

Farmers' Daughters: The Education of Women at Alfred Academy and University Before the Civil War

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HIKING THROUGH THE WOODS of western New York State one suddenly comes upon evidence of farms long since reclaimed by nature—a rock pile where a field had once been cleared of its glacial boulders, remnants of an old fence, or fruit trees now returned to the wild. Areas that in the nineteenth century were part of an intricate pattern of farming communities now house wildlife, leaving only the very old and antiquarians to remember that these lands had once been cultivated. In much the same way, we have also forgotten the higher education that served the daughters, and the sons, of these farms.

In part this is due to a Whiggish approach to the history of higher education which has taken the modern university as the model and searched for its antecedents in the past. This perspective has limited our understanding of what education was like in the antebellum period—how it fit into those times and met the needs of young women and men, their families and their communities, as well as those of a nation in the process of westward expansion and growing industrialization. Until very recently much of the research on women's higher education has shared this perspective, leaving the impression that little education of any importance existed for women before the founding of Vassar in 1865. And much of the work that has been done on the antebellum period has concentrated on women's academies and seminaries in New England and the more developed areas of eastern New York State, with Oberlin standing out as the lone exception.¹

In the last decade or so, historians such as David Potts, Colin Burke, and James McLachlan have questioned the traditional view that the antebellum period marked the nadir of higher education in this country. They argue that the small antebellum colleges provided opportunities for a rising middle class and aided in the transition from rural to urban life. These studies have been fairly general and have not looked at women students or the question of coeducation; and, though they call for studies of other types of institutions, their research has been on colleges, while academies and normal schools probably offered more opportunities for women.²

To anyone schooled in the stratified, age-graded educational system of the twentieth century, antebellum higher education seems chaotic and unstructured. It featured a wide variety of institutions offering education beyond the common school—institutions such as colleges, academies, seminaries, normal schools, and various technical and professional schools. The distinction between secondary and higher education was not at all clear. Many academies offered collegiate-level courses and might as easily have been called colleges, while most colleges had large preparatory departments. And either might offer teacher training. For example, before the Civil War Alfred Academy and University, a small coeducational school in western New York State, combined academy, normal school, and college. To try to separate them is an exercise in futility. But if we can somehow resist the temptation to try to sort this all out and equate it with familiar modern institutions, we may begin to see this system as one closely tied to local needs and providing educational opportunities for large segments of the population never reached by more elite colleges (for men) and finishing schools (for women). This paper will investigate Alfred as a microcosm of antebellum higher education to see how the goals and aims of the school interacted with those of the students to produce a group of alumnae who managed to combine marriage and careers.

In many ways nineteenth-century Alfred had more in common with a Midwestern village than an Eastern town. Hidden away in a narrow valley of the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, in Allegany County in western New York, Alfred remained fairly small and agricultural. A group of Seventh-Day Baptists had settled there about 1807 founding the town and, in 1836, the school which would eventually grow into Alfred University. The Seventh-Day Baptists (not to be confused with the more widely-known Seventh-Day Adventists) had broken away from the Newport (Rhode Island) Baptist Church in 1671 over the question of the Saturday sabbath. Even more than other evangelical sects, the Seventh-Day Baptists centered their religion on individual interpretation of the Bible. There they found the rationale for their observance of the “true” sabbath. But to read and understand the Bible children needed an education which meant that teachers were needed—preferably SDB teachers. Seventh-Day Baptists also shared Catharine Beecher’s fear that the lack of teachers in the Midwest would cause that region to come under the influence of Catholicism. Citing this concern the Education Committee urged the 1838 General Conference to “earnestly entreat that many of our young brethren and sisters may become qualified for teaching.”³

Other Protestant denominations also voiced concern about education, but in most colleges the training of ministers remained of paramount importance. The Seventh-Day Baptists were more ambivalent about the value of an educated clergy. There were still some church members who viewed classical education as

“hostile not only to the spirit, but also to the principles of religion. . . .”⁴ So it was not until 1862 that Alfred University offered a theological class; and unlike other colleges, Alfred’s primary mission remained training teachers of both sexes for the first few decades of its existence. This emphasis had important implications for the form that women’s education took at Alfred before the Civil War. No denomination or school that we know of in this period was actively recruiting and training women to be ministers. If the training of ministers were the primary mission of a college, it followed that women would be second-class citizens there; however, if teacher training were of foremost importance, the possibility existed that women would be treated equitably.

