

# Breaking the Bonds of Ignorance: Democracy and Education in Illinois During the Age of Jackson

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The Jacksonian Era, which lasted from the 1820's to the late 1840's, witnessed America shift from being an agricultural society to a more industrial one. Factories were built across the United States and the cotton textile workforce tripled. As infrastructure popped up across the countryside, roads and canals helped tie the country together. By 1840 there were over 3,200 miles of railroad tracks. The United States became a continental nation that expanded from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, largely due to the expansion of American transportation infrastructure. Federalist and Antifederalist ideology became a thing of the past and new political parties, such as the Democratic Party, came into existence.<sup>1</sup> The torch had been passed from the founding fathers to the next generation of Americans. Nothing, however, tells more about this age than the rise of democracy.

During the Jacksonian era, all white men were enfranchised, and in 1824 the popular vote was counted for the first time. While it is estimated that only twenty-seven percent of the population voted in the presidential election of 1824, an estimated eighty percent of voters went to the polls in 1840.<sup>2</sup> That kind of voter turnout is unheard of in the United States today. The cause of the

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<sup>1</sup> John Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*. (New York: The Random House Trade Publishing Group, 2008), 46-48.

<sup>2</sup> Dave Leip, "Atlas of United States Presidential Elections." <http://uselectionatlas.org/>

rise in democracy cannot be attributed to one man, but Andrew Jackson personified this new dream for America. In 1828, Jackson wrote, “As long as the government heeds the popular will, the republic is safe.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that Jackson keenly understood his populace, one area that he did not fully grasp was the importance of education in a democratic society. Jackson was a self-made man who had no formal education—a fact that was very appealing to voters.<sup>4</sup> But Jackson considered himself a Jeffersonian, which to him meant that the people were sovereign and the government’s job was to protect their rights.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson understood that the only way a democracy could work is if there is an educated citizenry. In a letter to Richard Price, dated January 8<sup>th</sup> 1789, Jefferson wrote, “wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government.”<sup>6</sup> It was no coincidence that the number of public schools increased substantially during the Jacksonian Era, for the public wanted schools, and were determined to have them. During Jackson’s presidency from 1829 to 1837, the number of liberal arts colleges founded was twice that of the previous decade.<sup>7</sup> This was a reflection of the democratic ideals of the times. An educated population is needed in a democratic system. People must be informed and able to construct their own beliefs and opinions in a way that is beneficial for the country as a whole. Nowhere was this belief embraced more than in Illinois during the early 1820’s, but as time went on it became a struggle between Jacksonian and Jeffersonian democratic ideology. This can be seen during the early period of Illinois statehood.

Illinois became a state in 1818. There was no mention of education whatsoever in the original state constitution. However, the first Illinois General Assembly, that very same year, declared that Illinois would create a system of public education that would

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<sup>3</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Mayer. *American Ideas and Education*. (Columbus: C. E. Merrill Books, 1964), 234.

<sup>5</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Julian P. Boyd, et al, ed. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Vol. 1. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 420.

<sup>7</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 47.

be available to all children pending Illinois's financial stability.<sup>8</sup> It was up to a War of 1812 veteran named Joseph Duncan from Jackson County, named after Andrew Jackson, and Governor Edward Coles to initiate the promise of the first Illinois General Assembly.

Governor Coles was essential in Illinois's early embrace of free public education. Coles was a former neighbor and personal friend of Thomas Jefferson. Although he had owned slaves while living in Virginia, he was a staunch abolitionist. He moved to Illinois in 1819 after serving six years as President James Madison's personal secretary. Coles took his slaves along with him down the Ohio River and emancipated them as soon as they made it to free territory. Furthermore, he gave a farm to the head of each family. The Jeffersonian influence can clearly be seen in this act.<sup>9</sup> In a letter dated August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1814, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Coles, "the love of justice and the love of country plead equally the cause of these people (slaves), and it is mortal reproach to us that they have they should have pleaded it so long in vain." Jefferson actually wanted Coles to stay in Virginia and fight for the abolishment of slavery in the state, but instead Coles came to Illinois.<sup>10</sup> He was elected governor in 1822 and believed that the best way to end slavery was to educate the masses. Governor Coles said in his first message to the General Assembly that, "there is no recommendation therefore more due from my station than that of a competent provision for the education of the rising and future generations." Also like Jefferson, Coles believed democracy required popular education as well.<sup>11</sup> Both of these ideas were seen in a bill that would be brought to his desk for his signature two years later.

