern habits of mind than those privileged by the empirical norms of social history. In this region storytelling, narrative forms, and the rich tradition of intellectual history could offer tools that dug deeper. In 1981 few other historians, including educational historians, bothered to consult W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941). Urban cited this belatedly acknowledged classic along with southern novelists, other historians, and essayists to propose “a stage in the development of our field where it is imperative that we get beyond easy explanations of any phenomenon” (p. 142).

Among the topics and themes he wanted treated in their full complexity were African American education and the substantive and methodological controversies that have engulfed it. What Urban had to say about the character of slavery and its place in American history proved prescient. “Historians,” he advised, “who are interested in showing that education is a larger category than just schooling should find the slave experience a fertile ground for study” (p. 138). Indeed, by 1981 that project seemed to be underway. Note Thomas Webber’s (1978) path-breaking reconstruction of education in the slave quarter community and Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876* (1980). Neither book fully satisfied the critics, as Raymond Wolters’ (1980) review of Webber made clear, but both showed inventive ways to find and use unfamiliar sources. Then, as later, however, most historians of education have not considered the institution of slavery to be one of their topics.

That predisposition can now be judged a disservice, as John Hardin Best (1996) anticipated over a decade ago. Although he too saw the South in some eras as more of a national influence than an isolated one, his essay focused on southern exceptionalism, applying the Bailyn (1960) rubric in search of “the distinctive southern culture, the culture that is ultimately the educator of the South” (p. 48). How central was slavery to the formation of this southern culture? To what extent did it shape post-emancipation southern experience? Did it broadcast seeds for later generations to harvest, a crop rooted in what Ira Berlin (2003) called the “moral stench” of slavery (p. 3)? Best’s questions moved the analysis into territory being explored in the recent literature on slavery. As he and Urban predicted, the emerging narrative has a dark, ominous quality. Learning is its theme, but this outcome took shape on multiple levels, affected races, classes, castes, and genders differently, and bore the potency of stockpiled social dynamite for the North and the South alike.

Urban (1981) argued, with the weight of evidence heavily on his side, that the cultural and social effects of the color line had never stopped at the Mason-Dixon line. The rationale for African inferiority devised by owners and their advocates to justify slavery moved undeterred across state borders, accepted in the North perhaps more insidiously than in the South (McAfee, 1998). By this measure, among others, by the early 19th Century, slavery qualified as a national problem, not merely a regional one. The demographic and nondemographic complexities alone, Urban cautioned, deserved to be explored in the historian’s critiques and via a refined sensitivity to southern qualitative evidence. On the latter point, he quoted the novelist Walker Percy:

And then there is the black thing. Of course, this is a hideously complicated business, very ambivalent, a very rich source for relationships because no matter what you say, or how bad the South is, there’s still a history of people getting along with each other.

(p. 139)

Thence came a ray of hope for southern exceptionalism unavailable to the North, a reason to probe more deeply the unfairly, superficially maligned southern way of life.

Percy’s veiled celebration of an ambivalent yet ultimately nurturing southern culture has become the bone of contention in the recent research on slavery and the formation of post-Civil War American society. Although respected historians no longer describe race relations as qualitatively better, then or later, in the North than in the South, the consensus
has shifted the argument to another subject, the disseminated learning that flowed from slavery. No one can claim that this still forming project is proceeding smoothly. Indeed, the new literature can be likened to the “dark and bloody ground” once attributed to the contested cycles of Reconstruction historiography (Angulo, 2005; Weisberger, 1959). The irony bears repeating that only a few educational historians have joined the fray.

The idea that slavery functioned like an educational institution hardly originated among our contemporaries. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips (1930), a previous generation’s leading historian of slavery, understood long before Bailyn offered his imperative that slavery impacted the nation, especially through its southern region. He even quoted Thomas Jefferson’s under-explored views on the subject in Notes on the State of Virginia (2002). Watching and mimicking the interactions between master and slave, the southern child (white or black), Jefferson warned, “thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities” (p. 195). Phillips then offered counter-testimony to the effect that financial self-interests and southern traditions of civility leaned masters toward benevolence and away from cruelty. In any case, argued one of Phillips’ sources, “fewer good public or private characters have been raised in countries enslaved by some faction or particular interest than those where personal slavery existed” (p. 363). Phillips saw educational effects on both sides of the master–slave relation and traced their efficacy to southern mores, codes of conduct, and religious commitments. Unlike Urban and Wagoner later (2009, pp. 97–99), he did not quote the coda that Jefferson (2002) added to his warning:

“Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; …

(p. 195)

Here was a deist eschatology as stern and unnerving as any devised by a fundamentalist Christian divine of the time. We now know what Phillips could not have known in 1930, although surely he had read the rumors. Jefferson not only owned slaves, but according to DNA evidence and family testimony, he also fathered children with Sally Hemings, a slave at Monticello (Gordon-Reed, 2008). Over his lifetime, he became personally acquainted with a wide range of the formative pathologies emanating from the South’s “peculiar institution.” Jefferson’s often expressed foreboding owed much to his own experience.

To Phillips (1930), concubinage of slave women was one of the habits practiced in the South, a regrettable but unsurprising one given human nature and warm-blooded southern culture. The culture itself he viewed forgivingly as vibrant and admirable. At its center stood the plantation, a multipurpose institution. It was “a school” (p. 198), with intentional training and socialization programs for slaves, although Phillips viewed the “civilizing of the Negroes” as actually “a fruit of plantation life itself” (p. 199). That was because the plantation also functioned as the workplace of a “conscript army” (p. 196), a “homestead” shaped by the customary human forces through which “a common tradition was evolved embodying reciprocal patterns of conventional conduct” (p. 197), and “a factory” organized to realize profits (p. 197). It was “a parish” established to Christianize slaves (p. 201), “a pageant and variety show” (p. 202), with slaves as both audience and entertainers, and “a matrimonial bureau” (p. 203) to promote domesticity, or as one of Phillips’ sources put it, a “magnificent negro boarding-house” (p. 205).

Slave life, whether on plantations, in foundries and other small scale operations, or in towns, Phillips admitted, “was not without grievous episodes” (p. 208), but on the whole he judged it to have been an enabling process through which slaves were properly schooled. At minimum, it had rescued them from the base conditions of an African existence. In 1930 Phillips was echoing a justification entrenched for over a century. James Anderson (1988) documented its resilience. Speaking in 1898, Principal H. B. Frissell of Hampton Institute announced untroubled acceptance of slavery’s “civilizing” influence on “barbarous Negroes” (Quoted in Anderson, 1988, p. 84).