This emphasis on the importance of teacher education reflected not only the religious beliefs of the Seventh-Day Baptists but also a secular belief in the power of education that was pervasive in the United States before the Civil War. The Jacksonian America of Alfred University’s early years was a nation in transition. Growing industrialization was changing the nature and site of work. Urbanization, immigration, and westernization further threatened traditional beliefs and local sources of power. Widespread public education became one solution for the all these problems. The rise of the common school movement in the first half of the nineteenth century created a great demand for teachers, especially women teachers who could be paid much less than men. “By 1850, two million school age children required two hundred thousand teachers, nearly 90 percent of whom were women.”⁵ At the same time the movement provided an ideology and rhetoric on the importance of education in improving society that could be used to plead the cause of higher education for women.

The education that Alfred offered must be viewed in the context of ongoing debates about how best to educate women. Many, such as Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, and Catharine Beecher, argued that women’s education should be separate and different from men’s, that women had special needs which could not be met in an education designed by and for men. This line of argument led to the founding of female seminaries which attempted to train women to be wives, mothers, and school teachers. Though they sought to enlarge the scope of woman’s sphere, they never seriously challenged the concept of separate spheres. There are at least two ways of viewing this. One, is to argue, as Keith Melder does, that “by providing education separate from and unequal to that of men,” the seminaries “confirmed and reinforced a double standard of education.”⁶ Another is Anne Firor Scott’s in looking at Emma Willard’s Troy Female Seminary. Scott contends that women who held some attachment to traditional values could be more successful in putting forth feminist ideas because they were viewed as less threatening. In fact, nearly all of the early feminists in this country upheld the idea of woman’s special sphere while

expanding it to include most activities. "Like many individuals, Troy as an institution combined an allegiance to certain well-defined ideas about what was proper for women, with a subversive attention to women's intellectual development."⁷

A few women, like Caroline Dall, believed that women's education should not differ from men's. Dall argued that "all educational institutions should be kept open for her; that she should be encouraged to avail herself of these according to her own inclination; and that, so far as possible, she should pursue her studies, and test her powers in company with man."⁸ Coeducation can be defined in various ways. It can mean educating women and men together in an identical way, which generally means the way designed for men, or it can mean educating women and men at the same institution but not necessarily in the same way. The education that Alfred offered women before the Civil War reflected both the seminary founders' belief in a separate but equally important sphere for women, while at the same time providing equal access to classes in all subjects.

We know very little about the education the select school provided, but when William C. Kenyon arrived to take charge of it in 1839, he found that he was expected to teach "Geography, Grammar, Arithmetic, Algebra, Surveying, Book-keeping, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Botany, Astronomy, Zoology, Geology, Mental and Moral Philosophy, besides Latin, Greek, etc. . . ."⁹ Four years later when New York State officially incorporated the school as an academy, it still offered most of these subjects, with two female and two male instructors assisting Kenyon in running the school.

The three-year Teacher's Course which expanded to four years in 1850, was the only full course of instruction offered by the academy in its early years. By 1845 Alfred Academy could boast of having "sent out not less than one hundred and fifty teachers annually for the two past years, a number much larger than from any other institution in the State."¹⁰ The Teacher's Course provided a great deal of flexibility in subjects. Women could substitute a modern language for the Latin required of men students. There were also various electives and for a short time (from 1854 to 1856) students could choose to study the legal rights of woman. In addition the school offered several partial courses in a variety of subjects including instrumental music, drawing, and painting for women.

Although teacher training remained the primary mission of the academy, it did recognize a demand for college preparation and by 1852 offered classes designed to cover the first two years of a college classical course. When, in 1857, the New York State legislature awarded Alfred a university charter, the school offered three parallel collegiate courses: the Classical, the Scientific, and the Ladies Course, "arranged to meet the growing demand for a higher standard of female education . . . to harmoniously blend thorough intellectual discipline with

the cultivation of a refined and elegant taste, high moral principles, and pure religious sentiments."¹¹

A comparison of the Ladies Course with the other two collegiate courses shows that it contained less mathematics than the Scientific but more than the Classical. The Ladies Course had more literature and modern language than either of the other courses; and while they included surveying, it offered perspective drawing. Both the Scientific and the Ladies Courses contained much less instruction in the ancient languages, though these could be substituted for the modern ones prescribed in the courses. The student records show that about half of the alumnae took Latin, several took Greek, and a few followed the Classical Course. There were only a few upper-level Greek and science classes which apparently no woman took, but then only a handful of men did; while the only classes that none of the male graduates took were instrumental music, Italian, and presumably drawing.

