

The Origins of Public High Schools

A REEXAMINATION OF THE BEVERLY HIGH SCHOOL CONTROVERSY

Maris A. Vinovskis

There has been considerable debate about the process of and the underlying motivation for the expansion of public education in nineteenth-century America. Interpretations which focused on the role of reformers like Horace Mann, or on the demands by workers for more public education, have been criticized by revisionists who see education being imposed upon an uninterested and unwilling populace by capitalists seeking to maintain a docile labor force during industrialization. Here, Maris A. Vinovskis challenges that revisionist view, employing sophisticated social science methodology in a work sure to be welcomed by all historians of American education.

Vinovskis's study of the origins of the Massachusetts ante-bellum public high school re-analyzes the establishment of the Beverly Public High School within the broader perspective of other educational developments occurring in that community as well as in the Commonwealth as a whole. The results raise serious questions about Katz's depiction of

the timing of and the reasons for the creation of that institution in Beverly.

This re-analysis of the vote to abolish the public high school also suggests a very different interpretation of events in Beverly than the one presented by Katz. By expanding the number of factors used in this study as well as employing recently developed techniques of statistical analysis, the importance of the opposition of the workers to the public high school is minimized, while the differences in the needs and resources among the school districts in that community become more important factors.

Maris A. Vinovskis, Professor in the Department of History and Research Scientist at the Center for Political Studies at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, is the author or co-author of three other books, including *Fertility in Massachusetts from the Revolution to the Civil War* (1981).
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