

PEDAGOGY

*Lessons in Latin: The Itinerant Scholar  
Who Shaped Horace Mann*

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When we think of Horace Mann, the great architect of American public education, we often picture him as a lone hero, rising from modest beginnings through sheer determination. But every great figure has teachers, mentors, and moments of grace that change their path. For Mann, one such spark came in the form of an eccentric, often disheveled itinerant schoolteacher named Samuel John Barrett. A master of Latin and Greek, a gifted grammarian, and a deeply troubled soul, Barrett is nearly lost to history. Yet his brief appearance in Mann's life had lifelong consequences, not only for Mann, but also for the millions of children whose futures were reshaped by the schools he would one day reform.

**Early Life: A Legacy of Learning**

Samuel John Barrett was born on January 2, 1759, in Hopkinton, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> His family roots run deep in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of New England. His grandfather, Reverend Samuel Barrett, was the first minister of Hopkinton and a Harvard graduate, ordained in 1724. Reverend Barrett was known more for his wisdom and gentleness than for oratory brilliance, so much so that the evangelist George Whitefield once quipped that he hoped the “dumb dog would bark.”<sup>2</sup> Samuel's father, also named Samuel, married Mary Caswell in 1758, and together they raised two children: Samuel John and his sister Anna.

From a young age, Barrett was surrounded by books, sermons, and classical ideas. He was educated at least in part by Reverend Elijah Fitch,<sup>3</sup> his grandfather's colleague, and later came under the tutelage of Reverend Aaron Hutchinson of Grafton.<sup>4</sup> Hutchinson's method of instruction was peculiar; he seldom used a book, nor did he have a classroom for teaching. In exchange for his instruction, his pupils worked on the farm. They plowed fields, chopped wood, and tended livestock, and all the while, their discourses on daily life and other subjects were conducted in Greek and Latin.<sup>5</sup> This immersive,

conversational style left a mark on Barrett, who would go on to embrace an equally unconventional teaching method.

In an era when formal schooling beyond the basics was scarce in rural New England, Barrett became an itinerant schoolmaster, traveling from town to town and opening a school wherever there was demand. He taught in various communities across Massachusetts, offering instruction in Latin and Greek to prepare local youth for college. This itinerant pattern was not unusual—indeed, like other professionals in the early nineteenth century, many teachers were essentially “itinerant laborers” who moved from one community to another in search of work.<sup>6</sup> Barrett, however, stood out for the depth of his classical learning, and for the peculiarities of his character that would become the stuff of local legend.

### **The Grammar Book That Tried to Change Everything**

Barrett’s specialties as a teacher were the classical “dead languages” and English grammar, although his knowledge was not limited to Latin and Greek. He was also a polyglot who reportedly knew Hebrew, Chaldee & Syriac (dialects of Aramaic), French, Italian, German, and, of course, English.<sup>7</sup>

Determined to apply his classical approach to the study of English, in 1813 Barrett authored his own textbook. It was a bold, idiosyncratic work titled, *A Grammar of the English Language: Containing a Variety of Critical Remarks, the Principal Part of Which are Original*, printed and sold by Munroe & Francis of Boston. A second edition, revised and expanded, appeared in 1819. On its title page, he boldly proclaimed in Latin: “*Qui nescit linguam Latinam, Anglicam accurate intelligere non potest*” – “He who does not know the Latin language cannot accurately understand the English.”<sup>8</sup> This epigraph encapsulated Barrett’s pedagogical creed: a thorough grounding in Latin was, in his view, the key to mastering English.

Barrett’s grammar book attempted to carry forward the work of the famed grammarian Lindley Murray<sup>9</sup> by teaching English through the medium of Latin. At a time when *Murray’s English Grammar* (1795) was standard in schools, Barrett’s less pretentious approach was original, if a bit unconventional. In the preface to *Grammar*, Barrett states that other grammar textbooks are “in a style so lofty and sublime that

it is exceedingly difficult for young persons to understand them.” *A Grammar of the English Language* was generally well received, and he even secured endorsements from prominent figures to bolster the book’s credibility. The first edition included laudatory reviews from classicist Dr. John Snelling Popkin<sup>10</sup> of Harvard University, and the Reverend Dr. Nathanael Emmons of Franklin:

Franklin, December 9, 1811.

Having heard Mr. Barrett read his manuscript, containing Critical Remarks upon English Grammar, I am free to say, that they appear to be both original and ingenious, and well calculated to remove some difficulties, which other grammarians have not removed; and I cannot but think, that the publication of them will be of great service, not only to those who are learning, but to those who are teaching the English language grammatically.<sup>11</sup>

NATHANAEL EMMONS,  
Minister in Franklin.

