by Roscoe L. West

President of the College from 1930–57

Editor’s Note: In recognition of our 150th, we thought it useful to recall why the College was established in the first place, and what it meant for the development of public education in America. This essay is a chapter titled "The Teacher Problem" from Elementary Education in New Jersey: A History, authored by West and published in 1964 under the authority of the New Jersey Tercentenary Commission. It is reprinted with the permission of West’s estate.

It has already been noted that in the colonial days, in addition to the schools maintained by the religious sects, two other kinds of schools developed—the "Dame school" in a home and the district school maintained in a building, often contributed by a group or by an individual and made available for school uses. Parents had to pay tuition in the "Dame school," which was really a private school. In the district school, maintained by the voters, fees were also paid, sometimes supplemented by money voted by the citizens. The teacher in the Dame school was the matron of the household who had enough education to teach the pupils the rudiments offered. The district school had great difficulty in finding teachers and would often advertise in the newspapers for a suitable instructor. The following, which appeared in the Pennsylvania Gazette on December 11, 1755, is typical: 

Wanted—A sober person that is capable of teaching a School; such an one, coming well recommended, may find encouragement by applying to David Stratton of Evesham in the County of Burlington, West New Jersey.

The Trustees hired the teachers who, without examination or license, started on the appointed day to "keep school" as their work was called. The schools that could pay the largest compensation got the best teachers, and the poorer districts had to take what came to them.

Teachers would often stay for a single quarter and then leave for a better position or some other kind of work, so that a given school might have several teachers in a year. No marked changes occurred in this general scheme through the entire eighteenth century except that a few teachers educated in New England came into the schools of New Jersey. These men had sometimes had part or all of a college education but had had no special training for teaching.

Another type of school, known as the Lancasterian school, made its appearance in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It derived from Joseph Lancaster, an Englishman who invented and promoted the idea of having a large number of pupils under one teacher, with older, brighter boys being assigned as "monitors" to hear groups of about ten younger children recite their lessons. The teacher would instruct the monitors and then a monitor would instruct a group according to what he had learned. Such a method obviously depended on rote recitations of facts that could be recorded and given to the monitor to check. Classes were inexpensive and thus appealed to the taxpayer.

Lancaster came to Mount Holly in 1784 and in the following year several teachers trained in New York came to the schools of Mount Holly. Other schools

It has already been noted that the campaign for professional education of teachers was a companion of that for the free public school.
Why was it ‘Normal’?

Ever wonder about the origin of the phrase "normal school"—as in our original name of The New Jersey State Normal School? Was it a subtle way to suggest that other types of schools were strange, or subnormal perhaps?

Dictionaries suggest a French connection. The first use of the term in American English is said to be in 1839 when Horace Mann, then secretary of the brand-new Massachusetts State Board of Education, was promoting a new type of school designed specifically to instruct young men and women in the skills required to teach, especially the elementary grades. The two first “normal schools” opened in Lexington and Westfield, MA, that year. Mann, who had studied European educational systems, certainly was aware that France and Germany already had, for many years, state-supported schools to prepare their teachers. The first government-sponsored school appeared in France in 1794 and was known as the "école (school) normale." The second word derived from the Latin norma, meaning a carpenter’s or mason’s square. The French thus named their school to suggest it as a pattern or standard for other schools yet to come.

Bruce VanDusen

In many of the counties, the freeholders neglected to appoint examiners, as the law provided, and when the district trustees hired teachers, several weeks would often elapse before the teacher went to the town superintendent to be licensed. Obviously, the latter could hardly refuse, except in very unusual cases. As a substitute for an institution for the education of teachers, associations of teachers were formed and county institutes organized. The first meeting was held in Somerville in the fall of 1833 with speakers from Connecticut and Massachusetts as well as local people. It was attended by 62 teachers and was said by the state superintendent to have been a “glorious meeting.” Specific instruction was given concerning teaching methods and there were general lectures on duties of teachers, how to handle problems of discipline, and accomplishments which should be expected of pupils.

Christopher Columbus Hoagland had been primarily responsible for this institute and in 1855 he was appointed the first agent of the State Teachers Association. Dr. Hoagland was to visit all parts of the state and “in every practical way to labor for the establishment of a normal school.” Prominent men who were very influential in the campaign for a normal school were Principal John T. Clark of New Brunswick, editor David Naar of Trenton, State Superintendent John H. Phillips, Richard S. Field of Princeton, and Governor Rodman M. Price. The State Teachers Association awarded a prize of twenty dollars to Principal Clark for his essay on education in the state. In it he said: Surely, if anyone needs professional preparation before entering upon his duty, it is the teacher. We must have a State Normal School, with a Model School attached, wherein our young men and women shall be fitted for teaching, in the same manner as persons are fitted for other professions—viz., by an apprenticeship, as a business for life.

