METHODISM, COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE, AND
"AMERICANISM"—THE WISCONSIN VERSION

THOMAS C. HUNT

Considerable controversy has revolved around the issue of compulsory school attendance in the last two decades. Challenged by Paul Goodman and his colleagues in the 1960s, the right of the state to compel attendance was circumscribed, albeit in a limited way, by the Supreme Court of the United States in the Amish decision in 1972, based on the free exercise of religion clause of the First Amendment. In more recent years Stephen Arons, for one, has argued that the structure and operation of the public school system (the only viable financial alternative to many parents), which utilizes compulsory attendance legislation, is a violation of the First Amendment rights of parents. David Tyack has contributed a particularly thought-provoking and insightful piece on compulsory attendance by presenting five models by which compulsory attendance legislation, a product of the 19th century, can be viewed.

The purpose of this essay is to study the struggles over compulsory attendance legislation, featured by a "good English education," with particular focus on the position of one important Protestant denomination—the Methodists—in latter 19th century Wisconsin. Generally speaking, Methodists, as well as other "mainline" Protestant denominations, were strongly supportive of public education in Wisconsin as in the nation during this period of time. This essay will begin with Wisconsin's admittance to the Union in the late 1840s and terminate with the repeal of the Bennett Law, the controversial piece of legislation which represented the culmination of those who advocated compulsory attendance legislation in English-language schools, in 1891.

Wisconsin at the Time of Statehood

The Wisconsin historian, Milo M. Quaife, wrote that as the Wisconsin Territory became more inhabited in the 1840s, a movement to establish common schools, whereby the Territory's population could be assimilated and organized, developed and grew. This movement is reflected in the

4Milo M. Quaife (ed.), The Movement for Statehood, 1845-1846 (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1918), p. 188.

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Constitutional Convention of 1846 (the voters subsequently rejected the Constitution it proposed) whose Education Committee recommended the legislature "provide for a system of common schools, ... as nearly uniform as may be throughout the state," said schools to be free from "sectarian instruction." 5 The intended cohesive function of the schools was manifest in the prohibition of all forms of "sectarian instruction," thereby to obviate the "sectarian disputes which distracted and disgraced New York." 6

Two years later the voters approved a second version of the Constitution and Wisconsin was admitted to the Union. Article X, Section 3 of that document called for the legislature to provide for "the establishment of district schools," said schools to be "as nearly uniform as practicable, ... without charge," and free from "sectarian instruction." 7

There was scant change in the backgrounds of the men who framed the two Constitutions, the vast majority of whom emanated from New York/New England. 8 Their influential role has been described by Quaife as follows:

Men of old American stock, from the northeastern section of the Union reinforced by English speaking aliens from the British isles, were chiefly instrumental in laying the foundations of the commonwealth of Wisconsin. 9

The 1850s

The Census of 1850 records that there were 305,391 residents of the state; 54,132 were natives; 139,166 had been born elsewhere in the United States, and there were 110,471 who were of foreign origin. The white population had increased from 30,749 in 1840 to 304,756 (an increase of about 891%) in 1850. 10

The Census' section on churches reveals that 236 of the state's 365 church edifices (about 64%) were affiliated with Baptist, Congregationalist, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations. 11 The Census did not record church membership. The "pan-Protestant" nature and function of the public schools is evidenced from a variety of sources, including attestations by the state's first two Superintendents of Instruc-

7The Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin 1849 (Southport: C. Latham Sholes, 1849), p. 34.
11Ibid., pp. 934-35.
tion, Eleazar Root and Azel P. Ladd. Collectively, they testified to the unifying, moral role of the common school, based above all on the reading of the King James Version of the Bible with attendant devotional exercises. The recipients of these practices, the students, numbered 46,354 whites and 67 "colored," who were in attendance in school in 1850.

