

## EQUALLY THEIR DUE: FEMALE EDUCATION IN ANTEBELLUM ALEXANDRIA

Gloria Seaman Allen

This is the last article in the series of a preliminary investigation into female educational opportunities in Alexandria during the antebellum years. The research, drawn almost entirely from primary sources, supports the exhibition - "Equally Their Due: Female Education in Antebellum Alexandria," on view at The Lyceum until January 5, 1997.

### PART THREE:

#### "Lately from France"<sup>1</sup>

#### French Influence on Education

French-speaking immigrants, arriving in Alexandria during the late 1780s and 1790s, contributed to a broadening of educational opportunities for young women, especially in the ornamental branches of learning. Alexandria newspapers from the period contain numerous advertisements placed by men seeking employment as instructors in French language, dancing, music, or drawing.

Alexandria was one of several port towns along the eastern seaboard that welcomed refugees fleeing from social and political chaos following the overthrow of the monarchy in France in 1789. People of noble rank and others who publicly disagreed with official policy escaped from France during the next five years. Revolutionary fervor spread quickly and spawned uprisings and a slave revolt in the French colony of Haiti (Saint Dominique). Thousands of French-speaking whites and people of color left the island in the wake of the destruction of their plantations and towns. Large numbers disembarked at the ports of Alexandria, Baltimore, and Philadelphia before moving on to other locations.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the immigrants, unable to speak any language but French, remained but a year or two in Alexandria where the market for French language instruction soon became saturated. Those who mastered some English and who could teach more than one subject met with greater success.

This issue of the Historic Alexandria Quarterly sponsored by  
Mr. and Mrs. Oscar P. Ryder

The most enduring of the French instructors was John Constantine Generes who first advertised in 1799 and continued in business off and on until about 1830. Generes and his family may have been among the refugees who fled Haiti and arrived in one of fifty-three ships that entered the port of Baltimore during a two-week-period in July, 1793.<sup>3</sup> While Generes gave French lessons and briefly tried a singing school, he was best known for his Dancing School for children and his "practicing balls" for adults who wished to improve their skills. The different sexes were instructed separately at different times of day. Girls received instruction Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at 3:00 pm; boys arrived at 6:00 pm. Monsieur Generes emphasized good manners along with dancing, and devoted part of each lesson to instructing his young charges in the proper ways to enter a room, curtsy, and sit down. On Saturday evenings, boys and girls came together for dancing that continued until 11:00 pm. They danced cotillions and contra-dances, many known by their French names. Other men, with surnames like Fabrir, Gaullier, Hubon, and Dupuy, offered instruction in "English and French modes

of dancing," or in "all the dances at present in fashion, with the greatest variety of figures."

Richard Bland Lee's niece, Ann Collins, attended Monsieur Generes' classes during the spring of 1811. Her aunt, Elizabeth Collins Lee described her progress in letters to her brother, Ann's father:

"One thing in which she is greatly interested in which she has made considerable improved [sic] is her dancing - we live next door to the school and you can tell by Ann's countenance at any time when it is opened. Nothing [is as] animating as the sound of the Fiddle."

"Ann will finish her dancing school this week and have [sic] attained sufficient I think of this accomplishment -- she dances very well."

Fourteen-year-old Ann sometimes enjoyed dancing too much. Her aunt wrote:

"...she has never had the slightest sickness but once of that by staying at a Ball till one o'clock and drinking rich chocolate just [before] going to bed..."<sup>4</sup>

Angela, daughter of Lawrence and Eleanor Custis Lewis, may have been one of Generes' dancing students. Her mother, in order to provide Angela with this ornamental aspect of her education, interrupted her usual routine at Woodlawn to spend three out of every fourteen days in Alexandria. In 1826, Nelly Lewis complained:

"This going to the dancing school is the most fatal interruption in Ped's [Angela's] important studies & to my Spanish studies --but I hope it will soon be over, & then I can devote my self to a more profitable cause than wasting three days in a fortnight in Alexa --"<sup>5</sup>

## D A N C I N G.

*Mr. Generes*

RESPECTFULLY informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of Alexandria, that he will open his DANCING SCHOOL on Thursday the 25th instant, next door to Doctor DICK'S in Prince Street. Young Ladies will be taught at 3 o'clock in the evening, and the Young Gentlemen at 5. October 18. d3t

*Alexandria Daily Advertiser, 20 October 1804*



Wood engraving from Francis D. Nichols,  
*A Guide to Politeness...*, 1810.  
 Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress

Many of the newly arrived French-speaking immigrants offered instruction in French language as a way of supporting themselves. Separate classes were arranged for young ladies and gentlemen at different hours of the day. Students, who did not find it convenient to attend school, could receive private tutoring in their own homes.

Proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking French was considered by most to be a necessary accomplishment for genteel young ladies of the early antebellum period. Dame schools did not provide French instruction, but female schools with a broader curriculum in the useful and ornamental branches of learning offered French as the only

foreign language . After 1830, seminaries frequently included classes in Italian or Spanish in addition to French.

Nelly Custis was accomplished in many of the ornamental arts, and her grandparents, Martha and George Washington, saw to it that she received excellent instruction from a series of tutors in Philadelphia, New York, and at Mount Vernon. In the back of one of her French exercise books she wrote down her study schedule.

Mondays--Get some French by heart.  
 Rehearse the last two grammar lessons.  
 Wednesdays and Fridays--Get 1 page of Dialogues; get ½ page of Grammar lessons.  
 Tuesdays and Thursdays--Get 1 page Dialogues.  
 Saturdays--Be examined in the Dialogues and parse some French.  
 Translate every day but Saturday.<sup>6</sup>

Nelly Custis was sufficiently proficient in French to correspond and converse easily with the Marquis de La Fayette, his son, and other French-speaking dignitaries who visited her grandfather at Mount Vernon. In later life she commenced Italian and Spanish lessons so that she could sing and write in those languages as well.

### French Language

THE Subscriber, agreeable to his promise in a former Advertisement, will open his ACADEMY for the instruction of young Ladies and Gentlemen in the French Language on Monday next, at the house lately occupied by Mr. Adams in St. Asaph Street between King and Prince Streets. Hours of attendance for young ladies, from 9 o'clock until 12 in the morning; for young gentlemen, from 7 until 9 in the evening. To young ladies or gentlemen who cannot make it convenient to attend school, attendance will be given at their houses

MARIN DETARGNY

October 5

*Alexandria Advertiser & Commercial Intelligences,*  
 5 October, 1802

Several of the Frenchmen who settled in Alexandria during the antebellum period were trained artists or, at least, sufficiently skilled to offer lessons in drawing. Monsieur Friget, more versatile than most, proposed to establish an academy where he would teach French language, mathematics, and drawing. Monsieur Le Blond de St. Hilaire, a surveyor by training, opened a Drawing and Mathematical Academy on Water Street in 1797. Although his curriculum was designed for young gentlemen seeking careers in the military or mercantile field, he also offered to instruct young ladies separately in the mornings or in their homes in "drawing landscapes, flowers, &c" and in the French language. Monsieur St. Hilaire charged \$8 a quarter for drawing instructions.

---

**"We Believe Most Friends Endeavor by Sample and Precept to Educate Their Children and Those under Their Care in Plainness of Speech, Deportment and Apparel..."<sup>7</sup>**

#### **Quaker Influence on Education**

Members of the Society of Friends have been in the forefront in establishing schools and recognizing the importance of a solid and useful education for young women. Their contribution to education in Alexandria, especially by members of the Hallowell family, is considerable.

Quakers began migrating to Alexandria from northern cities during the American Revolution to escape persecution for their pacifist views. They constructed a

meetinghouse in the mid 1780s and a more substantial one in 1811. However, it was not until 1815 that the Alexandria Monthly Meeting addressed female education and proposed a select school that would allow daughters of Quakers to be educated in a manner consistent with the religious principles of the Society of Friends. In the fall of 1815, the Monthly Meeting authorized that Rachel Painter, formerly a student at the Westtown Boarding School, be engaged at \$500 per annum to conduct the girls school. Four years later, the Monthly Meeting increased tuition and authorized, for the first time, hiring a teacher to conduct a male school.<sup>8</sup>

Benjamin Hallowell, after teaching at the Westtown Boarding School in Pennsylvania and the Fair Hill Boarding School in Montgomery County, established his Alexandria Boarding School for young gentlemen in 1824. The curriculum, which featured the basic courses of an English education and a selection of foreign languages, was especially strong in mathematics and the sciences. The Alexandria Boarding School emphasized Quaker ethics and sobriety and attracted students, both Quaker and non-Quaker, from a number of states and several foreign countries.

In order to make ends meet during a period of uncertain enrollment in the 1820s, Margaret Farquhar Hallowell, Benjamin's wife and also a former Fair Hill teacher, conducted classes for local young ladies in rooms on the second floor of the Alexandria Boarding School at 220 North Washington Street.<sup>9</sup> Her

students included two of Edward Stabler's daughters as well as daughters of other prominent Alexandria Quakers. Margaret's pupils had the opportunity of attending her husband's lectures and scientific demonstrations. Their sessions were separate, but comparable to those Hallowell conducted for his male students. Benjamin Hallowell had purchased several pieces of apparatus at considerable cost to demonstrate a variety of scientific experiments, and his evening lectures on chemistry, natural philosophy, and astronomy soon became a popular attraction in Alexandria.



