

A Window to the Past

What an Essay Contest Reveals about Early American Education



BY BENJAMIN JUSTICE

Pencils ready?

[Write] an essay on a system of liberal education, and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the government, and best calculated to promote the general welfare of the United States; comprehending, also, a plan for instituting and conducting public schools in this country on principles of the most extensive utility.

This was the question posed by America's premier scholarly association, the American Philosophical Society (APS), in 1795.

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In a list of seven contest questions on various subjects, this education question came first, and had the largest prize, including \$100 (in 1795 dollars, which is about \$1,400 today) and publication by the APS.¹ The winners were chosen two years later, in 1797.

In today's English, the question would mean:

Design the best system of education for the United States, appropriate for the wealthy as well as the poor, including secondary and higher education as well as elementary schools, reaching people in remote areas as well as cities, promoting the common good and strengthening our republican form of government.

No easy task in any era.

But these were no ordinary times. The nation's leaders had just completed their political revolution, with the states ratifying the Constitution (in 1788) and Bill of Rights (in 1791). Despite their monumental failures to end chattel slavery, honor the land rights of indigenous people, or abolish the subordination of women, the men referred to as the Founding Fathers had nevertheless achieved a rare moment in history: applying ancient and modern theories of government to the creation of a new country.

The APS education prize contest captured the excitement and apprehension that the Founding Fathers felt about that creation. With no king and no state church, the founders believed that only through the virtue and intelligence of its citizens could the American republic survive; and in federal and state law, governments took measures to encourage the spread of useful knowledge and virtue. They ensured the delivery of mail, protected free speech, encouraged learned societies like the APS and voluntary ones like the Freemasons, formed or reformed colleges and academies, and created funds to subsidize local schooling efforts. In New England, state governments reaffirmed colonial laws that required towns to maintain free elementary schools or pay fines for noncompliance.

How to spread learning across the populace was indeed a challenge, if one viewed education as being formal, functional knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The very aspects of society that intellectuals celebrated as uniquely American made it difficult to educate the masses. America was diverse—culturally, regionally, and religiously. Settlement patterns varied by region, placing many families at significant distance from each other, and from seats of government. Deeply held cultural traditions varied as well, leaving people in some parts of the United States more inclined to value formal education or pay taxes to support it, and people in other parts less inclined.

There were other problems as well, more serious and intractable, that the American Revolution did not resolve. Should women have an equal right to education? What about the nearly one-fifth of Americans who lived as chattel slaves? Or the free people of color who were nevertheless marked by the shade of their skin?

Educating the mass of citizens, whether in the positive sense of enhancing the interest of liberty or in the negative sense of social control, or some of both, became a central preoccupation of intellectuals in the 1780s and 1790s. Interest ran across the political spectrum. Even before the war with Great Britain ended, Thomas Jefferson joined John Adams and other leaders in the effort to write grand educational provisions into state law.² Over the course of the 1780s, as America slouched toward a replacement for the Articles of Confederation, the question of education in the republic gained popularity in magazines and newspapers.³

Among these were fully formed, almost utopian plans for systems of mass education through public schooling. Benjamin Rush, a civic leader and one of this country's Founding Fathers, published essays recommending a statewide system of public education for Pennsylvania, from universal elementary school through college, for girls as well as boys; Noah Webster traveled across the country delivering lectures and selling his new American textbooks, before using his federalist newspaper, the *American Minerva*, as a mouthpiece for educational reform; George Washington urged Congress to found a national university. Alongside a similar university proposal at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, James Madison proposed that the federal government be empowered to "encourage, by proper premiums and provisions, the advancement of useful knowledge and discoveries."⁴

Madison's educational proposals failed, but the APS picked up the slack, serving as the nation's leading intellectual institu-

tion and even, for a time, the informal library of Congress. Centered in the heart of what was then America's largest city and capital, Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Society was uniquely situated to take a crack at the challenge of education. Founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743, the APS sought to encourage and disseminate useful scientific and philosophical information. It was the age of associations, when Enlightenment intellectuals across Europe and, to a lesser extent, America formed clubs and academies to share ideas and discoveries.

