

## **Boston Historical Society**

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### **“To make them fit wives for well educated men”?**

#### **19th-Century Education of Boston Girls**

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The early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great change in education in New England, especially for girls. In 1789, Boston public primary schools became coeducational. High schools, however, usually did not admit girls until about 1820. The school term for girls was also shorter, but nevertheless, girls' education in Boston improved rapidly after the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The question is, of course, why?

First, the new republican ideology gave force to a new movement towards egalitarianism. Although women remained second-class citizens, the new republican individualism gave them a positive vision of womanhood. They earned respect as “republican mothers,” who contributed to the important task of raising republican children. Secondly, a result of the new republican ideology was a great expansion of education, which became an important element of a virtuous republican society.<sup>2</sup>

Some historians believe that the major motivation for 19<sup>th</sup>-century families to send their daughters to school was to strengthen their chances on the marriage market. When the first public high school for girls opened in Boston, the *American Journal of Education* wrote that the school should give “women such an education as shall make them fit wives for well educated men, and enable them to exert a salutary influence upon the rising generation.”<sup>3</sup> It is certainly true that such beliefs shaped girls' education, but, at least in Boston, there was also a broader assumption of girls' intellectual abilities. In their reports, the Boston School Committee always included examples of girls. Articles on education mentioned girls just as frequently as boys.<sup>4</sup> William Bentley Fowle, the head of a private boys' and a private girls' school, organized both schools after the same principles. Believing in women's equal intellectual abilities, he wrote: “I had quite a number of intelligent young ladies

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<sup>1</sup> See Martha Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood: Personal Health and Social Change in Nineteenth Century Boston* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 118 and Vera Butler, *Education as Revealed by New England Newspapers Prior to 1850* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 277, 288-289.

<sup>2</sup> See Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980) and “An Address on Female Education; Read at the Anniversary of the Brooklyn Collegiate Institute” *Ladies' Magazine and Literature Gazette* 1831 (4): 571-572.

<sup>3</sup> “Boston High School for Girls” *American Journal of Education* 1846 (1): 96-105. See also Kerber, 206-208.

<sup>4</sup> See Samuel G. Howe, *To the Citizens of Boston ... upon the grammar and writing department of the City Schools* (Boston: Eastburn's Press, 1848) and *Report of the Special School Board on a Portion of Remarks of the Grammar Masters* (Boston: John H. Eastburn, 1844), Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), Boston.

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among my scholars.”<sup>5</sup> A number of business cards of teachers and college professors show that they offered private lessons for girls in literature, philosophy, geography, and history.

About ten private girls’ schools opened in Boston between 1800 and 1850. The number of girls enrolled in Boston public schools also increased dramatically. Table 1 [Fig. 1] shows some numbers from contemporary newspapers. We notice three facts: First, the number of primary schools almost tripled between 1820 and 1839. Second, when girls were first allowed in primary schools from 1789 to 1820, their number rose to almost 800 and then doubled in the following eight years. Third, while there were almost twice as many boys as girls in Boston primary schools in 1829, by 1839 their numbers were almost equal.<sup>6</sup>

Although the educational opportunities for girls improved significantly, the movement for girls’ education did not always succeed. The first Girls’ High School, opened in 1826, closed just two years later because it had too many applicants. It took almost a quarter century for the Girls’ High School to re-open in 1852.<sup>7</sup>

As the educational opportunities for girls improved immensely in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has to be emphasized that such opportunities varied depending on a girl’s race and social class. African-American boys and girls shared the experience of racial discrimination in a segregated African-American school. The small school that the black teacher Susannah Bradshaw opened for girls in 1841 did not offer a curriculum that came even close to girls’ education in white schools; it was

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<sup>5</sup> William Bentley Fowle, *Autobiography*, ca. 1827, manuscript, MHS, p. 61. For the advertisement of lessons see William Adam, *Winter Classes for Ladies* (Boston: s.n., 1844), broadside, MHS; Benjamin Gleason, *Seminary Charlestown, Geography Lessons*, business card, 1812, The Bostonian Society (TBS), Boston; and Richard Henry Dana, *Richard Henry Dana, Certain Gentlemen have Proposed my Undertaking the Charge of a Class of Young Ladies in English Literature*, (Boston: n.p., 1835) broadside, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge.