**Alexandria Boarding School at 220 North Washington Street.**  
**Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.**

Female students, enrolled in Mrs. Porter's and Mrs. Waugh's seminaries, also received instruction in the sciences from Benjamin Hallowell by attending weekly lectures at the Alexandria Boarding School. Additional young women obtained private tutoring from Hallowell at his school or in their own homes.<sup>10</sup> Although Benjamin Hallowell ran an all-male boarding school, many local Alexandria girls were able to take



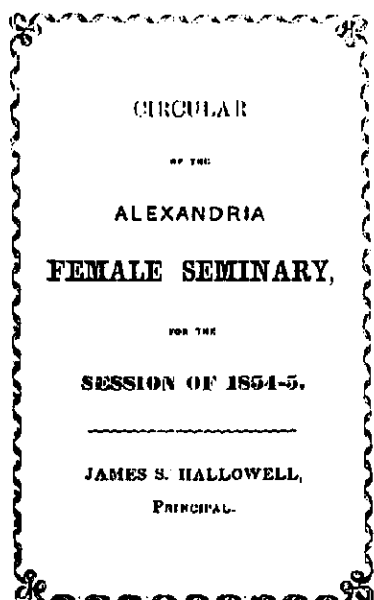
**James Hallowell's Alexandria Female Seminary at 213-215 North Fairfax Street.**

**Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress**  
 advantage of his instruction and obtain a superior education during the late 1820s and 1830s.

James Hallowell, nephew of Benjamin and Margaret Hallowell, opened the Alexandria Female Seminary in 1848. Like his famous uncle, James Hallowell gave lectures in natural philosophy, chemistry, astronomy, and other sciences using demonstrations conducted on an assortment of scientific apparatuses. The curriculum was comprehensive and rigorous, and Hallowell's students received a superior education.<sup>11</sup> Several former students recalled that their experiences were not always happy. Mary [Mollie] Gregory Powell was sent to the James Hallowell's school in 1856 at age nine. Describing her childhood years, Mary wrote in the third person:

"He was a fine teacher of mathematics and chemistry and his girls were well taught in these lines, also in map drawing and penmanship. He lectured to his school every Saturday from half past eight to half past ten. Mollie never objected to these

lectures though she was too young to fully appreciate the only opportunity she ever had to learn chemistry. He was not, however, a man of any polish or manner nor could he teach the nicer branches which were considered necessary for a girl of that day."<sup>12</sup>



Cover page of the *Circular of the Alexandria Female Seminary for the Session of 1854-5*. Collection of the Alexandria Library, Lloyd House.

Caroline [Carrie] S. Miller, daughter of Robert Hartshorne Miller and kin to the Hallowells, attended the Alexandria Female Seminary as a day student in 1859. She recorded her experiences in her diary.

10-21 "I went to school this morning, feeling not very well, got along pretty well with all my lessons except Astronomy, which seems to be a bugbear with me: when I came home and told Father how cold the schoolroom was, he said I must not go back..."

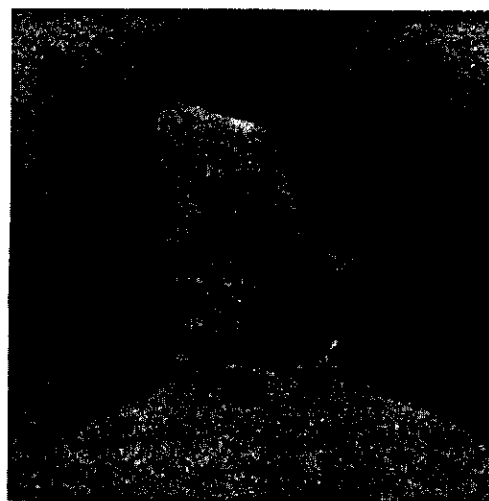
11-2 "I then went to school. I had a dreadful time in my Algebra, and I am sure it was not all for want of study..."

11-7 "I went to school this morning and got through my lessons pretty well, but in the afternoon I had a hearty cry over my Arithmetic, because I could not do the sum that was given me. I came home and cried again...After tea I studied my lessons awhile...I feel very sorry, of course, that I did not get through with my lessons to entire satisfaction, still I know that I studied my lesson until I knew it. I understood the principles of it and got half the sum right, consequently I do not feel that I deserved all the blame that was laid upon me, & for which I suffered."

11-8 "I went to school today and had another sad cry over my Astronomy. I explained something the way I understood it, and the way it was in the book, but it did not seem to satisfy J.S.H." [James Hallowell]

Carrie left school a short time later due to illness, but she continued to take private lessons in French. She occasionally saw boarding students from James Hallowell's school when she attended the Alexandria Meeting.

