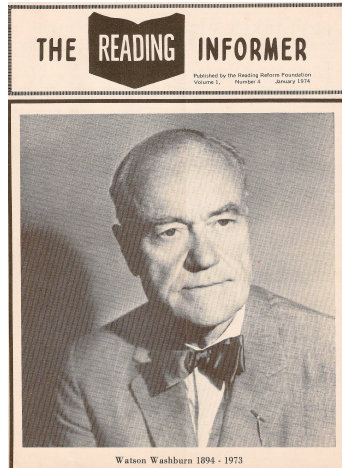


# Articles from the Pen of Mr. Watson Washburn

(Founder of the Reading Reform Foundation)



[Spelling Progress Bulletin December 1961 pp 2,3]

## **The Disintegration of Our School System, by Watson Washburn.**

The author is a distinguished New York attorney who was graduated summa cum laude from Harvard in 1914. He was a member of the victorious U.S. Davis Cup tennis teams of 1920-21.

Much has been said lately about integration in our schools. There is no doubt that this has become a major problem since the revolutionary decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* on May 17, 1954, which reversed the contrary rule of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, upon which since 1896 the segregated school systems of our Southern states had been developed with ever-increasing improvement, until they were suddenly confronted with the shocking impact of the Supreme Court's about-face.

However, while "integration" has become an explosive and dangerous problem in the South, it does not compare in evil consequences with the countrywide "disintegration" of our educational system which has been going on largely unnoticed for the past 30 years, until its awful results have finally attracted public attention - let us hope, before it is too late.

The most striking example of this disintegration, as well as the simplest and easiest to understand, is in the teaching of reading - the very first of the Three Rs. Catastrophe here followed slowly but surely *the abandonment of the alphabet* as the foundation of reading instruction, and the substitution of configuration. This method, called "look and say", requires children to memorize the appearance of whole words, regardless of the individual

letters which compose them, whereas the alphabetic method requires only the memorization of the 26 letters of our alphabet in their conventional order, plus the learning of the sounds which these letters represent — considerably more than 26 sounds — for some letters, particularly the vowels, represent more than one sound, but of course infinitely less than the number of separate words. The alphabetical method of relating the alphabet to sounds is often referred to as “phonics.”

The advantages of the alphabetical over the whole word system are so overwhelming that it is incredible that the latter should have been imposed upon most of the country’s public schools, and adopted by many private or independent ones; but this is obviously another case where we took things for granted for so long that we forgot how important they were and that they must be fought for to be preserved.

The alphabet was invented over 3000 years ago, and in due course adopted by all the leading nations of Western civilization, beginning with Greece. In the intellectual field, the discovery was universally considered as a milestone, like that of fire in anthropology, or the wheel in mechanics.

The addition which the alphabet brought to the human mind was not limited to the simplification of reading, enormous as this contribution was. The intellectual stimulation and training involved in building single-syllable words from the letters and then polysyllables, gave children a fine start toward mathematics and logic. Also, complete familiarity with the order of the letters (which can be memorized by the ordinary child of four in a few hours) permitted children to use freely and efficiently for the rest of their lives indexes, catalogs and works of reference of all kinds (including in this age the telephone book) which are very slow and frustrating implements to employ for those who have been denied this fundamental training. Further, since the alphabet is the same in English, as in other Western languages, the study of these languages is greatly helped by a thorough grounding in our own alphabet.

After this marvelous invention was adapted by the Greeks to enlarge so magnificently their linguistic and intellectual horizons, it became a common place attitude to look down on the benighted savages who resorted to picture-writing of one land or another, and also to pity the nations whose considerable progress in civilization had been stunted by the lack of an alphabet, such as the Egyptians with their hieroglyphics, and the Chinese with their tens of thousands of separate characters which called for the ability and patience of a Mandarin to assimilate. But *even the primitive picture writing of the American Indians, or other native tribes, or the much more intricate and sophisticated Chinese characters, are vastly superior pedagogically to the configurationism of our top professional educationists.* For the picture-writings used by these people have *some resemblance* to the meanings signified; among the primitives the likeness may be obvious, like the figure of a cat or a boat; in Chinese, the conventionalized character may be much more obscure, but to the expert scholar it has a number of stimulating associations. In vivid contrast, the shape of our alphabetized words has no relevance whatever to the meaning. Even the most avant-garde painter would hardly use the configuration of letters “cat” to depict a cat, just as conversely, unfortunate children who have been subjected to this modern perversity are likely to read “boat” as “ship”.