Issues related to moral education in general and Bible-reading in particular in the schools continued to be a central concern of the Superintendents as the 1850s progressed. However, as early as Superintendent Root’s second Report in 1851, one finds concern with private schools. Root, referring to the costs involved in attending them, averred that this was "contrary to the genius of our republican institutions, for our doctrine of the equality of political rights and of popular sovereignty," which called for "universal elementary education." His successor, Azel P. Ladd, wrote glowingly of the "theory which renders the State a bounteous guardian to its children..." Accordingly, he bemoaned the fact that in Milwaukee only 4,648 of that city’s eligible children attended public schools, which were, in his words, a "counterpart to a gospel that was without price and preached to the poor."

The 1860s

The Census of 1860 reveals that Wisconsin’s population numbered 775,681, of whom 276,927 were foreign born; 123,879 of this latter figure came from Germany, a sum larger than the entire foreign born population of the state in 1850;17 184,709 students were in attendance at school, 149,087 native born and 35,662 foreign born.18 Wisconsin ranked second to California in the nation in 1860 in the percentage of its residents who hailed from a foreign country.19

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15Annual Report...1853 (Madison: David Atwood, 1854), p. 59.

16Ibid., pp. 60-62.


18Ibid., p. 597.

19Ibid., p. xxx.
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Church statistics were as follows: 18,836 Methodists; 20 9,026 Baptists; 21 Presbyterians 2,098; 22 and the Presbyterian and Congregational Church (later to be simply the Congregational Church) 8,610. 23 Meanwhile, Roman Catholics reported about 180,000 members. 24 The increased Catholic presence can also be gleaned from church edifice figures. In 1850 the Methodists had reported the most church buildings of any denomination in Wisconsin with 110; the Catholics were second with 64. Their aggregate accommodations were 21,270 and 24,976 respectively; their total value $64,130 and $66,685. 26 In 1860 the Methodists had 320 church structures with an aggregate accommodation of 76,440 and a total value of $370,065; the Catholics had 205 church buildings which seated 70,469 and were valued at $545,477. 28

State Superintendent Josiah L. Pickard, addressing the private schools which existed in the state in 1862, referred to their "noble purpose," but felt their necessity would cease when Wisconsin's citizenry "fully appreciated the capabilities of the Public School system. . ." In the interim, private schools should be allowed to exist, but should "be made subservient to the general good." 27

It was evident from the writings of Pickard's successor, John McMynn, that such "appréciation" for the public school's capabilities did not exist during his tenure in office. In 1865, for example, he complained of private schools' failure to report their attendance figures to him. Indeed he mused that since these schools were not "under the supervision of any school officer, it is difficult to obtain any information concerning them." McMynn wondered whether such a situation called for the enactment in Wisconsin of compulsory attendance legislation similar to that which recently had gone into effect in Massachusetts. 28 A year later he wrote that such legislation could be justified on the grounds that education "protects property by preventing crime." 29

25 The Seventh Census of the United States 1850, pp. 934-35.
29 Annual Report . . . 1866 (Madison: Atwood and Rublee, 1866), p. 11.
With some satisfaction he noted in 1867 that private schools were declining in areas where public schools were “well conducted.” The improvement of public schools freed parents, he felt, from providing for the “education of their children by individual enterprise.” “The true friends of education,” he averred, “will labor to make the public schools so good, that private schools cannot successfully compete with them.” Compulsory attendance legislation, McMynn opined, may violate parents’ rights but it was warranted by making the student able to “discharge his duties as a citizen,” for, as he wrote, “We not only see but we feel, that under God, we owe our existence as a nation, to our public schools . . . .”

The rights of the state in education were espoused further by A. J. Craig, McMynn’s successor. The preservation of the nation’s government and institutions justified the right of the state to the time of the child. To carry out this task, Craig placed emphasis on organizing the state into educational districts with effective supervision.

