

THE PHILOSOPHY AND IDEAS
of
THOMAS JEFFERSON IN EDUCATION

AN ABSTRACT OF
A THESIS
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MASTER OF SCIENCE

by
Rhoda Kathryn Malino
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The eighteenth-century America was a century of explosive, dynamic forces. Its society could not contain with equanimity the political, religious, and economic authoritarianism of former centuries. The vigorous current of new scientific, religious philosophies shattered the old concepts in its wake; the brilliance of an enlightened age left the old doctrines to atrophy in darkness.

The dynamism of a different concept of man as an integral pillar in society spearheaded the march of democracy. The common man was raised from lowly insignificance to supreme importance in a societal structure that barred the entry of aristocracy. Authoritarianism and aristocracy were held at bay, while the common man rode the crest of the waves of individualism, natural rights, and pursuit of happiness. Educational patterns had to be evolved for man to become knowledgeable and secure in his new role. The success of a democracy depended largely on the effectiveness of its educative principles. If knowledge were diffused among all the people, man's innate reasoning ability could accomplish the descent of heaven to earth.

Thomas Jefferson, the century's outstanding apostle of freedom from all tyranny, erected a standing wall between Church and state that permitted no breaches. This was fundamental in his program to free man's mind from all bigoted encroachments. Implicit in his theories of education was recognition of the dignity of all men, of the human potential resident in all men, and the power of knowledge to eliminate the gross evil of man's inhumanity to man.

His Bill for the More Diffusion of Knowledge drafted in 1779, with additional reforms in 1817, contained the purposes and objectives for the establishment, administration, and support of a state system for public education. Included in these documents for universal elementary schooling was his selective principle for the higher education of poor boys of unique intellectual ability. Although the Virginia legislature rejected the original bill and the subsequent Bill for Establishing a System of Public Education in 1818, Jefferson knew ultimate success in the establishment of the University of Virginia, the pinnacle of his educational ladder.

His devotion of a life time to the ideals of education came to be recognized in the nineteenth-century. The twentieth-century utilized his concepts that were too radical for acceptance in his own century. The American students of today are reaping the educational harvest of seeds sown for them by one of America's most sublime prophets.