This educationist madness therefore is much more of a backward step than merely to the year of 1500 B.C., before the alphabet. It is more irrational than the caveman or ape-man who never would have imagined such a self-defeating attempt to try to teach a child to run before he has learned to walk. In fact, it has no point of reference in the whole of normal history, and seems suitable only for psychiatry study.

Some conturists advance as an excuse for their peculiar theory, the fact that a mature reader can devour pages of print at a speed incompatible with the “sounding out” of each letter in every word. From this simple truism they solemnly draw the illogical conclusion that such a reader must be identifying the words only by their outlines, and further that if this is true (a false assumption) the way to become a fast reader is to begin by memorizing the outlines. It is hard to take such a suggestion seriously.

The fact is that the alphabetically trained reader has always readily acquired the facility of fast reading; this is so because with constant practice the marvelous brain mechanism steadily speeds up until soon reading becomes automatic and subconscious. The brain reads each letter far faster than conscious thought could imagine. This is a common phenomenon with all skills. In fact, it is essential to be an expert in any activity. The golfer who thought about every little motion while hitting the ball would never break a hundred. But the champion’s brain does all this work for him automatically.

This crazy scheme (the whole word method) was introduced with such little fanfare into our educational system that it largely escaped public notice until its baneful effects finally forced the issue into the open. *The increasing number of unfortunate pupils who had later to take special remedial training courses attracted the attention of their parents.* So did the fact that the usual reading defects disclosed were evidently connected with the configurational method of instruction, and that the standard remedy was the alphabet.

Cure was much slower than prevention, for these older children had to unlearn all their bad reading habits at an age when their minds had lost some of the elasticity of childhood. The question naturally arose why, if the alphabet (or “phonics”) was the best or only way to teach these retarded children to read, it was not also the rational way to teach all children in the first place, thus avoiding altogether the painful expedient of the “remedial”, classes.

One of the by-products of contour-reading is the disappearance of good handwriting and correct spelling. The accuracy required to write the letters clearly and to spell properly is wholly foreign to configurationism.

Another unwholesome excretion of configurationism is the reading matter, which the unfortunate pupils are forced to swallow. Since the number of word shapes which primary children can memorize in a year is limited to two or three hundred and since without knowledge of the alphabet they are helpless if confronted with a new word, the texts given them for intellectual fodder have to be tailored to this Procrustean measure. The result resembles the repetitious drooling of hopeless senility. Naturally, no one with an ounce of literary ability or creative imagination would dream of writing such inhibited nonsense. It is no wonder that many young pupils are nauseated, and never recover the

taste for reading which familiarity with Lewis Carroll or Hans Christian Andersen might have developed in them.

When the awful truth dawned on the American people and Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* became a best seller in 1955, the reaction of the angry educationists was two-fold.

First, they made bitter personal attacks on the author, and any others who had the temerity to support his views, as "enemies of public schools", "reactionary ignoramuses", — in fact, the usual complimentary epithets bestowed by the apostles of academic freedom on those whose views on any subject differ from theirs. This was similar to the attempts they made more recently to endorse a school boycott against the largest national weeklies for publishing criticisms of so-called progressive education.

But the case for picture-reading was so pitifully weak that even the well-entrenched bureaucrats of the National Education Association felt it wise to establish a second line of defense by their "Committee for the Defense of Democracy Through Education". This was to deny that the alphabet had been relegated to obscurity, and to assert on the contrary that the New Teaching had merely embellished the old-fashioned A-B-C system with some modern improvements, of which picture reading was only one. The whole was thus described in "Phonics and the ABC's — 1956", an official publication, of the New York State Education Department: "*accurate and careful listening, correct and clear pronunciation, a constantly increasing sight-word vocabulary, picture and context clues, general configuration of-words, and the composition of the word. These skills should be used along with phonics, sometimes one, sometimes another, being the best aid to the recognition of a particular word*".