The 1870s

The 1870 Census reveals that the state’s population continued to evolve in terms of ethnic and religious components. Of the 1,064,985 inhabitants, 364,499 were foreign born, while 717,832 had one or both parents born in a foreign country; 162,314 of those born in foreign countries came from Germany; 260,732 were reported in attendance at school, and 235,835 of these were born in the United States, an astounding high percentage when compared with the percentage of residents from this country. The city of Milwaukee offers even more of an interesting comparison. Only 1,823 of the 14,432 reported in attendance of school were foreign born, yet 33,773 of the city’s 71,440 population was of foreign origin. The concern over illiteracy among the foreign born expressed by the Superintendents is reflected in the statistics that of the 1,702 students in the schools of Milwaukee who could not write English, 1,594 of these were foreign born.

It was also in 1870 that the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church successfully supported its Conference Secretary, the Reverend Samuel Fallows, for the post of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Responding to the number of foreign born children

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31Annual Report . . . 1868 (Madison: Atwood and Rublee, 1868), pp. 6-7.
33Ibid., pp. 394-95.
34Ibid., pp. 443, 292.
35Ibid., p. 443.
who could not write and/or who were in church-related schools which taught in German, Fallows argued that property owners had the right to insist that each child receive a “good English education.” Note that Fallows based his position for a “good English education” for each child not on the rights of the child, but on those of property owners.

The German “problem” had been noticed by educational officials in the state as early as 1854. Responding to an inquiry from a citizen, then Superintendent H. A. Wright declared that a public school taught “in the German or any other than the English language” was not entitled to any portion of the school fund. Contending that English was “the language of our country,” Wright hoped that “our German fellow citizens” will have their “children well and thoroughly instructed in the English language.”

The Wisconsin legislature in 1854 underscored the importance of conducting instruction in English when it passed a law requiring such practice. That this law did not dissolve the issue is clear from the reply of Superintendent Carpenter to an inquirer in 1859, in which Carpenter reaffirmed the law but suggested that a loose construction, which would enable the subjects to be taught in German, would be more prudent.

Local school officials, particularly in districts with large concentrations of immigrants, especially German, complained to the State Superintendent of the failure of the German-Americans to subscribe to the American way of life. For instance, Mr. A. Marschner, Superintendent in Sheboygan, deplored the existence of private, sectarian schools which he said were “oriented towards foreign ways, and dangerous to the state and nation,” because “our public school system is the very cornerstone of our liberty.”

In 1869, a decade after the passage of its earlier enactment, the Wisconsin legislature passed a law which empowered district boards to permit instruction “in any of the foreign languages, not to exceed one hour each day, . . .” This compromise legislation, which recognized the increasing number of immigrants in the state, was intended to make it possible for district boards to adapt to local cultural and political realities and to guarantee that all state residents learned their country’s common language.

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38H. A. Wright, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Decisions in Appeals, Series 5/3/6-1, February 17, 1854, p. 414.
39General Acts Passed By the Legislature of Wisconsin in the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-four, Together with Memorials and Resolutions (Madison: David Atwood, 1854), Chapter 80, Section 41, p. 108.
42The Laws of Wisconsin 1869, Chapter 50, Section 1, in Laws of Wisconsin Relating to Common Schools, Normal Schools, and the State University (Madison: Atwood and Culver, Book and Job Printer, 1870), p. 85.
43Ibid.
1870 was a noteworthy year for Methodists in Wisconsin for another reason besides the ascension of one of their clergy to the highest educational office in the state. Methodism, which listed 23,313 members in 1870, for the first time took official note of what it felt was the beleaguered status of the state's public schools. In a document entitled "The Relation of the Church to the Common School," the Methodist Episcopal Church in Wisconsin maintained that the "common school system is the offspring of the religion of the Bible," that Protestant Christians who had originated, nurtured, and maintained the system were now called upon "to repel the assaults" being made upon it. Two assailants threatened the common schools in the Methodists' eyes: 1) the Catholics, who sought to make schooling sectarian; and 2) the atheists who wished the abolition from the schools of all religion, reducing education to a natural endeavor. The adoption of either position would destroy the schools and gravely endanger the nation, the Methodists averred.

