



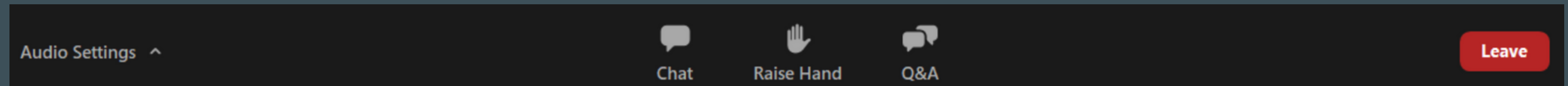
INSIDE THE VAULT

A Plain Political Catechism
with Dr. Adam Laats

THURSDAY, JULY 6, 2023



How to Participate



- If you would like to ask a question, you can use the Q&A feature.
- We will be answering audience questions throughout the session.
- The views expressed here are those of the historian.

For Security and Privacy

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.



Dr. Adam Laats

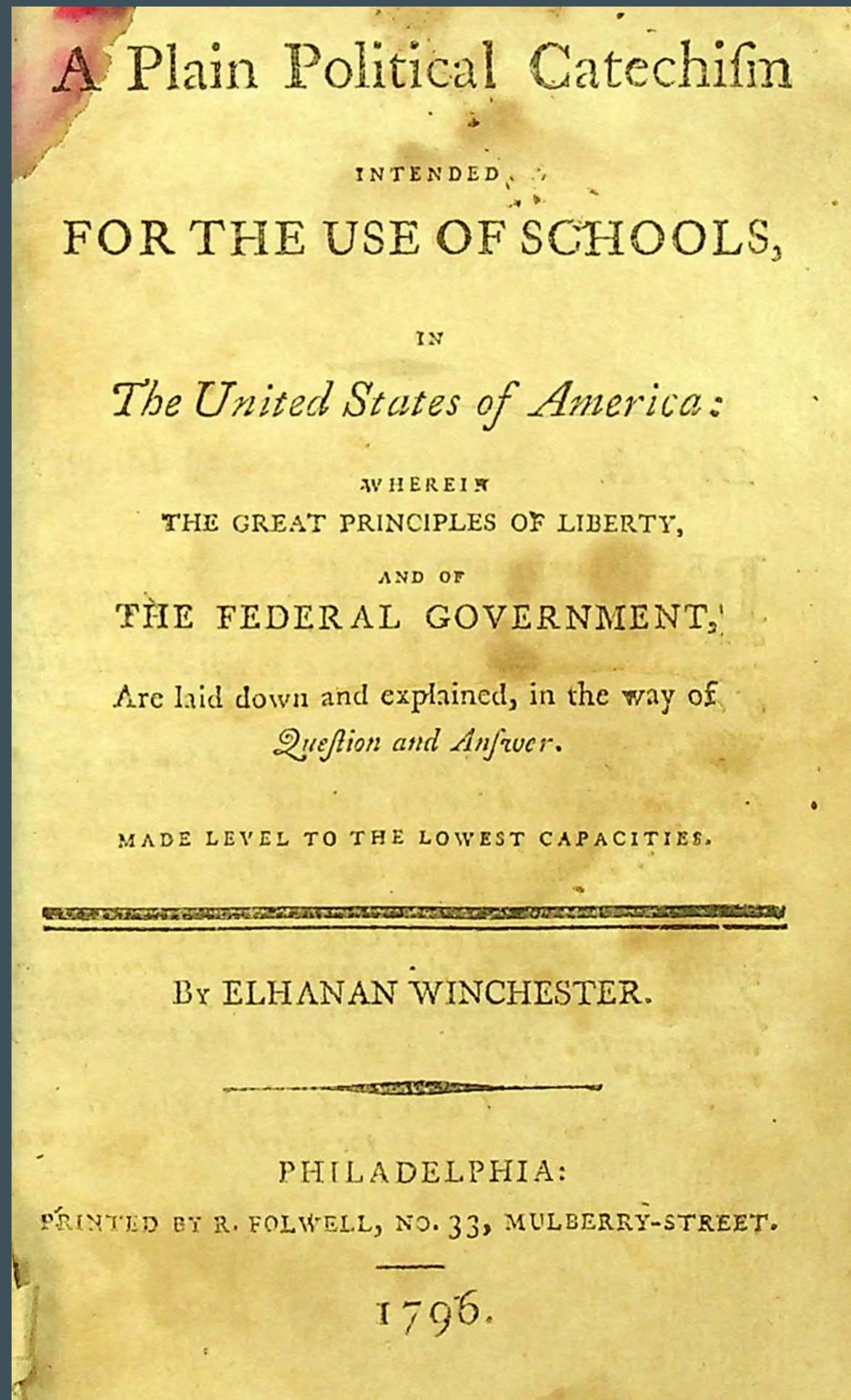


Adam Laats is a professor of education and history at Binghamton University (SUNY). He taught middle school and high school for ten years in Milwaukee and earned his PhD in US History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2006. He is the author of several books, including *The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education* (Harvard University Press, 2015) and the forthcoming *Mr. Lancaster's System: The Origins of US Public Education, 1800-1840*. Professor Laats offers commentary about history and education at the *Atlantic*, the *Washington Post*, *Slate*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.



