

Classical Education in America

The study of ancient Greek and Latin long ago vanished from most American classrooms, and with it has gone a special understanding of the values and virtues prized by Western civilization.

BY DANIEL WALKER HOWE

THE CLASSICS DEPARTMENTS AT MOST AMERICAN colleges and universities today carry the whiff of nostalgia and old chalk dust. Latin and ancient Greek can't compete with vocational disciplines such as engineering, business, and medicine. Classics programs are small and underfunded, and when education budgets are squeezed, such programs are often among the first to go—the recent elimination of the classics department at the Albany branch of the State University of New York is but one prominent example. In 2009, the College Board, which administers the SAT and advanced placement exams to millions of high school students, discontinued the AP exam in Latin literature. Fewer than 2,000 students sat to translate Cicero and parse the poetry of Catullus the last time the test was administered. Though an AP exam on Virgil remains, the College Board's decision further marginalized classical studies in American education.

This state of affairs would come as a shock to the Founders. They believed that if a modern citizenry were to benefit from the lessons of history, its members had to know the history of Greece and Rome. And they viewed the young republic they were nurturing as in some ways a rebirth of principles first implemented in the Roman

DANIEL WALKER HOWE is Rhodes Professor of American History Emeritus at Oxford University and professor of history emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles. His book *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 2008.

Republic. Recent books by Carl J. Richard, Caroline Winterer, and several other scholars emphasize the attention the Founders paid to classical learning. So what has happened to the classics in America since the Founding?

For several generations, classical antiquity remained alive and well in the American republic, both within educational institutions and in the larger society. American colleges required undergraduates to take Latin (and often Greek); they even usually demanded, as an admission prerequisite, that applicants have taken instruction in one or both languages. While Protestant, Catholic, and secular institutions differed on theology, in their emphasis on classics they occupied common ground.

Ever since the Middle Ages, a classical education had represented a synthesis of reason and virtue. Classical history and literature presented a panoply of heroes to admire and celebrate. Roman writers such as Cicero and the two Catos embodied not only the stern and self-denying virtues that appealed to Christian mentors but also republican values with special relevance to Americans, such as devotion to the commonwealth rather than to any special interest or faction. Besides, the effort of mastering the rigorous logic and grammar required to conjugate Latin verbs and decline nouns was itself regarded as a tool to teach young people self-discipline.

It was, by and large, white males who filled seats in classrooms and were therefore the beneficiaries of classical

learning. But when secondary academies and colleges for women began to appear in antebellum America, they taught Latin along with “feminine” pursuits including painting and needlework, and the classical emphasis on elocution inspired women’s rights activists such as Margaret Fuller. By the 1850s, a few schools in Northern cities offered a classical education to young free African Americans. Missionar-

put into the hands of the young student, can hardly fail to imbue his mind with the principles of liberty, to inspire the liveliest patriotism, and to excite [him] to noble and generous action, and are therefore peculiarly adapted to the American youth.” Modern history and modern foreign languages were eventually offered as electives at most colleges before the Civil War, but classics, along with some required

mathematics and science, remained the core discipline, as historian Carl J. Richard documents in *The Golden Age of the Classics in America* (2009).

Dickinson College in Pennsylvania was typical: Freshmen studied Sallust, Horace, and Xenophon.

Sophomores absorbed themselves in Cicero, Horace, Xenophon, and Euripides. Juniors took Sophocles, Euripides, Cicero, Juvenal, and Perseus. And seniors finished off with Aeschylus, Tacitus, and Terence. Even at the University of Virginia, famous for its elective system, students had to pass a Latin exam to graduate, and as late as the 1850s Latin remained the largest department.

At the beginning of the 19th century, undergraduate courses concentrated on the Latin and Greek languages themselves. Students translated texts and wrote compositions of their own in the ancient tongues. Educators interpreted aptitude for such exercises as a measure of general intelligence and believed that the texts provided models of virtue and vice. Soon, however, teachers set students to the task of analyzing the content of the assigned texts and the values of classical civilization in general. They also began to devote more attention to Greek as compared with Latin, as cultural historian Caroline Winterer notes in her elegant book *The Culture of Classicism* (2001). The shift reflected a changing America. The Greeks appealed to the rising Romantic movement in literature and the arts. While the Romans had celebrated republican virtues, the Athenians had embraced democracy and free thought. New attitudes found new reasons for studying ancient times.

