

# Howard University Studies in History

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Volume 7  
Issue 1 *THE HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION OF  
GIRLS IN NEW YORK AND IN NEW ENGLAND  
1800-1870*

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Article 1

12-1-1926

## Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

Maclear, Martha (1926) "Introduction," *Howard University Studies in History*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 1.  
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/hush/vol7/iss1/1>

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# A HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS IN NEW YORK AND IN NEW ENGLAND 1800-1870

By MARTHA MACLEAR

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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN THE FOUNDERS of New York and of New England came first to these shores, they brought with them certain institutions and traditions to which they clung with tenacity. Among these institutions none loomed larger than the church, the home, the school and the state. Not that these institutions remained the same as their English prototypes. Rather were they colored by the atmosphere of the new world and a Puritan tradition. It was perhaps in the home that this tradition was most apparent. Here strict discipline was exercised. Children stood in awe of their parents and learned at an early age that little folks should be seen and not heard.<sup>1</sup> Women also suffered under the blight of the Puritan tradition. The two-fold situation of transmitted bigotry and economic subjection tended to have a mischievous effect on family relations. An inheritance such as this left the way open to patriarchal despotism. The boys became overbearing while the girls and women were likely to be subdued with a sense of "woman's place" which prevented the full expression of their personalities. Even marriage presented no avenue of freedom but rather reduced the wife to a subordinate and cramped position. She was expected to embrace her husband's religion, to confine her activities to the home and to make her husband's pleasure her guiding star.<sup>2</sup> Such a situation was peculiarly difficult for girls to whom marriage was the only career open.

At one time, it had seemed as if England would follow the example of Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth century renaissance and foster the higher education of women. The learning attributed to Queen Mary, Lady Jane Gray, Queen Elizabeth and the daughters of Sir Thomas More is striking testimony to the influence of the Italian humanists in England. But, with the coming of the Reformation, Luther's ideal of what was seemly for a woman to know superseded the more generous Latin ideal. In his Letter to the Mayors and Aldermen of all the Cities

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<sup>1</sup> Schouler, James, "History of the United States of America," Vol. 2, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Carlton, Frank T., "Education and Industrial Evolution," Vol. 2, p. 82ff.

of Germany in behalf of Christian Schools, Luther stated that "The world has need of educated men and women to the end that men may govern the country properly and women may bring up their children, care for their domestics and direct the affairs of their households."<sup>3</sup>

The extent to which Englishmen had subscribed to Luther's viewpoint may be surmised from a letter written by Sir Ralph Verney in the century following the Protestant Revolt: "Let not your girls learn Latin or short hand; the difficulty of the first may keep her from that Vice, for so must I esteem it in a woman: but the easiness of the other may be a prejudice to her; for the pride of taking sermon notes hath made multitudes of women most unfortunate. Had St. Paul lived in our Times, I am confident he would have fixed a Shame upon our women for writing as well as for speaking in churches."<sup>4</sup>

In thus reducing the interests of women to the home, inevitably marriage became the aim of every girl. This objective in life for one portion of society was held tenaciously in England until well into the nineteenth century. To Jane Austin, are we indebted for a telling description of the state of mind of a young woman successful in accomplishing her aim, the capture of a husband. Charlotte Lucas, aged twenty-seven, has just announced to her family her engagement to Mr. Collins:

"The whole family . . . were properly overjoyed on the occasion. The younger girls formed hopes of coming out a year or two sooner than they might otherwise have done and the boys were relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte's dying an old maid. Charlotte herself was tolerably composed. She had gained her point, and had time to consider of it. Her reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither amiable nor agreeable; his society was irksome and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be a husband. Without thinking highly of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object: it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and, however uncertain of giving happiness, must be a pleasant preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without ever having been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it."<sup>5</sup>

Charlotte Bronte, writing as late as 1849, expressed herself on the same subject with even more feeling: "Believe me, teachers may be hard-worked, ill-paid and despised, but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest wrought and worst-paid drudge of a

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Cubberley, E. P., "The History of Education," p. 313.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Earle, Alice Morse, "Child-Life in Colonial Days," p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> "Pride and Prejudice," Vol. 1, p. 106.

school. Whenever I have seen, not merely in humble but in affluent homes, families of daughters sitting waiting to be married, I have pitied them from my heart."<sup>6</sup>

America reflected this particular social sentiment which was current in England. At the time when Sir Ralph Verney was arguing against learning for women, it was scarcely possible for a girl to obtain an education in New York. Mrs. Anna Grant, writing at this period, says that, "It was at that time very difficult to procure the means of instruction in those island districts: Female education was, of consequence, conducted on a very limited scale: girls learned needle work (in which they were both skillful and ingenious) from their mothers and aunts: they were taught, too, at that period to read, in Dutch, the Bible and a few Calvinistic tracts of the devotional kind. But in the infancy of the settlement few girls read English; when they did, they were thought accomplished; they generally spoke it, however imperfectly and few were taught writing."<sup>7</sup> After the Revolution, this meagre curriculum was added to somewhat but the aim of education remained, as in England, a well-chosen marriage.