11-20 "In the afternoon we had a very large meeting [quarterly meeting] and several sermons, but I did not feel much interested in them, my attention being drawn off by the breaking down of a bench upon which James Hallowell's girls were sitting."<sup>13</sup>



Caroline S. Miller at about the time she attended James Hallowell's seminary. Carte-de-visite. Collection of the Sandy Spring Museum.

Carrie Miller's younger sister, Eliza, attended James Hallowell's school for three years after attending Fair Hill Boarding School in Montgomery County for one quarter. She finished her education at a Friends school in Philadelphia. Eliza recalled her Alexandria schooldays in her *Personal Recollections*.

"I had Jennie [Greene] for a classmate at James Hallowell's school when we were in our teens, and with Mary Jane Hallowell (daughter of Caleb) were the most advanced class in mathematics, but Belle Gregory and Belle Smith were ahead of us in history..."<sup>14</sup>

---

## Educational Alternatives

Wealthy Alexandrians had several options to select from when deciding how to best educate their children. Most chose to send a daughter to a local dame school and then to a seminary for a year or more. Parents, with more delicate or very young children, opted for home tutoring, while parents who sought a better quality of education chose boarding schools outside of Alexandria.

**"By attending them in their homes..."<sup>15</sup>**

Some mothers were capable of instructing their daughters at home in a variety of subjects. However, their daughters were not always diligent students. This was especially true when they lacked constant attention from their instructors and the stimulation that came from interaction with other students. Eleanor [Nelly] Custis Lewis, a well educated woman of many accomplishments, commented frequently in letters to her friend Elizabeth Bordley

Gibson on her lack of success with home tutoring and her inability to find qualified tutors to instruct her daughters at Woodlawn.<sup>16</sup>

"I teach my Parke [age seven] to read, & she can read tolerably, but I believe I am not well calculated for an instructress, and her ill health prevents her attending as she ought to do. She is a child of fine genius, and an excellent memory, but she has no application, and being entirely alone in lessons, she has not that spirit of emulation so necessary to make her exert her talents..." March 23, 1806

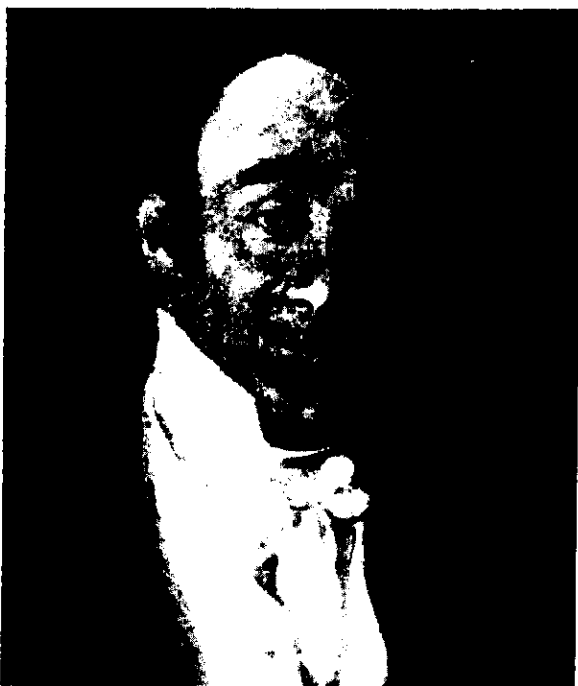
"..I am doing all in my power for Angela [age twelve] myself--but, interrupted continually by domestic duties, company &c, she is necessarily too much neglected, & has not steadiness enough to go on well unless I am near her. I cannot procure a teacher of music here, & she has a fine ear." Oct. 7, 1825

"My little Ped [Angela] attends to her studies & had she a better teacher, & one with fewer interruptions, she would progress most rapidly -- she has a very fine & apt genius. Her music master still disappoints her, but she has acquired nine tunes without him-- We cannot procure tutors here." January 17, 1826

Finding it difficult to get tutors to make the long ride from Alexandria to Woodlawn, Nelly Custis Lewis brought her youngest daughter, Angela, to Alexandria to be tutored privately in English and science by Benjamin Hallowell. Although Nelly did not mention Hallowell in her letters to Elizabeth Gibson, Hallowell was sufficiently impressed to be tutoring a member of the Washington family that he described the sessions in his autobiography. Hallowell tutored other girls from prominent Alexandria families between 1828 and 1830 to supplement the meager and unreliable tuition he received from the Alexandria Boarding School.

"In the fall of 1828 I began to give private lessons to the daughters of Craven Thompson and Robert I. Taylor, at their respective homes, having definite hours assigned to me, between my own school hours, like their music and French teachers. This was humbling to me, but I was in debt, and I was desirous of doing anything that was honorable to get out of debt and make a living. I went to Thompson's and Taylor's immediately after my afternoon school. Then after tea in the evenings I had a class of girls...in Philosophy, Grammar, Arithmetic, etc.