Alfred's first president, William C. Kenyon (1857-1867), had studied at Union College, which had instituted the rather radical though successful, curricular reform of offering parallel courses in the classics and science. The reform's radicalism stemmed from the equality accorded to the classical and scientific degrees. Alfred took this one step further by declaring that the Ladies Course was equivalent to both the Scientific and the Classical Courses. However, Alfred's faculty found it inappropriate to call a woman a "bachelor," so it created the Laureate of Arts which was given to a woman no matter which course she followed. At Oberlin, the Ladies Course was clearly viewed as inferior to the Classical; women completing it received diplomas—not degrees—which were presented in a separate ceremony. The women who gave Oberlin its place as the pioneer in coeducation did so by disregarding all advice and taking the Classical Course designed for men. This approach to women's education reflects Oberlin's primary mission of training ministers and proper wives for those ministers.¹²

At Alfred University the emphasis on teacher training continued with most students of either sex taking the three-year English or Teacher's Course "arranged for those who, while not intending to complete either of the longer Courses, yet are desirous of preparing for teachers, or for efficient laborers and influential members of society."¹³ This course started off approximately one term behind, but contained many of the same subjects as, the three longer courses. Its third year was nearly identical to the senior year in the others, with the addition of a special class in didactics. It lacked literature, multiple foreign languages (a student could study Latin, Greek, or a modern language), higher mathematics and sciences, as well as most of the advanced classical subjects. Those who completed this course received a Bachelor or Laureate of Philosophy (rather than Arts).

Of the 108 degrees awarded at Alfred University between 1859 (when the first collegiate degree was granted) and 1865, 69 were for the Teachers' Course (of which 40 went to women), 7 were for the Classical, 13 for the Scientific Course, and 19 were for the Ladies Course (including the women who had followed the Classical Course). In 1862 Alfred University's trustees passed a resolution giving those who had graduated from Alfred Academy before 1857 a Bachelor or Laureate of Philosophy. No explanation is extant for why all women taking a longer course were listed in the catalog under the Ladies Course no matter what their studies. The courses were flexible enough to allow a woman to take whatever she liked (as could a male student). This practice seems to reflect a recognition of woman's separate but equal sphere at a time when women were defined primarily by their gender, but it also reflects an expansion of that sphere, much like early feminists, to include anything a woman wished to do.

Of equal, if not greater, importance than their studies for many students was the self-culture they gained in their student literary societies which dominated student life at Alfred as elsewhere in the nineteenth century and provided an important supplement to the school's curriculum. After early experiments first with single-sex then with coeducational societies, the women formed their own Ladies Literary Society in 1850. Writing many years later, Abigail Maxson Allen, an early Alfred student and teacher, recalls that though the early coeducational societies had "contained about equal members of young men and women, yet the young men did most of the public speaking."¹⁴ Eventually, there were two male and two female literary societies (or lyceums as they were also called). In terms of stated objectives, there were no major differences between the women's and men's lyceums at Alfred. These objectives echoed those of most student societies at that time and stressed self-improvement. One important function of the lyceums was to bring speakers to campus. Often several or all of the lyceums would pool their resources to bring an impressive array of speakers to town, including such reformers as Frederick Douglass (abolitionist), Thomas Beecher (clergyman), Gerrit Smith (philanthropist), Joshua R. Giddings (abolitionist), Orson Fowler (phrenologist), and Elihu Burritt (pacifist).

The most important part of the lyceum's weekly meetings was the debate. Differences appear in the types of questions debated. There was a much stronger emphasis in the male debates on questions of law and politics, though the women did not totally abandon these fields. They did not discuss questions connected with commerce such as protective tariffs or internal improvements. They spent much more time than the men debating philosophical and moral questions—questions of truth, right, duty, justice, beauty, and the roots of evil. In the area of education, men and women discussed many of the same questions. Predictably, the women spent more time than the men discussing questions about women's

education, but the men, too, affirmed the benefits of coeducation and a woman's right to equal access to education. The cult of domesticity clearly gave women dominion over culture and morality, while men were left in charge of the public worlds of business and politics. Yet, with the exception of commerce, Alfred women debated all of the topics debated by men.

In the lyceums women practiced their skills in oratory and debate with the support of their "sisters." The confidence thus gained in their private meetings allowed women to hold their own in public programs and debates with men. When a women's and a men's lyceum collaborated to present a joint program, which usually took place at least once a year, members from each group participated equally. The public sessions, both with and without the participation of men, provided women with important practice in speaking before large promiscuous, or mixed, audiences sometimes numbering a thousand or more.

