

WHY PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS?  
WHOSE PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS?

WHAT EARLY COMMUNITIES HAVE TO TELL US

DAVID MATHEWS

NEWSOUTH BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

**D**ESPITE EVIDENCE that parents like their local schools, many Americans are convinced that the public school system is failing in its most basic responsibility—to provide good instruction for all. And that perception is prompting reforms ranging from standardized tests to vouchers, changes that some believe are crucial to saving the schools and others worry will undermine public education.

Even worse for the long term, many schools may be losing their ties to a citizenry willing to consider the well-being of common education as a common responsibility. A few years ago, Kettering Foundation research found a number of people who don't equivocate in saying that the public schools are not their schools. Maybe that attitude tells us something about the public as well as the schools. For example, some without children enrolled may argue that schools are the parents' responsibility. Parents, on the other hand, may see the schools as tax-paid utilities, somewhat like the companies that provide gas and electricity. As consumers, their job is to watch educators the way they would watch a cashier counting change. Their children sometimes develop the same attitude and think they should help their parents "keep the teachers in line." This way of thinking reflects people's frustration; it shows the extremes they feel they have to go to in order to influence the schools.<sup>1</sup>

### WHO IS THE PUBLIC?

How did we get to this point? Whose schools are the public schools, and who is ultimately responsible for them? How did we come to have the schools

we call public and why? No one responds to questions like these without some prior assumptions. Mine are that the public schools are the public's schools and that the public wanted them because it can't do its work effectively without them.

But who or what is "the public"? I'm worried about the partial and limited answers I hear—that the public is just a body of voters or taxpayers. Though important, voting and paying taxes aren't all that it takes to make this country work as it should, and they certainly aren't enough to sustain a system of schools that has to be both open to all and beneficial to all. I worry even more about the tendency to treat the public as merely a body of consumers.

My definition of the public begins with citizens—specifically citizens deciding and acting together to promote their common well-being—people actively exercising these collective capacities. In plain English, our collective capacity is the ability to get things done by joining forces with others. One assumption I *would not* make is that such a public is always out there waiting to be engaged. We have a capacity to be a public but that potential has to be turned into a reality.

What are we capable of when we join forces, and what does it look like when we act together? While there are any number of places to search for illustrations, I decided to study how some of the first schools were established in hopes of finding examples of people exercising their powers as citizens. That is, I looked at the origins of the first schools in order to learn about the characteristics of the first public. Schools have to have places where teachers can teach, so I asked, "Who built the buildings?" Raising a new generation also involves making difficult choices about who should be educated at the expense of the community as well as what level and type of instruction children should have. Who made those decisions, and how? The textbooks students read, even how they were examined, I thought, might say something about what the public was like.

I drew heavily on the grainy details of local history to try to make "acting collectively" less abstract. That's important. Today, people have difficulty imagining themselves in the public, and when the public is invisible to itself, citizens lose faith in their ability to do something about the problems that frustrate them. I also wanted to experiment with taking some notions about

the public found in political philosophy and see if I could put a human face on them.<sup>2</sup>

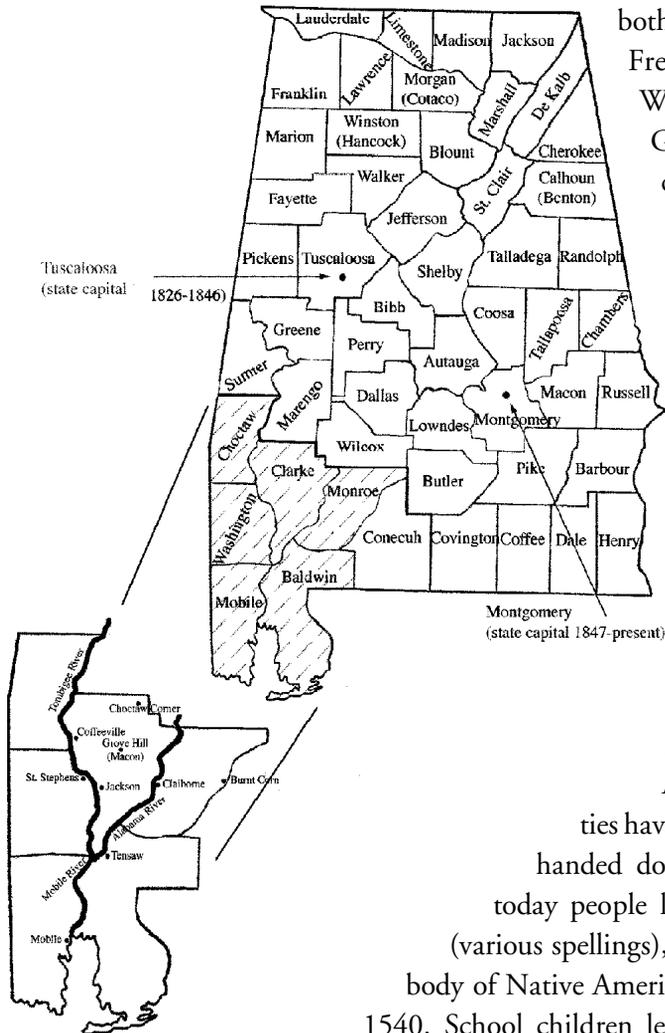
You might think of this book as a travelogue of a search for examples of the historical public in action. I didn't set out to marshal proof that there was indeed a public but rather to use people and events from the past to illustrate the collective capabilities we have as citizens, to show how those were used to provide education, and to describe the kind of relationship between communities and schools that developed as a result. Since the objective wasn't to write a history of either a particular period and place or of schools, I didn't deal extensively with many of the issues of interpretation that properly concern scholars. That said, I did propose a few hypotheses that historians might find interesting to explore, and I left a trail of notes.<sup>3</sup>