By the 1790s, the APS had become a significant institution in the transatlantic intellectual world, maintaining correspondence with similar institutions all over Europe. For a time, APS facilities

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were home to portions of the University of Pennsylvania. The membership list boasted the names of leading men of the day, Founding Fathers and European Enlightenment thinkers from Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Rush to Linnaeus, Lafayette, Talleyrand, Priestley, Condorcet, and Crèvecoeur. In their regular meetings, the society read and discussed contemporary issues in science, government, economics, and philosophy. A core of seven appointed members from various fields met at least once a month, usually joined by others who dropped in.⁵

The APS began awarding its first prize, the Magellanic Premium, for discoveries "relating to navigation, astronomy, or natural philosophy," in 1786. But the idea of sponsoring prize contests was much older, of medieval origins, and had become a staple of various European learned societies, which routinely sponsored essay and scientific contests on a variety of subjects. The most famous precursor to the APS education prize came from an Academy of Lyon essay contest, sponsored by the Abbé Raynal, in 1780. History teachers will appreciate the topic's enduring appeal: "Was the Discovery of America a blessing or a curse to mankind?"⁶

The Contest Question

As with all utopian projects, the dreams implicit in the APS education prize exceeded the reality. The education question did not frame an open competition of new ideas, but instead reflected the pet educational reform agendas of APS members. It had two very distinct parts. The first half of the question dealt with what

should be taught: curriculum and possibly pedagogy (as implied by the word “system”). “[Write] an essay on a system of liberal education, and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the government, and best calculated to promote the general welfare of the United States.”

Rather than make its question general, the APS asked for specific types of education, from two very different traditions. The first, “liberal education,” referred to elite education and required a discussion of college curriculum that, at the time, aroused passionate debate over the role of ancient languages. On the other hand, the phrase “literary instruction” could refer to mass education in basic literacy (reading and writing), or to academy- or college-level curriculum in vernacular literature. Both of these, the question challenged, should reflect and promote the “genius” of the newly minted government and the interest of the nation as a whole.

The men of the APS asked for a single plan that would cover the entire United States, encompassing primary and secondary education.

In post-Revolutionary America, a liberal education centered on the “dead” languages of Greek and Latin and was, to a large degree, synonymous with an academy diploma or college degree, but it was both more and less. It was an education afforded by free time for contemplation—quite literally, it was “liberal” in the sense that education in ancient Athens was for free men of means and not slaves (although some women had one too).⁷ Invoking a “liberal education” entitled a man to be heard on matters of politics and government. For many, a liberal education also implied a certain moral stature, even in the case of a woman.⁸ A few periodicals even aimed to provide a “liberal education” to those who lacked one, by giving readers a monthly dose of high intellectual culture.⁹

The dominant ideologies of the day argued that the American republic could survive only if its people were virtuous and well informed, and their rulers even more so.¹⁰ But while there was widespread consensus among writers (especially among those who *had* a liberal education) that a liberal education was necessary for creating future leaders, writers generally split into two camps with regard to the future of liberal education. Traditionalists championed the continued study of the oratorical and moral traditions of classics and classical languages, developing increasingly sophisticated rationales for existing practice. Reformers of a more philosophical mindset—outspoken APS men such as Franklin and Rush—argued that a liberal education should be more useful, inquiry-based, and scientific.¹¹

The second part of the APS essay question was really a separate one: to develop a practical plan to build and operate public schools across the nation. It read, “comprehending, also, a plan for instituting and conducting public schools in this country on principles of the most extensive utility.”

