A Review of “Women's Education in the United States 1780-1840”

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Margaret A. Nash explores the development and growth of higher education for women in the United States in Women’s Education in the United States 1780–1840. Her carefully researched book is divided into six chapters and investigates topics such as the discourse on education during the Early National Period; curriculum and pedagogy in schools and academies in the New Republic; female education and the emergence of the middling classes; intellectual and physical education for women during the Antebellum Era; and education and white middle-class womanhood. Nash’s book includes an appendix with an extensive list of the institutions that she considered while conducting her research, as well as a comprehensive notes section. The topics explored throughout Nash’s book are examined critically, at times with her assuming a revisionist perspective. It is an informative and revealing resource that is extraordinarily useful in understanding the history of higher education of women in the United States.

The focus of Nash’s book, 1780–1840, the Early National and Antebellum Eras, were a time of great change in terms of the evolving social, economic and governmental structures in the United States. The American Revolution occurred. The War of 1812 transpired. The economy shifted from a barter market to a cash one. National unity was sought. As a result of these changes and others, there was increased emphasis placed on education. The ability to read, write and compute mathematical equations was viewed as necessary to take part in modern society. Likewise, an informed citizenry was needed for the new nation. Education was seen as a means to achieve these ambitions that resulted from societal changes.

A central tenet of Nash’s research is that during the period of 1780–1849, intellect functioned in a separate realm from that of work, politics, and other areas of life that often were connected to divisions between men and women. Nash asserts that, with regard to intellect and academic study, relatively few distinctions were made with consideration to gender. This is not to suggest that no splits entered into academics, but rather that they were minimal. She suggests that historians assumed, problematically, that women’s education was inferior to that of men. However, Nash proposes that, “recently, historians have begun to reassess early American’s views of women’s intellectual capabilities, and have recovered points of view more favorable to female education” (8). She notes that, “assumptions regarding women’s work as wives and mothers did not result in curricular ideals
very different from those held for men” (10). Indeed, Nash suggests that, in general, contemporary historians and scholars suggest that the lines that seemed to divide men and women into separate spheres during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were not fixed, but rather permeable.

Nash notes that historians often look to the work of Catharine Beecher as a reference point for women and higher education, as she was a notable advocate of women’s education during this time. Beecher ([1841] 2008) is particularly known for her seminal piece, entitled *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, as well as her work in founding the Hartford Female Seminary. However, Nash notes that there were hundreds of other academies and seminaries, coeducational and single-sex, that also shaped the landscape. She suggests that a great deal of information is learned about higher education for women during this time period, when these experiences also are considered. In her book, Nash observes that she looked at these academies and seminaries “as institutions in their own right, reflections of the social, cultural, and intellectual more of their time” (pg. 4). By examining women and education more broadly, it is seen that thousands of women, largely White middle-class women, pursued learning, and that high goals generally were held for women students. Nash emphasizes that beliefs in the intellectual inferiority of women seldom were obstacles.

From 1780–1840, women’s opportunities for higher education flourished. By 1840, “hundreds of institutions existed, many of which operated on a permanent basis” (5). Nash proposes that support for the growth of educational opportunities for women did not necessarily imply a “concomitant belief in legal, political, or economic equality” (1). If one looks at differences in salaries between male and female teachers during this time in Massachusetts, for example, it is seen that men earned sixty percent more than women (60). Yet, the growth of institutions that provided higher education for women were suggestive of a place for women outside of the home.

There are many aspects of Nash’s book that I find appealing. For example, in chapter two she carefully provides and analyzes a myriad of writing that surfaced about women and higher education during the Early National Period. She includes examples of writing generated from anonymous women students who attended academies, as well as those from notable figures such as Noah Webster. She reflects on how the discourse was, at times, shaped by events, such as the Massachusetts Farmer Rebellion and Whisky Rebellion. She also connects educational activity in the United States to European philosophers and educators, such as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, and suggests how their writing shaped the landscape. She is careful to provide a balanced view of how a variety of discourse influenced higher education of women.