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<sup>8</sup> H.G. Walker, "The Development of the Free Public High School in Illinois During the Nineteenth Century." *History of Education Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (December 1964)

<sup>9</sup> Alta P. Rahn, *A Study of the Forces Affecting School Legislation of Illinois from 1818 to 1838*. (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1974), 35-37.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814*. Letter. From Princeton University Library, *The Papers of Edward Coles, 1797 to 1881*.

<sup>11</sup> Francis G. Blaire, *Centennial Celebration of The Enactment of the First Free School Law in Illinois*. (Springfield: Schnepf & Barnes, 1925), 60.

In 1824, Duncan introduced the *Act for the Establishment of Free Schools*.<sup>12</sup> It was the most far-reaching education legislation in the western United States since the Northwest Ordinance of 1789, which declared that, “schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged,” in the western territories.<sup>13</sup> Governor Coles enthusiastically signed the “Free School Law,” as it quickly became known, on January 15, 1825. Outside of New England, it was the only tax-supported public school system.<sup>14</sup> It was consistent with Jeffersonian democratic philosophy. As seen in the preamble:

To enjoy our rights and liberties we must understand them; their security and protection ought to be the first object of a free people; and it is a well-established fact no nation has ever continued long in the enjoyment of civil and political freedom, which was not both virtuous and enlightened; and believing that advancement of literature always has been, and ever will be the means of developing more fully the rights of man; and that the mind of every citizen of every republic is the common property of society and constitutes the basis of its strength and happiness; it is considered the peculiar duty of a free government, like ours, to encourage and extend the improvement and cultivation of the intellectual energies of the whole.<sup>15</sup>

These words were written as if Thomas Jefferson had inscribed them himself. It was his belief that the only way democracy could work was if voters were educated enough to understand what they were voting for; the masses cannot enjoy their rights if they do not even understand what rights they have. It is therefore the duty of the government, that allows its people to have these rights, to educate them and help them understand and enjoy the world they live in. The preamble encourages all of these Jeffersonian beliefs.

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<sup>12</sup> Eliphalet W. Blatchford, *Biographical Sketch of Hon. Joseph Duncan, Fifth Governor of Illinois*, (Chicago: 1905), 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> Northwest Ordinance of 1789.

<sup>14</sup> James Herget, "Democracy Revisited: the Law and School Districts in Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 72, no. 2 (1979): 123-138.

<sup>15</sup> Blaire, *Centennial*, 13.

The Free School Law itself proclaimed that every county in the state would establish at least one school, which allowed all white citizens between the age of five and twenty-one to attend. These schools were to be financed by the citizens of each county. Citizens in each county held meetings in which they elected a clerk, treasurer, collector, and assessor. The clerk's job was to keep track of votes and the proceedings of each meeting. They were required to send their records to the state government. The treasurer's job was to spend the money from their school district in a way that the majority of voters desired and keep track of expenditures made. It was the collector's job to collect the taxes in their district and to give that money to the treasurer. The assessor was to evaluate their schools and create ways to improve them based on majority opinion. The key part of this law was the "two percent clause," which declared that two percent of taxes collected would go to funding the public schools which would be "divided annually between the different counties if this State in proportion to the number of white inhabitants in each county under the age of twenty-one."<sup>16</sup> This was Jefferson's vision of democratic education at work. He had proposed legislation in Virginia that was very similar to the Free School Law. It was called *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*. Like the Free School Law, the school systems in each district would allow for the education of the masses and represent the popular will of its citizenry.<sup>17</sup>

However, the Free School Law proved to be too forward thinking for the small frontier communities of Illinois. One citizen of Jacksonville spoke of the law, "I remember well the opposition there was to this school law on the part of the poor people, who founded that their children would be educated and wholly unfitted for work on the farm; the very class which the law was intended to benefit opposed it."<sup>18</sup> A year later, during the next session of the Illinois General Assembly, every effort was made to alter the Free School Act. According to Governor Thomas Ford, the education

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<sup>16</sup> Blaire, *Centennial*, 13-15.