Contemporary historians have tended to dismiss Phillips as a racist, although a few admit that some of his sources and facts withstand scrutiny (Genovese, 1966). His long, closely documented books dominated the field of slavery studies during the decades immediately preceding World War II. His detractors unable to dent his reputation (Du Bois, 1962). Revisionists began gaining attention in the post-war years, and now their project dominates the current scene, as Phillips did his. It is this matter of slavery as education, a conversation he introduced as a subtext of slave life, that contemporary historians have moved to the fore and reconceptualized.

As Ira Berlin (2003) has confirmed, learning in the context of slavery varied over time by location, staple crop, climate, and the idiosyncrasies of particular actors. Violence or the routine threat of it gave new and vivid meaning to the pedagogical tradition of corporal punishment. One shared malignancy held the variations together, not the plantation, but the ominous condition Best (1996) identified. The slaves were owned by others. The master-slave relation gave impetus, contour, organization, and curriculum to an otherwise diverse institution that functioned effectively as a kind of antebellum common school for the
South. Transmitted by the rationale for skin color inequity, the infection spread North, or had been lying in wait there since its own slavery times.

Thus instructed, slaves sought and found subversive outlets, although it bears repeating we cannot count how many. Thomas Webber (1978), Lawrence Cremin (1980), Janet Duitsman Cornelius (1991) and most recently and in greater detail Steven Hahn (2003) tell this covert story in which slaves fashioned their own education as a vehicle of cultural formation and, in Hahn's work, exerted a political agenda. Literacy was one of their goals, and for this, where possible, some organized secret schools, but their educational intentions ranged farther afield. Again where possible, they redefined kinship to form extended, stubbornly knit communities, fashioned a spirituality of symbols, rituals, and myths that survived across generations, and forged channels of communication mysteriously able to span distant slave enclaves. Hahn reports that rumor, a richly encoded oral system, served them efficiently as a medium of news and information. Historians of education may want to pay attention to Hahn's book if only because he expressly refutes Walker Percy's claim of a happy history through which southern people, black and white, got along together. Given the documented habits of subversion nurtured among slaves by the master–slave nexus, Hahn warns, one is justified rather in assuming the claim is little more than a white man's fantasy. To be remembered instead is W. E. B. Du Bois's (2003) corrective theory of dual consciousness, which attributed to generations of black people a learned capacity to trick a race many viewed as morally inferior (also Butchart, 1988). James Anderson (1988) relied on this accumulation of social and cultural capital among slaves in his reconstructions of post-emancipation initiatives by African Americans to advance their formal education. He traced the agency exerted by subsequent generations to lessons learned by their slave forebears (see also Clarke, 2005; Staples, 2005).

Recent research on the history of slavery reveals other lessons as well that warrant investigation by education specialists. If slavery functioned as an educational institution, an obvious but unevenly explored question follows. What did whites learn from it? Jefferson's answer was tyranny, but that may be a facile and unsubtle judgment. Needed are refined probes into the origins and facets of white privilege reconceptualized as an educational outcome (Roediger, 1991). W. J. Cash (1941) saw one result in the uneasy truce reached by southern white planters and white yeomen. Surprised that the latter never revolted against the former, Cash found a likely explanation in the presence of black people, the South's literal middle class. Apparently being white was sufficient compensation to yeomen for the persistent unequal distribution of wealth. While provocative, Cash's conjecture about the reasons for white-to-white deference cannot deliver the final word on the lessons taken by whites from slavery's instruction. A huge, convoluted project now looms, growing from the working hypothesis that whites too sat at this teacher's feet.

Some learnings may have left marks on the South's policy environment, giving form and purpose to a variety of white institutions and practices. Much has been made of the dearth of public schools in the antebellum South. But there has been little exploration of whether this policy decision only mirrored the character of civic cohesion. In the North, struggles to finance public schools activated local, state, and federal negotiations, along the way generating considerable local social capital in the form of civic mindedness (Beadie, 2008; Rury, 2005). As both civic duty and reinforcement, has the paying of taxes functioned like an educational process? Because racial attitudes represented a notable exception within this nascent communal structure, contrasts between the two regions cannot be drawn sharply (McAfee, 1998). After all, civic cohesion was also evident and celebrated in the South. Here, as Urban, Best, and numerous others attest, a sense of community can be easily found in the sources on southern history. Consider the repeated stories and jokes, reliance on conversation and other informal (non-policy) communications as modes of cultural transmission, oral and written codes of chivalrous conduct, treasured traditions, chatty farm newsletters, regional chauvinism, and finally secession, but the resulting social construction tended to owe little to concepts of the common good. Was this because the white population was scattered across rural settings, espoused an entrepreneurial, centrifugal individualism, or also could not distill robust notions of the general welfare from a polity and public philosophy organized to rationalize slavery?

Angulo (2005) raises related questions regarding the effects of slavery on science and higher education in the South. He points to the “slave society’s code of honor” (p. 21) as one explanation of the sensitivity of young gentlemen at college to any perceived slight committed by a faculty member’s reprimand or order and their quick resort to violence. Not surprisingly, faculty sought exits from hostile campuses, opening what Angulo terms a “southern sieve” of intellectual talent. More telling and long-term was the dampened spirit of scholarly inquiry, particularly after 1829, as southern defensiveness about slavery grew fevered (Angulo, 2005, pp. 23–25). Thomas R. Dew's published defense of slavery, along with similar “scientific rationales,” curbed research during the antebellum period often in unexpected ways (see, e.g., Menand, 2001, pp. 97–116). Virginia's first geological survey, for example, walked into the crossfire between eastern planters determined to protect slavery and Appalachian
advocates of industry. The former associated the latter with disloyal, northern inclinations and eventually succeeded in halting the survey’s appropriation (Angulo, 2005, pp. 26–29). In this case the tightening need to defend slavery trumped scientific findings that might have led to a more diversified state economy, nonagricultural employment opportunities, and lucrative new revenue streams. Angulo’s point is not that industrial capitalism promised unalloyed benefits; it clearly did not, as experience with modernization in the northeast demonstrated (Katz, 2001). He admits other historians have read the evidence differently, but the critical point is that the emerging dispute only underscores the need for more research on possible educational effects of white anti-intellectualism spawned by slavery. Recent findings advise investigators to look beyond regional boundaries to capture the contributions of northern scholars to the scientific racialism that flourished before the Civil War and persisted long afterwards (Blackmon, 2008; Fredrickson, 2005; Menand, 2001).