This secondary defense was just as absurd as the direct counter-offensive. For it should be obvious even to a mind of the elementary grade that the alphabetic mode of expression is wholly incompatible with primitive pictography. This is like harnessing a horse to a jet plane. The Teachers' College men were as far off base with this alleged eclecticism or middle-of-the-road theory as an arithmetic instructor caught teaching that two and two make five, who offered to compromise on four and a half. Actually, the established hierarchy never gave the alphabet a chance, in the *first years of school when the pupils' minds are malleable*.

We may thank our lucky stars that our educationists have so far allowed children to learn to talk, in the old-fashioned way, at home with their families. Learning to talk from a scratch start, as babies must, is obviously far more difficult than learning to read after mastering oral communication. Just what particular form of new nonsense our configurationists would invent to bedevil the babies with, is hard to imagine, but the wrecks they have left behind in the reading field justifies the most pessimistic prophecies. For one thing, we may be reasonably sure that they would apply the concept of "reading readiness" to speaking.

If a boy of five is slow in reading, common sense would seem to recommend special effort and longer hours to bring him up to average but the current dogma calls for abandonment of all reading instruction for an indefinite period, until "readiness" mysteriously

arrives. By analogy, babies backward in conversation would be discouraged from further babbling till their teacher could discern the necessary growth of the requisite 'skill' in their little brains. This might prolong the period of dumbness for a good many years, but children so early grounded by their own experience in "progressive" technique would probably still be dumb enough when grown up to get a diploma from Teachers' College and carry on the good work from generation to generation.

The inertia of the bureaucrats in charge of the public school system of most states, and the intolerance of the despots of the National Education Association, make the task of abolishing from the top even such an absurdity as configurationism almost insurmountable. These people doubtless fear that *confession of such a gross error would hamper their master plan for securing control of billions of dollars of new Federal money for spreading their peculiar pedagogical theories.*

It may seem strange, in view of the shocking perversions of proper methods of instruction so consistently practiced by the highest educationist authorities for more than a score of years, how so many American youths are still able to read tolerably well. The great majority have mastered this accomplishment by the time they enter college, and only a small percentage then require remedial tutoring.

The reason for this is that numbers of parents, defying the warnings of the educationists, have taught their children to read in the normal way; and so have countless teachers, who from the practical experience with youngsters which the Teachers' College pundits lack, have learned picture-reading leads to a comic-strip mentality and either a remedial reading class or a reformatory.

Contour-reading alone has set back the education of American children in public schools by at least two years on the average, according to the experienced authors - one a remedial reading teacher and the other a professor of English - of the recent book: *Reading: Chaos and Cure*. It has permanently crippled the minds of millions. But while this is the clearest and most demonstrable mis-step of so-called "progressive" education, it also typifies similar perversions in almost every branch of public education, the poisonous effects of which have seeped into many college programs as well. The over-all picture is one of reducing the American people to a dull uniform of ignorant conformity, instead of educating them to be intelligent, independent-thinking, freedom-loving individuals.

The apparent impossibility of persuading the educationist bosses to correct their contour-reading aberration highlights the folly of trying to change their other more complex educational fallacies. The reform of these pernicious practices must evidently begin at grass-roots level. Fortunately, the public schools are still largely controlled locally, and a few active and well-informed crusaders in a community can soon accomplish wonders. The rank and file of teachers, who are a fine group of citizens, will often be found sympathetic with reform, tho afraid to express their feelings openly for fear of reprisals by their intolerant superiors.

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## Reading Reformers Organize

Another indication that the reading controversy is not going to subside is the announcement that a nationwide campaign to replace the widely used “whole-word” method with a phonics approach has been inaugurated by the Reading Reform Foundation, New York City. Says Watson Washburn, speaking for the trustees of the new non-profit organization: “All American parents who have been frustrated by the inability of their youngsters to sound out words phonetically and have seen their children referred year after year to remedial classless recognize that something is wrong with the present method of instruction.” The Foundation has laid plans to establish state and local affiliates throughout the country.

Serving on the Advisory Council of the Foundation are many educators and writers, including Arthur Bestor, Van Wyck Brooks, Douglas Bush, John Dos Passos, Rudolf Flesch, Edith Hamilton, William Ernest Hocking, Joseph Wood Krutch, Helen R. Lowe, Samuel Eliot Morison, Mortimer Smith, Edward Streeter, Josephine B. Timberlake Arther S. Trace, Jr., and Charles Child Walcutt.

