

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE INTELLECTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICA  
AND THE EXPANSION OF FEMALE EDUCATION  
IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC, 1780 - 1810.

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Degree and year: Master of Arts, 1998

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Since the early 1980s, women's historians have worked to uncover the causes behind the expansion of educational opportunities for women in the early American Republic. Their work delineated how constructs about motherhood, wifehood, religion, and social status influenced the expansion of female education in the late eighteenth-century. This research adds another powerful construct to the list: the civilization construct. Of all the constructs present in early American thought, beliefs about the meaning of civilization were among the most powerful. Inherited from European perspectives about the nature of civilized human societies, and modified by the American experience, the desire to join the ranks of "civilized" nations permanently changed educational practices.

In 1996, a search for evidence of republic motherhood ideology in the records of

the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia laid the groundwork for this thesis. I expected repeated references to motherhood. I was struck by the virtual lack of motherhood rhetoric. Instead, the trustees and students repeatedly cited the needs of their "civilization." Further research showed that civilization was cited by others, too. In a deliberate search for more references to civilization, writings by Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson, Noah Webster, Samuel Smith, Robert Coram and others were examined. Beliefs about civilization continually appeared in rhetoric surrounding education reform: in advertisements and prospectuses, poems, songs, essays, and speeches. I searched newspapers, magazines, private correspondence, records of public forums, and reprints of commencement speeches. It was everywhere. The legacy of the civilization construct and its affect on female education is traced here.

THE INTELLECTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICA AND  
THE EXPANSION OF FEMALE EDUCATION  
IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC, 1780 - 1820.

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland at College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

1998

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MD

DEPT OF HISTORY

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is dedicated to: my great-grandfather, historian Franklin Lafayette Riley, Ph.D.; my grandfather, historian Edward Miles Riley, Ph.D.; and my mother, historian Patricia Leigh Riley Dunlap (soon to be D.A.). I am privileged to follow in their footsteps.

I am especially indebted to my mother and father, Steve and Pat Dunlap, and my husband Mike Radigan for their emotional and financial support over the past three years. Additionally, Dr. Clare Lyons was extremely generous with her time, constructive criticisms, and understanding in the research and writing of this thesis and I am therefore deeply grateful.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past twenty years, histories of American women proliferated. Thanks to the work of earlier scholars, women's lives in the early American republic are no longer shrouded in mist. As more information about women is unearthed or reinterpreted, an increasingly multi-faceted understanding emerges. This work seeks to add another strand to that web of knowledge by linking early American national identity with the expansion of female education in the early republic.<sup>1</sup> Of all the constructs which formed the bedrock of the early American character, beliefs about the meaning of civilization were among the most powerful. In part inherited from European perspectives about the nature of civilized human societies, and modified by the American experience, the desire to join the ranks of "civilized" nations changed American educational practices. By concentrating on the words of middle to upper-middle class Americans from the mid-Atlantic and New England states, we can hear the echoes of ancient Western beliefs as they transform American society.

Thomas Woody's 1929 *History of Women's Education in the United States* was the first, and to date the last, comprehensive history on women's education in the United States. Though it was a massive narrative undertaking and ran to two volumes, each some 600 pages in length, Woody's opus gave little attention to the changing

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<sup>1</sup> According to Lynne Templeton Brickley, whose list is "only meant to be suggestive," there were 33 female academies and 48 coeducational academies established between 1780 and 1800. Lynn Templeton Brickley. *"Female Academies Are Every Where Establishing": The Beginnings of Secondary Education for Women in the United States, 1790 - 1830*. Unpublished qualifying paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1982. Appendix C.

world of women's education in post-revolutionary America. Though female academies proliferated in the early years of the Republic, Woody gave cursory examination to only three: the Moravian Female Seminary in Bethlehem Pennsylvania, the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia, and Caleb Bingham's school in Boston.<sup>2</sup> He offered no analysis of the debate which swirled around the issue of women's education throughout the late eighteenth-century.