Still, the right of women to speak in public was not universally recognized in this period. Oberlin refused to allow those women who graduated from the classical course to read their essays at commencement ceremonies as male graduates did for fear of appearing too radical.¹⁸ Oberlin's women students protested this treatment, and feminist Lucy Stone even refused to write a paper since she would not be allowed to read it. Jonathan Allen, an important Alfred teacher and later the University's second president, was a student at Oberlin when Stone made her protest. His wife relates that when asked how Alfred handled this question, Allen replied, "The most natural way in the world. If a young woman is capable of writing a paper, she ought to be able to read it."¹⁶

This reply sums up nicely the matter-of-fact way in which women's public speaking was treated at Alfred. From the very first, women students participated in anniversary exercises, with the primary differences being that while men generally gave orations, women read their essays. However, by 1854 some women were choosing to give orations which a local paper noted as "a sign of the progressive tendencies of the age."¹⁷ In part the general acceptance of women speaking in public in Alfred may have been due to the strong Seventh-Day Baptist interest in such reforms as abolition and temperance. At the 1850 anniversary dinner a local minister gave the following (non-alcoholic) toast: to the "Ladies of our Literary Institutions—May they ever spurn the rule of fashion, and be true and zealous reformers."¹⁸ To do this women had to be able to speak out in a good cause. It was only after the Civil War that Alfred women began to speak out about their own political rights, giving rise to some controversy at first.

This then was the education awaiting women who attended Alfred before the Civil War: the curriculum designed by the institution and the self-culture the students provided for themselves. A belief in separate but equally valued and overlapping spheres characterized both. But just which women did Alfred attract?

And why did they choose to come or their parents decide to send them?

From 1848 to 1861, women made up over 40% of the total student body at Alfred, and they were fairly evenly distributed throughout the various levels of instruction within the academy and university. Approximately 70% of these women came from Allegany County with 20% coming from the town of Alfred itself. Steuben County, whose border is only a few miles from Alfred, supplied another 15%. A somewhat greater proportion of the men came from distant towns. It seems to have been more acceptable for men to travel greater distances in search of an education than it was for women. Still, over half of the men came from Allegany County.

David Potts quotes a midwestern newspaperman who observed, "Men with their thousands can send their sons where they please; but men with only their hundreds must have a place near home, and where expenses will be at least reasonable."¹⁹ If this was true for sons, such considerations were even more important for daughters. Many of the local students could live at home, while for others the trip home to help out on the farm when needed remained a possibility. Attendance at the school was easier and required less of a real commitment; local students might even start by taking one or two courses in special subjects to see how they liked it. They were also more likely to have friends already attending the school. Some of these considerations are evident in a letter written by Esther Euphemia Potter who lived in Almond, some 6 miles north of Alfred. About 1845, she wrote her aunt,

Sally Stillman is attending school at the Academy. There is rising of a hundred students this term. I think some of attending in the winter. I think likely if I do I shall for one study take drawing as I did last winter." [periods added]²⁰

She went on to graduate in 1851, married the following year, then came back as a resident graduate in 1856. (She did not have her first child until 1866 when she was 34.)

Many of the remaining students came from nearby counties in the Southern Tier of New York and the northern border of Pennsylvania. For these students the decision had to be weighed more carefully. Minnie Reynolds, who came to Alfred in the fall of 1858 had first considered Genesee College, a Methodist Episcopal college in Lima, N.Y. where her brother had gone, but as she later explained,

At that time ladies were not admitted [to Genesee College] on an equality with the gentlemen and I would not go. Through an

Alfred graduate, I had formed an opinion that Alfred offered the best opportunities to ladies, better than any other school at that time . . .²¹

The tendency for the more distant students to be somewhat older than local students at matriculation is an indication of the greater degree of commitment generally required of the former. Also, there is a slight correlation (Kendall's tau of .14203, significant at the .005 level) between the distance of a student's home from Alfred and the likelihood that she would graduate.

Yet another important source of students for Alfred, the only SDB college at this time, were the Seventh-Day Baptist communities in Rhode Island, New Jersey, (West) Virginia, and Wisconsin that had important religious and family ties with Alfred. A few SDB families, like that of Thomas Williams, even moved to Alfred so that their daughters and sons could be educated²²

Transportation was another important consideration. Until the railroad reached Alfred in 1851, the trip to Alfred was not an easy one. When James Irish came to teach in November 1837, he described his trip as "a night ride on an engine facing a snowstorm to Utica, a trip on a canal boat amid ice blockades and delays to Geneva, a ride in a lumber wagon to Almond, thence afoot in snow, mud, and fog to Alfred."²³ The number of students coming from more distant areas did increase with the coming of the railroad. The women coming the furthest to study at Alfred were two women who came in the early fifties from Haiti where the Seventh-Day Baptists had a missionary. One of these women was the first black student at Alfred. Both women may well have been black, but after the first no mention was made of the race of subsequent students.²⁴ There were also at least two Native American women from the Allegany Indian Reservation in nearby Cattaraugus county.