Today's Document

Elhanan Winchester, *A Plain Political Catechism Intended for the Use of Schools, in the United States of America: Wherein the Great Principles of Liberty, and of the Federal Government, Are Laid Down and Explained, in the Way of Question and Answer*, Philadelphia, 1796.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC10103)



A deep republican anxiety: John Adams to Abigail Adams

April 14, 1776

“We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient – that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent – that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.”

John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776.

(Massachusetts Historical Society)

The Big Question

How to educate children into republican citizenship?

- PROBLEM ONE: RELIGION UNCERTAIN—but seen as absolutely necessary
- PROBLEM TWO: SCHOOLING UNEVEN—but seen as absolutely necessary

Civics for a new republic

1796

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QUESTION XX.

*What are the powers delegated to
the congress of the United States?*

ANSWER.

They are these eighteen, which
follow.

1st, To lay and collect taxes, du-
ties, imposts and excises; to pay
the debts, and provide for the com-
mon defence, and general welfare of
the United States: but all duties,
imposts and excises shall be uniform
throughout the United States.

2d, To borrow money on the cre-
dit of the United States.

3d, To regulate commerce with
foreign nations, and among the fe-
veral states, and with the Indian
tribes.



Republic? Or tyranny?

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therefore, it is very unlikely they should seek to tyrannize over us, even if it is in their power. And should their conduct give just occasion of offence, we shall soon have it in our power to displace them constitutionally, and to choose such as are agreeable to our wishes. So that no riots, mobs, nor tumultuous proceedings are necessary, to gain, what we can much easier obtain by legal, peaceable, and constitutional means; and the minority should never try to rule the majority.

QUESTION LI.

Is the true knowledge of the principles of liberty and government, and especially the constitution and laws of the United States of America, improper for the youth of this free and happy country?

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ANSWER.

By no means; but, on the contrary, highly proper; and these noble principles should be early impressed upon the minds of the rising generation, that so the liberties of mankind may be known, revered, cultivated, valued, and preserved amongst us to the latest period.

QUESTION LII.

Will the early knowledge of the politics of our country, tend to introduce disorder, discontent, division, animosity, and rebellion amongst the young people, as some persons pretend?

ANSWER.

On the contrary, it may be fairly presumed, that the knowledge of the principles of true liberty, &c. will tend to promote union, peace, happiness, and submission, in this country; for a very plain reason: because, our

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Republic? Or tyranny?

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A written constitution in government, is almost as necessary as a positive and written revelation is, in religion; for though people of leisure, education, and close-thinking, may have some good ideas of government, without a written constitution, and some wise and good men, might have some knowledge of the great principles of religion, without a written revelation; yet, in both cases, the great body of the people, for whose

QUESTION LV.

What then shall we think of those who would wish to keep youth, and the common people in general, from the knowledge of their rights, and of the constitution of their country?

ANSWER.

The same as we justly think of those blind guides of former ages, who kept the common people from reading the scriptures, though the great founder of the christian religion

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commanded his hearers to search them. All tyrants, whether civil or ecclesiastical, wish to keep mankind ignorant, that they may enslave them the more easily, and prey upon their substance; always however pretending, that much knowledge, whether of religion, or government, is hurtful to the people, by making them conceited, wiser than their teachers, more vicious, and harder to govern. But good men, that love true liberty and religion themselves, wish to communicate the knowledge of those grand sciences to all mankind, that all might enjoy the inestimable blessings derived therefrom.

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ANSWER.

Not only to destroy religion and true morality, but also to overthrow all government, and to disgrace, and, if possible, to destroy the liberties of these states?

QUESTION LVII.

How is that evident?

ANSWER.

Partly by reasoning, and partly by facts. Infidels argue, that no revelation is to be received, unless it be made immediately to each person, and that none are bound to believe or obey, unless they receive it at first-hand. It requires but little common sense to see, that this reasoning, as much overthrows all government, as it does re-

Republic? Or tyranny?

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QUESTION LXVI.