The other three denominations issued no official document as did the Methodists. Congregationalists reported 12,022 members; there were 4,804 Presbyterians; and the Baptists counted 10,149. The Baptists, however, did refer to the need to do missionary work among the Germans who had arrived in the state.

Concern over compulsory attendance was not limited to Wisconsin. Fallows' 1872 Report included a survey on the topic conducted by the United States Bureau of Education. The Bureau found its model in Prussia where "compulsory education has been most efficiently enforced, and its practical results can be easily computed." Hardly reassuring words to German-American Catholics and Lutherans who disputed the right of the state to hold first position in the rights of schooling as it did in Prussia.

Following his perusal of the illiteracy statistics in the 1870 Census, Fallows suggested that the legislature enact a law which would require "all children of the state to be instructed in the rudiments of the common English branches." Chapter 276 in 1873, which empowered cities to es-

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44 Minutes of the . . . Wisconsin Annual Conference . . . 1870, p. 21; Minutes of the Sixteenth Session of the West Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1870 (Milwaukee: Index Printing Office, 1870), p. 21.
45 "The Relation of the Church to the Common School," in the Minutes of the Twenty-Fourth Session of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1870, pp. 29-31.
48 Minutes of the Wisconsin Baptist State Convention 1870 (Waupun: P. M. Pryor, 1870), p. 38.
51 Ibid., pp. 71-72.
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tablish truant schools for children between the age of 7 and 16 who had “no lawful occupation or business and are not attending any school” if their children were found in the streets, was the result. It is worthy to note, however, that Fallows reported that “compulsory education,” not “compulsory attendance at public schools” was what was needed, and Chapter 276 reflected that position.

Edward Searing, Fallow’s successor, also favored truancy laws. In fact, he recommended that the state remove truant children of “dissolute and vicious parents” from their control. However, for a variety of reasons, he opposed compulsory attendance legislation, and disputed its effectiveness.

Compulsory attendance legislation, to counteract crime and illiteracy, was favored by the next incumbent of the Superintendent’s office, William C. Whitford. It was necessary, he maintained, for Wisconsin society to overcome the feeling of repugnance to such coercive measures since “our whole public school system is based upon compulsory attendance.” In 1879, during Whitford’s tenure, the Wisconsin legislature enacted a compulsory attendance law which required parents or guardians to send “children between the ages of 7 and 15 years” to “a public or private school, for at least 12 weeks in each school year...”

The 1880s

The Census of 1880 reported that Wisconsin counted 1,315,497 residents, of whom 405 were born in foreign countries, 192,016 of these in Germany. Persons with at least one parent of foreign origin accounted for 547,580 of the state’s residents, with 254,622 of these from Germany.

The State Superintendent’s Office recorded 170,402 pupils enrolled in public and 13,510 in private schools that year. (The school attendance figures released by church authorities were substantially different. Roman Catholics reported 167 schools with an enrollment of 19,658. The Wisconsin Lutheran Synod alone had 108 schools in operation in 1880.)

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62Ibid., pp. 70-71.
63Annual Report ... 1874 (Madison: E. B. Bolens, 1875), pp. ixvi-ixviii.
64Ibid., pp. iv, vi, ix, vi, 80.
65Annual Report ... 1879 (Madison: David Atwood, 1880), p. 56.
66The Laws of Wisconsin Passed at the Annual Session of the Legislature of 1879 (Madison: David Atwood, State Printer, 1879), Chapter 121, p. 155.
68Ibid., p. 691.
69Annual Report ... 1880 (Madison: David Atwood, 1881), p. x.
The Protestant denominations reported slight increases in membership in 1880. None of them compared with the population gains made by Catholics, who now numbered approximately 308,000.\textsuperscript{62} The Baptists reported 11,687 members;\textsuperscript{63} the Congregationalists 13,310;\textsuperscript{64} the Presbyterians 7,646;\textsuperscript{65} and the Methodists 26,434.\textsuperscript{66} In 1880 the Methodists, following the Baptists by a decade, referred to the need to engage in "missionary work among the Germans" in that state.\textsuperscript{67}