From the Middle Ages until the late 19th century, knowledge of the classics thus provided educated people the world over with a common frame of reference. Physicians wrote their prescriptions in Latin; scientists still often published research papers in Latin to ensure a worldwide audi-

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ies among Native American people taught Latin as well as English in their schools, hoping to prepare some of the students to go on to college. More fundamentally, the missionaries were introducing native people to all aspects of Western civilization, from modern technology to Christianity, and they considered classical learning basic to that project of assimilation.

To be sure, there were those who agitated against Latin in the schoolroom. Benjamin Franklin criticized the focus on classical languages (though he was quite willing to make rhetorical use of his own hard-won classical learning in his writings). Eventually, universities responded to calls for more utilitarian training, establishing postgraduate schools of medicine, law, and divinity. At the undergraduate level, however, educators dug in their heels: The purpose of college was not to train students for a vocation, they insisted, but to improve their minds with a liberal education. Such an education was called “liberal” because it was intended to be liberating and hence suitable for a free person. (*Liber* means “free” in Latin.)

The definitive defense of a traditional liberal education that centered on classics appeared in the Yale Report of 1828, drafted in response to a request by the Connecticut legislature that the university do away with its Greek and Latin entrance requirements in favor of modern languages. “The models of ancient literature,” wrote Yale president Jeremiah Day, “which are



All eyes are on ancient Greece as Professor Herbert Wing Jr. instructs students at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania around 1945. But classical instruction in colleges across America was rapidly waning. In 1946, Dickinson stopped requiring bachelor of arts candidates to take Latin or Greek.

ence of fellow professionals. Lawyers buttressed their arguments with Latin phrases. Artists flattered their subjects by painting or sculpting them in togas. Architects designed buildings in the increasingly fashionable Greek Revival style that we sometimes call “Federal,” its Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns providing an idiom of dignity and rationality to a variety of American structures, including plantation homes, courthouses, banks, and churches. The United States was self-consciously constructing itself as a modern version of a classical republic. Congress met in a Roman-style capitol, where in 1841 sculptor Horatio Greenough installed his famous statue of George Washington cast as the Greek god Zeus. (Within a few years, Victorian sensibilities found Greenough’s half-naked Washington discomfiting, and it was removed. The statue now resides in the National Museum of American History.) Americans loved Greek and Roman names for new towns—Athens, Rome, Troy, Corinth, Ithaca, Syracuse. In Ohio alone, no

fewer than 35 towns were given classical names.

Classical standards were not only illustrative and decorative but in at least some areas profoundly influential. The authors of *The Federalist* justified balanced government, which the Constitution embodied, by invoking Aristotle and Polybius. Later, Southern politician and noted orator John C. Calhoun made use of classical political ideas in drafting his own distinctive constitutional doctrines. Early American voting requirements derived their legitimacy from classical philosophy. The ancient authorities had taught that a citizen should be “virtuous,” meaning that he should be dedicated to the welfare of the commonwealth, not his own self-interest. Voting qualifications were designed to keep the ballot in the hands of those who could exercise such civic virtue. Only men could demonstrate patriotic virtue through military service, so only men should vote. (Indeed, the word “virtue,” like “virility,” derives from the Latin *vir*; meaning “man.”) And only persons capable of exercising independ-

ent judgment could attain public virtue. Hence, only men of property should vote, since (in the days before the secret ballot) a servant would vote as his master told him.

Forty years ago, the eminent historian Gordon S. Wood asserted that the ratification of the U.S. Constitution marked “the end of classical politics.” He has since backpedaled. In

CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM remained prominent in American education, culture, and political life until the Civil War.

truth, classical republicanism remained prominent in American education, culture, and political life until the Civil War. Far from standing in opposition to the early Industrial Revolution, classical learning at first expanded in response to it. The new commercial middle class felt eager to acquire refinement, which it associated with classical knowledge. Coins with a classical goddess depicting Liberty, Grecian gowns for women, and home décor items such as mirrors encased in classical columns were popular. Steam-powered presses mass-produced classical texts printed on inexpensive paper for consumption by an increasingly literate public.