On the 17th of Ninth month, 1830, I commenced giving private lessons to Angela Lewis, daughter of Major Lawrence Lewis. These lessons continued through the year, for which I charged fifty dollars...Eleanor Lewis, Angela's mother, always attended at her daughter's recitations in English Grammar, Parsing, Natural Philosophy, etc., so that her influence, which she afterwards exerted in my favor, and her praise of my method of teaching, was of greater value to me than the amount I received in hand for teaching her daughter."<sup>17</sup>



Benjamin Hallowell, by James McCormick Eaches, 1837.  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. A. Thomas Hallowell.

### "Sending their children to the Northern States..."<sup>18</sup>

Some parents elected to send daughters in their early to mid-teens north to Philadelphia where there were a number of select boarding schools. The Lewises of Woodlawn and the Calverts of Riversdale in Prince George's County preferred the French curriculum of Deborah Grelaud's school. Madame Rivardi offered a similar program for daughters of other elite families. Richard Bland Lee and his friends selected the more austere atmosphere of the Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Quaker parents frequently sent their daughters to schools organized by the Society of Friends in Montgomery County, Maryland, Westtown, Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia before or after a year or two of study at James Hallowell's Alexandria Female Seminary.

Nelly Custis Lewis sent her two oldest daughters to Madame Deborah Grelaud's exclusive, and expensive, boarding school in Philadelphia between 1815 and 1820. Although it was "a severe trial" to part with her children, she sacrificed her own happiness to provide for their well being and to give them the advantages of an education in the "splendid City" of Philadelphia. Her anxiety was high while her daughters were in a distant city, and with good cause. In the fall of 1820, Agnes Lewis became dangerously ill with a "bilious fever"; after some delay Mme. Grelaud summoned Nelly to nurse her. Evidently Mme. Grelaud procrastinated in notifying the Lewises as to the seriousness of their daughter's illness and in seeking competent medical advice. Shortly after Agnes' death at age fifteen, Nelly wrote to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson:



"I shall always do her [Madame Grelaud] justice, as far as I really think her due, & I will never say anything that can injure her as a Governess, or lessen her scholars, but the lasting regret that her neglect of my earnest requests has caused me, & the uneasiness occasioned to my suffering Angel [Agnes] by obstinacy & Aurora's [Mme Grelaud's daughter] want of thought & proper feeling -- I cannot soon forget. Never will another of my children live under their care. Never shall another sufferer beg me, in vain, to take them from that hated house...I regret most bitterly that my child was far from me when timely & proper attention & medical advice might perhaps have saved her -- & is not Madame G. the cause of all that..." November 22, 1820<sup>19</sup>

It was difficult for girls to leave home and make new friends in a school where most of the students were strangers to them. Philadelphians tended to consider girls from the Alexandria area to be socially inferior and provincial. Robert Hartshorne Miller's daughter Eliza remembered that she had but one friend when she attended Mary Anna Longstreth's school in Philadelphia.

"...none of the other girls took any notice of me. My social standing should have been all that any one could desire." [and indeed it was in Alexandria where her father was a leading member of the mercantile community and in Philadelphia where her uncle was a prominent doctor] "...all these Philadelphia girls knew each other and had been classmates for some years..."<sup>20</sup>

Eliza Miller also recalled that her academic preparation was uneven.

"...they were much ahead of me in Latin and French--but when it came to Algebra I was (thanks to James Hallowell) miles ahead of them and they considered me, in that respect quite a prodigy."<sup>21</sup>

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, several girls from Alexandria attended the Moravian Seminary for Young Ladies in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Established at Bethlehem in 1749, the school first admitted non-Moravian students in 1785. Dedicated to the education of women in the superior branches, the Moravians also were known for their accomplishments in music and fine arts. Girls, usually between twelve and fifteen years of age, attended for about two years and completed a needlework project in addition to their other studies.<sup>22</sup>

Cornelia Lee, thirteen-year-old daughter of Richard Bland Lee of Alexandria and Sully Plantation, entered the seminary in 1817. Cornelia previously had been a student of Mrs. Stone's in Washington City. Elizabeth Lee, her mother, compared the expenses for the two schools in a letter to her brother, Zaccheus Collins, and found that sending her daughter to a select boarding school was scarcely more expensive than sending her to a local school as a day student. She did not choose to have Cornelia instructed in needlework.

"I visited last night Mr. Colwell who has a daughter at Bethlehem...He expects to go there in May also 3 ladies from here who have daughters there...I have her [Cornelia] now with Mrs. Stone for a month that is April.

I find the expense less than I could have thought it having now before me Colwell's cost account, which makes a quarters expenses at Bethlehem. Board, Music, Painting, French, and complete English and washing - just the same as with Mrs. Stone for English and Music without Board.