<sup>17</sup> Boyd, et al, *Papers*, 526-33.

<sup>18</sup> John Pulliam. "Changing Attitudes toward Free Public Schools in Illinois 1825-1860." *History of Education Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1967), 193.

system that the 1825 law put in place worked extremely well. In his *History of Illinois*, Ford claimed that, “schools flourished in almost every neighborhood.”<sup>19</sup> However, the taxes had proved too costly for the people of Illinois. It did not help that the two major proponents of the law were no longer in the state government. Joseph Duncan had been elected to the United States House of Representatives and Edward Coles retired to Philadelphia. In 1827, the General Assembly struck the first blow to the Free Education Act. Districts could only tax their citizens to fund a school if they obtained written consent from every taxpaying citizen. Then in 1829, the law was repealed and the education of Illinois was reduced to “voluntary subscription.”<sup>20</sup> This move actually reflected the ideas of Andrew Jackson. He believed that in a democratic system people understood and would pursue their own interests. The voluntary system that was created gave citizens the right to send their children to school wherever they wanted or not at all. In this type of system the rights of citizens would not be infringed upon.

Despite these major setbacks of the public education system, the idea for free schooling proposed by the first General Assembly had not disappeared in the minds of some of the citizens of Illinois. In 1833, the Illinois Institute of Education met in Vandalia, declared its belief that education was essential to a republic, and surveyed the education systems all over the state. These surveys requested information in each district on the type of schoolhouse, number of months the school operated, the cost of operation, and willingness to support teachers in their districts.<sup>21</sup> The new life of the common school idea can be attributed to the many migrants that came to Illinois after the removal of the Indians during the Black Hawk War in 1832. These migrants came from all over New England by way of the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. New Englanders were accustomed to a system of free public education.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Ford. *A History of Illinois: From its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847*. (Chicago: S.C. Griggs, 1854), 36.

<sup>20</sup> Herget, *Democracy Revisited*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> Rahn, *A Study*, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, *The Development*, 270.

Ford described northerners as “the most liberal in contributing to whatever is for the public benefit.”<sup>23</sup> To them, free education was not a privilege, but a right. When Alexis De Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830’s he was amazed with the democratic system, the likes of which had not been seen in Europe.

He admired the common schools of New England. In a Jeffersonian way, Tocqueville said, “Give democratic nations education and freedom, and leave them alone. They will soon learn to draw from this world all the benefits which it can afford.”<sup>24</sup> The New Englanders set out to create their own public schools in Illinois. One example of this was a group called the “Yale Band.” They came to Illinois from New England and believed wholeheartedly in the idea of the common school and established Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois.<sup>25</sup> Another example occurred in the, then small, town of Chicago. Chicago established its first public school system in 1835, which was two years before it became a city.<sup>26</sup> The system that was established was very similar to the Free School Act that had been passed a decade before. A group of trustees were elected by the people and would levy and collect taxes to fund the school system. Schooling would be free to all of the estimated 300 students.<sup>27</sup> It was just before this that the man who had introduced the Free School act of 1825 happened to be elected Governor of Illinois.

Joseph Duncan had returned to Illinois from serving in the United States House of Representatives and won the gubernatorial election of 1834. The population apparently decided that it was tired of aristocratic governors, so they chose a man who was like them. This was a tradition that started with Andrew Jackson in 1828 and, like Jackson, Duncan was a self-made man with little

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<sup>23</sup> Ford, *A History of Illinois* 195.

