

CONNECTING WITH THE PAST IN TODAY'S PRESENT

EMMA HART WILLARD

Emma Hart Willard founded schools for women, published literary and instructive books, and established herself as one of the great champions for women's equality. Although she left Middlebury in 1819, the struggles and lessons learned during her 12 years here lay at the heart of her dedication and triumphs.

Emma Hart arrived in Middlebury in 1807 to be principal of the Middlebury Female Seminary. She married Dr. John Willard in 1809 and left teaching to devote herself to being wife and mother, managing their home on Main Street within steps of Middlebury College. Their lives and financial security were shattered in 1814 when Dr. Willard was implicated (later exonerated) in a local bank failure. Young Emma made a pivotal decision for her family: she returned to teaching and challenged the "law of Nature and of society that a man must support his family" by establishing a women's boarding school in her home.

Willard began teaching the subjects culturally suitable for "the female mind," but was bitterly aware of the disparity of educational opportunities between women and men. She drove herself to become proficient in subjects taught to young men at the college, like history, geology, mathematics and moral philosophy, and incorporated them into her curriculum. Her female students learned to recite, debate and memorize, and were the beneficiaries of Willard's insightful theories and creative methods of instruction. To teach history, Willard was convinced that students remembered best by associating events and dates with places, so she incorporated geography and maps into her lessons. Her pupils would learn to recount historical events while plotting their movements on maps they could draw from memory.

Her methods attracted the attention of Middlebury professors, whom she invited to observe her student examinations. Willard

hoped to observe the examinations of the young men, but Middlebury President Henry Davis did not reciprocate the invitation. We are reminded by Willard biographer Dr. George G. Bush not to judge Davis too harshly: "He was simply guarding well-bred society from a terrible shock."

In an 1815 letter to her friend Fanny Pierpont Skinner, wife of Vermont Gov. Richard Skinner, Willard speculated that one reason women were denied the opportunities of education was based on "the absurd prejudice that, if women's minds were cultivated, they would forget their own sphere, and intrude themselves into that of men." It was as foolish to contend, she argued, that the occasional "brawny woman who can lift a barrel of cider" warranted that the entire female sex be prevented from exercise, lest they should attain their full strength, "wrestle the scythe and hoe from the hands of men, and turn them into the kitchen."

Over the next three years, Willard lobbied for change in female education. She wrote to influential men in her community and in government, including President James Monroe, to garner support for the plan she was formulating, pledging that she would leave her home and friends to ensure its success.

Willard wrote her seminal "A Plan for Improving Female Education" in 1818. She identified existing problems with the unregulated system, one being "that the taste of men, whatever it might happen to be, has been made a standard for the formation of the female character." Willard argued for regulation and public funding, outlined the needs of female seminaries, and justified their benefits for women and society. Women, she wrote, "are primary existences... not the satellites of men."

She asked not for a masculine education but one that commanded the same respectability and was adapted for that "difference of character and duty." We might consider that



an unfortunate compromise, but consider: her appeal to the legislature preceded Middlebury College admitting its first woman by more than 60 years. And almost 30 years after that, Middlebury's 1909 college master plan included a separate Women's campus featuring dedicated instruction for pedagogy and the domestic arts.

Willard's plan, which was presented on the floor of the New York Legislature in 1819, was well received, and New York Gov. DeWitt Clinton invited her to open a school in New York. She and her family left Middlebury in late 1819, and The Troy Female Seminary, the first institution of higher education for women, was founded in 1821. It also became the first one to receive government funding, when the city of Troy raised \$4,000 through taxation to build the structure. The advancement of women, for Emma Hart Willard, that began in Middlebury was ultimately the advancement of a civilized society.

The Stewart-Swift Research Center of the Henry Sheldon Museum has several of Willard's publications, ranging from her plan for higher education through history and geography texts to a treatise on circulation of the blood, as well as some personal letters, biographies, and articles on the lasting influence of the school she founded.

Contributed by the Research Center Committee of the Henry Sheldon Museum. Excellent as the Research Center documentation is, it doesn't include everyone. Which courageous women of the past come to your mind? Who deserves recognition for their part in surviving or driving change? Why? Would you tell us about them? What about the Abenaki and people of color who've been ever present but little recognized? Do you have stories about them? We'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch at info@HenrySheldonMuseum.org.