Finally, southern fundamentalist Christianity as a unique feature of social formation requires analysis. Educational historians face a daunting task in identifying and explaining the contradictions between slave owners’ professions of Biblical faith and their selective use of these tenets to pacify slaves, justify the institution, and protect profit margins (Gordon-Reed, 2008; McAfee, 1998). Historians now know the strategy backfired with regard to slaves, who forged their own alignments with Christianity (Berlin, 2003; Clarke, 2005; Cornelius, 1991; Hahn, 2003). Did it also backfire in different ways with regard to southern whites, eroding and secularizing scriptural belief in deference to earthly needs? Did it dilute Christian faith into mere superstition? Open-ended explorations of theological uncertainties like these take educational historians into relatively unfamiliar territory (see Setran, 2007). We are not accustomed to interrogating religious phenomena to find and assess traces of learning, personal or public, but the proposed educational character of slavery pushes us to do so. The press for evidence and applicable concepts links the historical critique of antebellum southern religion to the global tradition of evangelical accommodation with imperialism (Anderson, 1988; Willinsky, 1998). However much it discomfits religious sensibilities, the search requires a willingness to entertain the possibility that white southern fundamentalist Christianity cannot be taken at face value. Should similar caution apply to the North, where faith and piety fired serial hate movements across time, including those directed against American Indians (Deloria, 2003; Fredrickson, 2005)?

The questions posed here are meant to add layers to a still forming research agenda, without begging answers. With regard to specific educational effects of slavery, Edward P. Jones (2003) offers literary guidance in The Known World, a critically acclaimed novel set in the antebellum South. Ostensibly, the narrative centers on a black slave owner in Virginia, a rare circumstance familiar perhaps to historians but few lay people. As the story unfolds, Jones’s “known world” became populated by an array of characters widely representative of slave life and intimately, dependently connected with each other: the black owner who died at the story’s beginning but remained an overarching presence; his black wife, now a widow and ambivalent slave owner; his offended father, a former slave who had purchased his freedom and became an agent for the “underground railroad;” several white masters; free blacks of varying complexions; a black private school teacher who could pass for white if she wanted to; the mixed-blood and black children she was paid by white planters to instruct; the free black mistress of one of the white owners and the mother of his second set of children; lower caste whites who admitted feeling trapped and infuriated by a social environment they could neither fathom nor resist; other non-owner whites who were troubled by slavery yet intuitively adhered to the color line; and numerous slaves, one of whom serviced for a time his widowed new owner and another, a young woman, who pretended to be “teched” but turned out to be a clear headed survivor. None of them escaped the culture of random violence; all were degraded as captives of the world they knew. As a meditation on the ownership of humans by other humans, the novel reveals the various forms and energies of the learning disseminated from that center. A cancer was spreading, all the characters knew it at some level, a few escaped, literally, and all hoped for a better or at least unfamiliar world. Whites may have been convinced they were immune to the disease of slavery, some blacks may have expected to enter a better world by joining the ownership class, and slaves may have considered themselves mere victims, but in one way or another all were deluded. There was no escape from slavery’s consequences, neither to the North nor with the passage of time. This quality of education did not fade, retained shadowy, enigmatic qualities, and still would not rest quietly in quarantine. Hope arrived as the hazardous option of calculated agency, as in the case of the young female slave. Available to blacks or whites willing to take the risks, its magic came, if at all, through intentional struggles toward transformation of self and community, rather than any anticipated cure. Slavery’s symptoms might slide from sight and still recur (Gates, 2002).

Jones’s work of fiction can be described charitably as difficult to read. In the southern tradition of storytelling it offers substantive and methodological clues for historians to follow as they gain access to the inside story of slavery. Historians of education,
particularly, may find that its details underscore the imperative of Urban’s now 30 year old advice: To understand the South, we need to appreciate its indigenous complexities and in doing so may understand the nation better. Treated as an educational institution, slavery offers keys for both sets of locks. The research agenda delineated above illustrates specific contributions historians of education can make, all needing interdependent, multidisciplinary conceptualizations of slavery and education as prerequisites.

Education in the forming of American society has been an ongoing process, not merely an achievement of the colonial or early national period. Launched with no laboratory manual as guide, an experiment in democratic government—of self, community, and polity—took various turns over the years. State and federal legislatures, the Supreme Court, the presidency, and something mid-20th Century historians called the American character emerged as malleable inventions along the way. Among the early failures, historians now seem to agree, none matched the destructive potential and durability of slavery. Here was an arrow aimed at the experiment’s soul, the founding affirmation of imported colonization of Africans, ironically by and among colonists themselves, whose own aspirations for self government reasonably should have taught them to think differently about owning other human beings. It was a uniquely American variation of western European imperialism (Willinsky, 1998). Like that larger project, where slavery was practiced casually, slavery in what became the United States seeped deeply into consciousness, but with a twist. Americans learned to divide their portion of the world by skin color to rationalize an aberration of democracy. Does the election of an African American President in 2008 signal the lessons are unraveling? Perhaps future historians will understand this unprecedented event and the campaign leading to it as an educational process with rippling effects in the unfinished construction of American society. If so, we can begin looking for that past now.

**American Indians in the Forming of American Education**

The conceptual muddle that has run through much of the educational history literature since before Civil War days is on full display in social science research on American Indians. Even Jeffrey Ostler (2004) in his “riveting, utterly original” (p. iii) study of the Plains Sioux, uses the terms “school” and “education” as though interchangeable. He wants readers to understand what Sioux children, their parents, and communities experienced through exposure to a variety of boarding, reservation, and day institutions. His verdict: There was more cost than benefit. He rests it on a painstaking analysis of curricula, policies, teachers, administrators, and recollections by affected Sioux, drawing heavily on the work of educational historian David Wallace Adams (1995). Like Adams, but with more of a detour, Ostler bolsters his judgment with asides on Sioux traditions, religious ceremonies, mores, and social practices. His point is that Euro-American forms of schooling threatened the bases of Sioux civilization. An implication follows that Adams confronts but Ostler examines only obliquely, namely that Sioux education, when defined as cultural processes and formative institutions, antedated contacts with whites.

Typically unstated, assumptions in this often repeated conflation warrant attention. They skew research at the outset, slanting emphasis toward European-derived formal institutions, their personnel, policies, and programs and away from an expansive sifting for contextual variables and their effects on learning. The missing reference points mean that the relative importance of schools, say, and their capacities for education or miseducation, cannot be ascertained. The assumptions tend to send researchers to familiar documentary trails, authentication protocols, and written evidence. The implied frameworks and methodological preferences have deadening effects on inquiries intended to reconstruct educational history from American Indians’ perspectives. They tacitly promote the assertion that Europeans brought education to the Americas, that the indigenous peoples lacked commitments of their own to teaching and learning. The idea gained astonishing currency, Elsie Clews Parsons (1940) complained, that somehow only after the arrival of Spaniards in the early 16th Century, did American Indians begin talking among themselves about communal life, thinking about cultural formation, and borrowing assets across tribes. In recent decades agronomists, anthropologists, archaeologists, economists, and geneticists, among other specialists, have provided ample evidence to dispute the claim, thereby confirming a central theme of Indians’ own narratives. These are not literatures and traditions typically consulted by educational historians.