**Note from Donald Potter:** Materials on reading from Charles Child Walcutt, Arther S. Trace, Jr., Rudolf Flesch, and Helen R. Lowe can be found on my web site. Josephine B. Timberlake was one of the authors of the 1942 Phonovisual Visual Chart Method, which is still in print. I have published a detailed analysis and review of the Phonovisual Method, which I used every day in my classroom. 10/23/09.

## Here's Why Watty Formed the R.R.F.

(Note from G. K. Hodenfield: The following article was written by our beloved founder, Watson Washburn of New York City, nearly a quarter-century ago. It explains beautifully why Mr. Washburn felt he had to form the Reading Reform Foundation, and why so many dedicated people have struggled so hard since to keep it active and effective.)

The headmaster of a large preparatory school recently stated:

“It has been my experience during 25 years of working with products of American elementary schools that the sight method of teaching reading whereby a child is taught the whole word instead of its phonics parts, is responsible for *incalculable damage* to American with effects actually beyond the reach of comprehension.”

The “phonetic” or alphabetic method (universally employed in Western civilization till 40 years ago) begins by teaching individual letters and their sounds, and from this foundation proceeds logically to the formation of words. On the other hand, the “whole-word” method (also known as look-and-say, picture-reading, or configuration) requires children to learn by sheer memorization the outlines of hundreds of whole words before they begin to learn the significance or sounds of any of the individual letters of the alphabet, which make up the words. This method seems to put the cart before the horse, and to be more suited to teaching Chinese or other languages not blessed with an alphabet.

A symposium of seven experts sponsored by the Council for Basic Education, Washington D.C., and published, October 31, 1961 – *Tomorrow's Illiterates* – asserts that about 35% of all America youth are seriously retarded in reading, 40% more are deficient, and even the most successful do not read as well as they could if properly taught. The main reason given is the whole-word or configuration techniques now generally used.

The advantages of the alphabetical over the word-by-word system are so numerous that it is hard to believe that the latter should have been imposed for nearly 40 years upon most of the country's schools, and adopted by many private or independent ones; but this is obviously another case where we took things for granted for so long that we forgot how important they were and that they must be fought for to be preserved.

The alphabet was invented 3000 years ago, and in due course adopted first by Greece and later by nearly all civilized nations. Its invention has always been regarded as one of the outstanding landmarks of human progress like the wheel, or the discovery of fire.

Tremendous as it was, the contribution, which the alphabet made to the development of civilization, was not limited to the simplification of reading. The mental training, which came from building one-syllable words from letters, and then into multi-syllable words, inevitably gave learners a start toward mathematics and logic. An ordinary child of four can memorize the letters of the alphabet in a few hours, and complete familiarity with the order of the letters gives children a permanent capacity to use effectively catalogs, indexes, works of reference of all kinds and telephone books – all of them difficult and frustrating tools for those who must stop to think whether “m” comes before “s.” Also, since our alphabet is largely like the alphabet of other Western languages, the study of languages is made easier by a thorough familiarity with the English alphabet.

From the time when the Greeks adopted the alphabet, and by so doing enlarged so dramatically their linguistic and intellectual horizons, the more civilized nations of the

West regarded scornfully those peoples who were still in the picture-writing stage. Even pictographs of the American Indians and the more sophisticated Chinese characters, are vastly superior, pedagogically, to modern configurationism, for they at least have some slight resemblance to the meaning of the symbols. Thus a primitive pictograph of a cat or a boat frequently suggested the thing in question; and even the highly stylized Chinese characters, while more obscure, had to the Mandarin scholar stimulating associations. In clear contrast, the form of our words has no conceivable connection with their meaning, and a modern child who is a victim of configurationism may very easily read “boat” as “ship.”

The introduction of the word-picture method into primary education was so quietly accomplished that the public was largely unaware of it, until its harmful results became apparent, as a result, chiefly, of an alarming increase in the number of children who had to take special remedial reading courses. It then became evident that the usual reading defects which were discovered were closely connected with the configurational method of instruction. It is significant that remedial reading classes resort to the alphabet as the most effective cure.