Both political parties exploited the classics to present their arguments. The Jacksonian Democrats played upon the classical republican virtues of thrift and distaste for luxury in their “war” on banks, especially the Bank of the United States. Missouri Democratic senator Thomas Hart Benton invoked the upstanding farmers of Virgil’s *Georgics* to advocate pricing western public lands as low as possible; his and fellow western congressmen’s efforts prevailed with the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862. The Jacksonians’ rivals, the Whigs, employed classical republicanism to warn against the dangers of an overmighty executive and to advocate balanced government. To them, Andrew Jackson’s rise to political power from a military background smacked of Caesarism.

Classical ideals of rhetoric and oratory governed 19th-century American practice. We still value eloquence, but in those days elocution was taught in school, according to rules laid down thousands of years earlier and transmitted

by modern teachers of rhetoric such as the Scottish professor Hugh Blair, whose work was widely followed in the United States. Public speaking was an art form, practiced by politicians, lawyers, preachers, lyceum lecturers, dramatic actors, and high school students. Their stylized performances attracted audiences that were often large and sometimes all-too-passionately engaged. In 1849, the bloody Astor Place Riot left 22 people dead after a dispute erupted between fans of two Shakespearean actors who had rival theatrical interpretations of *Macbeth*.

Dedicating the cemetery on the battlefield of Gettysburg in November 1863, the famous orator Edward Everett held forth for two hours. He described ancient Athenian funeral customs, particularly the burial of those who fell at Marathon in graves on that historic battleground, and concluded by invoking Pericles’ tribute to the fallen of the Peloponnesian War. Then President Lincoln delivered his two-minute address, perhaps the greatest piece of classical oratory in American history. Without formal education, Abraham Lincoln had absorbed the conventions of classical rhetoric through practical experience in law and politics. His address, as Garry Wills explains in *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992), demonstrated the Periclean model perfectly in its “compression, grasp of the essential, balance, ideality, and awareness of the deepest polarities in the situation.” Both speakers knew that the oratorical conventions they employed would resonate with an audience steeped in the classical tradition.

Before the war, as the debate over slavery grew increasingly bitter, Southerners had enjoyed a marked advantage when they appealed to the authority of the classics. Both Greeks and Romans had practiced slavery, and Aristotle lent his philosophy to its justification (though he gave his game away when he admitted that slaves were capable of friendship). American defenders of slavery such as George Fitzhugh, Thomas Dew, and George Frederick Holmes claimed that the enslavement of blacks undergirded the equality of white citizens in the South. They pointed to the cultural and artistic triumphs of Greco-Roman civilization as vindicating slave society. For their part, abolitionists made use of the ancient principle of natural law in their

arguments, but they usually invoked Enlightenment or Christian versions of it. Few abolitionists were willing to criticize classical civilization for countenancing slavery, fewer to celebrate the bloody slave revolt of 73 BC led by the Roman gladiator Spartacus.

Even while the classics enjoyed what Carl J. Richard calls their “golden age” of prominence in antebellum America, events were beginning to transform American life and politics. Although historians’ attention generally has been focused on Jacksonian democracy, American political culture was influenced at least as much by improvements in communications and transportation: the telegraph, the railroad, the steamboat, and the steam-operated printing press. The steam press, in combination with innovations in papermaking, facilitated the mass production of newspapers, magazines, and books, while the railroad and steamboat enabled their wide distribution. While these advances encouraged the proliferation of Latin and Greek

texts, both within and without the classroom, the new printed media also undercut the relevance and authority of elite classical republicanism.