What was it made the inhabitants of these United States such sons of freedom, and enabled them to support the contest in such a manner, even to victory?

ANSWER.

They had generally property, principle, or public virtue, and knowledge; if they had been in a state of ignorance, absolute poverty, and without patriotism, it would not have been easy for them to have gained what they did?

QUESTION LXVII.

Upon what can the people depend for the support and preservation of their rights and freedom?

ANSWER.

Upon no beings or precautions under heaven but themselves. The spirit of liberty is a living principle.

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It lives in the minds, principles, and sentiments of the people. It lives in their industry, virtue, and public sentiment: or rather it is produced, preserved, and kept alive, by the state of society. If the body of the people shall lose their property, their knowledge, and their virtue, their greatest and most valuable blessings are lost at the same time. With the loss of these, public sentiment will be corrupted: with the corruption of public sentiment, bills of rights, constitutions written upon paper, and all the volumes of written law, will lose their force and utility. Their government will immediately begin to change; and when the people themselves have lost the cause, the principle, and the spirit of freedom, they will no longer be capable of a free government. But let them preserve their spirit of in-

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Infidels? Or citizens?

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his wheat, tending to destroy it, or almost totally to hinder its growth.

QUESTION LIX.

Can infidels, acting according to their own principles, be looked upon as faithful citizens, or good subjects of government, or the true friends of mankind?

ANSWER.

No, by no means; for it cannot be expected that they who cast the laws of God himself behind their back, and trample his authority boldly under their feet, should pay much regard to the constitution of their country, or the wisest and best laws that can be framed by men. For they can make as good an excuse for not receiving them, as they can for rejecting divine revelation, as has been observed before. Besides, it is very obvious, that infidels acting consistent-

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ly with their principles, cannot be faithful citizens; for it is a principle with them, that no such thing as disinterested benevolence exists in the world, which is a full confession that they have none; and, without disinterested benevolence, there can be no patriotism, nor true love of liberty: for all sincere lovers of their country, must act from true principles of disinterested benevolence, or very little would ever be done for the good of mankind; for much of the real labor of true patriots is concealed from the observation of the people at large: and very frequently the best and noblest actions of the lovers of their country, are ascribed to wrong motives, and they are treated with the greatest ingratitude, and sometimes suffer disgrace, and even death, for those very deeds that ought to have

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New England Primer, "In Adam's Fall We Sinned All."

1785

*The New-England Primer Improved, for the More Easy
Attaining the True Reading of English. to Which Is Added,
the Assembly of Divines' Catechism, Boston 1785.*

(Courtesy of Houghton Library)

(11)



A
In Adam's Fall
We finned all.



B
Thy Life to mend
This Book attend.



C
The Cat doth play
And after slay.



D
The Dog will bite
A Thief at night.



E
An Eagle's Flight
Is out of fight.

Infidels? Or citizens?

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any means be lodged in the hands of infidels, (and they appear to be remarkably fond of it,) they would soon forbid the profession of christianity, and the public worship of God, and persecute to death, all that would not bow to them; and would not stop short of downright atheism in religion, and the most dreadful system of horrid tyranny in government. Therefore, let America beware of infidelity, which is the most dangerous enemy that she has to contest with at present, and the only foe that she has reason to be afraid of; as it aims at the entire destruction of all that is valuable and dear to us, and prevails in a most alarming manner.

QUESTION LXI.

By what means may infidelity be checked, and tyranny be prevented

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from encroaching on our privileges, and pure religion, and genuine liberty, (which must stand and fall together) be preserved and maintained in this country?

ANSWER.

One of the best methods is freely to encourage the investigation of truth, and a liberal enquiry into the principles of religion, liberty, government, the constitution of our country, &c. And instead of forbidding youth the knowledge of these things, let them be early instructed into such excellent points of wisdom, and trained up in the strict practice of all moral virtues; let them be taught to see with their own eyes; and when their judgment is properly ripened, let them learn to think for themselves. Thus will they see on one hand, the folly of

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superstition, and on the other, the madness of infidelity, and will wisely avoid them both. So they may attain such knowledge and virtue, as never to be the dupes of designing men, (who, while they promise their adherents liberty and happiness, are, themselves, the slaves of corruption, vice, and misery,) but be an honor to themselves, their parents, their country, their religion, and their God; good citizens, good politicians, and good christians.