After the establishment of the first state normal school in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1839, three others were opened in Massachusetts, one in Providence, Rhode Island, one in New Britain, Connecticut, one in Albany, New York, and one in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The New Jersey campaigners used letters praising the work of these institutions and worked on the pride of their fellow citizens not to lag behind their sister states. Teachers from New England who came to New Jersey schools were also influential in the establishment of such a school. Between 1850 and 1855, several conventions were held of both laymen and teachers for the promotion of a normal school. Resolutions were passed and petitions sent to the Legislature. Finally, in February, 1855, a bill was passed and signed by Governor Price. Several communities made bids for the school site, but it was finally located in Trenton, and opened October 1, 1855, in a temporary building with 15 students registered. The permanent building on North Clinton Avenue, financed by citizens of Trenton, was occupied in 1856.

In his report for 1855, State Superintendent John H. Phillips, commenting on the establishment of the State Normal School, had this to say about its meaning for education in the State:

It is a remarkable fact that no state in the union, nor nation of the old world, has perfected in system of public instruction without schools for the training and education of teachers, established and maintained by public authority; and it is no less remarkable that with nearly three hundred such schools now in successful operation in this country and in Europe, there is not on record a single instance, where the experiment has been tried under liberal legislative patronage, of the abandonment of this agency in providing good teachers for the public schools.

William F. Phelps was appointed principal. He had graduated from the New York State Normal School in Albany and had taught there for several years. The tradition of “selective admission” was established in the first year, as entrance examinations were given on November fourth (which was also Thanksgiving Day) to those who had reported on October first. Tests were given in arithmetic, geography, English grammar, reading, spelling, and penmanship. Some of the questions would find it difficult to answer the arithmetic and geography questions. All of the 15 students who had been in the school since October first and the date of this examination were allowed to remain.

Phelps believed that those who were admitted to the school should possess a good academic education, and be visualized the school as one which would train teachers in the theory of teaching and give them initial experience in the
of Descriptive and Physical Geography, Human and Comparative Physiology, Elements of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry. The students, under the heading of “Ethics,” studied Moral Philosophy, Natural Theology, the Constitutions of the United States and New Jersey, School Law of New Jersey, and the History of the United States. The “Theory and Practice of Teaching” consisted of Intellectual Philosophy, Study of School Systems, Lectures on Education and Details of Teaching and Practice in the Model School. Vocal music was given throughout the course. Apparently no attention was paid to ancient or European history, not much to science as we know it, very little to psychology or child study except as it came into practice teaching. Art is not mentioned except in relation to drawing maps and objects. In her diary, Mary Jane Larison put down the program of one of the classes in the Model School for a forenoon. The entire time was devoted to arithmetic, spelling, writing, reading, and geography.

One of the strong elements of the program introduced into the Normal School was observation of good teaching and practice with pupils in a typical classroom. During the first year, a so-called Model School was opened on the first floor of the Normal School. Later, having proved its usefulness, the Model School occupied a building of its own adjacent to the Normal School. This was the beginning of a policy which has grown in importance to the present day. The schools used for the purpose of giving actual experience to the teacher-trainees have been called “Training Schools,” and later “Demonstration Schools,” and sometimes “Laboratory Schools.” Whatever they were called, observation and study of good teaching in such a school, and practice in the school or in cooperating schools of the State, have been keystones of the teacher education program in New Jersey in all its normal schools and in the development of the teachers colleges.

The period from 1855 to 1865 was one of slow advance in some fields and of difficulties caused by the Civil War. The original act had authorized the Normal School for a period of five years. Despite some opposition to it, the act was renewed in 1859 for another five years. A class of 32 (21 “ladies” and 11 “gentlemen”) was graduated in 1858 and enrollment grew so that in 1860 there were 58 students (32 women and 26 men), but in 1861 there were only 16 women and 15 men because of the Civil War and attendant financial difficulties. As a matter of fact, many students left and went into teaching without completing the course. The state superintendent reported that by the end of 1858, 264 pupils had been “admitted and instructed” at the normal school, of whom 32 had received the diploma and 114 had stayed for longer or shorter periods and had left the school without graduating. Most of those who left before graduating were teaching.