This “public schools” portion of the question reflected a preoccupation of prominent leaders with a well-informed and virtuous citizenry on the one hand, and a homogeneous citizenry on the other. While the word “public” was not meant in the modern sense of the word, neither did it reflect any one specific definition or consistent usage. It could merely refer to education taking place in public, as opposed to in the home. But it was more than that too. The public schools described by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, for example, were to be funded in part with rent from public land and overseen democratically by local voters. New Englanders funded their public schools partially through local tax and defined them legally as having democratic, lay control by citizens, while also encouraging local clergy to oversee them (although some towns preferred to pay a fine rather than keep a school).¹² Southern states almost universally rejected the notion of public support for common education. And at the collegiate level, public education had yet other meanings. Graduates of Dartmouth referred to themselves in 1786 as having a “publick liberal education.”¹³

What the APS probably meant by public schools in its contest question was that the schools should exist in the public sphere, for the use and benefit of the general public, at some form of common expense. Presumably, though it was not stated explicitly, these schools needed to embrace the curricular concerns of the first part of the question, that is, liberal education and literary instruction. Finally, these schools needed to be described in a single plan that would cover the whole nation, from the rural South, which had no tradition of public support of education, to New England, which boasted one of the most literate, best-educated populations in the world.¹⁴

Thus, the APS education contest did not ask for the best or most original essay on education, but rather for an essay on specific reforms. Beginning with “liberal education,” it moved outward to increasingly general issues, with the unifying themes of utility and national character. Despite its eagerness to emphasize the unique aspects of American society and government, however, the APS addressed the very same issues that concerned the French learned societies. The men of the APS asked for a single plan that would cover the entire United States, encompassing primary and secondary education, taking a stand on the issue of liberal education, and doing so in a way that was practical and uniquely American.

Vying for the Prize

The society placed advertisements in Philadelphia periodicals (which had a national reach) in May of 1795, setting a deadline for the education contest of January 1, 1797. A year passed with no mention of an entry. By October 1796, there was still no mention of an entry, so the society tried more advertising. Finally, on December 30, it reported having three essays. By a new April 1, 1797, deadline, the APS would have a total of seven.¹⁵

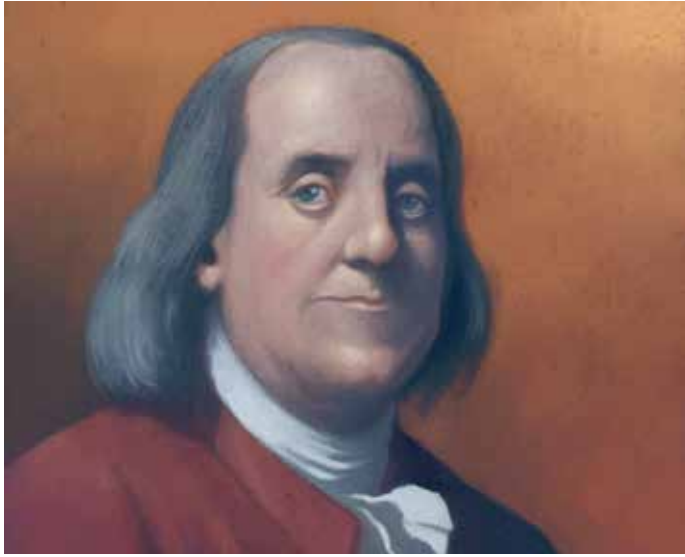
The peer reviewers followed a strict review methodology. Each entry had to be anonymous, accompanied by a separate

envelope with the name and address of the author, which would be opened only in the case of a winning essay. The APS secretary numbered and/or titled each essay, and someone read it aloud to the members of the society. The APS then assigned each to a review committee, which was to write an impartial summary for the benefit of the whole body.

Not all entries were created equal, however, and not all reviews were quite as impartial as they may have claimed. Each of the three strongest essays was long and carefully crafted, and arrived by the original deadline. Once the essays were assigned to review committees, they were numbered: No. 1 (written by

omy between elite liberal education and mass education—sound educational principles were universal. Smith’s radical plan eliminated dead languages for all but university students. He made no argument for religious instruction.¹⁷

Contender No. 2: Samuel Knox wrote the most thorough and detailed plan. Knox was a clergyman and a veteran teacher of more than 15 years, and his 200-page plan reflected an intimate knowledge of the classroom. Knox imagined a state-run, secular, four-tiered system of mass education for males, including primary or “parish” schools, “county schools” or academies, state colleges, and a national university. Like Smith, Knox argued that



The seven entries reveal a decided lack of consensus about American education.