At Bethlehem --

Board & English	\$25
Music	3
French	3
Drawing	1.50

Mrs. Stone

English	\$10
Music	180
use of Piano <sup>23</sup>	4

Quaker girls usually attended schools organized by members of the Society of Friends. With close kinship ties between Quakers in Alexandria and Sandy Spring, Montgomery County, it was convenient for Alexandria girls to attend school with their Maryland cousins and to board with relatives.

The Hallowell family of Alexandria had several connections with the Fair Hill Boarding School, opened in Montgomery County in 1819. Both Benjamin Hallowell and his wife, Margaret, taught at Fair Hill during the 1820s. Later, their daughter Mary attended the school, where she was remembered as "a girl of strong character, painstaking and almost morbidly conscientious."<sup>24</sup> Daughters of the Miller, Stabler, Richards, Hunter, and other Alexandria families also attended Fair Hill. By 1860, the school offered a full curriculum that included botany, geology, physiology, German, and Latin in addition to more traditional subjects. Lectures and demonstrations were followed by discussion and frequent examinations. Students attended for nine months beginning in October and followed a rigid schedule rising at 5:30 or 6:00 am and retiring at 9:00 pm. They were encouraged in correct and lady-like deportment and isolated from corrupting influences of local society and family members. To maintain proper discipline

and subordination to their teachers, girls were discouraged from visiting home during the school year.<sup>25</sup>



Sketch of the Fair Hill Boarding School.  
Photograph courtesy of the Montgomery County Society.

The Westtown Boarding School in Westtown, Pennsylvania attracted Quaker girls from Alexandria, especially during the first decade of the nineteenth century. The Janney and Hartshorne families sent daughters there. Benjamin Hallowell taught mathematics at Westtown between 1821 and 1823, before taking a position at the Fair Hill Boarding School. His sister, Mary, taught there from 1823 to 1826, when she left to teach in Alexandria. Much later, in 1847, Margaret and Benjamin Hallowell enrolled their daughter, Caroline.<sup>26</sup>

Westtown was established as a co-educational school in 1799, and soon became the most respected boarding school within the Quaker community. Students enrolled for no less than twelve months at a time. A 1799 broadside, issued by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, stated that students were to be outfitted with specified articles of strong

and substantial clothing in plain colors, clearly marked with the students' initials and number of their bill of admittance.<sup>27</sup>

Girls received a rigorous but practical education. In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, their curriculum included plain sewing, mending, knitting, darning, and fancy work that served an useful purpose. Entering students, some as young as nine, were requested to bring to school scissors, thimble, needle case, and work bag. A large number of Westtown samplers have survived, although none can be attributed to Alexandria girls.<sup>28</sup>

---

**“...the poor, whose situation in life excludes them from every source of mental cultivation...”<sup>29</sup>**

### **The Uneducated**

Private education in one of Alexandria's dame schools or more advanced seminaries was beyond the financial reach of many town residents. Only a few poor parents had the opportunity to place a child in one of the schools offering to educate children at little or no cost. Orphans, with a father or both parents deceased, children of Irish immigrants, and free blacks were among the uneducated population of Alexandria. Children who did not attend school and who lacked a parent to teach them faced a bleak outlook. Without the rudiments of reading and writing, their options were severely limited. Girls might hope to find a husband to support them, but for girls who worked outside the home, employment was limited to domestic service.

The apprentice system provided one solution for poor children. Widows, or relatives of children with no living parents, gave consent to the Orphans' Court to place a child with a master for a period of time. The child would labor in return for room, board, clothing, and instruction in an useful trade. The more fortunate received some tutoring in reading and possibly in writing and figuring. Thus the local government was relieved from the cost of maintaining indigent children. For boys, there was a wide range of trades to choose from such as cooper or miller; for girls, only two---“the art and mystery of house keeper and sempstress.” Mary Rhodes was more fortunate than most.

“Mary Rhodes - aged 6 an orphan girl of colour ... to learn the business of house servant and to serve until she is 18 and to be paid \$20 and to be taught to read.”

Recorded: November 7, 1825<sup>30</sup>

Far fewer girls than boys were bound to masters during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Girls's names appeared on only twelve percent of the apprenticeship indentures recorded in Alexandria between 1801 and 1830. The girls ranged in age from four to seventeen years, with eleven the average age for starting an apprentice-ship. Fifty-five percent of the girls were listed as orphans and twenty-four percent were described as “mulatto” or “of colour.” During the thirty-year-period of the indenture survey, the numbers of orphans and non whites increased dramatically so that half of all the female apprentice indentures recorded between 1822 and 1830 were for “orphan girls of colour.”<sup>31</sup> In reality, many African-American girls

in Alexandria exchanged one type of bondage, slavery, for another, apprenticeship.