Expanded educational opportunities for women eventually resulted in profound alterations to the American social fabric. The female academies that were founded in the late eighteenth-century provided a cadre of female leaders with both the intellectual and institutional foundations to advance female education long into the nineteenth-century. The influential American leaders, Emma Willard, Catharine Beecher, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton all attended the first generation of female academies. These academies trained teachers for the growing public schools, freedman's organizations, normal schools, and foreign missions. Because these institutions reached out to the masses, the impact of the academies was not limited to the elite classes. Additionally, in the first decades of the nineteenth-century some young women financed academy educations by alternating, "academy attendance with teaching in the common schools or work in the New England mills."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States*. New York: Octagon Books, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Schwager, "'All United Like Sisters': The Legacy of the Early Female Academies." in Catherine Keene Fields, and Lisa C. Kightlinger, eds., *To Ornament Their Minds: Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy 1792 - 1833*. Litchfield,

(continued...)



A more complete analysis of the late eighteenth-century discussion over women's education began twenty years ago with the publication of Nancy Cott's, *Bonds of Womanhood*. By the end of the eighteenth-century, according to Cott, two interpretations of woman's role appeared: the egalitarian feminist view that stressed woman's common humanity with man; and the ideology of the woman's sphere which detoured the question of equality by stressing sexual propriety. Both of these interpretations deplored the treatment of women as sex objects; both advocated female education; and both saw women as responsible mothers of citizens. Cott traced the rhetoric of republicans such as Benjamin Rush as well as those opposed to women's education. She demonstrated that a strong prejudice against learned women remained after the revolution; opponents to female education argued that it made them dissatisfied with their station and predisposed women to vain pursuits. Early education, Cott asserted, existed so that women were trained to know their place and distill virtue.<sup>4</sup>

Spurred by Cott's work, historians Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton wrote histories of women that detailed the new educational opportunities which emerged after the American Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Norton framed the late eighteenth-century changes in

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<sup>3</sup>(...continued)

Connecticut: The Litchfield Historical Society, 1993. p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England 1780 - 1835*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1980. Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750 - 1800*. Boston and London: Scot, Foresman and Company, 1980.

woman's education as an improvement in woman's status and condition. She saw woman's education as the key to further changes in her self-image even if formal institutional change lagged far behind. Norton deepened Cott's analysis of the impact of academy attendance on young women. Norton's analysis of the 222 women born before 1810 and listed in *Notable American Women*, revealed that the majority attended female academies. She also traced the rise in female literacy as an indicator of new-found personal power.

Kerber refuted Norton's view. Though some of the rhetoric which supported women's education stressed her competence, intellectual ability and need for independence, Kerber argued that changes in education actually contributed to the growing confinement of women within the republican ethos. Kerber showed that even though contemporary journals and newspapers printed pro-education articles, they also supplied plenty of room to anti-education pieces. Early Americans continued to express the long-held fear that intellectual accomplishment would unsex women and cause them to abandon home and family. In the face of this strident anti-education rhetoric, those who supported improvement in women's education retreated to a glorification of educated motherhood. Kerber found that republican education for women was limited by its emphasis on civic virtue and domesticity. Kerber argued that these new opportunities resulted from an ideology which she called, "republican motherhood."<sup>6</sup> Kerber asserted that the expansion of female academies and

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<sup>6</sup> Kerber dealt with the subject of women's education in both *Women of the*  
(continued...)

introduction of academic subjects to previously vocational curriculums resulted from the infusion of republican values into society. Citing Benjamin Rush's 1787 speech at the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia as the prototype of republican motherhood ideology, Kerber explained that early Americans justified the academic education of young women by citing their future influence on their sons. If the new republic were to survive its infancy, the next generation of men needed to be inculcated with republican ideology which emphasized virtue, self-sacrifice for the good of the republic, and rational thought. According to Rush, mothers were the earliest and most profound source of influence over American boys and therefore required an education so that their sons might be proper republicans.

Entering this debate, historian Jan Lewis shifted the emphasis from "republican motherhood" to "republican wifedom."<sup>7</sup> According to Lewis, the ideal republican marriage was based on love, respect and wifely obedience. It served as a model for most human institutions. Men and women practiced the ideals of virtuous republicanism but only women were expected to propagate it. The primary targets of their influence, according to Lewis' interpretation of early republican literature were their husbands, not their sons.

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(...continued)

*Republic*, and "Daughters of Columbia: Educating Women for the Republic, 1787 - 1805." in Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic." *William & Mary Quarterly*, 44, (October 1987) 688 - 721.



