

19th Century Schooling

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The 19th century saw the growth of the education system in the United States. Beginning in the 1840's with Horace Mann's work in New England, elementary-level public schools opened their doors to all children. Prior to this decade, children had to attend private schools to receive an education, greatly limiting schooling opportunities for those less wealthy. These new public schools, like their private counterparts, operated locally. Secondary schools required more travel across the state or country.¹

These common-school reforms did not stand alone. Women's education was also broadened, with the first coeducation college, Oberlin, founded in 1833.² However, at the primary and secondary levels, boys and girls were still taught differently, although there was some overlap. For example, boys spent their time out of the classroom helping with heavier work on the farm while girls tended to domestic needs.

Nevertheless, both private and public schools for either gender focused on the same basic educational standards. These teachings included good penmanship and reading, arithmetic, recitation, typically of a Biblical nature, and good, respectful manners.³

Near Long Branch Plantation, a number of Nelson family relatives lived and ran a schoolhouse at Rosny, which family and friends attended. Thomas Nelson Jr. wrote about his time at Rosny in letters to his mother and father, Susan and Robert Nelson Sr. He spent a fair amount of time recounting his farm work, but also his learning of Latin and Greek. He often mentions working with Virgil's works.⁴ Additionally, Thomas, or Tommy, was repeatedly said to have very poor penmanship, and his letters would often be finished by female family members.⁵

Tommy's letters from his schooling at Rosny began in 1857 and ran through 1860. However, with the coming of the Civil War, he left to fight for the Confederacy. Prior to leaving, he often wrote home describing his and other boys' desire to form their own company and fight.⁶ In September, 1861, Betsy Nelson, Tommy's former instructor, wrote him begging to come to Rosny, though it does not seem he ever did given the lack of correspondence afterward.

Also beginning in 1857, Long Branch resident and daughter of Hugh M. and Adelaide Nelson, Nannie Nelson, attended high school in West Chester, New York at Pelham Priory under the instruction of Miss C.W. Bolton.⁷ Nannie's schooling experience was communicated via a series of letters to her mother and younger brother, Hugh Jr., throughout 1857.

The letters between Nannie and her mother focused on more domestic interests and

¹ "A History of Public Education in the United States." A History of Public Education In The United States. Accessed July 8, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ "America's One Room Schools of the 1890's." Accessed July 8, 2015.

⁴ Thomas Nelson Jr. to Robert Nelson Sr., October 31st, 1859 or 1860 and April 23rd, 1860.

⁵ Evelyn P. Nelson to Robert Nelson Sr., unknown date, 1859 or 1860.

⁶ Thomas Nelson Jr. to Robert Nelson Sr., October 31st, 1859 or 1860.

⁷ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, April 30th, 1857.

hobbies, as opposed to Tommy's outdoor farming experiences at school. In an advertisement for Pelham Priory, it offered its "home-like influences and educational advantages," demonstrating the valued mix of the domestic and cultivated in women's education.⁸

Upon her arrival at Pelham, Nannie was placed in the first class at the priory, and described as having a voice "nice and cultivated."⁹ Adelaide frequently checked in on Nannie's progress in learning the harp and took special note of how her daughter should value Miss Bolton's bible class, in order to improve her recitation skills.¹⁰ Like Tommy, Nannie also took liberal arts-based classes, such as History and French. Adelaide frequently requested that her daughter also learn astronomy.¹¹ Finally, when discussing Miss Bolton as a teacher, her outstanding qualities included her "fine manners" and her high intelligence.¹²

Although Nannie had a pleasant schooling experience, save for her dislike of the school minister, this was not the case for all boarding schools. In a letter from Nannie's cousin Harriot Scollay, the younger girl describes the "Priory as being nicer than other boarding schools," even though the older girl spends so much of her day in the classroom.¹³

Pelham's exemplary nature may be connected to its fellow New England schools' reforms and progress, as the area led the way in advancements in education. However, while a number of emerging public schools for women, such as many in Boston, encouraged a more egalitarian view of education for both sexes, other institutions, especially private schools with roots in the 18th century, were said to have the gendered goal of making girls "fit wives for well educated men, and enable them to exert a salutary influence upon the rising generation."¹⁴

Criticism of this simple, traditional boarding school method contributed to the growth of schools offering a more "intellectually challenging curriculum" like that which was offered to boys. New 19th century-style schools were known as academies, of which, by 1860, there were 6,000 with 250,000 students.¹⁵ While some were operated by local boards or religious denominations, they were most often kept up by individuals or families, such as the Priory. These academies were private schools maintained by wealthier families and were common in the North and the East. Held in the families' large houses, these schools could accommodate a number of girls.

In both cases, however, 19th century education was remarkable in its progress and union of new and traditional ideas, and emerging diversity of options. Middle and working class parents had the chance to send their children to elementary grammar schools, and both boys and girls had some form of educational opportunity.

⁸ "Advertisement for Pelham Priory School." Historic Pelham. Accessed July 8, 2015.

⁹ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, April 9th, 1857.

¹⁰ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, March 28th and May 20th, 1857.

¹¹ Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, April 25th and June 1857.

¹² Adelaide Nelson to Nannie Nelson, April 28th, 1857.

¹³ Harriot Scollay to Nannie Nelson, May 4th, 1857.

¹⁴ Kermes, Stephanie. "'To Make Them Fit Wives for Well Educated Men'? 19th-Century Education of Boston Girls." Boston Historical Society. Accessed July 8, 2015.

¹⁵ Volo, James M., and Dorothy Denneen Volo. *Family Life in 19th-century America*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007. 299-301.