In his 1881 \textit{Message} to the state legislature, Governor William E. Smith spoke of the "healthy rivalry between public and private schools," and avowed that the educational field was "broad enough for all."\textsuperscript{68} His sentiments, however, were not shared by State Superintendent Graham. Perhaps in part due to the discrepancy of attendance figures in private schools noted above, Graham complained that private schools, especially those which were church-related, were not reporting attendance figures to his office.\textsuperscript{69}

Meanwhile, the authority of the district board in matters of school attendance was strengthened exceedingly with the passage of Chapter 298 in 1882 by the legislature. This enactment empowered the district board to determine the legitimacy of non-attendance at public school by children between the ages of 7 and 15 within that school district.\textsuperscript{70}

The issue of relative rights of parent, church, and state regarding school attendance neared the crisis state in the late 1880s. Superintendent Thayer began his \textit{Report} in 1888 with a commentary on school attendance figures. These showed a decrease of 3,825 students (from 14,164 to 10,339) in private schools from 1886 to 1888, an overall percentage decrease of 7 to 15 year olds who attended school during the year (from 86 to 79.3), which could only be accounted for by the failure of private schools to report their attendance.\textsuperscript{71} Given what he felt was the widespread lack of cooperation on the part of private school authorities, he made a powerful plea to the state legislature to require private school officials to report their attendance.

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\textsuperscript{62}Sadlier's Catholic Directory, pp. 76, 276, 288.
\textsuperscript{63}Minutes of the Fortieth Annual Meeting . . . 1880 (Madison: M. J. Cantwell, 1880), p. 38.
\textsuperscript{64}Minutes of the General Assembly . . . 1880, N.S., VI (New York: Presbyterian Board of Publication, S. W. Green's Son, Printer, 1880), pp. 459-60.
\textsuperscript{65}Minutes of the Wisconsin Annual Conference 1880 (Milwaukee: Rev. S. Reynolds, 1880), p. 79; Minutes of the West Wisconsin Conference 1880 (Milwaukee: Riverside Printing Co., 1880), p. 54.
\textsuperscript{66}Philo A. Bennett and James Lawson, \textit{History of Methodism in Wisconsin} (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1890), p. 450.
\textsuperscript{67}In \textit{Assembly. Journal of Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Session of the Wisconsin Legislature. 1881}. (Madison: David Atwood, State Printer, 1881), p. 32.
\textsuperscript{68}Annual Report . . . 1882 (Madison: David Atwood, 1882), p. 11.
\textsuperscript{69}The Laws of Wisconsin Passed At the Annual Session of the Legislature of 1882 (Madison: David Atwood, State Printer 1882), Chapter 298, pp. 927-28.
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attendance to his office; otherwise, he wrote, "it will be impossible to ascertain with accuracy the proportion of our school population which is failing to receive an elementary education."72 Milwaukee provided an apt example. There were 32,442 youth between the ages of 7 and 15 in that city, but only slightly more than half (17,203) were reported in attendance at school.73 It is clear that the welfare and preservation of civil society, supposedly obtained by a "good English education," could not be guaranteed in such an uncertain and unstable educational situation.

The Bennett Law of 1889

In his Message to the legislature in 1889, William Dempster Hoard, Governor of Wisconsin, called for legislation which would empower local school superintendents to inspect all schools boarders of their districts to see that "reading and writing in English" were "daily taught therein." The child, the future citizen, had a right to demand such instruction and the state had the duty to provide it.74

Hoard was a lay Methodist minister who had chosen not to serve in the pulpit.75 While on duty with the Union Army in Virginia during the Civil War, he had become convinced that the lack of popular education accounted for the immoral attitude of Virginians toward slavery.76 He believed strongly that the use of the English language in school was the indispensable vehicle by which the country's traditions and heritage could be preserved and developed, and a true American nationality, a loyal citizenry with broadly-based, non-credal religious underpinnings, could be forged.77