That the effort was not so striking in America and the tension not so great was due to the larger number of men found in the new world. According to Fanny Wright, the English radical, youths of both sexes in the states were married too early. She found, in her tour of the country, that girls of eighteen were wives and mothers. Naturally such early marriages played havoc with the education of girls. It might have been possible before that immature age to have stored their minds with useful knowledge, and training to fit them to be judicious guides to their children might have been given them. But such was not the custom. Miss Wright felt that girls were married without knowing anything of life but its amusements and quickly became immersed in household affairs and the rearing of children. "So inevitably they commanded few of the opportunities by which their husbands were daily improving in sound sense and varied information."<sup>8</sup>

One is tempted to believe that the following description of the well-known Deborah Kallikak might be taken as a good picture of one of these young women. "She is cheerful, inclined to be quarrelsome, very active and restless, very affectionate, willing and tries; is quick and ex-

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Goodsell, Willystine, "The Education of Women," p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Earle, Alice Morse, "Colonial Days in Old New York," p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Dausmont, Fanny Wright, "Views and Manners in America in a Series of Letters from that Country to a Friend in England during the year 1818-1819 and 1820," p. 33.

citable, fairly good-tempered . . . . . has a good memory, writes fairly well, is excellent in imitation, is a poor reader and poor at numbers, spelling is poor, music is excellent, excellent in entertainment work, very fond of children and good in helping care for them, has a good sense of order and cleanliness, is not always truthful, is proud of her clothes and likes pretty dresses.”<sup>9</sup>

However such a social condition could not long persist in a pioneer country. From the very nature of the life itself women were destined to gain a larger freedom. The women who came with their husbands and fathers to New England and to New York came as helpers not parasites. It was they who carried on the work necessary for existence since the home was still the center of such occupations. Industries connected with the production and preparation of food and drink were but a small part of the duties of the woman in the home. The task of furnishing light to the house was in her hands and the making of candles furnished tasks for the long winter evenings. Carding, spinning, weaving and the making of home-spun garments as well as table-linen and bed-linen were all part of her duties. To these peculiarly feminine tasks were added the duties of husband or father when affairs of a public nature necessitated an extended absence from home of the male members of the family.

The fact that America was an agricultural nation during the first quarter of the nineteenth century was but another reason for a gain in freedom by the women in the family. In the isolation of the country, responsibilities fell to her lot which she was not slow in embracing. With the sense of power thus achieved, she felt herself fit to enter upon the opportunities opened up by the Industrial Revolution. When this change in industry from the home to the factory did come to America—more than twenty-five years after the change had taken place in England—it was looked upon as a distinctly feminine movement. The men were very generally employed in agriculture, a pursuit so popular that few male workers were tempted to enter the new field of industry. “So long as land remained cheap and agriculture profitable, it was taken for granted that women could be counted on to continue in the mills, the work they had formerly done at home.”<sup>10</sup>

It seems never to have occurred to the society of that day just what it would mean to women to be taken out of the home and given economic independence. Such blindness of social vision suggests the nonchalance with which the lid was lifted from the box of Pandora. Of the evils

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<sup>9</sup> Goddard, Henry, “The Kallikak Family, a Study in the Heredity of Feeble-mindedness,” p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Abbott, Edith, “Women in Industry,” p. 47.

which were thus fastened upon the world, there was no prevision. Instead rosy pictures were painted of the improved circumstances of women, once living in miserable homes dependent on their parents. Now, it was pointed out, these same young women were comfortably housed, clothed and fed by their own efforts. Very general, also, was the approval of child labor. In *Niles Register*, it was held to be a fortunate circumstance that the machines for carding, roving and spinning were separate contrivances: "The first worked by a girl or woman and fed by a child; the second worked by a child; the third worked by a child or girl."<sup>11</sup>

With such social backing, it is not surprising that, in 1831, women over ten years of age constituted sixty-eight per cent of all employees in the cotton industry throughout the country. In New England, especially in Lowell, Mass., work in the mills was held to be highly desirable for the daughters of self-respecting Americans. But with the coming of immigrants of different social background, that is after 1850, these young women gave up their places in the mills and took up teaching.

