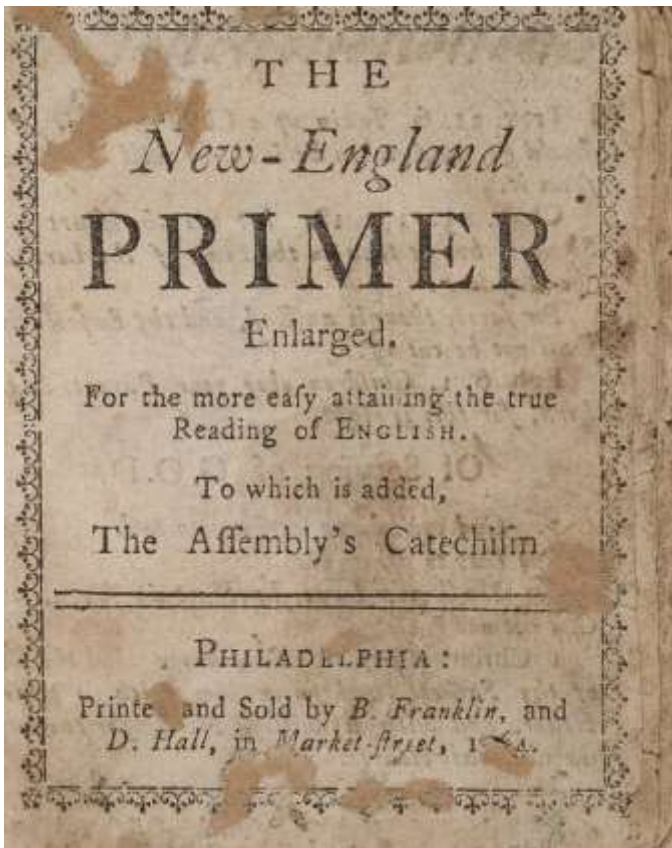


Education in Colonial America



Education in colonial America was shaped by social class, region, race, and gender. Wealthy white boys—particularly in New England—had the greatest access to formal education. Young children often attended small local or “dame” schools, where they learned reading, writing, arithmetic, and Christian teachings. Wealthier boys might later study with private tutors or attend academies in preparation for college or professional careers. Poorer boys frequently learned trades through apprenticeships.

Educational opportunities for enslaved African Americans were extremely limited. In many colonies, laws prohibited enslaved people from learning to read and write, reflecting fears that literacy could encourage rebellion or escape. Nevertheless, some acquired literacy secretly or through religious schools such as the Bray School in Virginia.

Native American education was often provided through missionary schools intended to introduce European languages, religion, and customs. Schools such as Moor’s Indian Charity School educated some Indigenous students as teachers or missionaries, but many programs were short-lived. Most Indigenous

children continued to receive their education within their own communities from family members, storytellers, spiritual leaders, and skilled hunters.

For girls, education generally emphasized reading, writing, household management, sewing, and other domestic skills. Girls from wealthy families sometimes received private instruction or attended dame schools, but few had opportunities for advanced academic study. Education for enslaved girls was largely prohibited, while Native American girls were sometimes educated through missionary programs.

Colonial Colleges

By the Revolutionary era, the colonies had nine colleges, including Harvard, Yale, the College of New Jersey (Princeton), King’s College (Columbia), the College of Philadelphia, the College of Rhode Island (Brown), Queen’s College (Rutgers), Dartmouth, and the College of William & Mary. Although most were founded by religious organizations, their curricula increasingly included subjects such as law, medicine, and agriculture.

Many future Revolutionary leaders attended these institutions. During the Revolution, however, colleges were directly affected by the conflict. Harvard students temporarily relocated, its buildings housed Continental soldiers, and Harvard Hall was damaged when its roof was used to produce bullets. At William & Mary and King’s College, Loyalist leaders were removed or forced to flee. Students and faculty also participated directly in the Patriot cause, with many joining the Continental forces.

Colonial education was therefore far from universal, but it played an important role in shaping the generation that would lead the American Revolution and establish the new nation.