<sup>24</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, rev. ed. Vol. 1.(New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1900), 665.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Backus Barton. *The Founders and Founding of Illinois College*. (Jacksonville, Il: John K. Long, 1902), 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Walker, *The Development*, 269-270.

<sup>27</sup> John Moses and Joseph Kirkland. *History of Chicago*, Vol. 2. (Chicago: Munsell & Company, 1895), 81.

education.<sup>28</sup> Once elected governor, he pushed for a return to free public education. In a message to the Illinois General Assembly in 1834, Governor Duncan said, “every virtue connected with the virtue, elevation and happiness of man and the character and prosperity of our state and of our common country, calls upon us to establish some permanent system of common schools.”<sup>29</sup> However, little attention was paid to creating a free public school system during his administration. Most of Duncan’s focus and that of the legislature was on internal improvements like fixing roads and bridges.<sup>30</sup> However, during the 1835 session of the Illinois General Assembly, Senator William Jefferson Gatewood called for the creation of a free public education system, which would model both Chicago’s system and the system set up by the Free School Law of 1825.

Gatewood brought his *Report on the Subject of Education* into the state senate chamber on February 5, 1835. Echoing the ideas of Andrew Jackson, Gatewood claimed that both the United States Government and the Illinois Government’s “supreme power is in the people, it assumes the bold principle of universal suffrage and gives to every man the power of effecting real influence upon its measures by his vote.” As Gatewood’s report continued, his ideas reiterated those of Thomas Jefferson. “Public opinion must be enlightened, else we have no security that a wise and liberal course of policy will be pursued.”<sup>31</sup> It can clearly be seen in Gatewood’s report how large of an impact both Jackson and Jefferson’s ideas of democracy had on the Illinois educational system during this time period. Gatewood used these ideas to try to persuade the Illinois Senate to adopt his bill for *An Act to Establish Common Schools and County Seminaries*. In it, each town was to elect trustees, similarly to the Free School Act of 1825. However, the trustees had different duties than those of the law of 1825. Trustees were to evaluate teachers and recommend textbooks and courses for their district to pursue. The trustees also had to keep track of the number of people

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<sup>28</sup> Ford, *A History of Illinois*, 114.

<sup>29</sup> Blair, *Centennial*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Blatchford, *Biographical Sketch*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Rahn, *A Study*, 239.



between five and twenty-one years old in their districts as well as the number of days each one had been taught. The amount of funds proportioned depended on the number of student-aged children in the district, the same standards that were required in the Free School Act of 1825.<sup>32</sup>

The bill was not passed, but it demonstrated that the idea of creating free public schools to enlighten the people in an increasingly democratic society was still fresh in the minds of Illinois legislators. The ideas that Edward Coles brought with him to Illinois still had life. There was concern in the Illinois General Assembly that the people of Illinois weren't ready for a tax-based school system. The editor of *Illinois Monthly Magazine*, James Hall, said it best; "Education is decidedly popular, and all classes are willing to contribute to the introduction and support of schools. But how to obtain the desired object is a question upon which there is no settled opinion."<sup>33</sup> Despite the failure of Gatewood's bill, there was some gain in education policy during the 1835 session.

On February 7, 1835, a law was passed that allowed trustees in each school district to lease public school lands. Furthermore, people or groups of people had the ability to get together and rent school lands. On the same day, a second law passed that allowed for the commissioners of each school district to use the money collected by the sale of public lands to improve the school system and to pay teachers.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the money that was collected from leasing school lands was not sufficient enough to provide public schooling due to the fact that districts were still not able to tax citizens unless everyone in the district allowed it. In 1836, the school fund got a boost when the Second Bank of the United States' federal charter expired. The federal government had more money than it needed to operate, so the excess funds were sent to the states. Illinois set some of the money aside to fund schools.<sup>35</sup> Ford claims that most of it was used to fund internal improvement

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<sup>32</sup> Rahn, *A Study*, 253-256.