Responding to the urgings of Thayer and Hoard, the Wisconsin legislature passed, and Governor Hoard signed into law, the "Bennett Law" on April 19, 1889.78 Its key and most controversial features required twelve weeks attendance at a school for children between the ages of 7 and 14 "in the town or district in which he resides," the precise time to be determined by the school board; and it defined a school as one in which "there shall be taught therein, as part of the elementary education of

72Ibid., pp. 1-2.
73Ibid., Appendix, p. 42.
76George W. Rankin, William Dempster Hoard (Fort Atkinson: Wis.: W. D. Hoard and Sons, 1925), p. 124.
children, reading, writing, arithmetic and United States history, in the English language.\textsuperscript{79} Superintendent Thayer praised the legislation as essential for good citizenship.\textsuperscript{80} The Wisconsin Teachers Association passed a resolution which unanimously endorsed the Bennett Law, claiming it would yield "great benefits" to the individual and to the community.\textsuperscript{81}

The law was not met with universal approbation, however. Catholics, particularly of German descent, and their Lutheran counterparts, vigorously opposed the legislation. Collectively, they contended that it was an invasion of the rights of parent and church, and sometimes termed it an assault on their national origin. The three Catholic bishops of the state, all born in Germany, issued a "Manifesto" on March 9, 1890 which termed the law "unnecessary," "offensive," and "unjust."\textsuperscript{82} Christian Koerner, the legal editor of the \textit{Germania}, a German language periodical published under Lutheran auspices in Milwaukee, was the leading Lutheran spokesperson. He regarded the Bennett Law as a menace to Lutheran parochial schools and an invasion of the rights of parent and church.\textsuperscript{83}

Political turmoil was to revolve around the Law. It was destined to become the major factor in determining the outcomes of the Milwaukee mayoral election in the spring of 1890 and the Wisconsin gubernatorial contest in the fall of that same year.

The 1890s—Decision and Defeat

Demographic statistics of Wisconsin in 1890 portray an ethnically and religiously diverse state, one fraught with tensions which erupted over the "citizenship" attempt made via the Bennett Law. The \textit{Census} of 1890 reported that of Wisconsin's 1,686,880 population in 1890, 629,030 had been born in Germany or had at least one parent born there.\textsuperscript{84} Overall, 73.7\% of Wisconsin's population was either foreign born (30.6\%), or had at least one parent foreign born (43.1).\textsuperscript{85} Wisconsin ranked third in the Union as to the percentage of eligible voters from foreign lands.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{81}Milwaukee Sentinel, December 29, 1889, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{83}Christian Koerner, \textit{The Bennet Law and The German Protestant Parochial Schools of Wisconsin} (Milwaukee: Germania Publishing Company, 1890).
\textsuperscript{85}Ibid., p. 471.
\textsuperscript{86}Ibid., p. 430.
Religiously, there were 249,164 Catholics and 160,919 Lutherans in the state in 1890. Together they constituted approximately 75% of the communicants of the religious bodies in the state.\textsuperscript{87} Catholics reported 646 congregations with 620 church buildings, with seating room for 189,831 and valued at $4,859,950 in the state. Lutherans, meanwhile, had 894 congregations with 757 church edifices, with seating for 233,570 persons, and valued at $2,328,138.\textsuperscript{88}

As for school enrollments, Wisconsin ranked first of the north central states in parochial school enrollments with 66,065 students. Of this number there were 37,854 and 26,359 in attendance at Catholic and German Lutheran schools, respectively, representing 97% of the state's parochial school enrollment.\textsuperscript{89} (The private school attendance figures released by Superintendent Thayer in 1890 reveal a considerable disparity from those above. He recorded 38,508 of 7 to 14 year olds in attendance at private schools in the state, some 26,000 below the figure recorded by the U.S. Census.\textsuperscript{90})