But the reports of the town superintendents indicate that a very large majority of them had high hopes that the normal school would in time provide them with well-prepared teachers. Several said that they could get some good teachers from those who showed up with training in other states or with some kind of advanced education. Many, however, echoed John Ford of Hanover who wrote, “We are still suffering from a scarcity of teachers of the right kind and from the still more frequent changes of those we had. It is becoming a more and more serious question: What are our schools to do?”

Ephraim Bateman of Fairfield said:

The teachers employed, I regret to say, are too many of them young and inexperienced; that teaching as a temporary expedient, intending to abandon it as soon as a more lucrative situation shall offer. They are, alas! often lamentably deficient in much that goes to constitute a good teacher.

The campaign for the establishment of a state normal school gave an impetus to efforts in some cities to give professional training to their teachers, even if it had to be on a part-time basis. Newark started Saturday classes for its teachers in 1855. This was the foundation for what in 1879 became a one-year training school and a two-year school in 1888. It continued as a city normal school until 1931 when it became a state normal school. Paterson started evening and Saturday classes in 1855. In 1882 this school had its first class of high school graduates; in 1897 it went on to a two-year course and continued as a city normal school until taken over by the state in 1923. Jersey City in 1856 began Saturday classes which lasted until 1879 when evening training classes were held in the high school.

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Have you a teacher's certificate, or
What special rules would you prefer
How would you teach morals and
In what grade would you prefer to
say that anyone passing all these
the schools of some large city.” This
and to draw up a plan for organizing
previously assigned by the examiners,
lecture to a class on some subject
Each candidate also had “to deliver a
the addition of examination in any
Grad Certificates had to be taken with
examinations as for Second and Third
Grade Certificates had to be 25 years old, with
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Grade Certificate, but the certificate
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four. Candidates for the First Grade
Certificate had to be 25 years old, with
five years of experience. The same
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Grade Certificates had to be taken with
the addition of examination in any
three of 16 pedagogical texts offered.
Each candidate also had “to deliver a
lecture to a class on some subject
previously assigned by the examiners,
and to draw up a plan for organizing
the schools of some large city.” This
license was good for life, and one might
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hurdles deserved it.
In the ensuing years, some districts
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History, Rhetoric, Mental Philosophy;
English and American Literature, Natural
Philosophy, Chemistry, Geology, Botany,
Physiology, Theory and Practice of
Teaching, and the School Law of New
Jersey. Now, in 1867, for the first time
since its establishment in 1855, the
graduates of the Normal School were
given this certificate without examination
and non-graduates were given a
temporary license good for one year.

Candidates for the Second Grade
Certificate had to be 21 years of age,
with four years of experience, and take
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1. a. What is the area of the
rectangle? b. What is its
perimeter? c. How many
squares are in the rectangle?
2. What is the sum of the
numbers 1, 2, and 3?
3. What is the product of
the numbers 2, 3, and 4?
4. What is the quotient of
the numbers 12 and 4?
5. What is the difference of
the numbers 7 and 3?
6. What is the average of
the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4?
7. What number is one more
than 8?
8. What number is one less
than 7?
9. What number is between
6 and 8?
10. What number is the
square root of 16?
11. What is the value of
2 + 3 x 4?
12. What is the value of
3 x 2 + 4?
13. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 4?
14. What is the value of
2 x 3 + 4?
15. What is the value of
2 + 3 x 2?
16. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2?
17. What is the value of
2 x 3 + 2?
18. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 4 - 2?
19. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 4 + 2?
20. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 + 4?
21. What is the value of
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22. What is the value of
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23. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 x 3?
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2 x 3 x 2 x 4 + 2?
26. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 x 4 - 2 x 4?
27. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 x 4 + 2 x 4?
28. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 x 4 - 2 x 4 - 2?
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37. What is the value of
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38. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 x 4 - 2 x 4 - 2 x 3 - 2 x 2 - 2 x 1 - 2?
39. What is the value of
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2 x 3 x 2 x 4 - 2 x 4 - 2 x 3 - 2 x 2 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2?
41. What is the value of
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51. What is the value of
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52. What is the value of
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53. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 x 4 + 2 x 4 - 2 x 3 - 2 x 2 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1?
54. What is the value of
2 x 3 x 2 x 4 - 2 x 4 - 2 x 3 - 2 x 2 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1 - 2 x 0 - 2 x 1 - 2?