<sup>33</sup> James Hall. *Illinois Monthly Magazine*, December 1831, 102.

<sup>34</sup> Rhan, *A Study*, 221-224.

<sup>35</sup> John W. Cook. *Educational History of Illinois*, (Chicago: The Henry O. Shepard Company, 1912) 39-40.

contracts, which ended up putting the state into an enormous amount of debt.<sup>36</sup>

In 1837, a bill was signed that gave the people of any township the power to organize their townships into school districts under the direction of the trustees. The title of all school property was given to the trustees. They also had to collect school statistics and distribute school funds and all other money that was collected for school purposes to the schools in their district. It must be pointed out that even after the laws of 1835 and 1837, there was no express permission for the trustees or the county commissioners to directly sell school lands. A law signed in 1831 allowed lands to be sold only if three-fourths of the white men over the age of twenty-one in the township approved it. No lands could be sold whatsoever if there were less than fifty white citizens in the township. The Illinois General Assembly did not get the power to sell these lands until 1843 when the sales made up to that point were confirmed.<sup>37</sup> The school legislation of the 1830's mostly dealt with land and not the schools themselves. William Jefferson Gatewood's proposed legislation was the only exception. Although a decade was spent on school land legislation in Illinois, it was ridiculed by others outside of the state. The July 8<sup>th</sup> 1838 issue of *The United States Democratic Review* made the claim that Illinois was selling its lands for about one-fourth of its value. They also said that Michigan was the first western state "to lay the broad and deep foundations of a complete system of public instruction."<sup>38</sup> The latter statement is false. The Free School Act of 1825 had been the first to institute such a system, and although the law was repealed and public education became voluntary, the 1840's would show that Illinois was taking steps to institute a free public education system.

In 1841, the Illinois General assembly passed *An Act Making Provision for Organizing and Maintaining Common Schools*. It was the most comprehensive education law that Illinois had passed

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<sup>36</sup> Ford, *A History of Illinois* 130.

<sup>37</sup> Rhan, *A Study*, 198, 212-213.

<sup>38</sup> J. Langley and H.G. Langley. "Public Instruction in Michigan." *The United States Democratic Review* 2, no. 8 (July 1838), 270.

since 1825. The law was twenty-eight pages long and contained 107 sections. Most of the law dealt with school lands just as the laws did in the 1830's, but there were a lot of administrative improvements. The first division of the law called for the county commissioners to protect and preserve school lands. It was also the job of the commissioner to appoint three trustees, instead of electing them. The trustees were to serve four-year terms. It was their duty to appoint a treasurer who would handle school funds. They were also responsible for maintaining all real estate or property belonging to their townships. All the money that the trustees received was to be paid over to the school commissioners to support schools. A school commissioner was to be elected every two years in each county. His responsibilities were to sell school lands and use any money obtained to support schools. This law also improved organization and encouraged townships to build schoolhouses. People of the school district could get together in groups and could buy land, not exceeding ten acres, to build schools. The number of schools that were built and operated in each district depended on the preferences of the citizens of the district. When it came to managing the schools in operation, the teacher's employers would meet and select three teachers to be in charge of the school. Educators that were hired had to pass an examination and obtain a certificate in order to teach. If employers hired teachers that did not have certification, their school would not receive public funds. The funds were still to be apportioned based on the number of inhabitants that were twenty-one years of age and under. However, there was not a provision for taxation. The law did repeal fifteen other laws, which included the acts of 1831, 1835, and 1837.<sup>39</sup>

While there were several improvements to the education system created by the *Act Making Provision for Organizing and Maintaining Common Schools*, it was not enough for some Illinois citizens. A report was sent to the Illinois General Assembly from the Illinois State School Convention, which was held in Peoria. They asked the legislature to make changes that they believed

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<sup>39</sup> *An Act Making Provision for Organizing and Maintaining Common Schools*. (Springfield: 1841).