Alfred University prided itself on educating a broad middle class—"the working classes" as President Jonathan Allen (1867-1892) later described them—rather than an elite.²⁵ To test this assertion I used a sample consisting of all the women who had attended the school at any level between 1848 and 1861 and then had gone on to graduate, matched by a like number randomly selected from those who did not graduate, for a total sample of 298 students, or roughly 20% of the women attending Alfred at this time. Of these, I located the families of 183, or nearly two-thirds, in the 1850 census. To examine possible differences between the backgrounds of those who graduated and those who did not, I ran the information for these groups separately and compared them. In most cases there were few differences between the two groups, and those that did exist were not highly significant.

Judging from the measures of family wealth recorded in the 1850 census, most of Alfred's women students belonged to a middle-income group. None were from extremely wealthy families. Nearly three-quarters came from families owning \$3000 or less in real estate as compared to just over half of the students at Mount Holyoke which also sought to draw upon middle-income families in this period. A few Alfred women came from families with little or no real estate. Both the school and the Seventh-Day Baptists provided financial assistance and scholarships for needy students of both sexes.

Approximately three-quarters of the women came from farm families. Home production of cloth in New York State declined dramatically before the Civil War, giving farm girls a chance to consider doing other things with their time—things like going to school. Still, there is no evidence that these women were the superfluous daughters no longer needed at home that David Allmendinger found at Mount Holyoke.²⁶ Most came from areas where dairy production remained an important part of the farm economy and had not yet been industrialized. Farm production of cheese and butter continued to be high, with nearly every farm producing butter for market.

A problem with Allmendinger's study of Mount Holyoke is that he does not compare the families who sent daughters with those that might have but did not. To make such a comparison for Alfred, I used the 1855 New York State census, one of the richest sources of socioeconomic data from this period, and a sample consisting of all the families living in the town of Alfred that had at least one unmarried daughter in the age range of 9 to 20 living at home when that census was taken.²⁷ Of the 115 families that met this criterion, 57 had sent at least one daughter to Alfred while 58 had not. In most respects, including family size and composition, the families that sent daughters to Alfred were remarkably similar to those that did not. In one respect they were markedly different and that was in terms of wealth. This was most pronounced in the value of dwellings. Although one family in the non-sending group had a house valued at as much as \$900, 62% of these families lived in houses valued at \$150 or less, while this was true for only 6% of the families who sent daughters to Alfred. Differences in wealth also appear in the value of farms and farm equipment. In almost all areas of production of goods involving women's labor, the families sending daughters to Alfred tended to produce more than those that did not.

Some scholars, including Allmendinger and Kathryn Sklar, have argued that the declining availability of land and a change in the roles played by young women on the family farm were instrumental in the decision to send them on for further education.²⁸ The evidence for Alfred is mixed. Land was still available in the area, and rather than declining in value, the mean value of farms increased from \$1361 in 1850 to \$2305 in 1860. The decline of domestic production of

cloth was partially offset by the dominance of dairy production and thus had less of an impact in the areas supplying most of Alfred's students than it did in New England farms sending students to Mount Holyoke. There are limits to what a sample from a single town can tell us; however, in Alfred at least, it seems that the desire of families to educate their daughters or of the daughters to educate themselves was fairly universal and that some families were prohibited only by poverty. Although the school offered scholarships and work opportunities to poor students, it could not replace the value of a daughter's lost labor which must be considered as part of the cost of education. Daughters from many of the poorest families had to be satisfied with the education the district school provided.

Life on the farm included separate spheres for women and men, but these spheres were permeable because of the nature and demands of the work, and women's work still had highly visible economic value. This meant that mothers might take an active role in seeing that their daughters went to school. When Mary Ann Sheldon wanted to attend Alfred Academy, it was her mother who decided she could spare enough butter for the tuition (and presumably also her daughter's time), while Mary Ann's father supplied enough grain to pay for the rest of her expenses.²⁹ After only a term at Alfred Academy, Sheldon got a job teaching in a district school and made enough money to give her father the \$10 he needed to pay his taxes and still have \$3 left for herself, a rather quick return on her parents' investment. But she continued to combine teaching and going to school until in 1849, ten years after she began, she graduated from Alfred Academy with a teaching degree.