Such praise suggests that Barrett’s expertise was recognized in learned circles. For a man with no scholarly background, this was a remarkable achievement.

### **Personal Struggles and Family Circle**

Those who remembered Barrett in the communities he served painted a picture of a man as eccentric as he was intelligent. One acquaintance later described him as “eccentric and abnormal both in appetites and faculties.”<sup>12</sup> Physically, Barrett was a distinctive figure, “very short and stout, and even fat”<sup>13</sup> as one reminiscence put it. He cut an unmistakable silhouette in the classroom and on the road. Yet it was his habits and behaviors that truly earned him a reputation for oddity.

Barrett was notorious for extreme cycles of sobriety and dissipation. During his teaching terms, he abstained from all stimulants stronger than tea. Once a term was over, he would succumb to bouts of intemperance that became local lore. For stretches of months, Barrett

would “travel the country in a state of beastly drunkenness, begging cider, or anything that would intoxicate, from house to house, and sleeping in barns or styes”<sup>14</sup> until the drunken paroxysm passed. Then, as if coming to his senses, he would sober up, “clothe” himself respectably, and secure another teaching position in some new town. This oscillation between dedicated schoolmaster and drunken wanderer was so regular that Barrett himself viewed it as a kind of periodic madness. Friends in Boston recalled helping to pick the “unfortunate scholar from the gutter”<sup>15</sup> during one of his drunken stupors, and hearing him mourn the chronic alcoholism, which he felt he had inherited and was powerless to control. He has also been criticized for being something of an unapologetic nonconformist. “At that time, say from 1815 to 1820, he must have been from 50 to 60 years old, and evidently so unacquainted with the ways of men as to miss the respect of that large portion of the community, who judge of the worth of a man by his tact in making money.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite his overindulgences and his intermittent employment, Barrett maintained a semblance of family life. In 1784, he married Bridget Bryant in Boston.<sup>17</sup> She was a steady presence in his otherwise unsteady life, and together they had two children: Clarissa, born in 1785 in Hopkinton, and Orlando, born in 1786 in Wrentham.<sup>18</sup> Clarissa married Levi Bicknell in 1803, had seven children, and seems to have lived a quiet life in Hopkinton. Orlando never married, and in 1838, the town of Hopkinton placed him, with his consent, under legal guardianship due to “excessive drinking and idleness, exposing the town to charge expenses for his maintenance and support”—a grim echo of his father’s periodic descent into addiction.<sup>19</sup>

No clues have been found as to how Samuel Barrett’s cycles of sobriety and relapse affected his family relationships. His marriage to Bridget lasted over three decades until her death in 1816. He died five years later in 1821, at the age of 62, in Foxborough, Massachusetts.<sup>20</sup>

### **Teaching by Memory**

Barrett’s intellectual gifts were by all accounts extraordinary. When sober and in the classroom, he was a different man, an inspiring teacher and a prodigy of memory. His knowledge of Latin and Greek was encyclopedic. As a schoolmaster, Barrett famously never needed to refer to a textbook; his students would recite their lessons from Virgil,

Cicero, or the Greek New Testament, and “he never took a book into his hand”<sup>21</sup> to correct them. Not only could he recall the sentiments of the classical works, but also the exact sentences, in Latin word order. They were “as familiar to him as his A, B, C.”<sup>22</sup> If a pupil mangled a line of Virgil’s *Aeneid* or a sentence from Cicero’s orations, Barrett would gently recite the passage perfectly from memory, “binding up and healing its wounded and dislocated parts,”<sup>23</sup> as one observer vividly described. Sometimes, in a reverie of scholarship, he would “croon off...page after page of an author, winding up each paragraph with such an inarticulate chuckle of delight such as only a very fat man like him could give.”<sup>24</sup> These charming eccentricities in recitation underscored the depth of Barrett’s mastery. His mind was a storehouse of classical literature, and he took palpable joy in the beauty of these works. A literary critic, in a review of the second edition of *Grammar of the English Language* observed:

Mr. Barrett, it seems, from several highly respectable testimonials prefixed to his Grammar, is a teacher of some celebrity both of the English and of the learned languages. He has not been permanently fixed in that capacity, in any one spot, but has laboured at intervals in Hopkinton and Franklin, and if we are not grossly misinformed also at Attleborough and Mendon. Without pertinaciously rooting down on one spot, and teaching on, whether the children have learned out or the parents paid out or not, Mr. Barrett goes where he is most wanted, and thus scatters abroad what light it is in his power to dispense.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Franklin Term: Mann Meets Mentor**