would improve the present system. The changes suggested were mostly administrative. The convention asked for the creation of a state superintendent of education that would be appointed by the governor. The state superintendent would meet with county superintendents to decide what improvements could be made. They would take these ideas to the General Assembly every year and suggest amendments to the system. A mandatory local tax was not asked for; however, the convention recommended that if a majority of the voters in a district voted in favor for a tax to fund schools then a taxing mechanism would be put into place.<sup>40</sup> The General Assembly took the advice given in the report and amended the law that was passed in 1841. The office of State Superintendent of Common Schools was created, but according to historian John Cook, the officer was only an *ex officio*, which means that the Secretary of State of Illinois would take on the responsibilities of the office. It gave trustees permission to buy school libraries and property for schoolhouses. The last amendment stated that the voters in each district would vote on whether or not their districts would levy a local tax for the support of the school system.<sup>41</sup> This was the last major education legislation that passed through the General Assembly. Focus had been placed on creating a new Illinois Constitution.

As the Jacksonian period ended, attitudes in Illinois government began to change. The Secretary of State, Horace Cooley, said in a letter to school officials, “the constant changes to which our school laws have heretofore been subjected have been felt as a serious evil.”<sup>42</sup> Herein lies the problem with Jackson’s democracy: the power belongs to the majority and the majority does not always know what they want without education. Nothing of real value had been accomplished because of the lack of

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<sup>40</sup> Illinois State School Convention. *The Memorial of a Committee of the State School Convention: held at Peoria in October last, upon the Subject of Common School Education, December 7, 1844.* (Springfield: Walters & Weber, public printers, 1845).

<sup>41</sup> Cook, *Educational History*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Horace Cooley, *A Synopsis of the School Law of 1849 and Suggestions to School Officers and Others.* (Springfield: State Register Power Press, 1849), 3.

education. The situation in Illinois was said best by Ford, “it was a maxim with many politicians just to keep along even with the humor of the people.” He goes on to say, “any measure was to be considered right which was popular for the time being.”<sup>43</sup> That is why Thomas Jefferson believed so passionately in education in a democratic society. When people are educated, they can better form their own views, which is essential for a democracy to work. In the time since the Free School Act was passed in 1825, nothing of great value had been accomplished. Illinois did not pass legislation for tax-based schools until 1855. Growing sentiment throughout the 1840’s and 1850’s for tax-based schools increased. One of the main factors was that emigrants from New England, who believed in a Jeffersonian philosophy of education, took control of the Illinois government from the Jackson advocates of voluntarism.<sup>44</sup>

It is beyond a doubt that democracy thrived in Illinois during the period from 1825 to 1848. It was not Thomas Jefferson’s democracy, but Andrew Jackson’s, which personified this era of history. The constant changes in Illinois education policy during the time period expressed the idea of a majority rule without education. Jackson did not believe that education was essential to a democracy. This was proved false in the Illinois experience and Thomas Jefferson was proven right. The Illinois General Assembly followed majority opinion, but the majority constantly changed their minds so nothing of great importance concerning education could be achieved. If Jefferson’s democracy had persisted and the Free School Act of 1825 had not been repealed, the democratic experience could have been a lot different in Illinois. The early government in the state saw how essential education was to a democracy and it could be seen in the preamble of the law, which stated, “To enjoy our rights and liberties we must understand them; their security and protection ought to be the first object of a free people.” Coles made a grand attempt to achieve the legacy of Thomas Jefferson in Illinois. The Free School Act did not fail; it was proven that once the idea was introduced, there was no going

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<sup>43</sup> Ford, *A History of Illinois*, 132.

<sup>44</sup> Herget, *Democracy Revisited*, 135.

back. This could be seen in Gatewood's proposed bill and in the Chicago public school system. Even without the Free School Act, the number of public schools increased in Illinois and all over the country during the Jacksonian period. The idea of a tax-based school eventually won out in Illinois in 1855. From then on, every child in the state would have the opportunity to be educated and productive citizens in a democratic society.