Educational scholars have been writing about the history of the school curriculum since the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, curriculum history has only come into its own as a distinct field of inquiry with such disciplinary trappings as a complement of identifiable practitioners, an array of investigatory methods, and a more or less shared research agenda during the last forty or so years. Arriving on the scene in the late 1960s, curriculum history emerged in the midst of a movement among a group of American educational historians to reinterpret the nature and purpose of their discipline. Known as revisionism, it was an enterprise that would in various ways affect the course of development of curriculum history from its inception until the present day. The purpose of this essay is to consider the initial roots of curriculum history in the ideas of revisionism and then to look at how it has built on those origins to shape a distinct academic tradition within both educational history and curriculum studies.
It was in the midst of the conflict over revisionism that Reese and Rury describe in chapter one that curriculum history first came into its own as a field of study. From the outset, the dividing line between these two fields of study has been somewhat unclear. It would in fact be hard to imagine how one could write about the history of education without paying attention to the curriculum and its development. In a 1969 essay, Arno Bellack identified four areas of study—the development of curricular and instructional practices, the growth of curriculum as a field of work and study, the lives and careers of curriculum theorists, and the recommendations and proposals of national committees that were organized to study the curriculum—that he saw as constituting the subject matter of curriculum history. Yet in the same essay, he went on to say that curriculum history should not be a separate subject but rather a part of the general field of social and intellectual history.

Although the boundaries between the two fields are unclear, it was the case that those who began writing explicitly about curriculum history in the late 1960s and early 1970s were for the most part not professional historians. They may have had some training in history or the history of education but were more likely to find themselves in the university in departments of curriculum and instruction or educational administration than in the departments of educational foundations or policy studies that were the terrain of educational historians. By the 1980s, this would change, as increasing numbers of educational historians would begin to write more extensively on issues of curriculum history.

Indicative of the murkiness of the boundaries between these two areas of study, it was the same conflict over revisionism that was then occurring among educational historians that would shape the development of curriculum history as a field of study. There were those curriculum historians who produced the kind of celebratory accounts that so displeased Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence Cremin. Writing in 1966, Mary Louise Seguel examined the published writings of seven individuals who she identified as the early leaders of the curriculum field, including Charles McMurry, Frank McMurry, Franklin Bobbitt, W. W. Charters, John Dewey, Harold Rugg, and Hollis Caswell. The work of these individuals, as she tells her story, established the curriculum field on an essentially progressive trajectory.