Samuel Harrison Smith), No. 2 (written by Samuel Knox), and No. 3 (anonymous, but very likely written by Rev. William Smith). The author of No. 3 hoped to collect the essay in the event it lost the competition, asking the committee to return it care of a nearby tavern keeper. When No. 3 did lose, the essay was duly delivered—and thus does not survive in the archives of the APS. What does survive, however, is the review committee’s report.¹⁶

Contender No. 1: Samuel Harrison Smith, a newspaper editor in Philadelphia, wrote a highly theoretical, 79-page argument built upon the prevailing discussion in Scottish philosophy about the nature of virtue: were men born inherently good or evil, or were they blank slates, or somewhere in between? From a lengthy discussion of what he saw as the connection between “virtue and wisdom,” he proceeded to outline a three-tiered system of free, compulsory public education for the boys and men of the United States funded through property tax.

Smith argued that the first-tier schools should be of two types: primary schools for boys ages 5 to 10, and secondary schools for boys ages 10 to 18. These should focus primarily on reading, writing, and arithmetic (the three Rs, the saying goes), but at the secondary level should also include history, geography, mechanics, memorizing portions of the Constitution, and other “useful” studies. The second tier, state colleges, and the third, a national university, would be available at public expense to a select group of students promoted from lower schools, as well as to those who could afford tuition. Smith rejected the dichot-

each level should select a small percentage of students to move to the next, but unlike Smith, Knox saw clearer distinctions between education for the masses and education for the elite. Primary schools would teach the three Rs, but academies should emphasize Ancient Greek and Latin first, followed by French and arithmetic.

Knox’s plans for colleges and a national university did not imagine anything unusual, except that he punctuated his plans with obsessive detail, from the size and relative position of professors’ residences to the design of the iron gates. Although Knox was a clergyman, he placed relatively little importance on religious education, urging schools at all levels to protect freedom of conscience by avoiding sectarian instruction and limiting religious content to brief, universalist prayers at the start and finish of the day. He also urged a uniform collection of national textbooks, and state boards of education to oversee local schools. He conceded the possibility that local families may want to send their girls to primary school, in which case he argued that all schoolmasters should be married, so that their wives could teach separate classes for girls. As with all the essayists, he did not discuss race.¹⁸

Contender No. 3: This essay has gone unnoticed by historians, though significant artifacts of it survive either as quotations or in summary. Forty-seven pages in length, the language is provocative, as the committee noted, and the proposal differs from its peers on key points. The author was probably Rev. William Smith, former provost of the University of Pennsylvania and

founder of Washington College. First, Rev. Smith put nonsectarian religious instruction front and center in his proposal, writing, “Morality was ever constructed as inseparable from the principles of Religion.” At higher levels of education, Rev. Smith saw no conflict between science and giving “due homage to the Supreme Creator who established its Laws.”

As did most of the others, Rev. Smith proposed a three-tiered system of schools, comprising free primary schools for poor children—presumably both girls and boys, since they were to be taught by “masters and mistresses”—and offering instruction in “national language, Arithmetic, morality, and a general descrip-



tion of the terrestrial globe.” These schools would be run by justices of the peace or “corporations.” At the next level, central schools or academics would provide two separate courses—a short course for future teachers and a longer academic course that would be the equivalent of college. At the highest level, a national university would set the standards for all levels of education, provide the highest levels of education available, and provide inspectors for lower schools. Existing colleges and universities could become “central schools” in this plan. At the end of the essay, Rev. Smith listed an unusual provision: schoolmistresses would be ranked equally with professors at the central schools, potentially creating a professional teaching career for educated women.¹⁹

Other entrants: There were four weaker and shorter submissions as well. One written by Francis Hoskins, a Philadelphia accountant, focused on classroom concerns—the school schedule, rewards and punishments, schoolhouse architecture, and teachers. Another essay was likely submitted by John Hobson, a Unitarian minister from Birmingham, England, who fled to America after a mob burned down his church and home. He wrestled with curriculum theory; discussed teaching literacy to children, including the use of phonetics; and laid out a system of building, funding, and maintaining public schools through a statewide property tax.