<sup>6</sup> The ten private schools for girls are: Abbott’s Mount Vernon School, Bailey’s High School for Girls, Fowle’s Monitorial School, Ford’s Classical School, Freemasons’ School for Girls, Inglis’s School for Young Ladies, Protestant School for Girls in South Boston, the School for African American Girls, Ursuline Mount Benedict Academy, and Willard School for Young Ladies. See “Report of Semiannual Examination of the Schools in District No. 2, September 29, 1824,” manuscript, TBS; “Boston Primary Schools” *American Annals of Education* 1835 (5): 567; “Boston Schools” *Common School Advocate* 1840 (42): 310; “Boston Public Schools” *American Annals of Education* 1834 (4): 556-557; “Boston Schools” *American Journal of Education* 1830 (1): 151-153; and “Boston Town Schools” *The National Register, or Weekly Paper* 1820 (10): 146.

<sup>7</sup> City of Boston, *Report to the Common Council on the Subject of a High School for Girls* (Boston: Eastburn Printers, n.d.), TBS; Olivia White, *Centennial History of the Girls’ High School of Boston* (Boston: Paul K. Blanchard, 1952); Lucy R. Woods, *A History of the Girls’ High School of Boston, 1852-1902* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1904); and “Boston High School for Girls” *American Journal of Education* 1826 (1): 96- 105.

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limited to needlework, painting, good handwriting, and composition. White girls, especially in private school, received a classical education with a curriculum that included languages and sciences.<sup>8</sup>

Social class also played a large role in determining girls' educational opportunities. Of course, many white girls received a primary education in the public schools, but until 1852, high school was usually only an option for middle-class girls whose parents could afford to pay 100 dollars a year in tuition. When Fowle opened his private school for girls, he commented on that class distinction by pointing out that public schools were crowded, while private schools had a higher level of education and better learning conditions.<sup>9</sup>

The schedule from the 1836 journal of Martha Kuhn, a nine-year-old student at Mr. Alcott's School, a progressive private school, tells a lot about private girls' schools, even if Alcott's methods were considered radical at the time. Already at Kuhn's age, girls at the school learned spelling, reading, composing, rhetoric, Latin, philosophy, arithmetic, geography, and biology. Subjects offered at other private schools included history, natural history, bookkeeping, French, Spanish, astronomy, chemistry, education, mythology, algebra, geometry, and logic. These subjects did not prepare young girls merely for motherhood; they must have provided them with a claim to be respected intellectually. Furthermore, Boston boys' curricula usually included the very same subjects as the girls' curricula.<sup>10</sup>

Although Horace Mann, an ardent reformer, achieved an improvement of Massachusetts' public schools in the 1830s and 40s, teaching methodologies were still more progressive in private schools.

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<sup>8</sup> "School for Young Ladies" *Liberator* 1841 (11): 167.

<sup>9</sup> For Fowle's school see William Bentley Fowle, *Autobiography*, ca. 1827, manuscript; William Bentley Fowle, *Prospectus of a New School for Young Ladies: Embracing the Modern Improvements of the British and Swiss Systems* (Boston: s.n., 1823?); and "Constitution of Fowle's Monitorial School;" all at MHS. For tuition see *Mr. Lyon respectfully informs his friends* (Boston: s.n. 1811, broadside, MHS; Samuel Willard, *Prospectus of the School, proposed by the Subscribers, to be opened about the first of October next, in such a place as may be most convenient to the Pupils* (Boston: s.n., 1829), broadside. MHS; Ebenezer Bailey, *Young Ladies' High School* (Boston, n.p., 1827), broadside, TBS; *Mrs. Inglis's Establishment for Young Ladies* (Boston: s.n., 1843) broadside, MHS; and *Ninth Annual Catalogue of the Teachers and Scholars in the Young Ladies' High School, Boston July, 1836* (Boston: John H. Eastburn, 1836). For the Freemasons' School see "Freemasons' Female School" *Boston Cultivator* 1844 (6): 155.