Sheldon wrote that she decided to attend the academy after listening to its new teacher, William C. Kenyon, speak at the school's year-end exercises on "the advantages of education preparatory to meeting the responsibilities of life."³⁰ Kenyon actively promoted the common school movement, and later Alfred teachers also stressed the importance of teaching as a calling. Women students seem to have shared the school's belief in the importance of religion and education. And the fact that educating a daughter could be seen as a way to augment the family income or prepare her to support herself if necessary must have added to its attraction to both parents and daughters. However, a woman did not need a degree in teaching to get a job or even to have a career as a teacher as is evident from looking at the teaching careers of women who were among the 90% of Alfred students who never graduated. (The percentage of men who did not graduate was roughly the same as that for women, but some of them may have gone on to other schools while few, if any, of the women did.) For some women education was more than a way to prepare oneself for a vocation. Women students at Alfred spoke of a love for learning, developing their "God given

powers of mind," and the importance of education, echoing their teachers who spoke to an audience of both women and men.³¹ There is no evidence of the "planning," which "encompassed everything from details of daily routine to schemes for staging entire lifetimes," that Allmendinger found in the language of the Holyoke students, echoing their teacher, Mary Lyon.³² Very likely women came to Alfred for a variety of reasons, including economic, religious, vocational, and educational considerations.

Some historians have argued that the antebellum colleges sponsored "social mobility to a degree as great as in any period of American history before the post-World War II era" and moved "students from old to new cultures and environments."³³ By this they generally mean male students. What function did antebellum higher education serve for women?

For Allmendinger the answer is fairly straightforward: economic and demographic changes had disrupted women's traditional pattern of living at home until an early marriage. "Teaching, and preparation for teaching, replaced early marriage in the female life cycle, without displacing marriage in the female life *career*." Looking at Mount Holyoke students, he found that they "were seeking traditional life courses." Although 19% never married (in contrast to 6 to 8% of women in the general population), he asserted that this figure is comparable to that for Troy students and for Boston women. Most of the Holyoke graduates (82.5%) taught school, but of those who married, only 7% ever taught again. "Marriage returned these women to traditional life careers from which their unconventional life cycles momentarily had veered."³⁴ Women's true career was marriage, and teaching provided a means of occupying her time and contributing to the family income or supporting herself until she could find a husband. However, Allmendinger does concede that while Mount Holyoke helped conserve the traditional life cycle for women, it also altered "their experience, their associations, their life chances, and their mentality," but he does not elaborate on this, nor does he discuss what the 17.5% who did not teach did.

Scott employs a different perspective in her study of Troy Female Seminary. While Allmendinger looks for evidence of continuity, she searches for evidence of change. She finds that "while one of Emma Willard's avowed goals was to make better wives and mothers, her pupils were less likely to marry than women in general and, if married, they bore fewer children than their contemporaries."³⁵ The number who remained single in the antebellum period varied from a low of 13% in the 1820s to a high of 21% in the 1850s. Scott does not present information on the socioeconomic backgrounds of her students, but since it cost women more than twice as much to attend Troy as it did Mount Holyoke or Alfred; it is likely that Troy women came from more elite families. This could help explain why only 26% of the women reported working for pay at any

time in their lives, though some of them were engaged in a variety of interesting pursuits from farming and geology to medicine and missionary work. Scott contends that "despite their emphasis upon the importance of woman's sphere," the seminaries "were important agents in that development of a new self-perception and spread of feminist values which contemporary observers described as the 'great nineteenth century movement for the elevation of women.'"³⁶ Though there are difficulties involved in comparing Allmendinger's statistics with Scott's since they are based on different sources of information, it is clear that Troy and Holyoke women married at the same rate (about 80%) and only a small fraction of these (about 6%) worked after marriage. For most of these women, being a wife and mother was apparently their primary or sole career.

Of the Alfred alumnae from 1848 to 1861, at least 81.2% married, but unlike Troy and Holyoke alumnae at least a third of Alfred's married women graduates worked after marriage. Information on the careers of Alfred women was culled from the SDB and student newspapers, alumni reports, genealogies, and reminiscences. Since such sources are likely to report the activities of achieving women, the statistics given here are deliberately conservative and assume that none of the third of the married women for whom no information is available worked. Therefore, the true figure of those who worked after marriage could be as high as two third. This is similar to Rita Saslaw's findings for Oberlin alumnae for this period. Saslaw estimates "that somewhere between thirty to sixty percent" of the Oberlin alumnae she studied "had active occupations during marriage."³⁷

A large majority of Alfred alumnae taught for at least some part of their careers. This is hardly surprising given the demand for teachers and Alfred's stress on the importance of education. However, most of the women who continued to teach after marriage did so in private academies, seminaries, or small colleges—both coeducational and women's. Many of the public schools may have had regulations that did not permit married women to teach, but it also seems likely that private schools offered women the flexibility needed to combine marriage and a career.