Two others remain anonymous, despite extensive archival research to determine the authors’ identities, but both appear to have been connected to the study of medicine, as students or

possibly faculty of the University of Pennsylvania. One author, with the pseudonym “Hand,” wrote that a national university should oversee all education by setting national standards. In addition, he believed that higher education should take a more direct role in managing common schools, training and overseeing teachers, and providing professional development in the form of lectures on special topics. The final contestant, “Freedom,” argued that the acquisition of literacy was a mechanical art, virtually devoid of thought or personal expression. He then devoted his essay to weighing every aspect of the academic curriculum against the idea of “utility” and emphasized basic medi-

State-sponsored public education has become a universal public good, found in nearly every nook of the globe.

cal training, no doubt a response to the deadly epidemics that had begun to sweep through Philadelphia in the 1790s.

And the Winner Is...

At a June 1797 meeting, society president Thomas Jefferson ordered a special meeting to judge the seven entries for the education prize. For one month, the seven essays lay together on a table, inside Philosophical Hall, which the society kept open every day (except on Sundays) so that members had “ample opportunity of estimating the comparative merits of the Essays on this important Subject.” The general public was not invited.²⁰

The seven entries reveal a decided lack of consensus about American education—even in a context as selective as the APS contest. Written as questions, these uncertainties sound hauntingly familiar to educationists of any generation: How can (or should) religion be taught in public schools? Is higher education an entitlement or a privilege? Should schools prepare students to be better workers, better thinkers, or better human beings? What role should the federal government have in dictating local school policy?

Given their high aspirations, it should be no surprise that the members of the APS were frustrated with the results: only three strong contenders. Finally, in December of 1797, the APS decided that Samuel Harrison Smith and Samuel Knox should share the prize. But the body resolved that neither essay was exactly what it was looking for, and immediately explored the possibility of a second contest. It never happened. Over the ensuing century, the

winning essays made their way into the canon of early republican writing on education, while the contest became an iconic moment for historians of American education.

Taken together, the essays provide us with a window into the ideas and beliefs of educational reformers at the birth of the United States. While the educational writings of more prominent leaders are well known—Jefferson’s plans for Virginia, Benjamin Rush’s for Pennsylvania, and Noah Webster’s textbooks for the whole nation, for example—the APS contest introduces us to a second tier of educational reformers: a newspaper publisher, an accountant, the principal of an academy, a political refugee, a



former university head, and two writers who remain anonymous. The winning essays by Smith and Knox provide us with substantial, well-crafted arguments drawing together the best educational literature of their time. Yet the losing essays, too, give us an indication of the problems and solutions of American education through the eyes of more ordinary men.

Why should their vision matter? It’s fair to say that all the essays favored the same general late-18th-century Enlightenment orientation as the APS, and were thus not indicative of the full range of views on education at the time. But we must also recognize that the men of the APS (and others like them) led the revolution, wrote the Declaration of Independence and federal and state constitutions, and served in the highest political offices in the land. The essays of the APS contest offer us a link between the political vision of the United States and its educational significance. What did the Founding Fathers think about public education in America? It’s not an easy question to answer, but the APS contest is a great place to start.

The award of the prize in 1797 to Smith and Knox did not signal the end of the conversation about education in the republic, but instead marked its beginning. In the intervening centuries, state-sponsored public education has become a universal public good, found in nearly every nook of the globe, sponsored to some degree by every stable national government. And whether one is in the United States, United Kingdom, or United Arab Emirates, the provision of free, universal, and state-regulated education has become one of the standard measures of the

health and well-being of any society. If the APS contest is, for the historian of the early republic, a rich source for understanding the 1790s, it is also, for the scholar of modernity, a useful starting point for understanding the relationship between public schools and state building that has laid the foundation of global liberalism.