### STORIES FROM EARLY ALABAMA

As a setting for the search, I chose Alabama between the last years of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century—concentrating on six counties in the lower southwestern part of the state. I grew up in that area and have been browsing through its history for a long time. Every now and again, I stray over county lines or go beyond the time frame for a particularly good story. Or I use an account of what was happening in the state at large in order to give a sense of what was probably happening in the southwest. Still, most of the stories in the book come from the six counties, especially Mobile, which has the most comprehensive records of its schools. While I had to restrict myself to a specific place and time to keep the search from going on forever, I think that what I found in Alabama could have implications for other states and citizens.<sup>4</sup>

In case you haven't been there, let me introduce southwestern Alabama, an area that is fixed in literature between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Forrest Gump*. On a map it extends about a hundred or so miles north of Mobile Bay. The six counties there—Clarke, Mobile, Baldwin, and Washington, along with their neighbors, Choctaw to the west and Monroe to the east—have a distinctive geography and a shared history. These are primarily Piney Woods counties, enriched by the economy and Creole traditions of the Gulf Coast. (Creoles,

**S**ince some readers may be interested in local history and others concerned with concepts, I've put additional historical information and more commentary on concepts of the public in side text like this.



*Southwestern  
Alabama*

both black and white, were descendents of the French and Spanish colonists.) Unlike the Wiregrass area on the eastern border with Georgia, these counties are covered with red clay hills that flow into sandy flats. And they don't enjoy the dark, fertile soil of the Selma Chalk or Black Belt region. The experiences of the people in the southwest have been, to some extent, the experiences that their fragile, sandy loam has brought them.<sup>5</sup>

As most who live there know, the six counties are far from carbon copies of each other. They never were. Mobile has always been different because it has a large city. Monroe, Washington, and Baldwin had the larger plantations; Clarke and Choctaw had more small farms.

Among the most important things the counties have shared are legends of their origins—stories handed down from generation to generation. Even today people look for the lost city of Maubila/Mauvila (various spellings), where Hernando de Soto defeated a large body of Native Americans led by Chief Tuscaluza/Tuscaloosa in 1540. School children learn about battles with the Creek Nation during the War of 1812. Rather than accounts of defeating the British or of the rise of General Andrew Jackson to prominence in national history, these are tales of personal courage and cowardice, of compassion and hatred, of cunning and stupidity. They are morality plays like the story of the runaway slave who gave his name to Hal's Lake, where he founded a community before being cruelly betrayed. The stories—as much as the geography—define southwestern Alabama.<sup>6</sup>

The years before 1860 are ideal for studying the first public and the first

schools because the state was just being formed. Most of the southwest was still undeveloped, although European colonization dates back to French settlements in the early 1700s. Squatters began to farm there before the federal government had the legal mechanisms in place for selling land. The law was slow in taking hold, and the first people to arrive weren't always the noblest of God's creatures; crime was widespread. Outside the city of Mobile, most homes were primitive; the dress of the day was rustic. Don't imagine *Gone with the Wind*; the setting was more like a Clint Eastwood western.