Another 7%, or just half as many women as men, went on from Alfred to become doctors. One woman entered medicine to support her family after her husband died. Another, Pheobe Babcock Wait, managed to juggle a very active medical career, which included serving as dean of the New York Women's Medical College, with raising six children (a seventh having died in infancy). Dr. Wait encouraged women to become physicians because she believed it to be the only profession where they could receive "equal compensation with men," but she was also concerned about the question of marriage and its effect on the career of a woman doctor. She saw no reason for a woman physician to remain single,

and she insisted that it was the height of folly for a woman to abandon her practice upon marriage. She urged her students to make their professions as inseparable from their lives as a husband or child, but she also warned them, "Your family relations are a part of your inheritance from the All-Father, and no duties which you may assume could justify you in ignoring them."³⁸ However, other than eschewing society, she offered little advice on how to manage all this, nor did she describe how she had done so. Her husband was "sympathetic," and it seems likely that she had servants. She may also have been able to draw upon a network of family and friends.

A few women became missionaries, but they remained single. Dr. Ella F. Swinney went to China as a medical missionary where her practice included thousands of men, women, and children. Other women went as teachers to Africa or to freedmen's schools in the south.

Several women joined their husbands in running businesses including schools, a general store, a Swedish Movement Cure sanatorium in New York City, and a publishing house. In addition, many of the married women who taught did so at the same institutions as their husbands. Only a few women became farm wives. Alfred seems to have played much the same role for young women that the antebellum college played for young men, aiding in the transition from rural to urban life and moving women from farms into careers, though for them the range of available occupations was more limited. Still, the period of transition before the Civil War seems to have offered women new opportunities, and institutions of higher education seem to have played an important role in the decisions women made about these.

A definitive statement on the exact nature of this influence awaits further research into the various forms higher education for women took in the antebellum period. However, some possibilities can be suggested for Alfred.

Allmendinger and Sklar's argument about the role the decline of farms had in the decision of New England families to send their daughters to Mount Holyoke is an intriguing one, but not one that applies to all schools. The Midwest, where coeducational institutions were more prevalent, had abundant and rich farmland. Industrialization was undoubtedly having an impact, but that impact varied with region and industry. In New England where the manufacture of textiles was fairly advanced and had supplanted an important farm industry, the effects were greater than in the Midwest where farms concentrated on food production or much of New York State where dairy production was predominant. New York and Midwestern farms would be affected by decreased domestic textile production, but not to the same extent as New England farms. The great majority of Alfred's students came from farms where women's work still played an important part in the farm economy. Daughters coming from such farms would

be much more likely to view the family as a production unit and work as compatible with marriage, even after their schooling had taught them to strive for careers beyond the farm.

Another important factor that helped determine the shape that a woman's education might take or what she looked for in it was religion. Sklar contends that "religious commitment allowed young women to resist the 'family claim' on their services and greatly facilitated their entrance into the larger world of social service."³⁹ Like most antebellum colleges, Alfred maintained close ties with a religious group, but it was not sectarian. It made a point of welcoming students of all faiths. When Julia Ward Howe visited in 1871 she found, "The Sabbatarian confession of faith though always recognized and maintained at the college, is not made a *sine qua non* with the pupils, many of whom are like the rest of us first-day people."⁴⁰ The problem comes in trying to discover just how many "many" was. The few ministers who sent their daughters to Alfred were all from evangelical churches, but one large Episcopalian family sent all its daughters. Some students (both Seventh-Day Baptists and non SDBs) certainly saw education as a missionary effort. And whatever the actual number of students coming from Seventh-Day Baptist families, that denomination had an important impact on the school in stressing the importance of teaching and reform work as well as women's vital role in each.

Holyoke women also viewed education as a missionary effort, but the two schools differ in the emphasis placed on a woman's role as wife and mother. Alfred was training future teachers of both sexes in classes that were coeducational. There, students were told that teaching was an important career through which a person could influence others and help to shape society; it was not merely a job to occupy one's time until the more important role of wife and mother came along. Also the students had role models in the married women teachers at the school. These women taught mostly in areas that could be considered women's spheres, but they were visible on campus and were often combining the roles of teacher, wife, and mother.

Also important in coeducational institutions were the relationships that sprang up between male and female students. At Alfred men and women competed against each other in the classroom and cooperated in some of their lyceum productions. Fourteen percent of all the married alumnae married classmates, and in those cases where some information is known about their lives after marriage (there is no information on three and a fourth died shortly after marriage), nearly all worked, and the few who did not work outside the home seem to have helped their doctor or minister husbands. All of the women worked with their husbands. Many taught in the same schools as their spouses, but one joined her husband in editing a newspaper, while another ran a store with hers,

and a third studied law with her lawyer husband. This is not to say that these were all equal partnerships, but in each case the woman was involved in the same work world as her husband.

