



## Back to School: The History of Education and the Pennsylvania House of Representatives

In the early nineteenth century United States, rudimentary education was hard to come by. Most schools charged tuitions that generally limited attendance to families with the resources to send their children to school. In Pennsylvania, some legislators had promoted greater access to education in various fashions since the formation of the General Assembly, but no measures taken were far reaching enough to benefit all classes of Pennsylvanians. George Wolf, seventh Governor of Pennsylvania (1829-1835),



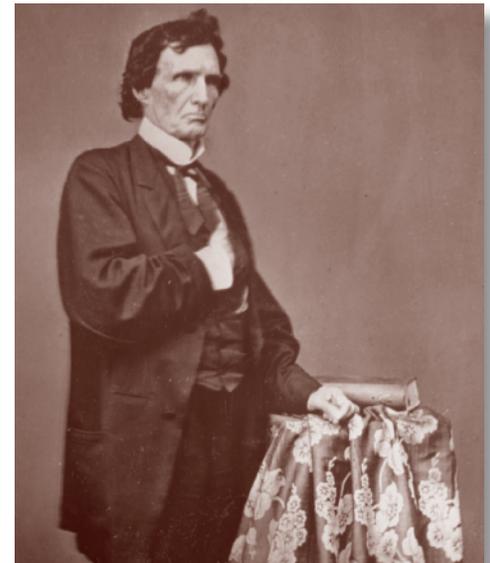
*George Wolf, pictured here around the 1830s, was Pennsylvania's Seventh Governor from 1829 to 1835).*

repeatedly expressed his support of establishing public schools in the Commonwealth in each of his Annual Messages to the Assembly since his induction in 1829. In his 1830 message, Wolf proclaimed, "What an incalculable loss has not this Commonwealth sustained... in the ingenuity and skill that would have been imparted to labour and science; and in the moral and intellectual endowments that would have been engrafted and matured, had a judicious, well arranged system of universal education been early adopted."

Many supporters of free public schools were motivated by a desire for social and economic opportunity for all Pennsylvanians. This issue was naturally deeply connected with the issue of child labor—many, if not most, families among the lower and middle classes needed the wages that children could earn in order to make ends meet. Education and employment were at odds, and legislators were especially concerned about the situation of child workers. Into the early 20th century, legislators were fine-tuning laws regarding the attendance of children

in schools, as well as laws relating to child labor.

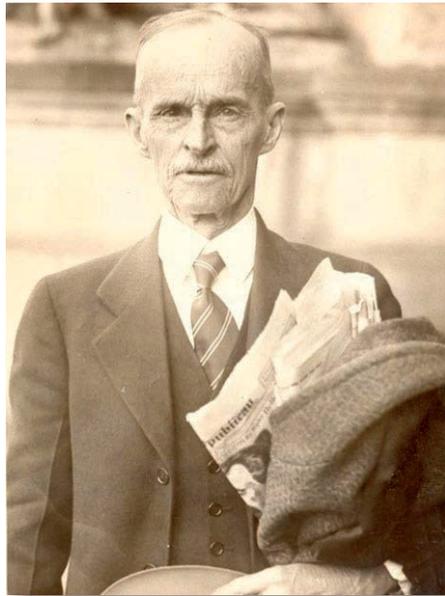
The world-renowned Thaddeus Stevens was an outspoken advocate of free childhood education. He is credited with casting a deciding vote in the House in favor of free public education in 1834.



*Thaddeus Stevens, pictured here circa 1863, represented Adams County in the Pennsylvania House from 1833 to 1839, and again in 1842, before going on to serve in the United States Congress, where he championed the rights of freedmen during and after the Civil War. National Archives, Washington, D.C.*

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In that session, the Assembly considered a piece of legislation that would establish school districts throughout the state, as well as require and make provisions for the rudimentary instruction for children.