Whether we view the great contest narrowly or generally, as a source for political theory or historical understanding (or both), the challenge of finding the ideal system of education for the United States remains as relevant and fruitful today as it did when the APS deemed it as being worthy of a contest. The knowledge it produced is still useful. □

Endnotes

1. “Premiums,” *The American Monthly Review, or, Literary Journal*, May 1795, American Periodicals Series Online (hereafter cited as APSO); and Minute Book of the American Philosophical Society, American Philosophical Society Archives (hereafter cited as APS Minute Book), entry for May 1, 1795.
2. Thomas Jefferson, “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” in *Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 365–373. John Adams was the primary author of the Massachusetts State Constitution of 1780.
3. Readers may refer to the APSO, which allows for keyword searches online. The number of articles containing the word “education” jumps dramatically over the course of the 1780s.
4. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 2:321–322.
5. Merle Odgers, “Education and the American Philosophical Society,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 87, no. 1 (1943): 20–23. The website of the APS also contains useful information on its founding and prominent members, at www.amphilsoc.org. See also John L. Brooke, “Ancient Lodges and Self-Created Societies: Voluntary Association and the Public Sphere in the Early Republic,” in *Launching the “Extended Republic”: The Federalist Era*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 273–359; Bernard Fay, “Learned Societies in Europe and America in the 18th Century,” *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 255–266; and Verner W. Crane, “The Club of Honest Whigs: Friends of Science and Liberty,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 23 (1966): 210–233. On the presence of the university, see Nancy Beadie, “Encouraging Useful Knowledge” in the Early Republic: The Roles of State Governments and Voluntary Organizations,” in *The Founding Fathers, Education, and “The Great Contest”: The American Philosophical Society Prize of 1797*, ed. Benjamin Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 85–102; and Allen Oscar Hansen, *Liberalism and American Education in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: MacMillan, 1926), 106.
6. Fay, “Learned Societies,” 261; and Gerald A. Danzer, “Has the Discovery of America Been Useful or Hurtful to Mankind? Yesterday’s Questions and Today’s Students,” *History Teacher* 7, no. 2 (1974): 192–206.
7. Andrew Ahlgren and Carol M. Boyer, “Visceral Priorities: Roots of Confusion in Liberal Education,” *Journal of Higher Education* 52 (1981): 173–181.
8. *The New-Haven Gazette, and the Connecticut Magazine*, August 24, 1786, 219, APSO.
9. “Introduction: Addressed to the Youth of These States,” *The Christian’s, Scholar’s, and Farmer’s Magazine*, August 1775, 353, APSO; Saul Sack, “Liberal Education: What Was It? What Is It?” *History of Education Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1962): 210–224; and Ahlgren and Boyer, “Visceral Priorities.”
10. Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Educated Citizenry in America 1650–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Richard D. Brown, “Bulwark of Revolutionary Liberty: Thomas Jefferson’s and John Adams’s Programs for an Informed Citizenry,” in *Thomas Jefferson and the Education of a Citizen*, ed. James Gilreath (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002).
11. Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).
12. David Tyack, Thomas James, and Aaron Benavot, *Law and the Shaping of American Education, 1785–1954* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 20–42; and Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 182–190. On Massachusetts and Connecticut, see Benjamin Justice, “The Place of Religion in Early National School Plans,” in Justice, *Founding Fathers*, 155–174.
13. “Commencement at Dartmouth College,” *Worcester Magazine, Containing Politicks, Miscellanies, Poetry, and News*, October 1786, 344, APSO.
14. E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 384–385.
15. APS Minute Book.
16. A team of researchers worked together to identify the contestants, including Kim Tolley, Lisa Green, Eric Strome, Campbell Scribner, Nia Soumakis, Christina Davis, and Michael Hevel. Their work, including transcripts of the original essays, may be found in Justice, *Founding Fathers*.
17. See Justice, *Founding Fathers*, 205–217.
18. See Justice, *Founding Fathers*, 219–232.
19. See Justice, *Founding Fathers*, 233–238.
20. *Early Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge* (Philadelphia: McCalla & Staveland, 1884), 258–260.