Three consequences of the omissions come to mind. Lacking evidence on Indian cultures, historians cannot support convincing cost-benefit critiques of Indian schooling, whether on or off reservations. Instructing Indian children in English, farming, and other vocations (see, e.g., Adams, 1995; Axtell, 2001, pp. 143–213; Ostler, 2004, pp. 149–168; Wilson, 1998, pp. 310–322) may have delivered benefits of a sort, but the trade-offs in terms of cultural loss, poverty, and mortality also require calculation. Second, the cultural coin is rarely flipped. What did the whites who planned, managed, and taught in the schools take away from their encounters with Indian leaders, parents, and especially the children? Few paper trails of evidence, specifically that promulgated by whites, lead
reliably to answers. Third, the tacit assumptions, in
devaluing Indian cultures, close doors to a broader but
intriguing and provocative line of inquiry on indigenous
education. Short of that, historians are left with the
familiar narrative structure that begins with the per-
spectives and subsequently the tactics of conquerors.
In this context, as varieties of documents attest, we
can grasp more surely why the options considered by
European, colonial, and U.S. authorities swung wildly
between extinction and assimilation (Axtell, 2001;
Deloria, 1991b; Lawrence, 2006; Wilson, 1998).
Matthew Gregg and David Wishart (2009) provide
grounds for a different historiographical approach. As
economists, they aimed to find and weigh data on the
costs and other financial outcomes of the “trail of
tears” episode in Cherokee history. Acknowledging
the frequently cited brutalities described in written
and oral sources, Gregg and Wishart nonetheless
intended to perform a largely absent statistical analysis
of federal, state, and personal direct and indirect
expenditures in the relocation of Cherokees from the
southeast to federally allocated lands in the west, a
transfer begun in the 1830s. Their questions drew from
basic economics, with the general goal of demonstrat-
ing contributions economists and other empirical
researchers offer to American Indian history. They
benefited from the availability of voluminous federal
documents and records. Other scholars had traveled
this route, but few had followed it to obscure state and
local sources and none had undertaken statistical ana-
lyses that permitted them to extrapolate detailed costs.
Among their findings, Gregg and Wishart uncovered
evidence of the Cherokees’ resistance, including suc-
cessful counter proposals for repayment on lost lands
and relocation expenses. The bottom line proved to be
unfavorable to the federal government. The red ink
was appropriately calculated as subsidies to the white
Georgians who occupied the land to their state. It would
take decades to erase the debt. Historians of educa-
tion can use this analysis to guide investigations on
where, by what means, and at what costs learning (as
a profit) intruded as an explanatory process, in effect
couching the trail of tears as an educational event.

The uneven (or absent) consultation between
archaeology and anthropology that annoyed Parsons
in 1940 has been somewhat corrected over the years.
Yet her basic complaint remains valid for scholarship by
those interested in the American Indian past. Intel-
lectual silos dot the disciplinary landscape, isolating
relevant research literatures from each other and
detering multidisciplinary collaboration. One problem,
Thomas Bender (2006) argued, was the isolated insider
perspective that tended to inform the organizations
and interpretations of United States history. They
change dramatically when cross-cultural or global
perspectives come into play. His aims have been to
illustrate new, perhaps truer, American histories that
emerge when the vantage points have been multiplied.
The challenges surface unavoidably when we venture
into the histories of interactions among American
Indians, the early Spanish explorers of the southern
and western regions of what became the United
States, and any learnings traceable to the encounters.
The more historians explore these pre-1600 eras,
the murkier and more unfinished the picture becomes.
Definitions and predispositions can block inquiry at
the outset and along the way. Who were the residents
of these “discovered” lands? How numerous were
they? Were they settled or mobile, urban or transient
hunters and gatherers? Most provocative of all, what
effects, if any, link them to the American narrative
that European invaders are typically credited with
beginning? Such are the questions being addressed by
a growing array of social scientists and their cross-
disciplinary collaborators. Their answers, which many
of the contributors freely characterize as tentative and
debatable, nonetheless hint that accepted historical
accounts of the formative years of the United States
warrant re-examination. At the very least, the begin-
nings should be pushed back in time. On the last
point, one long-recognized, but still not fully corrected,
deficiency emerges from the east coast bias that has
left gaps and distortions in the history of Spanish and
French colonial influences and in general the pre-
colonial history of indigenous Americans (Parkman,

Historians of education face similar conceptual
labor in designing research on American Indians.
Armed only with assumed characteristics of educa-
tional institutions defined by European experience, we
may find few examples to reconstruct. Looking for
deposits of New England (and British) influence on
the rest of the country, we are likely to miss indigenous
developments and draw erroneous or at best narrow
conclusions, leaving uncorrected the southern and west-
ern omissions in the literature. They could amount to
a gaping hole. After all, permanent European and
Mexican settlements in these regions predated those
in the northeast. Even more damaging to inquiry has
been the failure to act on anthropological knowledge,
which anthropologists and archaeologists themselves
apply unequally, that all cultures take shape and survive
through education, whether defined as institutions,
processes, or both. We find its traces by searching
inductively for where and how people learned. But
what halts investigation in its tracks, archaeologist
Gordon R. Willey has cautioned, is “not being able to
find what you are not looking for” (Quoted in Mann,
2005, p. 183). Referring to what is now South Amer-
ica, Amerigo Vespucci wrote in 1502, “I have found a
continent more densely populated and abounding in
animals than our Europe, Asia, and Africa. We may
rightly call this continent The New World” (quoted in
Arciniegas, 1955, pp. 226–227). The term stuck and
still drives a key narrative arc of world history. Thus began the sleight of bias that has clouded European vision of the unfamiliar territories ever since. As Vespucci acknowledged, these lands were inhabited. They constituted a “new world” only to the Europeans. In the 21st Century we know Vespucci got it wrong. Recent archaeology proposes that what he discovered was another old world, peopled at the time by arguably more advanced civilizations than Europeans enjoyed (Mann, 2005).

Records of the Hernando de Soto expedition support the assertion, providing the basic evidence for histories of the North American incursion begun by the Spanish adventurer in 1539 (Ewen & Hann, 1998, pp. 117–213; Galloway, 1997b, pp. 3–177). Four chronicles constitute the sole written account of the expedition, the first sustained encounter (as far as we know) between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the United States. Of these, one possibly qualifies as a primary source, although scholars have long debated the point. Drawing clues from details provided in these documents, historians and archaeologists tend to agree on the 10 states traversed, from Florida and the Carolinas to East Texas, but they have been unable so far to determine De Soto’s exact route. The expedition began with a landing in what is now known as Tampa Bay on May 30, 1539, and moved on to a winter encampment near present-day Tallahassee. The entourage included more than 600 soldiers, 200 horses, and fatefuly some 300 pigs. De Soto, who had profited richly from his exploits in Peru, was on the hunt for another gold strike. He found instead neither precious metals nor the primeval forests and pristine wildernesses favored in subsequent European tales, but more of a controlled natural environment and what the chronicles described as cities, farms, and empires.