*John R. Farr, pictured here circa 1908, represented Lackawanna County from 1891 to 1900. Photo courtesy of the Scranton Times-Tribune.*

As provisions were debated and tweaked, and the bill was considered and reconsidered in committees by both the House and by the Senate, a majority were set to vote it down. In the eleventh hour, Stevens delivered a powerful address on the floor of the Pennsylvania House, enjoining all of the Members present to cast their votes “that the blessing of education...shall be carried home to the poorest child of the poorest inhabitant of the meanest hut of your mountains, so that even they may be

prepared to act well his part in this land of freedom.”

But the effectiveness of offering education for poor children was offset by the demands for the labor and wages of even the youngest children in the Commonwealth. Sixty-one years after the passage of the Free Public School Act, Pennsylvania became the 28th state in the U.S. to legislate compulsory education for its young citizens. Leading up to the 1895 law, a united front for education activism in the Commonwealth was largely the result of advocacy against child labor. Early victories by groups such as the Public Education Association and the Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty included an 1887 law which banned industrial employment for children under the age of 12.

Pennsylvania Representative John R. Farr, who served as Speaker of the House from 1899 to 1900, was instrumental in sponsoring legislation to improve access to education and quality of instruction in the Commonwealth. In 1895, he was the author of the bill which became

the Compulsory Attendance Law (Act 53), which “required children between eight and thirteen to attend school for at least sixteen weeks,” with punishable noncompliance. Farr was also responsible for Act 51 of 1893, which mandated that the state provide free textbooks for all schoolchildren. Heated debate on the House floor accompanied the passage of the compulsory education legislation and the amendments which followed, but Farr cited high illiteracy rates as a barrier to effective citizenship and argued that if immigrants were going to arrive in Pennsylvania, then the state at least “wish[ed] to insist that they must educate their children.”

Farr himself had been employed from a young age, working as a newsboy in northeastern Pennsylvania. As a legislator, however, he expressed the view that the state had a responsibility to educate its children, stating, “It is unfair to the little boys and girls of this Commonwealth that the State does not assert its authority, not only for the State’s welfare, but for the future welfare of these children.”



*Postcard from John R. Farr’s congressional campaign, circa 1908.*

*When we were Kids, we did not have Free School Books. Our children have—Thanks to John R. Farr.*

# Average Age of a Member in the Pennsylvania Legislature: 1965-2016

In the current 2015-2016 session, the average age of a Member in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives is 55 years old. This represents a 50-year high in the average age for House Members. The average age of Members has been slowly increasing since the 1973-1974 session, when the average age was 47 years old.

A closer analysis of the data shows that the percentage of Members who are under the age of 35 has been on a rollercoaster ride since the 1970s. The peak percentage of those 35 years old and under was during the 1977-1978 session, when 23 percent of Members were under 35 years of age. This high percentage could be attributed to a host of factors that were occurring in the early 1970s, such as the 26th Amendment giving 18-year-olds the right to vote, fallout from the Watergate investigation, and the troubling economic times (oil crisis and high inflation). After the 1977-1978 session there was a steep decline in Members under 35 years old.