Other scholars followed the thread of inquiry established by Kerber and Norton. Rosemarie Zagarri traced the genesis of republican motherhood backward to the Scottish Enlightenment. Her comparison of European and American concepts of womanhood showed that woman's role became more structured in republican American thought and practice than it was in Europe. This led to a new approach to female education and a sense of social equality that nevertheless made no impression on women's civil rights. Zagarri found that Scottish Enlightenment theories, the intellectual root of republican motherhood, profoundly affected American womanhood. Americans began to believe that their new civilization was superior to all others, past and present. Early Americans claimed that "the United States represented the culmination of the historical process." This new republican womanhood, Zagarri asserted, still defined woman in terms of her relationship to man. Woman's role was merely "an intellectual compromise between the insights of the European Enlightenment and the rhetoric of the American Revolution."<sup>8</sup>

Ruth Bloch's intellectual history delineated the meaning of virtue for eighteenth-century Americans. For both Classical cultures and Protestant Christians, virtue was a public, rational concept and therefore a masculine trait exercised by both ruler and ruled as, "indispensable to preserving the good health of the polity." In the eighteenth-century world of polar opposites, if man was virtuous, woman was necessarily irrational, unreliable, and threatening. According to Bloch, during the mid-1770s, this

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<sup>8</sup> Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother." *American Quarterly*, 44:2, (June 1992) 192 - 215. Quotations on 208, 211.

masculine definition of virtue was applied to the revolutionary soldier and statesman and thus endured, but the aftermath of war produced new ways of thinking and new versions of virtue that feminized the concept with the practicalities of peacetime. While the establishment of the Republic continued to feature public versions of virtue, new connotations were also added. Republican virtue also became religious, benevolent, and emotional. These new aspects of virtue not only included women but also feminized the entire concept. As virtue became more female, literature glorified women's moral sense. Women, once demonized as the basest of creatures, became the source and purveyors of virtue while men were animalized as lustful rakes and villains in need of women's civilizing influence. This, Bloch asserted, "facilitated and reflected a transformation within American political thought." Though classical notions of public virtue survived, they were superseded by the new, feminized, concept. Virtue continued to be an essential ingredient in the republican recipe, but it became a female trait that women were expected to impose gently on men.<sup>9</sup> This perception of female influence on society pervades the late eighteenth-century debate about female education. Though she did not deal directly with changes in female education, Bloch's analysis points out how changes in the intellectual environment of the late eighteenth-century supported an increase in educational opportunity for women.

All of the work done by these historians has unearthed many of the intellectual constructs maintained by Americans in the early republic. Womanhood and

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<sup>9</sup> Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America." *Signs*, 13, (Winter 1987) 37 - 59. Quotations from pages 41, 53.



republicanism were analyzed for the contributions each belief system made to changes in women's education in the late eighteenth-century. Cott, Norton, Kerber, Lewis, Zagarri, and Bloch showed that beliefs about the meaning of womanhood and republicanism influenced women's educational opportunities. These constructs, however, are only a piece of the controversy surrounding female education in the late eighteenth-century. More recent historical work by Doris Malkmus showed that some young women were motivated more by religious or social reasons than by republican ideology. Malkmus was joined by Margaret Nash in arguing for a more complex understanding of the reasons behind the growing population of girls at school.<sup>10</sup>

After twenty years of research and analysis a multi-faceted portrait of the catalysts behind the new educational opportunities for women is emerging. The changes in women's education were due to many causes, among them: republican motherhood, religion, social standing, and changes in the beliefs about womanhood. This paper decodes yet another element of American society that changed female education in the early years of the republic: an intellectually constructed faith in a distinct American civilization. This faith created profound change in female education in the early Republic.

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<sup>10</sup> See Doris Malkmus, "Female Academies in the Early Republic" Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Oregon, 1993; Lynne Templeton Brickley, *Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Academy, 1792 - 1833*. Unpublished thesis (Ed.d) Harvard University, 1985; Margaret Nash, "Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia." *Journal of the Early Republic*, 17, (Summer 1997) 171 - 191.