However, remedial reading is at best merely a palliative. It cannot make up for the wasted early years. The victims must unlearn much of what they have already been taught, and learn a new system at an age when their minds have lost some of their original elasticity. Naturally the question arose why, if the alphabet (or “phonics”) was the best method of teaching children who were already backward in their reading ability, it was not also the rational way to teach all children from the beginning.

An important subsidiary result of contour reading was the virtual disappearance of good handwriting and spelling. The accuracy needed to write the letters clearly and to spell correctly, which go hand-in-hand with phonics, fell by the wayside when the configurationists took over.

Another unhappy by-product of contour reading is the quality of the reading matter, which confronts the unfortunate pupils. The number of word-shapes which a child can commit to memory in a year is limited to three or four hundred, and without knowledge of the alphabet he is helpless when he meets a new word; hence the texts given him for intellectual fodder must be strictly limited to those words whose contours he has memorized. The reading material is necessarily hopelessly repetitive and dreary. It is little wonder that many young pupils, thoroughly bored with the whole business, never acquire a taste for children’s classics and prefer watching TV cartoons to reading Aesop’s Fables and, a little later, a third-rate TV Western to “Tom Sawyer” or “Treasure Island.”

A revolt, chiefly of angry parents of frustrated children, but also of many perceptive primary teachers and remedial reading tutors, was fanned by Rudolf Flesch’s bestseller, *Why Johnny Can’t Read* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1955). As a result, the educationist hierarchy has grudgingly allowed the alphabet and phonics a subsidiary place in their elementary curriculum. But this compromise is useless. The logical alphabetic method of reading is wholly incompatible with primitive pictography. This is like harnessing a horse to a jet plane. And in practice, the alphabet seldom gets a chance in the first years of school when the pupil’s minds are most malleable.

A book by Professor Trace (Random House, New York), just published — *What Ivan Knows That Johnny Doesn’t*— shows that Soviet Russian children of eight or nine, taught alphabetically, are several years ahead of ours in reading; that with a vocabulary of



10,000 words and the ability to use a dictionary, they then can read and enjoy the masterpieces of Russian literature, while American children, limited to painfully memorized contours of 1,500 words, have to struggle through textbooks of incredible banality. If education is a major factor in the cold war, perverted pedagogy is actually endangering the survival of civilization.

Protests against the curse of configurationism have been steadily increasing in recent years in all parts of the United States. But the appalling situation seems now too critical to await gradual or haphazard correction. Accordingly, the Reading Reform Foundation was established in October 1961, "to restore the alphabet to its proper place as the basis of elementary reading instruction in English." Its National Advisory Council will include representative persons interested in educational and reading problems from all parts of the country. It is a non-profit and (in counsel's opinion) tax-exempt trust.

It is the Foundation's purpose to enlighten teachers, parents, public authorities, and the nation generally on the nature and extent of the reading crisis, its cause and cure; to coordinate, and encourage the numerous local reform movements already active; and to create an informed national public opinion in favor of quickly eradicating from all our schools the cancer of configurationism; to the end that every child may soon have the opportunity to appreciate as early in life as possible the richness of the English language and the beauties of English literature, and to progress in a logical and orderly way to the other departments of education, of which reading ability is the indispensable basis.

## **Memorials for Watson Washburn**

### **From the January 1974 *Reading Informer***

#### Death takes Watson Washburn

Watson Washburn, founder and long-time president of the Reading Reform Foundation, died in his New York City home Sunday, Dec. 2.

His death came as a heavy blow to those who knew and loved him.

Watson Washburn was a good man, a gentle man, a wise man, and an intensely warm and human individual.

He never hesitated to challenge a thought, but he did not challenge people — preferring instead to “suffer fools gladly,” one of his favorite admonitions from St. Paul which he used frequently.

He “used” people, as he permitted himself to be “used.” George Bernard Shaw could have been describing Watson Washburn's philosophy of life when he wrote:

**“This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not make you happy.”**

Watson Washburn was one of those rare men, the ones who leave the world a better place than they found it. Millions of Americans will lead a better life because he saw an appalling flaw in the American educational system, and led the long, hard fight that is eradicating it.