It is not clear to what extent the coeducational nature of Oberlin and Alfred is responsible for the greater percentage of alumnae who continued to work after marriage. Oberlin and Alfred shared other features such as student bodies from similar socioeconomic and geographic settings, as well as evangelical religions which, though very different, did both include roles for women in reform. At the same time there were some real differences in the way women were treated at each school. Clearly, more research is needed on the ways each of these factors affected a woman's assessment of her options. However, it seems that by drawing on the older tradition of the family production unit and the new ideology of the importance of education, while relying on flexible working arrangements and important networks of support, many Alfred alumnae were able to combine marriage and a career. By studying schools like Alfred, we may expand our concepts of the education offered to women before the Civil War and the role higher education played in their lives.

NOTES

1. For an excellent summary of the history of women's higher education in the United States see Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
2. David B. Potts, "College Enthusiasm: A Public Response," *Harvard Educational Review*, 47 (February 1977), pp. 28-42; Colin B. Burke, *American Collegiate Populations: A Test of the Traditional View* (New York: New York University Press, 1983); and James McLachlan, "The American College in the Nineteenth Century: Toward a Reappraisal," *Teachers College Record*, 80 (December 1978), pp. 287-306.
3. Joan N. Burstyn, "Catherine Beecher and the Education of American Women," *New England Quarterly* 47 (September 1974), p. 395; and *Minutes of the Seventh-Day Baptist General Conference* (DeRuyter, NY: J & C H Maxson, 1838), pp. 8-9.
4. *Protestant Sentinel* 5 (March 30, 1835), p. 669.
5. Pamela Roby, "Women and American Higher Education," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 404 (November 1972), p. 122.
6. Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 23.
7. Anne Firor Scott, "The Ever Widening Circle: The Diffusion of Feminist Values from the Troy Female Seminary, 1822-1872," *History of Education Quarterly* 19 (Spring 1979), pp. 4-5. For

a discussion of early feminists' concepts of separate spheres, see Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

8. Caroline H. Dall, *The College, the Market, and the Court* (New York: Arno Press, 1972; originally Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1867), p. 6.
9. Letter from W. C. Kenyon (April 3, 1839) reprinted in *Alfred Student* 3 (April, 1876), p. 77.
10. *Alfred Academy Catalog*, 1844, p. 16.
11. *Alfred Academy and University Catalog*, 1859, p. 29.
12. James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College* (Oberlin, Ohio: E. J. Goodrich, 1883); Frances Juliette Hosford, *Father Shepherd's Magna Charta: A Century of Coeducation in Oberlin College* (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1937); and Robert S. Fletcher, "The First Coeds," *American Scholar* 7 (Winter 1938), pp. 78-93.
13. *Alfred Academy and University Catalog*, 1860, p. 30.
14. Abigail A. Allen, *Life and Sermons of Jonathan Allen* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing, 1894), p. 46.
15. Hosford, p. 82.
16. Allen, p. 52.
17. *Hornesville Tribune*, (July 13, 1854), p. [2].
18. *Sabbath Recorder*, (July 25, 1850), p. 21.
19. Potts, p. 38.
20. Esther Euphemia Potter to her aunt, circa 1845, Special Collections Room, Herrick Memorial Library, Alfred University.
21. Newspaper clipping of letter from Minnie Reynolds Barlow, source and date unknown, Special Collections Room, HML.
22. Letter from W. Williams to Prof. Tomlinson, Sept. 1, 1907, Special Collections Room, HML.
23. James Irish quoted in Allen, p. 378.
24. T. Dwight Thacher, "Thirty Years Out of School" (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1886), pp. 4-5.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 385.
26. David F. Allmendinger, "Mount Holyoke Students Encounter the Need for Life-Planning, 1837-1850," *History of Education Quarterly* 19 (Spring 1979), pp. 27-46.
27. In New York State a town is the political entity into which counties are divided. The town of Alfred included several villages and the surrounding countryside.
28. Allmendinger, p. 28, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Founding of Mount Holyoke College" in

Women of America, eds. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), pp. 177-198.

29. Mary A. Sheldon Powell, "A Few Reminiscences of My Early School Days," typescript copy in Spec. Coll. Rm., HML.
30. Ibid.
31. Hannah Simpson, *Diary*, Feb. 9, 1861, Spec. Coll. Rm., HML.
32. Allmendinger, pp. 27-46.
33. Burke, pp. 96-97.
34. Allmendinger, p. 40.
35. Scott, p. 17.
36. Scott, p. 19.
37. Rita S. Saslaw, "Conflict of Roles: Evangelism and Feminism—A Twentieth Century Perspective?" History of Education Society Meeting, Vancouver, BC, October 20, 1984, pp. 27-28.
38. *Sabbath Recorder* 48 (May 5, 1982), pp. 274-275.
39. Sklar, p. 192.
40. Julia Ward Howe, "An Idyl of Mid-Summer and Middle Ages," *Old and New* 4 (October 1871), pp. 448-449.