<sup>10</sup> See "Martha Anne Kuhn, Diary of a Schoolgirl," 1836, manuscript, TBS; "Record Book of the Boston Lyceum, 1823-1840," TBS; Jacob Abbott, *Description of the Mount Vernon School in 1832* (Boston: Peirce and Parker, 1832); *Ursuline Community* (Boston: s.n., 1828), broadside, MHS; and "Letter to a Young Lady" *The Massachusetts Teacher* 1849 (2): 75-78. For catalogues of boys' schools see for example *Annual Catalogue of the Teachers and Pupils of the Chapman Hall School, Boston 1847-1848* (Boston: Dickinson, 1847); *Annual catalogue of the Pupils of Spring Lane School, Boston, 1843* (Boston: Dickinson, 1843); and Fanny G. Patten (editor), *History of the Winthrop School* (Boston: Winthrop School Association, 1918).

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Exceptions existed, but in public schools classes were generally conducted in small, dark rooms with bad ventilation and insufficient heating, by teachers whose preparation for their task was as poor as their salaries.<sup>11</sup>

Middle class girls in private schools, in contrast, usually studied in well-maintained, well-heated, bright, large classrooms in a quiet setting. A watercolor of Mrs. Rowson's School [**Fig. 2**] depicts a sizeable school property with large trees and beautiful landscaping. It looks very orderly and almost like someone's home. The building in the middle was perhaps a library, observatory, or teacher's house. Private schools had libraries, musical instruments, maps, charts, globes, and models. Fowle was proud of his school's natural history museum and flat roof for observations in astronomy.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to differences in girls' education determined by race and class, it is important to realize that there was a strong trans-Atlantic component to Boston education. At his own expense, Mann made a trip to Europe that inspired many of his reforms. Public schools did modernize, but they certainly did not catch up with the progress in most private schools. While corporal punishment was very much limited in Boston public schools after the mid-1840s, most private girls' schools never used it to begin with. Almost all private girls' schools followed the British Lancastrian system, which used better students as monitors to teach weaker students. Progressive founders of Boston girls' schools also applied ideas of the Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who emphasized group rather than individual recitation and focused on participatory activities such as drawing, singing, and model and map making.

Many private schools in Boston encouraged their female students to engage in a dialogue instead of mere recitation. Ebenezer Bailey, for example, encouraged students even to criticize their teachers.

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<sup>11</sup> For Horace Mann's reform see George B. Emerson, *Observations on a Pamphlet, Entitled "Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report of the Hon. Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education"* (Boston: Samuel Dickinson, 1844) and Horace Mann, *Answer to the "Rejoinder of Twenty-Nine Boston Schoolmasters, Part of the Thirty-One" Who Published "Remarks" on the Seventh Annual Report of the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education* (Boston: Wm. Fowle and Nahum Capen, 1845). See also Woody, 225 and Butler, 302. On public schools see Catherine Fennely, *Town Schooling in Early New England, 1790-1840* (Sturbridge: Old Sturbridge, 1962), 14-20; and One of the School Committee, "Boston Primary School Rooms" *American Annals of Education* (1838) 12: 545-55.

<sup>12</sup> For private schools see Fowle, *Autobiography*, p. 60; Fowle, *Prospectus of a New School for Young Ladies*, p. 5; Circular Monitorial School, 1827, MHS; "Record Book of the Boston Lyceum," 1823-1840, p. 9; Abbott, *Description of the Mount Vernon School; Ursuline Community*, 1828, broadside; and Bailey, *Young Ladies' High School*, 1817, broadside. Margaret Nash argues that education was a key part of the definition of class identity for middle-class families, Nash, 4.

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Rare and most valuable sources for such perceptions of Boston schoolgirls are two diaries of students at the Bronson Alcott School, Martha Anne Kuhn and Emma Savage. Both diaries are detailed accounts of the girls' school, social and family life, their studies, work, and play, and reveal a high level of education and freedom to develop their own opinions. Kuhn and Savage managed difficult declinations in Latin; made maps of the states with remarks on each state's climate, geography, population, and economy; learned details about functions of human body parts; and drew sketches of a Siam house and William Shakespeare. They read broadly, from the daily newspaper to Wordsworth, William Lloyd Garrison, *Arabian Nights*, and bible stories. Alcott even allowed students to interpret the bible. In their diaries, both girls commented freely on class discussions and readings, although they knew that their teacher would read their entries.<sup>13</sup>

We can conclude that Boston girls' educational opportunities improved dramatically in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although more so for middle-class white girls than for African-American girls or lower-class white girls. This conclusion challenges a general assumption among historians that the new girls' schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on motherhood as a profession, taught very different curricula than the boys' schools, and did not encourage girls to think for themselves. Rural areas in New England did not offer similar opportunities. Boston schools were progressive for their time.