Naturally, conditions changed as the decades went by. A territory was becoming a state; settlers were becoming citizens. Self-government took hold and flourished all across the American frontier, Alabama included.

After clearing land and building cabins, settlers turned to what might be called "community-building," which not only involved the physical construction of shops and streets but also the creation of a way of life to reflect the settlers' highest values. That is the reason people built churches and schools and—in case those didn't do the job—courthouses and jails.

Pioneers founded schools almost as soon as they arrived, and the Alabama legislature incorporated them into a state system in 1854. Common schooling was but one of many social movements sweeping the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. Reformers championed a range of causes, including better treatment of the mentally ill, expanded legal rights for women, fewer saloons for alcoholics and, most controversial of all, the abolition of slavery. This was a time of "freedom's ferment," as Alice Tyler writes in her history.

Twenty years ago, if you had asked me about the public and the early schools, I would probably have said that I hadn't given them much thought. Reading the first histories of American education, which concentrate on the school laws, gave me the impression that state assemblies, inspired by great educators like Horace Mann of Massachusetts, created the public schools. But a serious problem with this interpretation is that most of these schools were *already* operating *before* the legislatures acted. So if not the legislators, who saw to it that future generations had access to instruction?

In southwestern Alabama, I found citizens in community after community who spurred other citizens to build, finance, staff, and operate many of

the first schools, which were public in the sense that the public created them for public purposes. While legislators justified their laws on education with the most compelling rhetoric since the Revolution (stirring words about the need for a general diffusion of knowledge to complete the great work of independence), communities had more immediate and practical reasons.

They needed schools for their survival, and their schools needed them. Community expectations gave schools what amounted to a “charter” with a number of mandates to carry out (in conjunction with other educating institutions like families).

Although I find the nineteenth century helpful in understanding the public, some may not think it relevant because it was a long time ago and conditions were different. While the point is well taken, I believe the differences between then and now, as well as some similarities, put today’s educational issues in a context that provides us with an expanded perspective on our potential as citizens.

I don’t mean to imply that antebellum Alabamians created a golden age of education. They would be the last to say that. Despite their best efforts, the results

were disappointing. Although not that different from other frontier states, nearly half of Alabama’s white children weren’t in classes. Worse, illiteracy among slaves was estimated at 95 percent, even though free blacks had literacy rates equal to or slightly higher than whites.

**Y**ou will notice that people in the nineteenth century had a number of ways of describing the schools that served their communities—so many that I don’t think anyone could say categorically what made a school public. Schools and education were called “common,” “popular,” “universal,” and “free,” as well as “public.” These were usually different names for the same institutions; each adjective emphasized a particular characteristic. When schools were called “free,” it typically meant that they didn’t charge tuition, that they waived it in some cases, or that the intent was to lower fees gradually until they disappeared. (Those unable to pay were assisted with various kinds of scholarships.) In other cases, “free” referred to schools *exclusively* for the poor. Adjectives like “universal” suggested an education that was “available to everyone,” reflecting egalitarian notions that all citizens should have access to instruction and that resources should be distributed fairly. “Common” or “popular” might have meant “for the common people,” and “common” was sometimes a code word for the conviction that cities or counties needed a common culture and that schools were to promote good relationships among different economic classes.

While circumstances are quite different today, experiences from the formative years of public education speak to many of the issues we worry about now. Take local control, which is now called “home rule.” In the beginning, control was almost exclusively local; most schools had their own trustees, usually at least three. (Significantly, the combined membership of all of these boards resulted in a much larger percentage of citizens directly connected to public education than is the case these days.) Yet if local control didn’t mean public or community control, it could be unacceptable. In Mobile, citizens overthrew a self-perpetuating school board because they didn’t think it represented the community. A collection of able people, even with a progressive plan, didn’t necessarily make for a good board—certainly not for a public one. Today, when some argue that local trustees have outlived their usefulness, the experiences of the first boards are highly relevant.<sup>7</sup>

Public control may also have been at issue in an experiment with what we now call faith-based organizations. Sound policy or not, having churches take on public responsibilities is nothing new. Alabama churches once received tax funds to operate nonsectarian public schools. Although it was a short-lived experiment, why it ended is instructive. (More about that later.)

Accountability is another issue that has been around since the 1800s. People in those days, as now, wanted to know what was going on in the classroom and whether students were getting a good education. Nineteenth-century teachers had the equivalent of a standardized test, an exercise in which pupils repeated back, word for word, what was in the textbook. Teachers were the judges of good instruction. But I also found examples of a more open form of examining students through public demonstrations of their abilities. Communities could see firsthand how their schools were doing and judge for themselves.