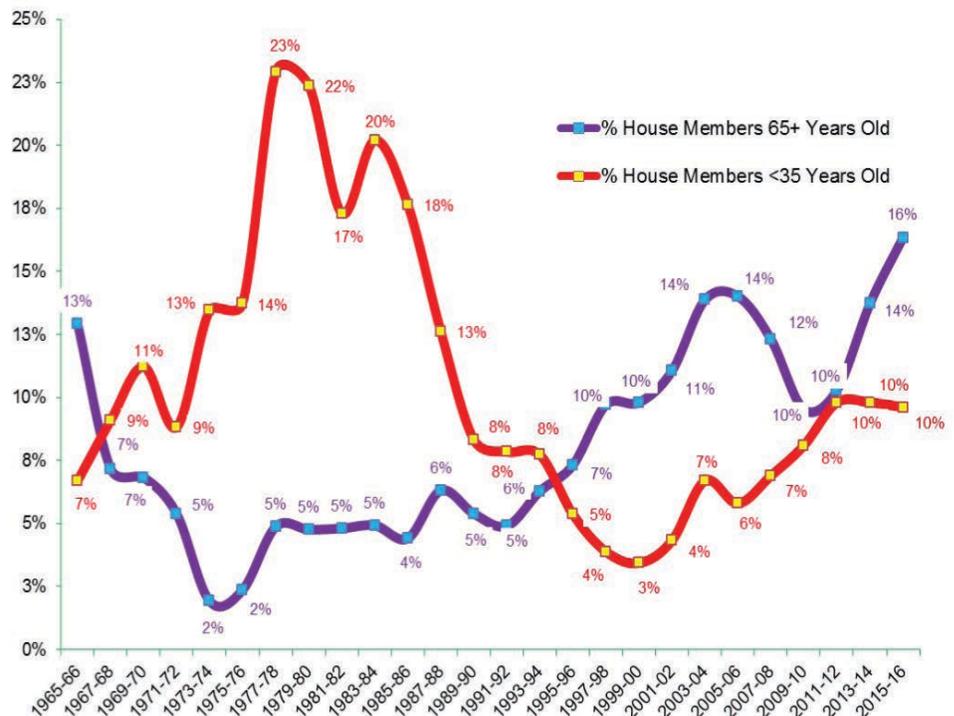
In this current session, 10 percent of Members are under 35 years old, while 16 percent of Members are 65 years of age and older.

When comparing the number of bills introduced per Member according to average age of the legislature, there was no relation. This could suggest that issues faced by the legislature transcend generational differences.

Nationwide, the ages of the Members in the United States House of Representatives run

parallel with the ages of members in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Both houses have seen an increase in the average age over the past 50 years and similar increases and decreases in average age over the years. The United States House average age, as of 2015, is 57 years old.

**Percentage of Pennsylvania House Members Under 35 Years Old and 65 Years Old and Older, by Session, 1965-66 to 2015-16.**



Data source: Pennsylvania House of Representatives Archives



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## Recent additions to our collections

- Framed photograph, Members of the House of Representatives, 1879
- Framed print, Bird's Eye view of Harrisburg, 1881
- Personal Papers of Ken Brandt (R) 1973-1990, 5 boxes
- Personal Papers of Tom Usiadek, Executive Director of House Transportation Committee, circa 1978
- Framed art work, Gift of His Imperial Majesty Ooni Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi (Ojaja II) the Ooni of Ife (Nigeria) to the Speaker of the House, Mike Turzai
- Photographs of 125th anniversary celebration of Battle of Gettysburg and Gettysburg Address, 1988
- Materials from the 200th Session including speeches, photographs and video.

## Longest Serving Representative in Pennsylvania House History



*"During my tenure in the House of Representatives, I am pleased that we have done a lot to expand the definition of who a human being is."*

The longest-serving Representative in the Pennsylvania House, Mark B. Cohen, has spent more than 42 years serving the people of the 202nd District in Philadelphia and the state of Pennsylvania, supporting workers' rights, seniors and victims of abuse. When reflecting on his time in office, Cohen noted being fortunate to have friendships with both Republicans and Democrats, as well as enjoying the challenge of working on individual constituent concerns in his district and addressing statewide and even national issues in Harrisburg.

Cohen was 25 years old when he took office as a Democrat on June 10, 1974, after winning a special election in May of that year. During his tenure, Cohen was elected as Democratic

Caucus Chair and Majority Whip. He served on many committees, including leadership roles as the Democratic Chair of the State Government, Human Services and Labor Relations Committees. While in office, Cohen received praise for his work on a special task force that worked to solve an unemployment crisis and preserve benefits for unemployed workers.

Cohen took the mantle as the longest-serving Member in 2016, serving for a total of 42 years, 5 months and 21 days. The previous longest-serving Member, Representative Norman Wood of Lancaster, served 42 years (1922-1964), and former Speaker Matthew J. Ryan was in office for 40 years, 4 months and 29 days (1963-2003).