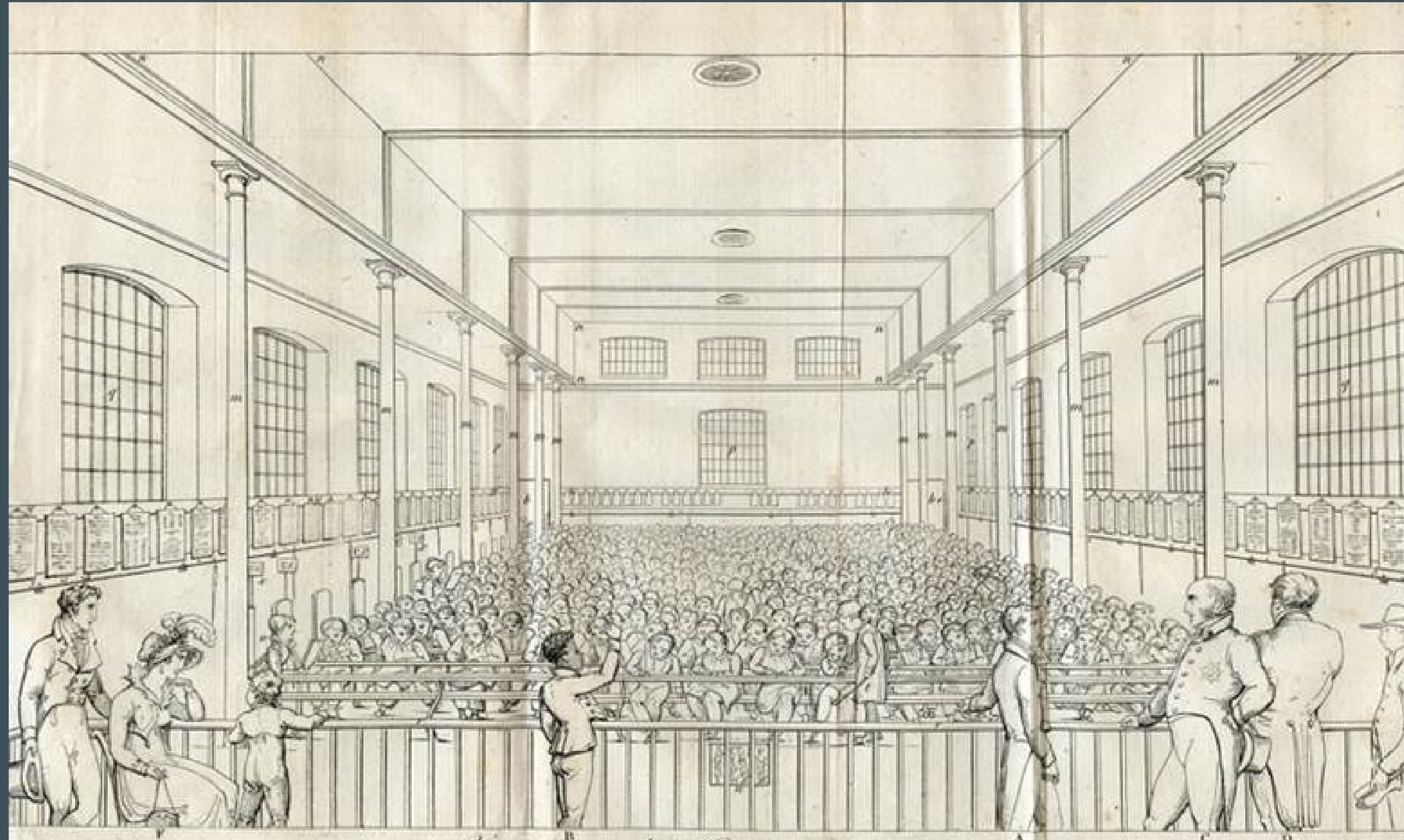
QUESTION LXII.

What are the great and important

“L’enseignement mutuel ou Histoire de l’introduction et de la propagation de cette méthode”



1818



Intérieur de l'École. (école de garçons)

Joseph Hamel, *L'enseignement mutuel ou Histoire de l'introduction et de la propagation de cette méthode*, Paris, 1818. (© Fondation vaudoise du patrimoine scolaire, Yverdon-les-Bains)

Joseph Lancaster Papers

1796-1840



Joseph Lancaster papers, 1796-1840.
(Courtesy American Antiquarian Society)

Upcoming Programs

INSIDE THE VAULT: August 3 at 7 p.m. ET (4 p.m. PT)

- We will be joined by Barbara Perry (University of Virginia) to discuss materials related to twentieth-century voting rights.

BOOK BREAKS: July 9 at 2 p.m. ET (11 a.m. PT)

- Chad Williams will discuss his book *The Wounded World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the First World War*.

TEACHER SEMINARS

- Registration is still open for seven of our online Teacher Seminars; visit gilderlehrman.org/teacherseminars to learn more about current offerings and email seminars@gilderlehrman.org with any questions.