None of the Protestant churches which comprised the Protestant center had experienced the growth in numbers, property, or political strength which the Catholics and Lutherans had. Each of the four was on the defensive in 1890 in Wisconsin. On March 17 of that year the Supreme Court of Wisconsin had ruled, in a unanimous decision (the case is referred to as the Edgerton Bible Decision), that the reading of the King James Version of the Bible constituted sectarian instruction and therefore was in violation of the Wisconsin Constitution.\textsuperscript{91} This decision, considered such as affront to the Protestant position on the traditional relationship which each of the four denominations felt should exist (and had existed) between and among Protestantism, the Bible and public education, occupied the predominant place in Protestant concerns in 1890. Nonetheless, officially and unofficially, in groups and individually, the four denominations responded to the compulsory attendance strife. While there was no formal alliance between or among the four, it is well to note that in 1890 the Wisconsin Congregational Convention heard reports from its delegates to the meeting of the Wisconsin Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists. The Congregationalists publicly recognized the observers sent to their meeting by the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{88}Ibid., pp. 261-81.
\textsuperscript{89}Ibid., p. 120.
\textsuperscript{90}Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of the State of Wisconsin, For the Two Years Ending June 30, 1890 (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1890), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{91}Wisconsin Reports. 76 Wis 177.
\textsuperscript{92}Minutes of the Fiftieth Annual Meeting of the Congregational Convention of Wisconsin 1890 (Madison: Tracy, Gibbs and Co., 1890), p. 11.
The Methodist Response

In 1890 the Protestant denominations which had comprised the religious backbone of the state in 1850 recorded yet another proportionate decline in numbers and influence. For instance, the Baptists reported 16,913 communicants, with 250 congregations, owning 231 church edifices, with a seating capacity of 58,706 and valued at $960,700. The Congregationalists numbered 15,841 members in 182 congregations with 196 church buildings, with seating room for 52,615 persons and assessed at $1,089,750. The experience of the Presbyterians was akin to that of the Baptists and Congregationalists. In 1890 there were 14,154 persons who were listed as communicants in the Presbyterian Church in the state, in 180 congregations with 190 church structures, valued at $1,004,355, with a seating capacity of 45,977.

Meanwhile, in 1890 the Methodist Episcopal Church in Wisconsin counted 43,696 members. There were 784 Methodist congregations in the state with 672 church edifices, having seating for 144,693 people and worth $1,889,200.

In the spring of 1890, while the mayoral election in Milwaukee was being hotly debated, the Milwaukee Methodists approved several resolutions, introduced by the Reverend J. R. Creighton, Pastor of the Summerfield Church in Milwaukee, which pertained to the Bennett Law. One of these resolutions verified the right of the state to have proof that a parochial school taught a sufficient amount of English. Another, which can be interpreted as a rejection of the Catholic Bishops' "Manifesto," and an endorsement of the rights of the state in education downplayed religiosity and ethnicity, and emphasized citizenship and the preeminent right of the state in inculcating it. It was not, the Resolution asserted, "a question of foreign or native born, Protestant, Catholic, rich or poor, but it is a question of American schools for American children."

The Reverend Creighton, an outspoken foe of the Edgerton Bible Decision, utilized his pulpit in the Bennett Law strife as well. Echoing a nativist call, Creighton thundered that the republic was in danger due to the immigration from Europe of her "undesirable population." These immigrants constituted an "imminent peril" unless they could be "assimilated and influenced" by Christian principles. The role of the

94 Ibid., pp. 300, 261-81.
95 Ibid., pp. 304, 261-81.
96 Ibid., p. 303.
97 Ibid., pp. 261-81.
99 Milwaukee Sentinel, July 7, 1890, p. 7.
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public schools in inculcating the principles of Americanism was depicted in his educational platform as:

Compulsory education in the language of the land, the language in which the Declaration of Independence was written, Christian morality and the instruction of our children as absolutely necessary to a responsible and loyal citizenship, common schools and not parochial schools for the elementary training of our future citizens—if, however, these latter have received legal sanction there must be strict inquiry into the sort of education they give, to the end that all intolerance and disloyalty may be crushed out—and finally, no foreign dictation as to the management and maintenance of our educational interests. Let us stand invincibly by these principles—by our common school system as the noblest product of American civilization.100