In the last years of his life the Reading Reform Foundation was his consuming interest. But even before he turned his talents and his energies to reading reform, he had lived a full and colorful life, as the New York Times reported:

Mr. Washburn was a lawn tennis player of international renown. Off the tennis court, his prosecutions of fraudulent dealers in securities won him prominence of another kind, when he was Assistant Attorney General of New York in charge of the Bureau of Securities. In tennis Mr. Washburn gained distinction both as a player and for his many years of devoted service on the committees and in the councils of the United States Lawn Tennis Association. He was a member of Davis Cup and Olympic teams, was runner-up in the Wimbledon and United States doubles championships, won three veterans' doubles titles, one veterans' singles crown and one indoor doubles championship. He was ranked among the 10 best players of the United States seven times. In recognition of his playing ability, and his distinguished service to the game, Mr. Washburn in 1965 was elected to the National Lawn Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, R. I., of which he was an organizer.

An honor student at Harvard College, class of 1914, Mr. Washburn studied law at Columbia University. In 1921 he was appointed special assistant to the Under Secretary of the Treasury as an adviser on legal and financial matters. In 1929 Mr. Washburn was appointed by Attorney General Hamilton Ward as Chief of the Martin Anti-Stock Fraud Bureau in New York City. His office brought 104 actions that year against 342 firms and individuals, to enjoin them against illegal practices.

Mr. Washburn's drive against stock swindlers led to the institution of proceedings in.

more than 150 cases in 1930. He returned to the private practice of law in 1931. In 1932, with Edmund S. DeLong he wrote "High and Low Financiers."

With a deep interest in politics, Mr. Washburn was a member of the New York County Republican Committee. He was secretary of the Greater New York Hoover Committee and chairman of the 17th Congressional District Hoover Committee. Mr. Washburn was an authority in the United States Lawn Tennis Association on anything pertaining to rules and regulations. He was chairman of the Constitution and Rules Committee from 1920 to 1930, and continued as a member until 1946.

As a player, Mr. Washburn first made his mark in 1913 by winning the national inter-collegiate doubles championship with J. J. Armstrong from Harvard. The next year he was ranked ninth in the country, and in 1915 he won the national indoor doubles with Gustave Touchard. He ranked eighth that year and seventh in 1916.

Resuming his tennis competition in 1919, after World War I service, Mr. Washburn was ranked tenth. In 1920 he was seventh, and in 1921 and 1922 he was fifth. In 1920 he went to New Zealand as a member of the team that won the Davis Cup from Australia and New Zealand. In 1921 he and Richard Norris Williams 2d. won the Davis Cup challenge round doubles match from Zenzo Shimizu and Ichiya Kumagae of Japan.

Mr. Washburn never married.

Funeral services were held at St. James Episcopal Church, New York City, on the afternoon of Dec. 5.

## TRIBUTES

### Watty – a good man, a gentle man...

Watson Washburn was an individual who fought for sanity in education, yet was a gentleman; who argued before high bodies, yet did it with grace; who pladed with mankind, yet undestood reluctance; who inspired people everywhere to lend their talents, never demanded, who strove for a goal, and almost saw it accomplisheed

**Robert C. Price**  
**Executive Vice President**  
**Reading Reform Foundation**

Watty made a national name for himself in his absolute dedication to a purpose and goal. There are not man men or women who possess such a tenacity in following through on a worthwhile objective as he did. The great thing is that he lived long enough to see his efforts bring a significant turn-around in national practice. I believe that with respect to RRF goals, his passing will serve as a goad to the rest of to complete what he started.

**Jeremy Brown**  
**Springfield, Vermont**

I learned just yesterday . . . of Watty's death and am as astonished and heart broken as everyone who knew and loved that great man. I just can't believe it...

Enclosed is a donation in honor and memory of Watty. I hope it can be used as part of a fund for an annual Watson Washburn Award.

**Mrs. Boyd McKnight**  
**Simi Valley, Calif.**

Watty has left an effect on education which the reading establishment can't even begin to fathom, wrapped up as the are in their self-interest and opposition. Once I realized I was not fighting a lone battle in my phonics work, I had so much more confidence. That realization came as a result of being part of the Reading Reform Foundation. Your battle lies before you. I shall keep you in my prayers everyday.

**Sister Monica Foltzer**  
**Cincinnati, Ohio**

I feel a real sense of loss over Watty's death, he influenced my work in so many ways. I hope we can double our efforts.