In 1996, a search for evidence of republican motherhood ideology in the records of the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia laid the groundwork for this thesis. Because Benjamin Rush, the patron of republican motherhood according to Kerber, had founded the school I expected to find repeated references to motherhood. Instead, I was struck by the virtual lack of motherhood rhetoric. Instead, the trustees and students repeatedly cited the needs of their "civilization." Further research showed that they were not alone in referring to civilization. I examined well-known writings on education by Rush, Thomas Jefferson, Noah Webster, Samuel Smith, Robert Coram and others, deliberately searching for more references to civilization. I was not disappointed. Every single author used civilization as a justification for education reform of some sort. "Civilization" continually appeared in rhetoric surrounding education reform for boys and girls: in advertisements and prospectuses, poems, songs, essays, and speeches. I searched newspapers, magazines, private correspondence, records of public forums, and reprints of commencement speeches by adults as well as young women. In one form or another, it was everywhere. Secondary sources helped me trace its genesis to the Scottish Enlightenment and understand its adaptation by American thinkers. Though it was held and manipulated by both women and men, specific questions about women's agency in using these beliefs to affect female education reform remain a separate subject.

Rather, the focus here is on the link between beliefs about civilization and the reform of female education. Ancient beliefs about the nature of history and the evolution of civilizations affected Euro-Americans' perspective concerning their place

and status among nations. Over and over again, American leaders trumpeted the dawning greatness of the American civilization. The long-held faith in “a western cycle of empire passing from the Near East to Greece, from Greece to Rome, from Rome to Western Europe, and from Western Europe eventually across the Atlantic to the new World” deeply infused American intellectual construction.<sup>11</sup> Existing alongside this conviction, though, was the gnawing fear that America was too provincial, too uncivilized and therefore unable to take its rightful place in the cycle of history. The tension forged between belief in the inevitable dawning of American greatness and evidence of enduring American deficiencies infused the debate over education with a new urgency.

For the generation of the Enlightenment, “what ultimately counted . . . was whether or not, ‘our country will be the chosen seat, and favourite abode of learning and science.’”<sup>12</sup> Education was the key to forging the great civilization they envisioned. The emphasis on education and rational thought which began with the Enlightenment took on a new character after the Revolution. Well-known men such as Thomas Jefferson, Noah Webster, and Benjamin Rush were joined by their lesser-known contemporaries Samuel Smith, Robert Coram, Simeon Doggett, and Samuel Knox in promoting education in the young republic. They knew that they were creating a civilization out of virgin cloth, and though they had different visions of form and

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon Wood, ed., *The Rising Glory of America, 1760 - 1820*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon Wood, ed., *The Rising Glory of America, 1760 - 1820*, p. 17.



purpose, education was the common denominator in their discourse. When pressed to name a practical use for expansion of educational opportunity, they often resorted to lofty rhetoric about the needs of the republic. From learned men, the republic needed political virtue. From women, however, there was no clear contribution. A few argued that women's influence on their children merited their education — the “republican motherhood” argument noted by Linda Kerber. Some cited women's influence over the conduct of adult men — the “republican wifehood” cause cited by Jan Lewis. Still others harked to the Revolutionary rhetoric which championed equality — the strain of feminist thought revealed in Nancy Cott's and Mary Beth Norton's works. Recent histories have stressed religious or social reasons behind burgeoning educational opportunities for women. All of these contributed to the expansion of female education. I have identified another cause in the writings of late eighteenth-century Americans: a belief system that I call the “civilization construct.” Created from a web of constructs about the nature of history, time, and civilization. The effects of the civilization construct are traced here. The first chapter reveals their legacy in the thought of national leaders. The second chapter examines records from educators of boys and girls, while the third analyzes speeches and writings left by the students of the first women's academies. Time and again their words reveal the influence of the civilization construct.

The civilization construct was composed of five recurrent themes: one, a celebration of the advancement of the American civilization — frequently brought about and evidenced by female education; two, use of other civilizations, ancient and

contemporary, as benchmarks for American progress ; three, declarations of male and female equality — despite women's political and legal disenfranchisement; four, declarations that societies that denied education to females were barbaric; and five, the use of female status in society as a gauge for and cause of civilization. All of these themes appear in public discourse throughout the early years of the republic. It was not unusual for contemporaries to use rhetoric infused with the themes of the civilization construct in support of both expansive and restrictive schemes for female education. As with all intellectual constructs, it was easily manipulated. Noah Webster used the civilization construct to propose a very restricted plan of education for young women. James Neal used the civilization construct to advocate a broad liberal education for females. This work exhumes the civilization construct and shows how it drove the expansion of female education in the early republic.