The change in the economic position of woman was the most obvious manner in which the industrial revolution affected her. But there were other indirect ways in which her situation was altered. With the substitution of machine for hand work, there came a concentration of life in towns and small cities. Here life was easier for the housekeeper. There was more leisure time for her to think as well as greater opportunity to exchange ideas with her own sex. It was but natural that such possibilities for social intercourse should give birth to ideas that certain changes in the social order might be desirable. None of which loomed larger in importance than the right of a woman to the rewards of her own industry.

The status of married women according to English common law had been adopted by America. According to Justice Blackstone, writing late in the 18th century, "By marriage the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband. . . . Upon this principle of a union of person in husband and wife depends almost all the legal rights, duties and disabilities that either of them acquire by marriage. . . . For this reason, a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her; for the grant would be only to covenant with himself; and therefore it is

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Abbott, *op cit*, p. 59.

also generally true that all compacts made between husband and wife when single are void by the inter-marriage."<sup>12</sup>

It was this point of view that women in the new republic felt called upon to change. The right of a married woman to be a person and so to own the fruit of her industry became a pressing problem. The answer came first in Connecticut where, in 1809, a law was passed granting to married women the right to will property. From that date on, the extension of control of women over their property has increased from state to state until there is scarcely a state in which such a right is disputed.<sup>13</sup> With each new law came a corresponding change in the respect in which women were held and a similar alteration in woman's attitude toward her own sex.

This change was not effected at once. Immediately after the revolutionary war, America was far from being hospitable to radical ideas. Social classes were fixed much as they had been in Colonial days. The right of suffrage was restricted and the common people had little voice in the affairs of the nation. The writers of the constitution had seen to it that such should be the case. Even in educational institutions, class feeling prevailed. It was not until 1767 at Yale and 1773 at Harvard that the custom of listing the students in the college catalogue according to the rank and standing of their parents had been abandoned. Yet even this slight change toward a more democratic procedure had no effect on the status of women. When a young woman, Lucinda Foote by name, presented herself for entrance at Yale in the late 18th century, she was refused entrance. Her preparation was not questioned by the college but her sex was sufficient ground for the refusal.<sup>14</sup> A century later, in 1836, Mrs. Livermore, then a young woman, and five of her friends stormed the doors of Harvard, to ask of President Quincy that they be admitted to college with their brothers.

"Very smart girls, unusually capable girls," he said encouragingly, "but can you cook?"

"Oh, yes, Sir," said one, "we have kept house for some time."

"Highly important," he said, and so on during the space of an hour.

Mrs. Livermore became impatient and asked, "Will you allow us to come to college when our brothers do? Is there anything to prevent our admission?"

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Goodsell, Willystine, "The Family as a Social and Educational Institution," p. 346.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 433.

<sup>14</sup> Slosson, Edwin, "The American Spirit in Education," 237.

"Oh yes, my dear, we never allow girls at Harvard. You know the place for girls is at home."

"Then I wish" . . . . .

"What do you wish?" he said.

"I wish that I were God for one instant that I might kill every woman and let you have the masculine world all to yourself," and the girls departed in tears.

"I wish that I were dead," said one.

"I wish that I had never been born," said another.<sup>15</sup>

Evidently the manner of receiving the refusal for admission to college varied from century to century although the form of the refusal did not change.

However signs were not lacking that progressive movements were at hand and it was inevitable that such innovations should carry with them a broadening of woman's social and intellectual horizon. It was not to be expected that men who were struggling themselves for fuller political and economic opportunities should long remain impervious to the rights of one half the members of society. The political pioneers of America could not go on year after year preaching the doctrine of liberty and equality without coming to see that such doctrines applied to daughters as well as to sons. Not only in the political field but in the educational as well was equal opportunity for all being asked. Workmen, conscious of their rights as human beings, were demanding free, state supported schools. The Latin grammar school was declining and the American academy was rising to challenge its hold on the affections of the nation. Two new colleges, Pennsylvania and Kings (now Columbia), had been established to provide a more practical education, while new types of text-books were being introduced as more fitting to secular schools.

All of these changes—political, legal, economic, social and educational—could not fail to affect the status of women. In no single way was the transformation more visible than in giving her self-confidence and self-respect. In attaining these two essentials to an efficient struggle, she became articulate and capable of helping to establish the educational programme so necessary for the emancipation of her sex.

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<sup>15</sup> Howe, Julia Ward, "Reminiscences 1819-1899," p. 275ff.