The next recorded extended visit by Europeans to the Mississippi Valley occurred more than a century later, led this time by the Frenchman La Salle. He found a different world, over-populated by wild game, yet with many fewer human beings than expected. The Caddo societies, once dominant in the Missouri-Arkansas-Louisiana-Texas region, had declined steeply in number. Other cultures had vanished, and without people to hunt them the animal population multiplied. Archaeologists have located the sudden appearance of mass cemeteries in the area and measurable drops in agricultural production that can be dated to this time frame (Mann, 2005, pp. 98–101). Between the De Soto and La Salle expeditions, the landscape of pre-existing civilizations had been radically altered.

Pathologists now suspect the pandemics that raced through Indian societies in the 1500s and afterwards can be traced to the earlier invasion, the microbes introduced to North America, notably domesticated pigs (Deagan, 1985, pp. 286–289; Mann, 2005, pp. 97–101). In the precontact era, native inhabitants north of the Rio Grande River numbered upward from about 10 million. (The estimates are contested, with some scholars pushing them closer to 25 million.) Postcontact, roughly 1500–1800, the figure fell at least by half (Galloway, 1997a). Some authorities estimate the mortality rate to have been as high as 90%. Initially, the causes were not war or genocide, both of which exacted heavy tolls, but imported diseases. In Patricia Galloway’s vivid analogy, “It was like dropping a nuclear bomb on the culture” (Galloway, 1997a, pp. 290–291). Entire villages and clans disappeared; civilizations were decimated. Mysteriously, or so it seemed, the epidemics did not require direct contact with whites, leapfrogging crazily from place to place, probably all the way to New England. As Galloway reminds us, the human costs have had consequences for historians. The diseases spread quickly, especially among elders and children, the keepers and primary beneficiaries of stories and rituals. Amid the death and devastation, the hoop of collective memory was broken as tribes struggled to recover lost portions of their history maintained through oral traditions. Almost from the beginning then, the European narrative of Native America had incomplete Indian versions to challenge it, leaving historians who came later with the daunting assignment of reconstructing the Indian past with fragmentary Indian sources.

The De Soto documents nevertheless give us valuable descriptions of precontact indigenous life in America. In some areas Indian settlements lived in relative peace with each other; others engaged routinely, almost ritualistically, in war. (There is scant evidence that Indians, unlike the invading Europeans, launched battles or conquests for religious purposes.) All relied heavily on storytelling and myth to communicate cultural norms; none had a written language, at least none that was witnessed by the invaders. Yet they managed to deliver information to each other. As the expedition progressed, the various settlements seemed to know of its impending arrival. Word got around. In some instances, the strangers received hostile greetings; in others they were met warmly, if warily. The Indians apparently learned quickly what the Spaniards wanted, initially gold, later maize and salt, and misdirected them to locations where the treasures reportedly existed in abundance (Wilson, 1999, pp. 134–137; Axtell, 2001, pp. 46–55). The chroniclers took note of one welcoming tradition that dumbfounded the intruders. This was the practice of greeting visitors with effusive displays of weeping. The recorders interpreted the ritual as evidence of weakness and fear, a misreading, anthropologists have learned from Indian sources, of what was intended as a joyous reception of unknown brothers (Young & Hoffman, 1991, pp. 71, 104 n.10, 116, 126).
That the Indians resorted to deception in dealing with De Soto was evidently a survival strategy. The horses, an animal they had never seen, the clanking armor—some of the natives favored war shields decorated with vivid plumage—and most of all the fire-spitting weapons terrified them, initially at any rate. De Soto used the equipment savagely, yet often found his troops effectively stymied by the Indians’ expert archers. Stunned and frustrated by their marksmanship, he puzzled over how a seemingly unsophisticated people could have acquired such advanced skill and the technology needed to sustain it. Moving west, the accounts recorded, his expedition nonetheless slaughtered its way across the south. Sometimes the entourage only stole food before departing; on other occasions they razed entire settlements, murdering everyone except for men and women enslaved as burden bearers (Rabasa, 1997; Steigman, 2005, pp. 83–89). From the Indian perspective, De Soto’s death from a fever in May 1542 must have come as unqualified good news, but a tradition of carnage lived on at the hands of Luis de Moscoso, his increasingly desperate successor.

For their part, the Spaniards learned from their encounters about multiple religions, which they routinely classified as pagan and inferior. They refined the use of horses, armor, and guns to intimidate, strategies De Soto had employed with deadly force in Peru, and they learned from Indians how to mine and distill salt, an urgent need on which their health and stamina came to depend (Steigman, 2005, pp. 75–76). They had learned about the nutritional value of maize in Mexico and Peru, and their appreciation for its benefits (for one, it was easy to transport) deepened significantly as the expedition moved west. But we can now know how much the Spaniards missed. Consider the powerful Apalachees of northwest Florida, a people virtually destroyed by war and disease. De Soto met them at the beginning of his trek.

The outsiders noticed, beyond the missing gold, the Apalachees’ agricultural and military skills and their regional influence, but there is little documentary evidence that the invaders pondered the Apalachee culture, which we now acknowledge as advanced (Hann, 1988). They relied on maize as a hedge against starvation but expressed little curiosity about the scientific knowledge needed to grow it. Respect came centuries later as biologists, botanists, archaeologists, and geneticists reconstructed the painstaking process of seed selection and cross fertilization that led to the invention of maize in Mesoamerica centuries before Columbus arrived. The achievement required at the outset “determined, aggressive, knowledgeable plant breeders,” qualifying as one geneticist wrote in 2003 as “arguably man’s first, and perhaps his greatest, feat of genetic engineering” (Quoted in Mann, 2005, p. 196). This “bold act of conscious biological manipulation” sired offspring (Mann, 2005, pp. 191–201). In relatively short order maize agriculture moved north and south from Mexico, in each case necessitating adaptations to local climates and soils. The Apalachees had mastered the science long before the Spanish encountered them. The Spaniards paid more attention to the Apalachees’ military skill, courage, and ferocity. On several occasions, despite guns, metal armor, and horses, they reportedly fell victim to guerrilla tactics and outright trickery. Yet they seemed unmindful of the learning and practice needed to execute battle ready acumens (Steigman, 2005, pp. 83–89). With native enemies nearby, the Apalachees had developed over the years what can be labeled a military culture sustained by war games, training, practice, and weapons technology. Like those within the military, none of their other achievements in art, agriculture, and trade can be explained as ad hoc occurrences. They imply cross-generational, institutionalized commitments to intentional teaching and learning.