Official Methodist groups supported the Bennett Law in their 1890 meetings. The Wisconsin Conference described the conflict as a national, not a state matter, because it was a "question of domestic or foreign domination." The maintenance by Lutherans and Catholics of "foreign ideas, customs, and languages" constituted "nothing more dangerous to the traditions and spirit and institutions of our country." While they supported the rights of parents in the education of their children, "nothing can be more hurtful than the perpetuation of foreign ideas to the utter exclusion of those which are fundamental to our national life." But of the assimilationist intent of the Bennett Law, with its aim that every citizen "know and love the government of their adoption," the Wisconsin Methodists came out "emphatically in favor of the maintenance and enforcement of the so-called Bennett Law, or its equivalent in everything essential to it."101

The West Wisconsin Conference joined with their brethren in the Wisconsin Conference. The controversy pointed out the necessity felt by these Methodists, that their members, "ministers and laymen take greater interest in the public schools."102

Local groups of Methodists added their voices to the chorus of support. The Milwaukee District, for example, resolved that while they had "no objection to parochial schools, we think that the state should require that they give sufficient instruction in the English language to enable the pupils to read and write it readily."103 Similar sentiments were expressed by the Methodist Ministerial Association in Milwaukee, which tied the Bennett Law to the right of the government to teach "every child" the "American language," and identified its opponents as "menaces against liberty."104

100Ibid.

101Minutes of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Forty-Fourth Session 1890 (John Schneider, Editor and Publisher, 1890), pp. 56-57.

102Minutes of the Thirty-Sixth Annual Session of the West Wisconsin Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1890 (Evansville: R. M. Antes, 1890), pp. 49-50.

103Milwaukee Sentinel, September 3, 1890, p. 1.

104Ibid., September 9, 1890, p. 3.
In 1880 the Wisconsin Methodists had referred to "missionary work among the Germans." Several Methodist groups of German orientation went on record in the Bennett Law turmoil in 1890. The Galena District Conference of the German Methodists, representing northern Illinois, southern Wisconsin and eastern Iowa, meeting in LaCrosse, maintained that the Bennett Law was not "calculated to prohibit private or parochial schools."105 Another group of German Methodists, meeting in Chicago, denied that the Bennett Law interfered with schools that gave their students "a thorough education and most necessary knowledge of the English language."106

Conclusion

William Dempster Hoard was soundly defeated in his bid for re-election in November of 1890. His advocacy of the Bennett Law was a major factor in his defeat. The man for whom "Jesus Christ was a magnificent democrat," saw the "ecclesiastics" as inimical to the rights of the state in conducting citizenship education.107 Likewise the Bennett Law was doomed. In his Message to the legislature in 1891 Governor George W. Peck called for its repeal and upheld the "rights of the citizen to educate his child in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience, without interference on the part of the State."108

The law which replaced the Bennett Law was less stringent and proved no threat to backers of religious-affiliated schools. In 1892 Superintendent Oliver E. Wells complained that the "tendency, though it may not be the purpose of these schools, is to disintegrate and divide." It was the "common school alone," Wells iterated, that "can weave the varied threads of our national life into the web of American citizenship."109 He, too, complained of the failure of the private schools to report to his office, with the result that he could not accurately tally the number of children in the state who were not receiving formal instruction.110

Wells' plaints fell on deaf ears. For Wisconsin Methodists, the defeat in the Bennett Law struggle, while not as crucial to them as the Supreme Court's ruling in the Edgerton Bible case, was testament to the decline, if not the demise, of positions they held on public schooling, positions which were once dominant in the state. Those positions were no longer dominant, nor have they been to this date.

105Ibid., May 15, 1890, p. 2.
106Ibid., September 4, 1890, p. 3.
110Ibid., p. 17-18.