Differences between then and now can be as revealing as similarities. For instance, few communities today have the same relationship with their schools that they originally had. State and federal governments now play a much larger role. Why the change? Was it some failure of the communities or did other considerations promote this centralization? For instance, conventional wisdom holds that local control is the mortal enemy of equity. Was it? Or, perhaps local officials were “soft” on the need for excellence in education?

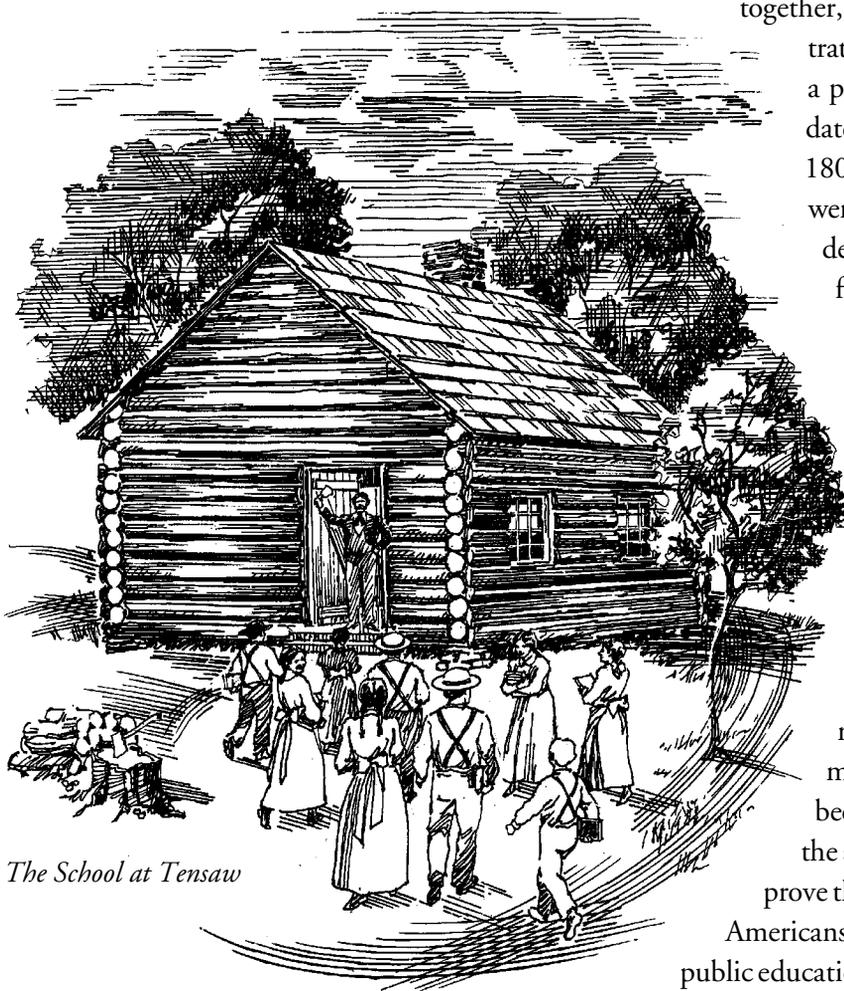
Were they? Did instruction have to become professionalized in order to be good?

Another striking difference is the absence of an educational bureaucracy. The first schools were freestanding institutions directed by the citizens of a community. Today, everyone—parents, students, teachers, school board members, would-be reformers, even bureaucrats—complains about bureaucratic control, which seems to be spreading faster than kudzu. Regulations of every kind and from every source combine to entangle schools. Individual

rules may be reasonable, and yet when added together, they often immobilize, frustrate, and inhibit. This trend isn't

a product of modern society; it dates back to at least the mid-1800s, when the public's schools were absorbed into state systems designed to produce what reformers called a "public school." State officials reordered instruction and management to conform to supposedly infallible scientific principles.

Hard as it may be to believe, bureaucratic centralization was once a reform. Notwithstanding recent "site-based management" efforts to give schools more control, we have long been consolidating authority on the assumption that it would improve the quality of instruction. Still, Americans today aren't convinced that public education is what it should be or that



*The School at Tensaw*

they have the means to correct what needs correcting. One of the questions raised in this book is whether quality might have something to do with the relationship between communities and their schools.