Another strength of Nash’s book is that she is careful to analyze and define key terms that connect with higher education for women. For example, in chapter
three Nash sets about describing and distinguishing between adventure schools, academies, and colleges. She establishes a solid analysis of these institutions from which she is then able to discuss women’s participation. Nash asserts that academies were more bountiful than colleges. She notes that although women were not admitted into colleges until the nineteenth century, in many cases the distinctions between these institutions were not significant. For example, academies, at times, offered college course work. As a result of her careful discussion of the goals of academies and colleges, Nash is positioned to discuss the types of curricula offered to students. She delves into thoughtful discussion regarding curricula offered to men and women and carefully shows how the differences were minor. In her discussion of academies and colleges, Nash reveals that descriptions of curricula offerings of academies and colleges also were not fixed or orderly, and uses this information to skillfully position women into the educational landscape during that time. It is the lack of orderliness with regard to academies and colleges that Nash uses to paint a promising picture of women in higher education.

With regard to the curriculum that was pursued by women during this time period, particularly the Antebellum Era, I was delighted to find that Nash also discussed physical education. In chapter five, she provides a thoughtful discussion regarding why physical education was important for both sexes and how this connected to holistic ideas that surrounded discussions of mind, body, and spirit. This is a part of a discussion of curriculum and women and higher education that might be placed to the side of an analysis, or not included at all, yet Nash does not do this. Subsequently, readers learn more about the experiences of women students during this time.

When reflecting on the strengths of Nash’s book, I add as a concluding comment that the reliability of her analysis is substantiated further as she incorporates a discussion of class and how it was influential with regard to women and higher education. In chapter four, Nash focuses on the economic contexts of the Early National and Antebellum eras. She writes about the increasing industrialization of the United States, the rise of a capitalistic society, and how this connected to class formation. She draws on this important discussion in connection with women and higher education by showing that families could move from wealth to poverty in a relatively short period. Higher education of women positioned them to sustain themselves, as well as their families, if needed.

The new scale of capitalistic enterprises meant that some people became wealthy and many more descended into poverty. In this environment of constant material instability and uncertainty, middling-class women needed to be able to provide for themselves. (64)

A very interesting and notable example of these circumstances discussed by Nash, which reveals how women needed to be prepared to enter an occupation
such as teaching as a means of support, is also seen in Megan Marshall’s 2005 biography of the notable Peabody sisters. In her biographical review, Marshall explains that Eliza Peabody, mother of the sisters, facilitated a school while they were growing up that brought some money into her family. Marshall, likewise, took note of the schools that were facilitated by the sisters as they grew older and needed to support themselves and their family. In one section of the book, Marshall describes the students the sisters taught, as well as Elizabeth Peabody’s work experience as a young woman.

The girls who would be Mary and Elizabeth’s students were daughters of bankers and importers who had begun to find year-round residence in the suburbs. . . . Now twenty-one, Elizabeth had moved every spring since her seventeenth birthday, first to Lancaster, then Boston, Hallowell, Gardiner, and finally Brookline, each time in search of a way to earn her own living and help pay off her father’s debts. (153)

By examining factors, such as class, that guided and shaped the entrance of women into higher education, Nash broadens understanding of this pursuit and interest. Nash’s book concentrates on the eras of the Early National and Antebellum periods, thus her discussion is focused on women’s education in seminaries and academies, and colleges to a small extent. Those who attended these institutions, though there was a proliferation of them, tended to be a relatively small number of women of an elite status. “They were White and middle or upper class” (100). These women, therefore, were the individuals who Nash explores in her book.

Some might inquire why Nash did not extend her study beyond 1840. Some might question why she did not move into a review of other schools, such as normal schools, which developed in 1839, and also proved to be another key source of higher education for women. Nonetheless, I found Nash’s focus to be an asset. She examined a period that paved the way for future undertakings in the field of higher education of women. For a broader discussion about this topic, one could look at the small number of other outstanding books published about the topic. For example, Christine Ogren’s book, The American State Normal School: ‘An Instrument of Great Good’ was published in 2005, the same year during which Nash’s book was published, and proves to be an excellent resource about higher education in the normal schools. Her research compliments Nash’s inquiries.

Nash’s book provides an outstanding discussion of higher education for women in the United States from 1780–1840. Her analysis of the reasons why women entered into higher education, the institutions that these women joined, and the curricula that was studied and how it was similar to that of men during that period, was thoughtful and carefully researched. Women’s Education in the United States 1780–1840 is an excellent resource for college faculty, students, and
those interested in broadening their understanding of higher education during this time.

REFERENCES