Conjecture about contacts between the Apalachees and Mesoamerica, including possibly the Triple Alliance (popularly known as the Aztec empire), point to additional fronts of cultural evolution during the long precontact era. If Apalachee traders reached the Mexican region, and there is fragmentary archaeological evidence that they did, they very likely traveled by sea, meaning they could design and build vessels capable of withstanding the treacherous Gulf streams, a notable accomplishment even if they sailed close to shore. They also needed experienced, confident navigators. Among the bartered treasures they brought home may have been cobs of maize and the science of propagating it. The Apalachees were indeed aggressive and adventurous traders. The Spanish testified to their skill and endurance as swimmers. It is also known that they routinely fished in Gulf waters.

Finally, there is the intriguing possibility that Apalachee traders witnessed or heard about the Triple Alliance’s compulsory schools (Leon-Portilla, 1963, pp. 134–150). Flourishing during the 14th and 15th centuries and until the Spanish conquest in 1521, the institutions qualified as one of the world’s earliest public education systems. All male children, whatever their status, attended one of two types of school. Each had its own curriculum, one leading to military and vocational service and the other to religious, political, or intellectual leadership. Although rank and prestige attached more directly to the latter, high born and commoner sons mingled at both institutions. The system shared general goals to inculcate the values portrayed in the empire’s foundational and classical literature, including philosophy, myth, and poetry, and to promote patriotism and obedience to authority. The second purpose especially would have appealed to precontact Apalachee chiefs, who saw their people beset by envious marauders. There is no documentary
or to date archaeological evidence to suggest they established schools of either sort.

The implied narrative complexities suggest why the history of American Indians has not yet received the full attention of educational historians, despite efforts by David Wallace Adams (1995; 2006), Vine Deloria, Jr. (1991b; 2003), Adrea Lawrence (2006), and a handful of other scholars (see Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Monaghan, 2005; Mihe suah, 1998; Swisher, 1998). Emphasizing 19th- and early 20th-Century sections of admittedly under-explored historical territory, these authors have begun laying a theoretical foundation. Not surprisingly, their accounts focus on the imposition of Euro-American forms of schooling on native peoples. For one reason, primary sources, government reports, and census records are readily available in print and electronic archives. Although buried in often obscure collections, thus requiring labor intensive investigations, the trail remains accessible if not warm. Recent contributors to this work tend to cast Indian exposure to white schooling in the context of 19th-Century proclamations of manifest destiny. Research dwells on the explicit intentions of Euro-Americans to save Indians by destroying their cultures, classifying the project as an instance of a hydra-headed and efficiently hegemonic colonialism. Ostensibly to redeem native souls through conversion to some branch of Christianity, Adams, Deloria, and Lawrence argue, the aim is more accurately portrayed as a determined quest by outsiders for profits and Indian lands. Slaughter or, short of extreme measures of extermination, forced relocations became acceptable strategies. Both were followed throughout the country from the 17th Century onwards, north, south, and across western territories, as treatments of the Pequots, Cherokees, Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), and Diné (Navajos) illustrated (Axtell, 2001, pp. 148–173, 306–308). Education policy entered the plans well before Thomas Jefferson’s day, who had much to say on the subject, and it too followed the colonial pattern (Ellis, 2007, pp. 128, 154–155, 161–164; Jefferson, 2002, pp. 142–152; Wallace, 1999). As Ostler (2004) reported with regard to the Sioux, taking Indian children to often distant schools, separated from their parents and communities, forbidden to speak their languages or practice ancient rites, dressed in “American” garb, and shorn to look “American,” seemed to whites at least a humane alternative to overt brutality (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Szasz, 1988; Wilson, 1998, pp. 313–315). Most Indians failed to grasp a meaningful distinction between the two strategies. The analysis has opened doors to other inquiries. These authors want to examine what Indians lost along the way toward schooling. Yes, many eventually learned to speak and write in the favored European language, eventually English, and acquired other basic cultural and economic tools of assimilation, but the costs proved dear to Indians, notably the loss of native tongues and with them oral traditions that had been maintained through centuries-old, routine rehearsals of the capacity to remember (Monaghan, 2005). In danger as well were a unique spirituality and most fundamentally the cultures that freighted and organized communal understandings for individual tribal members. The goal was a frontal assault on Indianness. An irony deserves mention. Children of the Arikaras, among other tribes, were taught farming, a skill their ancestors had acquired and refined centuries earlier (Cordell & Smith, 1996; Fowler, 1996; Meyer, 1977).

The schooling of American Indians has become a frequently visited topic in the history of education, as even a cursory review of survey textbooks reveals (Rury, 2005; Spring, 2008; Urban & Wagoner, 2009). By contrast, the field offers comparatively less that advances the other research goal of inquiry on the educational relevance of the cultural histories of Native Americans, their determination to protect and enrich these reservoirs of meaning, and their persistent assertions of independence. If only to provide counterweights for non-Indian perspectives cast by written materials, both projects require access to Indian sources and testimony from the outset.

The larger, multifaceted, and contested cultural dynamics fall squarely within the purview of historians interested in education. So understood, American Indian history becomes an epic struggle over learning, where and how it occurred, and what profits and losses followed in its wake. The approach poses methodological difficulties with substantive implications. Different methods and theoretical constructs capture different data. The analyses veer accordingly; different stories emerge. Sources in familiar documentary formats that mirror Indians’ vantage points are not readily available. Useful information and clues lie embedded in the specialized literatures of numerous disciplines, and some can only be found farther afield in the surviving stories, myths, and cross-generational memories of Indians themselves. To ensure that Indian perspectives are weighed, this culturally attentive history requires abilities to “read” and contextualize oral traditions, art, and artifacts; religious beliefs, symbols, and performances; and institutionalized practices that bear little similarity to Euro-American concepts, conventions, and social organizations. The relevant literature surfaces as a blend of ancient sources, some only in oral formats, and research findings that have accumulated over the 19th and 20th centuries. Not all of the latter bear scrutiny, given the overt and sometimes subtle taints of racial stereotyping and faulty science (Fixico, 2003).

