

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns surrounds the text. The border is composed of repeating motifs of flowers, leaves, and scrolls, creating a classic and elegant frame.

Frontier Education

Information based
on a
Mini-exhibit from
2018

The Historic Indian Agency House

A decorative border with a repeating pattern of stylized flowers and scrolls, framing the text. The border is composed of black lines on a white background, with floral motifs at the corners and midpoints of each side.

Frontier Education

In America's early days, educational opportunities varied dramatically from region to region. Thus, everyone on the frontier had a unique story in regard to his or her educational experiences. Even among families, the stories differed. This was especially true of John H. Kinzie's family. Although diverse, their stories all demonstrate how highly education was valued and how motivated the individuals were to pursue the best use of the means available to ensure an effective education.

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Running From School... and Then Back

John Kinzie, Sr.

John H. Kinzie's father's education was shaped by his independent spirit. Although his education began formally, John Kinzie, Sr.'s, taste for adventure spurred him at age ten to run away from home one day on his way to school. He commenced a wild trip to Quebec, Canada, where he remained for some time, encountering a different kind of education: the apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship was a common type of education in this era. Young boys often learned a trade through observation of a master craftsman. In Quebec, John learned the silversmith trade from a craftsman who took pity on the wandering boy. His education as a silversmith eventually earned him—and his son—the Native American nickname, "Silver Man."

John's family thought he was dead until one day he simply showed up again. Upon his return, he went back to school, continuing his formal education where he had left off.

*John Kinzie Sr. received both
a trade education and formal schooling.*

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Taught By Family and Experience

John H. Kinzie

John H. Kinzie lived in a place where he did not have access to a formal education, but that does not mean that he did not learn. In fact, by the time he was twenty years old, John had learned over a dozen languages and knew enough math to be a bookkeeper for the American Fur Company.

When John was young, he found—by accident—a school book tucked into a shipment of green tea. His cousin, Robert Forsyth, saw value in this book and used it to give young John a rudimentary education. John's wife, Juliette, later divulged that John was a rather unruly pupil! Nevertheless, John treasured the education he received from his cousin. Juliette said that until the day he died, John would recall his early schooling whenever he smelled green tea.

John's education did not end there. As an apprentice to a fur trader, his master held him to strict standards of perfection. If John made even tiny errors in math or penmanship on his invoices, he would have to do them over until he got them right.

*John H. Kinzie provides an example of
great learning without formal education.*

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A Fine Education

Juliette (Magill) Kinzie

Juliette Kinzie—living at a time when it was rare for women to be finely educated—secured extensive, high-quality schooling. She began her formal education at a boarding school in the New Haven, Connecticut, area—likely at the Cheshire Episcopal Academy. The school proudly declared that it existed to not only teach about God, but also to train students in “the English language, philosophy, mathematics, and every other science,” in addition to Classical languages.

Juliette did not stop there. She learned Latin and French from her uncle, Alexander Wolcott. Her continued desire to learn led Juliette to the prestigious Emma Willard’s School in Troy, New York. Willard was an early proponent of women’s higher education, and her school led a unique movement to educate women at the same level which men would achieve in seminary. Here, Juliette learned “religious and moral, literary, domestic, and ornamental” subjects to a high degree.

Juliette Kinzie was among the most highly formally-educated women of her era.

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A Different Perspective

The Ho-Chunk People

As the sub-agent at Fort Winnebago, John H. Kinzie was directed by Secretary of War John H. Eaton to encourage the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) to send some of their young men to a special school. The Ho-Chunk's perspective on education is reflected in their reply:

"Father! If the great spirit had made us like white men, he would have given us a way to be educated like them....If [our great father above] had seen proper to have us educated, he would not have made us different from the white men....We have gone on thus far without it, and we wish to remain in the same state as we have ever been....There are none of us now who appear to be anxious to have our children educated...."

The Ho-Chunk valued their traditions, wishing to continue to teach their own children the culture and skills of their tribe—things more important to them than reading and writing.

*The Ho-Chunk identified education as
learning through tribal traditions.*

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Educating Others

The Kinzies' Community

John H. Kinzie valued learning. In 1825, while in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, he—along with two others—pushed against some local opposition to provide education to the next frontier generation by establishing a Sunday school, which in those days taught reading and writing in addition to biblical instruction.

Juliette Kinzie, acknowledging that Fort Winnebago was far removed from any schools, was determined to educate the young people within her circle of influence, including her servant girl and the family of local trader Pierre Paquette. While her students proved unruly, she proudly concluded that they had begun to learn their primers under her guidance.

John and Juliette worked together in 1833 to help another frontier child receive a better education. When the Kinzies learned that Mary Mitchell, a fur trader's daughter, wished to go East to finish her education, they personally escorted her to Pennsylvania to do just that!

*John and Juliette's appreciation for education
prompted them to give of themselves to educate others.*

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What is Your Story?

Everyone has a story about how they learned. Write your story below.
Then ask your parents and grandparents to tell you their stories!