Barrett’s most significant role as educator lay in his brief mentorship of Horace Mann. Their fateful teacher-pupil encounter occurred in 1815, when Barrett was in his late fifties and Horace a young man hungry for learning. Mann, born in 1796 in Franklin, Massachusetts<sup>26</sup>, had grown up with very limited formal schooling. Typically, he received only a few wintry weeks per year of rudimentary instruction in a cold dilapidated schoolhouse. Secondary school options in Franklin were nonexistent, as the town did not open its first high school, a private academy, until 1835 and its first public high school until 1868.<sup>27</sup> By his late teens, Mann was largely self-taught from library books,

and he nurtured what he described as an “irrepressible yearning for knowledge” driven not by thoughts of wealth or fame but by a desire to do good in the world.<sup>28</sup> However, without access to classical instruction, Mann’s university dreams would be dashed. “Knowledge was my needed instrument,”<sup>29</sup> Mann would later say of his youth, yet opportunities for advanced study on the Massachusetts frontier were scarce.

Into this educational desert wandered Samuel Barrett. In March of 1815, Barrett arrived in Franklin,<sup>30</sup> setting up a classroom in an upstairs room in the home of Daniel Fisher, about a mile from the Mann family farm.<sup>31</sup> Barrett’s reputation as an expert in Latin was likely known to Reverend Nathanael Emmons in Franklin who, as noted, would later endorse Barrett’s grammar book, and he may also have endorsed Barrett as a teacher. Into this impromptu, unorthodox “school” enrolled a young Horace Mann. There, he encountered not just Latin declensions, but an entirely new way of thinking. Barrett’s enthusiasm, encyclopedic memory, and refusal to follow convention lit a fire in Mann. In just six months, under Barrett’s guidance, Mann raced through a Latin and Greek curriculum that would normally take years. He read Corderius, *Aesop’s Fables*, *The Aeneid*, portions of *Bucolics and Georgics*, Cicero’s orations, *The Four Gospels* in Greek, and selections from the *Graeca Majora* and *Minora*.<sup>32</sup> The experience was transformative. With Barrett’s rigorous coaching in classical languages and grammar, Horace Mann’s educational progress was so rapid that he was able to gain admission to Brown University as a sophomore in the fall of 1816.<sup>33</sup> This was a remarkable leap for someone who, only a year earlier, had never studied Latin at all. Mann went on to excel at Brown, graduating valedictorian of the class of 1819 after just three years of study. Reflecting on Barrett’s influence, Mann wrote:

A teacher with whom I partly fitted for college, Master Samuel Barrett, an itinerant schoolmaster and a profound linguist...in hearing the *Aeneid*, the select orations of Cicero and the four evangelists, in Greek, never took either grammar or text-book into his hand; and he would have considered it an indignity, if a pupil had offered him one, by which to set the next lesson. I know that this ability of his inspired one of his pupils, at least, with sentiments of respect towards him, with conceptions of excellence, and with an ardor for attainment, such as all the places and prizes ever bestowed,

and a life of floggings into the bargain, would never have imparted. I well remember that, when I encountered difficulty, either in translation or syntax, and was ready to despair of success in overcoming it, the mere thought, how easy that would be to my teacher, seemed not only to invigorate my effort, but to give me an enlargement of power, so that I could return to the charge, and triumph.<sup>34</sup>

### **A Quiet Legacy**

Samuel John Barrett passed away in relative obscurity in 1821. A brief obituary-style entry in the 1874 *Gazetteer of the State of Massachusetts* noted his work as a teacher and his grammar book, but little else.<sup>35</sup> He left behind no fortune, no school named in his honor, and no official recognition. Mortimer Blake wrote of Barrett in his centennial history of Franklin, “A singular grammar published by him in 1813 is his only surviving monument.”<sup>36</sup> Yet Barrett’s true legacy was far more profound: he inspired a student who would carry forward his passion for learning and turn it into a national movement.

Horace Mann went on to become the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, a fierce advocate for free, universal, non-sectarian schooling, and an inspiration for educational reformers throughout the nineteenth century. While many factors shaped Mann’s philosophy, the influence of the eccentric, erratic, and extraordinary Samuel Barrett was one of the earliest and most essential.

### **Remembering Barrett**

While history tends to memorialize those who achieve public distinction, it is often the overlooked who plant the seeds of transformation. Samuel John Barrett never held a college degree, but he mentored students into the most prestigious of universities. He never had a formal classroom of his own, yet his voice echoed in the classrooms Horace Mann would build. He lived on the fringes of polite society yet helped shape one of its greatest reformers.

Barrett’s life is a reminder that education does not always flow from institutions, credentials, or order. Sometimes it comes from

passion, memory, and a mind too big to be contained by ordinary circumstances. When honoring Horace Mann, credit must be given to the uncommon schoolmaster who saw potential in a farmer's son and gave him the tools to change the world.

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#### Notes

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