This study looks into the beginnings of school administration and, particularly, the relationship of the first administrators to the public. It's an important chapter because the people's ability to act together effectively is often challenged by forces from outside their communities. When that happens, as it did in Alabama, it has to be included in the illustrations of the experiences of the public.

The 1850s saw tremendous growth in the number of classrooms and students as a result of community initiatives. Yet the decade also marks the beginning of the eclipse of the community as the leading force in education. In the name of excellence, reform-minded educators made changes that had a host of unintended consequences, which still affect us. Citizens and the schools began to drift apart as the public's role in education diminished.

The stories in this book begin in 1799. That was the year when the boundary with Spain was located, showing that most of the southwest belonged to the United States. The history of Alabama schools dates back to that same year, when John Pierce opened what appears to have been the state's first American school on Lake Tensaw, or Boatyard Lake, which is just off the Alabama River.

The year 1799 might have been to Alabama education what 1776 is to American independence—a time of celebration and reflection. Sad to say, the two hundredth anniversary passed without being recognized. The fact that it went unnoticed suggests something about how schools today understand the public—and how the public has come to understand its relationship to the schools.

## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> The Kettering research on the perception that the public schools aren't the public's schools is in a report I wrote, titled *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 1996). The attitude of parents as consumers is described in a study done for the Kettering Foundation by Doble Research Associates, *A Consumer Mentality: The Prevailing Mind-Set in American Public Education* in March 1999, pp. 2, 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Along with the works cited in the text, those that have influenced the concepts of the public found in this book include Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); James S. Fishkin's *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland's *Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Peter Levine's *The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Noëlle McAfee's *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); and John Gastil's *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy through Deliberative Elections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). I also drew on the writings of Michael J. Sandel, Giovanni Sartori, and John Dewey. Kettering research is summed up in a report I wrote, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> While I didn't deal with many of the issues of educational historiography, for those who want a brief overview of the major controversies, I would recommend a review of the literature by Diane Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: Studies in the Historiography of American Education* ([Stanford, Calif.]: National Academy of Education, 1977). She later expanded this essay into a book-length discussion in *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Although concentrating on Alabama, I looked into the origins of the public schools in other states to see if what I was finding was unique to just one area of the country. For reference, I chose three states with populations comparable to Alabama's: Maryland, Michigan, and New Jersey. Jon Per-

due, a Kettering researcher, located sources such as Malvina Hauk Abonyi, "The Role of Ethnic Church Schools in the History of Education in the United States: The Detroit Experience, 1850-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 1987); Charles O. Hoyt and R. Clyde Ford, *John D. Pierce, Founder of the Michigan School System: A Study of Education in the Northwest* (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Scharf Tag, Label, and Box, 1905); Michigan House of Representatives, *Report of the Board of Education of the City of Detroit*, no. 14 (n.p., 1843); Leo Joseph McCormick, *Church-State Relationships in Education in Maryland* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1942); Arthur B. Moehlman, *Public Education in Detroit* (Bloomington, Ill.: Public School Publishing Company, 1925); David Murray, *History of Education in New Jersey* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1899); *Report of the Committee on Common School System* (Trenton, N.J.: Joseph Justice and Son, 1837); Mary Rosalita, *Education in Detroit Prior to 1850* (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1928); Bernard C. Steiner, *History of Education in Maryland*, Contributions to American Educational History, no. 19 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894); and Vernon S. Vavrina, *The History of Public Education in the City of Baltimore, 1829-1956* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> The descriptions of the six counties came from Neal G. Lineback, ed., *Atlas of Alabama* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1973) and Lewy Dorman, *Party Politics in Alabama from 1850 through 1860* (1935; reprint, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The most recent account of Hernando de Soto's expedition in southwestern Alabama is an interesting book by the director of the Mobile Municipal Archives, Jay Higginbotham, *Mauwila* (Mobile: A. B. Bahr, 2000). Heroes of the southwest include William Weatherford, the Creek chief who led a massacre at Fort Mims and later returned to live among the survivors, and an African-American known only as "Caesar," who paddled the small canoe that Captain Sam Dale and his companions from a Clarke County militia used to attack a large war party in the middle of the Alabama River. Because he and his wife Helen, who assisted him, are from the area, David Strode Akens tells the stories the way I heard them told in his master's thesis "Clarke County to 1860" (University of Alabama, 1956), pages 17, 23-24, 82-83.

<sup>7</sup> Jay Mathews, "Are School Boards Really Necessary?" *Washington Post*, 10 April 2001, A19.