

HISTORIC ROOTS

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HISTORIC ROOTS

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BOYS AND GIRLS TOGETHER

When Middlebury College opened its doors, in November 1800, it admitted only male students, and only seven of those. Few men attended college anywhere in those early days. Most of those who did became ministers or doctors or lawyers.

Until the founding of Oberlin College in Ohio, in 1833, there were no colleges in this country that allowed women to attend. Oberlin not only admitted female students, it admitted students of color as well.

This did not mean that most men and women were untaught. At the end of the Revolution, people were proud of their new country. They wanted girls to be educated as well as boys, so they could teach their sons to become good citizens.

In Vermont, small children went to school in the summer. Older children were needed at home to work on the farm. In the winter, they went to the school in their section of town. Boys who wanted to go to college then attended an academy, which was like a prep school. Some towns, like Middlebury, had separate academies for girls. Others, like Lud-

low, Vermont, had a coeducational¹ school, the Black River Academy.

For the most part, female academies taught music and art instead of history and math. But there were exceptions. Emma Willard, who became the second principal of Middlebury's Female Academy in 1807, later founded her own school there. She believed that women's brains were as good as men's and that women should study the same subjects. When Middlebury College refused to let her or her students sit in on classes there, she began to teach her students mathematics, history, and philosophy, along with music and sewing.²

College education for women came later and began in the west. Oberlin and Antioch Colleges in Ohio, the first two to admit women, were private colleges. But by the 1860s, the Universities of Michigan and Wisconsin, public colleges, admitted women as well. And west of the Mississippi River, all the land-grant colleges, except for the University of Missouri, were coed from the start.³

The eastern states followed slowly. The first college for women was founded in the east, in Elmira, New York in 1855. The 1870s and

¹Coeducation is the education of boys and girls together.

²In 1891, Willard moved to New York State. Two years later, she founded a school for girls in Troy, New York.

³Land grant colleges were founded on public land and supported by state money. The University of Vermont is a land grant college.



Middlebury College Archives

May Belle Chellis, the first woman graduate of Middlebury College, graduated at the top of her class in 1886.

1880s saw the founding of many others. And in 1872, Cornell University became the first in the east to admit both men and women. The University of Vermont admitted women soon after.

Not everyone approved of higher education for women. Dr. Edward H. Clarke, a professor at Harvard Medical School in the 1870s,



The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History

In this house in Middlebury, Emma Willard boldly taught girls mathematics and philosophy as well as sewing and dancing. The building now houses the Middlebury College admissions office.

insisted that study would have a bad effect on a woman's ability to have babies. Educated women would become masculine. Because their brains would use up all their blood, they would become ugly and would not be able to breed. "Identical education of the two sexes," he wrote, "is a crime before God and humanity."

Middlebury College admitted its first female students in 1883. It did so for two reasons. First, because it was in financial trouble and needed more students. Second, because a lot of Vermont families wanted to send their daughters to college.

Three women were admitted in the fall of 1883, along with four others who attended part-time. Women did not live on campus; they took rooms in town and walked back and forth to classes. They were not permitted to eat with men or to study in the same rooms. Until 1887, women were not allowed to speak in public or compete with men for prizes.

After a few years, College trustees decided that the women should have a separate college. The separation never took place. But in 1911, the College opened a dormitory for women on land across the road from the main campus. Social rules were different for men and women, but their education was the same. And since



Middlebury College Archives

Female students studying in their own "Brown Study," in the early days of coeducation at Middlebury College. Note the portrait of Gamaliel Painter on the wall.

about 1909, the number of men and women students at Middlebury College has been about equal.

Today men and women not only study together, they live in the same dormitories and eat in the same dining rooms. Separate colleges for men and women still exist. But students in coeducational colleges and universities, such as Middlebury College and the University of Vermont, receive the same education and the same treatment by professors and members of the staff, regardless of their gender.

ANN E. COOPER
Editor

Rooting Around

What can you find out about early schools in your community? Did boys and girls study together? In many towns old schoolhouses are still standing. Your librarian or town clerk or historical society can help you find them.