**Mrs. Paul B. Hinds**  
**Rochester, N.Y.**

Never have I met a finer, kinder, more gentle man, and his gracious and goodness will remain in my heart and mind as long as I live.

**Mrs. D. Ellwood Williams, Jr.**  
**Annapolis, Md.**

"We all feel very deeply the loss of our dedicated leader. I always enjoyed his humor as well as his serious devotion to his many interests.:

**Dr. Louise Gurren**  
**New York City**

## RRF dedicated to reach goals that Watty set

**By Bettina H. Rubicam**  
**President: Reading Reform Foundation**

Sunday, Dec. 2, 1973 Watson Washburn, founder of the Reading Reform Foundation and its guide for the past 12 years, passed from us, leaving his devoted followers with the deepest sense of loss.

As we mourn, so must we be grateful for the years of his leadership. His dedication, his courage) his scholarly approach, and — above all — his gentleness and kindness will always remain in our memories.

Although the major part of his life was taken up by his legal career, his lasting memorial has come from his early perception of the greatest danger the republic could face — illiteracy. That perception impelled him into action.

The thousands of letters he received when his first treatise on reading was published proved that a large public was in agreement, and was searching for someone to lead them in halting the disaster taking place in our schools.

Watson Washburn's vision in perceiving reading failure as a principal cause of emotional disturbance, dropouts, youthful frustrations and even much teenage crime, launched his successful efforts in reading reform. He lived to see Dick and Jane removed from publication, although many of their banal counterparts still remain to be exorcised.

Watty's selflessness in seeking nothing but good for the nation, his generosity in giving of both his time and his substance, his tenacity in fighting almost overwhelming odds — these things must inspire us to carry on towards the goals which he set, and which have been steadily drawing nearer. We stand dedicated to the final task of seeing those goals accomplished in his memory.

# **Kathy's Corner**

by Mrs. Dean J. Diehl  
Director of Research RRF

One of the many wonderful things about our beloved Watty Washburn was that he never said, "After all, I'm just one person. What could I possibly do about it?"

Instead, this man — who personified the word "gentleman" — was so certain that people respond to the truth, and want to do the right thing, that he devoted many years of his life and poured his efforts, his income and his heart into trying to solve the massive reading problem in American schools.

Let us remember for just a moment how truly hopeless the situation looked years ago when Watty formed the Reading Reform Foundation. If you are looking today (as many still must) at a local situation in which the school superintendent couldn't care less whether children can read or not, so long as the tax money rolls in, it may still seem hopeless during the darker moments.

## **The tide is running**

But it isn't. It is just a matter of time — time and continuing patient work. For the tide is running. Effective reading methods are being brought back to the first grade classrooms by enthusiastic teachers and principals and supervisors and superintendents and school board members. And, at long last, the good is driving out the bad. Consider, by contrast, the overwhelming monolith Watty faced back in the 1950s.

Fifty million children were in the public schools, and all but a few scattered thousands were suffering the worst reading training ever devised. Not a single good reading program was available from any major U. S. publisher. There was not a teaching-to-read course available to teachers in any U. S. college that taught them anything but the look - say theory. And remember, too, the national educational "leaders" whose knee-jerk reaction was to scream "Enemy of the schools!!" at anyone who dared suggest there was a reading problem.

Parents — at least many of them — had at long last learned precisely what was wrong with learning-to-read because of the blanket news coverage provided Rudolf Flesch's "Why Johnny Can't Read" in the mid-50s. That hundreds of newspapers carried the syndicated article? from that book, and virtually every major general magazine featured it, was one of the greatest public services U. S. journalism has performed.

## **The establishment replies**

But during the next 10 years the Reading Establishment's answer to the public outcry was:

— To form the powerful International Reading Association, of, by and for the people whose vested interest it was to defend and promote the look-say monopoly.

— To pretend that no problem existed. Remember the “Children are reading better than ever” chant of just a few years ago?

— To pretend that phonics was indeed taught, which confused most parents — and; too many teachers — who did not realize there are two kinds of phonics: the real, intensive phonics methods Flesch and other critics were asking for, and the look - say, counterfeit, lip-service type.

— To attack the critics, rather than do anything to help the poor readers. In the past eight years, “helping the poor readers” has become a profitable new empire. Most of it has accomplished little, but it is one step forward from the 1955-65 position of “WHAT poor readers?”