Employment opportunities for uneducated females, whether black or white, did not improve during the antebellum period. At late as 1860, the majority of girls who had arrived as immigrants from Ireland or who were born to Irish parents, worked as domestics in private homes. Most of them were in their mid teens, but girls as young as eleven held jobs outside the home. Older Irish girls worked as chamber maids in one of Alexandria's hotels or boarding houses. A very few ascended the skill ladder to work as cooks, or as seamstresses in small millinery shops, or as spinners in the local cotton factory. Others found jobs as prostitutes in one of Alexandria's several brothels.<sup>32</sup>



"Milliner," woodcut from Edward Hazen's, *The Panorama of Professions and Trades*, 1837. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

For free black girls, employment opportunities were limited to only two occupations --domestic and nurse. The great majority of young girls of color, who were listed in the 1860 census, worked in white households as servants; some were as young as nine. Girls who

primarily looked after white babies and children as nursemaids often were not much older than their charges.<sup>33</sup> Free black girls in Alexandria continually ran the risk of being abducted and sold back into slavery, regardless of whether they possessed freedom papers or had someone to attest to their free status. During times of racial unrest, such as after the Nat Turner uprising in 1831, their situation was especially precarious.



Laura Brown, nursemaid. Carte-de-visite. Photograph courtesy of the Alexandria Library, Lloyd House

One can conclude from the extensive number of teachers and schools and the variety of educational opportunities available in Alexandria during the antebellum period that many young women received sufficient instruction in a range of useful and ornamental subjects to allow them to become congenial companions to their husbands, proper guardians of their children's moral character, competent managers of their households, and useful citizens of the

new Republic.<sup>34</sup> For many of Alexandria's daughters an education of some kind was "equally their due," but it was not necessarily equal in quality and scope to their brothers. For other girls, who were restricted by race and class, education was *not* equally their due.

Some girls, fortunate to receive a number of years of instruction, benefited more from their education than others. It has not been possible to follow Alexandria's schoolgirls into adulthood, but a few women who received instruction locally are well known from their writings and other activities. Angela Lewis Conrad, Nelly's cosseted daughter, married in her late teens and moved to the frontier of Louisiana where she had little opportunity to show off her more ornamental accomplishments and her knowledge of natural philosophy. Angela had two sons and died at age 24.

Carrie Miller, who struggled at Hallowell's Female Seminary with astronomy and arithmetic, married Roger Farquhar of Montgomery County, raised a number of children, and lived a long and full life which she and her husband recorded in their diaries. Mollie Gregory, another unhappy student of James Hallowell's, wrote down her impressions of Alexandria's people and places. Mary Gregory Powell's historical account remains a valuable resource.

Mary Peake, who came to Alexandria for the educational opportunities offered to free blacks, became the first woman of color to teach former slaves who sought refuge inside the Union lines at Fort Monroe. Mary died at age 39, but an elementary school and a street in

Hampton, Virginia commemorate her contribution to the education of African Americans.

Alexandria's most infamous schoolgirl, Mary Jenkins, was a boarding student for four years at St Francis Xavier's Academy. Shortly after finishing her education seventeen-year-old Mary married John Surratt. Later, she and her husband ran the Surratt House and Tavern, a busy way station and hub for secessionist activities in Prince George's County. In 1865, Mary Surratt was accused as a conspirator in the plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln, convicted, and executed. She was 42.

---

### Endnotes

1. This phrase appeared frequently in newspaper advertisements placed by French immigrants.
2. A number of French people, en route to the Northwest Territory [later the state of Ohio] under the auspices of the Scioto Company, entered the United States through the port of Alexandria and chose to remain in the area rather than moving westward. Those who continued on founded a colony known as Gallipolis. Robert Wendell Eaves, "A History of the Educational Developments of Alexandria, Virginia, Prior to 1860," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2nd. Ser., vol. 16, no. 2 (April, 1936), 115.
3. Generes initially conducted dancing classes in Annapolis and later in Washington City. For a more detailed study of Generes see Edith Moore Sprouse, "Monsieur Generes, Dancing Master," *The Fireside Sentinel*, vol. VI, no. 12 (December 1992).
4. Elizabeth Collins Lee to Zaccheus Collins, 17 May, and 8 April, 1811. Copies courtesy