The revolution in communications made political opinions and debates more widely available. This broadened the opportunities for political participation, as more people could learn about candidates, issues, and the decisions of government. States responded by liberalizing suffrage requirements and providing for presidential electors to be chosen by popular vote. No longer was political leadership to be confined to a leisure class whose members could afford to serve without salary. Nor did the classical rationale for a property-based electorate carry conviction any longer. Literacy replaced civic virtue as the desirable characteristic for a voter. Instead of a small-scale republic with the restricted citizenry of classical city-states, a continental empire with a mass electorate now seemed plausible, even desirable. Political parties, which the classically influenced Founders had equated with factionalism and hoped to prevent, seized the opportunities provided by the printed media



At the turn of the 20th century, black schoolchildren gaze on Horatio Greenough's once-controversial statue of George Washington cast as Zeus.

to distribute their pamphlets and broadsides. Improved means of transportation supported the parties' traveling election campaigns, whose songs, slogans, and parades resembled those employed by revivalists and circus promoters.

But classical learning and respect for the virtues it taught died hard. Displaced from politics and political philosophy, classicism found a new purpose in private life. Classical learning became a vehicle for self-cultivation, for the pursuit not of public influence or civic participation but of personal perfection. Thus, the place of the ancient languages in a liberal education could be, and was, reaffirmed. Toward the end of the 19th century, the ancient languages came to share with modern languages a new category, "humanities," so named because they nurtured the student's humanity and helped realize his potential.

The Greek and Roman classics have occupied a place in defining American culture exceeded in importance only by the Enlightenment and Christianity. The first overt challenge to their primacy in higher education came with the landmark Morrill Act of 1862, which established federally subsidized land-grant colleges for the study of agriculture and engineering. But the general de-emphasis of classics in the U.S. educational system after the Civil War was a broad phenomenon. Nor was it occasioned simply by the rise of natural science. Carl J. Richard perceptively argues that it was a consequence of a declining confidence in human reason and virtue that diminished respect for the ancient writers and the heroes they celebrated. Moral relativism undercut trust in the standards the classical authors had long embodied.

Study of the ancient languages and literature remained important in American higher and secondary education for about a century after classical republicanism began to lose its relevance to the American political system. As late as 1900, half the students in U.S. public high schools were taking Latin; then began a long, gradual decline. Classics had always had something of an elite image; after all, classical knowledge was the hallmark of gentility. But in 20th-century America, elitism came to seem like an accusation one needed to deny. Parochial and private schools maintained the classical standards longer than most public ones, but much of the incentive for Catholic schools to do so was removed in the 1960s, when the Mass ceased to be celebrated in Latin.

But all is not lost. Despite their curricular marginaliza-

tion, many great works of classical civilization are still read, though now mostly in translation. The texts of Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, Homer, Virgil, and the Athenian playwrights are still studied in courses on literature, history, and philosophy. While we accord them less authority than Americans did a century and a half ago, we still hold the conviction that the ancient classics have enduring worth as sources of instruction and inspiration.

As they did in the 19th century, today the Greeks seem to speak to us more profoundly than the Romans, having originated many of the intellectual institutions we increasingly value as characteristically American: democratic politics, natural science, and free inquiry, to name a few. In a recent memoir, Garry Wills looked back over his own classical education, which culminated in a PhD at Yale. "Learning classical Greek is the most economical intellectual investment one can make," he wrote. "On many things that might interest one—law and politics, philosophy, oratory, history, lyric poetry, epic poetry, drama—there will be constant reference back to the founders of those forms in our civilization."

There are still those among us who defend the value of classical learning. Ridgeview Classical Schools, a group of public charter schools in Fort Collins, Colorado, defines their mission this way: "So important has classical education been in the history of the West that it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that the march of civilization has paralleled the vibrancy of classical schools." At Ridgeview schools, Latin is mandatory starting in the seventh grade, and English itself is taught as a classical language. The schools have so many applicants that admission is by lottery.

Ridgeview Classical does not seem to me merely an eccentric holdout against modern trends in education. I did not myself enjoy the benefit of a classical education, though I studied Greek for a while as a gateway to the New Testament. But in learning about the history of classical education in the United States, I have come to respect many of the ideals for which it has so long stood, to believe that they transcend the limitations of time and place, and to hope for their perpetuation. The neglect of classics in our educational curriculum has been a loss for our civilization. It is not simply the ancient languages themselves but the spirit in which they are studied that has value for students today. ■