Indeed, what could one man do?

### **RRF Formed**

What Watson Washburn did was form a national coalition of phonics and remedial reading experts who knew exactly how destructive the look-say methods are; parents who had been pleading for the schools to teach their children to read (and often teaching them to read at home), and educators who were determined to start giving children a good education again.

Through the work of the Reading Reform Foundation, thousands of teachers have learned what real phonics is, and the immense benefit it gives to children. Whole school districts have switched to phonics because one key administrator became an RRF member — and followed through. Often this created an “oasis” effect, with one district changing to phonics and nearby districts following suit because of the good results. As a result, within a few years you could see pockets of phonics schools with successful reading programs in the middle of a desert of look-say, with the edges of the pockets creeping steadily outward.

Today, the demand for better results is so great that dozens of good phonics programs are available, with more new ones appearing every year. (One of the fascinating facets of all this is that so many of the new programs are devised from pure common sense, by teachers or reading supervisors, used with great success in a local district, and then announced proudly as a brand new approach. That just shows how well today’s educators have been screened from knowing anything about solid phonics methods of the past — each one thinks he just invented it!)

### **Ferment in IRA**

Like thousands of schools, the International Reading Association is in ferment at the local level, pushed by good teachers who are asking questions and demanding answers. Eventually) the top leadership, too, will change its theories and practices, or be replaced by new thinkers.

Only in most colleges, still captive of the Old Guard, has there been little change yet. Generally speaking, the teacher training in reading is just as bad as it has been for decades. Studies show that teachers are now aware of this, and they are hunting better methods on their own — many of them need the better methods to teach the good, new programs their schools have bought.

They find that effective training they want and need in the Reading Reform Foundation, because Watty never said, “No one could win against a national monopoly, why should I bother to do anything?”

Watty always knew his goals were within reach, because he had so much faith in the good side of people. It is such a hard thing to lose him.



## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

November 29, 2008

I have been interested in the work of the *Reading Reform Foundation* ever since I learned about the organization several years ago. I appreciate Kathryn Diehl for sending me a box of *Reading Informers*. I published *The Summarization of the Afternoon Session of the First Annual Conference, Reading Reform Foundation*, Aug 1, 1962. I also have published articles by Sam Blumenfeld and others from the *Reading Informers*. I found this article by Washburn today on the Internet and decided it should be published because of its historical value and continued relevance.

I consider my family a direct beneficiary of great work of the RRF since my own children learned to read from two of the great phonics programs they recommended: the old *Open Court* (not the new and fundamentally different program bearing the same name) and Economy's *Phonetic Key's to Reading*. **To my knowledge, there is no commercial basal phonics program available that can compare with the quality and effectiveness of those two programs.**

Effective phonics programs of the type recommended by Mr. Washburn can be found on my web site, [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net). Most of the programs on my web site are in free pdf, e-book format. I want to be sure that good phonics materials are available to all teachers and parents regardless to their financial resources. In particular, I recommend Hazel Loring's 1980 *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade*. Loring was honored with the *Watson Washburn Award for Excellence in Education* in 1982. I have extensive experience with the program and recommend it without reservation for students of all ages.

Presently the *National Right to Read Foundation* is leading the struggle to assure that all the boy and girls in America develop good reading skills through phonics. Their web site is [www.nrrf.org](http://www.nrrf.org).

I added the article, "Here's why Watty formed the R.R.F" to this document on July 11, 2010. It was taken from the March-April 1984 *Reading Informer* a publication of the Reading Reform Foundation. Although it is very similar to the first article, I went ahead and added it to this document because of its historical interest. I also added the picture at the top of the document. It came from the March-April 1984 *Reading Informer*.

Sadly, nothing much has changed since Watty organized the RRF back in 1961. About the time that his organization was starting to make progress, getting phonics back in the classroom (Flesch's "Phonics Five"), Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith's whole-language fiasco swept through the profession with a form of "reading instruction" that Dr. Patrick Groff aptly called the "New Anti-Phonics." Charles Walcutt described whole-language as an "Empire of Misinformation." The profession has yet to recover.

I added the references to Watson Washburn's passing from the January 1974 *Reading Informer* on July 14, 2010.