- of the Fairfax County Park Authority, originals in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
5. Quoted by Judith S. Britt in *Nothing More Agreeable: Music in George Washington's Family* (Mount Vernon, VA: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 1984), 72.
  6. Collection of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.
  7. Minutes of the Alexandria Monthly Meeting, 23 July, 1818. Partial typescript in the vertical files, Alexandria Library, Lloyd House.
  8. Minutes of the Alexandria Monthly Meeting, 11 November, 1815 - 22 April, 1819.
  9. This building was the location of Benjamin Hallowell's Alexandria Boarding School between 1826 and 1833. The building is now known as the Lloyd House and serves as the repository of the manuscript collection of the Alexandria Library.
  10. Hallowell described Margaret's school and his sessions with female students in his autobiography. *Excerpts from Hallowell Autobiography - Alexandria Years*, first published as *Autobiography of Benjamin Hallowell* (Philadelphia: Friends' Book Association, 1884), 106-107.
  11. A copy of the 1854 circular for James Hallowell's Alexandria Female Seminary is in the manuscript collection of the Alexandria Library, Lloyd House. The circular includes the curriculum and a list of current students.
  12. Mary Gregory Powell, "Scenes of Childhood," with introduction by T. Michael Miller, *The Fireside Sentinel*, vol. IV, no. 2 (1990), 21.
  13. The Caroline Miller Farquhar diaries are in the library collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society. Jane Sween, Librarian, kindly brought them to my attention.
  14. Eliza H. Miller, *Personal Recollections of Eliza H. Miller* (N.P., ca. 1926), 3. Printed booklet in the collection of the Alexandria Library, Lloyd House.
  15. Alexandria teachers advertised that they would give private lessons and accommodate students "by attending them in their homes."
  16. Letters from Eleanor Custis Lewis to her friend Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, compiled and edited by Patricia Brady in *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).
  17. Benjamin Hallowell, 108.
  18. Eliza Porter, *Phenix Gazette*, 19 August, 1828.
  19. Quoted by Brady.
  20. Eliza Miller, 15.
  21. Ibid.
  22. For definitive studies of Moravian needlework see Patricia T. Herr, "*The Ornamental Branches*" *Needlework and Arts from the Lititz Moravian Girls' School* (Lancaster, PA: The Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County, 1996), and Betty Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers & Pictorial Needlework 1650-1850* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993) 434-449.
  23. Elizabeth Collins Lee to Zaccheus Collins, 15 April, 1817. Cornelia Lee is listed in the Moravian Seminary catalogue as entering in 1817.
  24. Mary C. Brooke, *Memories of Eighty Years* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1916), 44.
  25. A copy of the 1862 circular for Fair Hill Boarding School is in the library collection of the Montgomery County Historical Society.
  26. *A Brief History of Westtown Boarding School with a General Catalogue* (Philadelphia, 1888).

27. The broadside is illustrated by Betty Ring in *Girlhood Embroidery*, fig. 421.
28. See Ring, 388-395.
29. Ann Murray, *Mentoria or the Young Ladies Instructor in Familiar Conversation* (New York, 1812), 19.
30. T. Michael Miller compiled apprenticeship indentures recorded between 1801-1805, 1811-1817, and 1822-1830 from Alexandria County Orphan Court Records and published them in *Portrait of a Town - Alexandria, District of Columbia [Virginia] 1820-1830* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1995), 457.
31. These conclusions are based on a simple analysis of the indentures published by Miller in *Portrait of a Town*. Of the 777 indentures recorded between 1801 and 1830, 91 or 12% were for girls. My findings are similar to those of Eleanor M. V. Cook to Montgomery County, Maryland. She published her analysis in "Apprentice and Master in Montgomery County 1779 to 1840," *The Montgomery County Story - Quarterly of The Montgomery County Historical Society*, vol. 37, no. 2 (May 1994).
32. Occupational analysis of the 1860 federal census for the city of Alexandria. The most frequently cited occupations for girls of Irish birth or with parents of Irish birth were - domestic, chamber maid, cook, dressmaker, shirt maker, mattress maker, cotton spinner, and prostitute. Almost no girls of German ancestry were listed in the 1860 census. A few from Bavaria either worked as domestics or were not employed outside the household.
33. Black or mulatto girls working as domestics ranged in age from 9 to 20, those who worked as nursemaids ranged in age from 12 to 18.
34. The data base that supports this research includes the names of more than 230 schools or teachers that offered instruction of some type to young women in Alexandria between 1785 and 1860.

**Office of Historic  
Alexandria**  
P.O. Box 178, City Hall  
Alexandria, Virginia 22313

**BULK  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
ALEXANDRIA, VA  
PERMIT NO. 5506**

*Kerry J. Donley, Mayor*  
*Redella S. Pepper, Vice Mayor*  
*William C. Cleveland, Councilman*  
*William D. Euille, Councilman*  
*Lonnie C. Rich, Council Member*  
*David G. Speck, Councilman*  
*Lois L. Walker, Council Member*  
*Vola Lawson, City Manager*

The  
*Historic Alexandria Quarterly*  
is published by the Office of  
Historic Alexandria.  
(703) 838-4554  
© Copyright 1996

Jean Taylor Federico  
Director