Historians of the United States confront similar difficulties in part because of their own history. Much early study of native America rested uncritically on
outsiders’ perspectives and sources, producing Indian history without Indian testimony. When history emerged as an academic discipline at European and American universities in the 19th Century, newly professionalized historians recognized early on that the indigenous peoples of North America, and by extension natives everywhere, say, in Japan, Australia, or sub-Saharan Africa, posed significant, perhaps even unique, methodological and substantive dilemmas (Conn, 2004, pp. 1–34; Frey, 2007; Galloway, 1997a, pp. 283–294). The science of history required documentary evidence, but at the time most of the sources accepted as reliable had been produced by non-Indians. Almost uniformly, these materials echoed commonly held (white) views on native peoples, namely that they were uncivilized, irreligious, uneducated, and brutal, savages in several meanings of the word. They were hunters and gatherers who roamed as needed, lacked cultural roots, and were guided by superstitions, not reason, morality, and Christianity. With this slanted historiographical tradition in mind, Vine Deloria, Jr. (1991a), among other native scholars, doubted whether outsiders could master the basic challenges of writing American Indian histories (see Deloria, 2003; Mihesuah, 1998; Swisher, 1998). For one thing, the perspective they bring to sources tends to be singular and unilateral, as over against interactive and dimensional. For another, they fail to consider sources Indians rely on, thus evincing grave difficulty conceptualizing multiple narratives and competing value systems without arranging them hierarchically. Ironically, by admitting at the outset that Indians are not interchangeable, that they have always been diverse, socially, culturally, and axiologically, outsider historians could perhaps learn from research on Indians how to design and conduct more nuanced, hence more probing, investigations whatever the subject (Fixico, 2003; Shorter, 2009).

Hovering as background of historical research on American Indians are the often repeated interpretive alternatives between assimilation and extinction. Although rarely welcomed by whites and state and federal governments, and until the 20th Century denied full citizenship status, Indians, it was said, should learn to function within the United States or sooner or later they would vanish (See, e.g., Tocqueville, 2000, pp. 307–325). The dichotomy tacitly assumes that Indians (pre- and postcontact) had never confronted ecological, military, economic, or political shocks requiring cultural or organizational adaptations, that they had persisted (or not) through seasonal, repetitious, reminiscient cycles of change. They were frozen in time, like exhibits in museums of change. This perspective implies that the indigenous peoples of the United States, with little sense of accumulated experience and only imprecise tools to record it, can be understood as lacking histories of their own prior to European contact. Recent research in multiple fields and revisited old documents, animated by interrogations of Indians’ oral traditions, reveal the outsider-driven historical narratives of Native Americans to be shallow and, more to the point, incorrect. To reconstruct more accurate and useful pasts, historians, including historians of education, need to frame a largely unprecedented scholarly discourse released from binary limitations. As Charles Mann (2005) observed, there is little evidence of sustained colloquia among Euro-Americans and Indians over the centuries that advanced cross-cultural knowledge (compare, e.g., Odora Hoppers, 2002; Ostler, 2004; Shannon, 2000). The normative meeting format has been a negotiation bounded by the long established either-or choices of Euro-American centrism, with whites often bringing hidden agenda to the table. The approach has offered historians little more than a scholarly cul-de-sac that failed to lead to explanations of where and through what processes Indians learned and how so many managed to survive.

Resourceful and inventive, the Arikaras offer prospects of an intriguing case study. Originally part of the powerful, hegemonic Caddoan language group that was centered across the lower Mississippi Valley, they began migrating upland perhaps as late as the 15th Century (Meyer, 1977; Ostler, 2004, p. 22; Parks, 1991, vol. 3, pp. 1–7; Smith, 1995, p. 6). Historically related to the Pawnees, who also traveled north, the Arikaras eventually settled in lower North Dakota along the Missouri River. Continuing into the present, they have honored the river as an irreplaceable part of their ceremonies. It led them north. Their oral traditions and tribal stories do not reveal why or precisely when they relocated, although the people themselves cite divine guidance. Almost certainly they had departed before the De Soto entourage moved through the southeast region in the early 1540s. The expedition’s reporters described encounters with the Caddos and some of their affiliated tribes but made no mention of the Arikaras. Not a people who could be easily overlooked, they lived in earthlodges clustered in permanent settlements devoted to farming and trade, practiced achievements they took to North Dakota. On the way, before Euro-Americans arrived on the scene, they re-introduced maize agriculture to the Great Plains and upper Midwest, including several varieties of what is now known as corn. (Earlier indigenous civilizations had engaged in maize farming, but their empires had long since declined and scattered.) Their initial journey stopped temporarily when they found advantageous sites along the Missouri for farmlands and a trading post. At the time, both were uncommon among Plains Indians and attracted attention. The latter became a center of intertribal trade among the Arapahos, Cheyennes, Commanches, Dakotas, Kiowas, and
Plains Apaches, a place where the nations gathered, according to native lore, with the Arikaras functioning in the crucial role of peacekeeping “middlemen.” Marking the beginning of the postcontact era in the Plains, white hunters later frequented the center as well. Arts, crafts, animal skins, and even traditional native dances were among the items bought, sold, or bartered. They continued this now traditional dual commitment to farming and commerce in subsequent migrations up the Missouri. The journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition described meetings with the Arikaras early in the 19th Century (Ostler, 2004, pp. 19–22; Parks, 1991, vol. 3, p. 10). Disaster struck in the 1780s and again in the 1830s when smallpox epidemics reached their settlements, a likely result of Euro-American contacts. Their numbers greatly reduced, the Arikaras nonetheless survived, as one traditional song put it, to “remember them, the ways of the old ones who were: The good ways that were ours” (quoted in Parks, 1991, 3, p. v).

In 1991 Douglas Parks published a four-volume collection of their traditional narratives in the Arikara language, accompanied by English translations. Recounted by contemporary elders, the stories tell of symbolic animals and mythic figures, episodes from the distant past, and memorable events of more recent vintage. Some tales rehearse tribal wisdom and values, often grounded in affirmations of spiritual gifts bestowed on the people by land, soil, corn, and the mysterious Missouri River. Others depict with subtle humor the Arikara practice of trying to mediate conflicts, whether among animals or humans, or across both worlds, as occasions required. Celebrated too are their entrepreneurial habits. They have long known how to drive hard bargains, intending to be fair unless provoked by those with a different commitment. The narratives are meant to explain and re-awaken communal memory. Collectively, they qualify as mnemonic educational resources that expose a long history of learning.

These selected examples of transcontact American Indian experiences point to processes of social organization and shared understandings that began in the undocumentable past. To learn about it, and from it, historians orchestrate an inventive mix of sources in the social sciences and the sciences, much of which require newly available technological tools. In addition they expand traditional definitions of reliability and validity by weighing the utility of human memory in historical reconstructions. For one thing, it can take us inside experience, a particularly necessary excursion for educational historians, who need to identify the phenomena of teaching and learning in whatever arenas they occur. Communal memory, rehearsed, exercised, and revised over years of practice, represents a uniquely muscular variant of the genre. Within it, encoded myths and other traditional narratives open doors to inquiries inaccessible and even unimagined on trips along familiar paper trails. Far richer and more provocative than linear reconstructions, the resulting chronologies of American Indian histories transform the past into a moving target, an expanding, inviting, educative presence (Shorter, 2009).