(Figure 1)

### Boys and Girls in Boston Primary Schools

Year	Number of Primary Schools	Girls	Boys
1820	34	782	1420
1828	57	1680	1750
1839	91	2612	2790

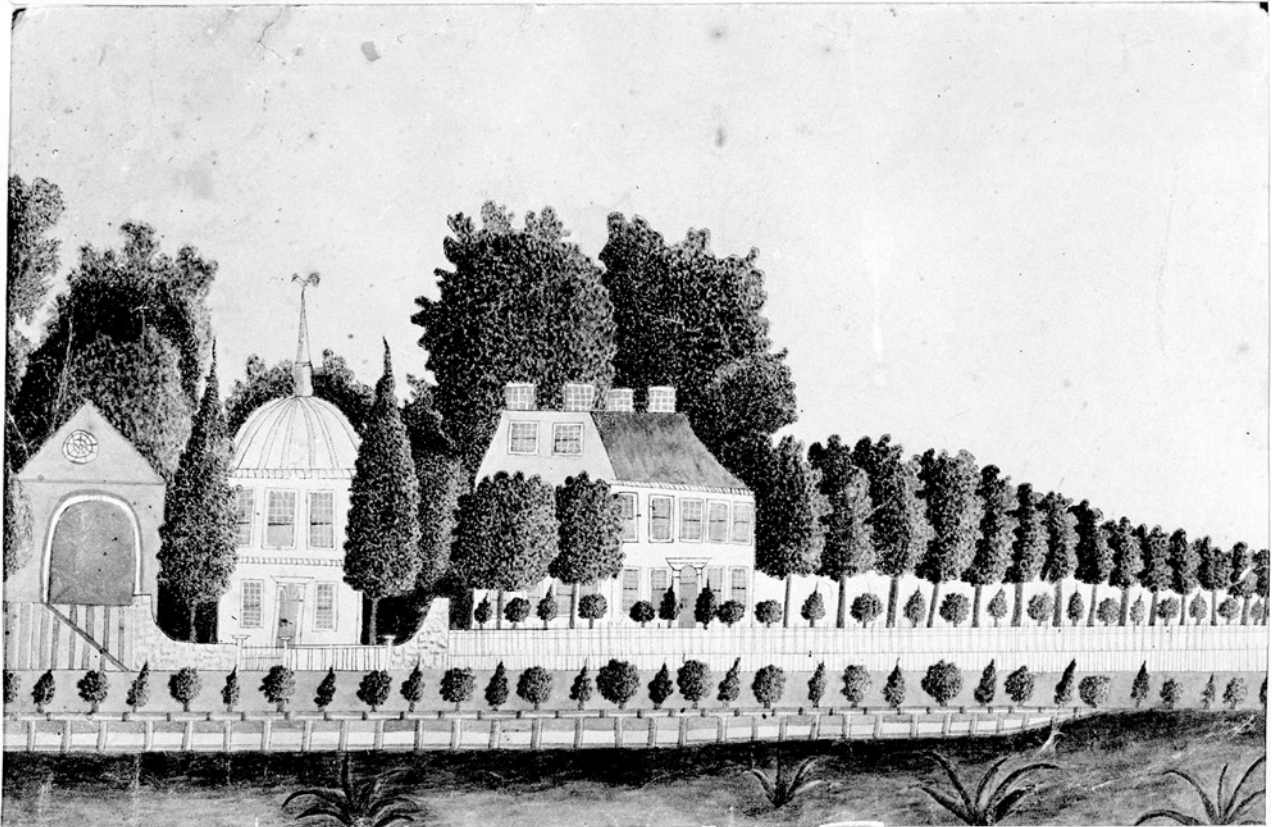
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<sup>13</sup> E. Bailey, "Boston High School for Girls" *American Journal of Education* 1827 (2): 206; Kuhn, "Diary of a Schoolgirl," 1836; and Emma Savage Journal, 1836.

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(Figure 2)



Miss Rowson's School, Washington Street Near Roxbury Line 1807-09 (watercolor on paper)  
Artist unknown, probably a student 1919.0015.001

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