Taken together, recent research, old documents, and oral traditions shed light on previously cloaked episodes of cultural formation among American Indians. European contact accelerated the processes and simultaneously very nearly destroyed them. Some Indian cultures evolved, as they had previously, surviving in altered, perhaps unanticipated forms. Others devolved or vanished. In all cases the multidisciplinary and multigenerational sources, and the perspectives they cast, support a working hypothesis: Theirs is an extensive educational history. We may not be able yet to date its origins, but we know American education preceded the arrival of Europeans.

An Agenda of New and Unfinished Business

This chapter offers a brief survey of the history of education as a research field and two illustrations of different approaches to the work. Throughout, the aim has been to encourage use of multidisciplinary sources and diverse methods, with both decisions guided by the topic at hand and the emerging evidence. In this way we keep substance and method linked and proceed toward findings, not anticipated conclusions. The latter have often proved more distracting and irresistible than we might have supposed.

Among the illustrative topics suggested above is a preliminary range of essential educational investigations related to American Indian history. Assuming we can manage the required conceptual realignments, who better to design the research than historians of education? That can be seen as a rhetorical question, begging for a negative answer. Other scholars, Indian elders, and their students are far ahead of us in pursuing such lines of inquiry in their specialized endeavors. In truth educational historians, with notable exceptions, have been less than diligent or rigorous in asking tough questions about America’s indigenous past. The exciting news is that our projects have at hand expanding sources to mine and methods to adapt from anthropology, archaeology, economics, and ethnohistory, among other fields, and from tribal narratives and oral traditions that are leading the march of discovery.

This multidisciplinary approach to historical investigation has been employed profitably in recent research on the history of slavery in the United States. The results have been stunning, a field turned inside out. We now have evidence of slaves acting as authors of their own history, not as mere victims. Against horrendous odds, many more than previously claimed made lives for themselves, exerting agency in unexpected...
and subversive ways. These new histories require us to reframe questions about what slaves learned from slavery and to begin pointed inquiries on what owners and whites in general learned from it as well. When slavery is reconceptualized as an educational institution, different narratives emerge. They cannot end in 1863 but through the persistence of cross-generational memory, and as new sources come to light, continue at least hypothetically into the present.

Richard Storr’s (1961) inductive approach to educational history clears the way for inquiry on other topics as well. One can be found in Eileen Tamura’s (1994) research on Americans of Japanese ancestry. Her latest contribution transforms the World War II internment camps into places of learning. The camps had schools, to be sure, but they were incidental to the more pervasive and enduring “value messages” delivered through the legal structures and organization of the camps, the daily experiences of the people who were forced to live in them, and the fact of incarceration itself (James, 1987; Tamura, 2010). She found supporting evidence through the biography of a man who emerged as a leader in one of the camps. A graduate of Roman Catholic institutions, well schooled in democratic values and U.S. political history, a World War I veteran, and member of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, he learned from the camp experience that his country had betrayed its own heritage. He renounced his U.S. citizenship and, once the war ended, emigrated to Japan. Tamura’s work opens doors to reassessments of a wide variety of educational episodes in the histories of racial and ethnic cultural identity in the United States and in other countries too.

Within the histories of cowboys and rodeo, learning from experience has functioned as cultural glue that likewise owes little to formal schooling. If historians of education primarily search for connections, they risk putting the cart before the horse, as it were, missing both explanatory details of continuity and change and a unique educational core (Allen, 1998). Serendipity can be a delightful accompaniment of inductive perspectives and methods. Applying them to the histories of cowboys and rodeo, even those having only a passing acquaintance with the topic may not be surprised to find education and humor wryly mixed (Black, 1995). The linkage is rare in histories of education, where unrelieved solemnity seems to reign. For that reason alone, its discovery can be rejuvenating. Note too the methodological and substantive contributions the histories of cowboys and rodeo offer in challenging the durable east coast bias that tends to map a unidirectional flow of social and cultural formation, forgetting the inconvenient fact that the European intrusion on what we know as the United States began in Florida and out West. These histories represent only one case of cultural development outside of eastern perimeters and independent from them. Latino and American Indian histories come to mind as other examples of specializations in which Storr’s inductive search for evidence of learning could uncover multiple sites of educational originality (Davis, 2005; Gallegos, 1992; Manuel, 1930; Perez, 2009). Given the iconic roles cowboys and rodeo have played in history and art, an educational narrative reconstructed on their own terms holds methodological and substantive promise (Johnson, 1994). It can cast light on the broader history of a quintessential American symbol and cultural tradition. The possibilities amount to little more than conjecture, for educational histories of cowboys and rodeo have yet to be written.

The same can be said for the educational history of disability, a topic apparently reserved for brief treatments in certain textbook introductions and unjuried entries on the web. Existing research tends to be general, with a weak evidentiary base. It confronts fluctuating definitions, public attitudes, and scientific assertions scattered across an array of professional and scholarly outlets. Impacting children and adults, their families and communities, institutional cultures, and related personnel, disability poses unusual challenges for historians, not the least of which is deciding where to begin. Inductive methods caution against applying time-bound definitions, if only to avoid delimiting the search for sources. Some offer advocacy, others emphasize pathologies and treatments, but the tone, thrust, and scope of the literature has varied distinctly over the past two centuries. Potential contributions of research on the history of disability range across multiple genres, from policy to clinical and, of course, educational history.

Finally, for a model of inductive historical methods, we can consider the histories of teachers. Applications of such approaches help explain the recent productivity of scholars working on the topic (Clifford, 1989; Finkelstein, 1989; Henry, 2006; Warren, 2004; Labaree, 2004; Rousmaniere, 1997; Zimmerman, 2006). As most of us know, searching for teachers in the past can be likened to an archaeological quest for a lost tribe. The trail can be cold or nonexistent, cleared sporadically by discoveries of letters, diaries, or other personal history records. Regarding those who worked over a century ago, or any others unavailable for interviews, we are left for the most part to assume teachers’ presence in a school or community, often locating not named actors but more commonly anonymous participants in a local policy environment. Familiar names crop up repeatedly—Margaret Haley and Ella Flagg Young usually come to mind—leaving ordinary teachers with careers only in classrooms in a fog of obscurity. We find evidence of their work more typically than we can identify the people themselves. Doors to teachers as persons, their students, and classrooms have proved difficult to penetrate. Novels, short stories, and autobiographies can help, along with a
method of triangulation from multiple data sets, which is the way specialists in several fields have been able to identify and track the cultural achievements of the Apalachees and other early American peoples. This list is far from exhaustive or even representative. It merely illustrates a range of work that can be pursued by historians of education when the scope of the field and the methods employed are left open-ended. For all the above items, the tasks are not only to fill gaps, although such projects are sometimes needed, but more basically to rethink the field. The full agenda will be long, inviting, and important, inevitably unfinished and in motion.


References