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE NATIONAL LEADERS

From the beginning of colonization, America was more than a place. It was an idea. Western European convictions about civilization and history merged with European experiences in America to create a new canon which held that America was different from anything that had come before. Whether this was true is not the point. Colonists and Americans *believed* that they were unique.<sup>13</sup> It was this belief, not the reality, that shaped their behavior in the New World, and provided the conceptual basis for advocates of female education in the early republic.

The concept of the American continent as a special place, with a special purpose began with the founding of the European colonies. There were no guarantees of success for every colonist whose foot stepped on American soil. There were no promises that every colonist would become a member of the gentry. There were, however, constant depictions of the New World as a place of unbridled opportunity, “an exceptionally promising field of pursuit.” As historian Jack Greene has argued, the belief in American exceptionalism was “far from being the creation of later historians and social analysts . . . The concept of American exceptionalism with its positive connotations was present at the very creation of America. . . .” “This concept,” Greene said, “had become one of the principal components in the identification of America.”

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<sup>13</sup> Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity From 1492 to 1800*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Concurrent with the belief in American exceptionalism, however, lay the notion that American barbarity corrupted the best aspects of European civilization.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of whether America was exceptionally good or exceptionally bad, there was no doubt among contemporaries that it was different from Europe.

The most striking difference grew out of the European belief that the American colonies were in a state of nature. As Western Europeans saw it, history was evolutionary. According to the Scottish Enlightenment “four-stage theory” all nations, including those of Western Europe, began in savagery as itinerant hunters. As historian Rosemarie Zagarri explained, the four-stage theory, “postulated a progression from hunter to shepherd to farmer to merchant, with the merchant and the mercantile society representing the culmination of history.” Such a society was, “the pinnacle of material comfort, social refinement, and intellectual achievement.” Furthermore, Zagarri explained, “In each stage, social evolution both benefitted females, by increasing their status, and depended on them, because women softened and refined men’s passions.” In first-stage societies, according to Zagarri, relations between men and women were debased by, “the savagery of physical existence.” The efforts required just to survive made women the physical servants of men. Women had little influence over men in first-stage societies; sex was ungoverned.

The second stage of society, the pastoral phase, improved women’s status slightly. According to Zagarri, physical existence was less threatened, causing, “The

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<sup>14</sup> Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, p. 6

growing separation of the sexes,” and “the emergence of class distinctions . . .” Growth in the amount of leisure time led to attempts at self-improvement for some. Sexual relations were no longer a matter of convenience as the emergence of “passionate” love goaded men to charm women deliberately.

These distinctions were furthered in third-stage, agrarian, societies. Sufficient commodities were produced to ease the “burdens of subsistence.” Land-based wealth and greater leisure time led to increased opportunities for self-improvement. In addition, the dichotomy between the male and female worlds expanded, creating ambiguous benefits for women. “Unable to indulge their merely sensual appetites,” Zagarri clarified, “men were forced to compete for women, to sublimate and channel their passions.” Unfortunately, “the improvements in [women’s] status came at the expense of their living in society.”

“Only in the fourth stage,” Zagarri wrote, “with the appearance of mercantile society did women emerge . . . ‘out of slavery to possess the elevated state they are justly entitled to by nature.’” This “elevated state” was driven by male desire for the company of women who were charming and amusing. According to Zagarri’s interpretation of the Scottish Enlightenment theories, “Only in the fourth stage,” were women “valued for their accomplishments rather than viewed as mere sex objects. They came to be seen, . . . ‘as faithful friends and agreeable companions.’” Growing wealth and expanded trade in these mercantile societies encouraged and enabled men to become educated. These men, in turn, appreciated the companionship of educated



women. "Women became valued for their accomplishments . . ." in fourth stage societies.<sup>15</sup>

In *The Intellectual Construction of America*, Jack Greene argued that for the American colonists, the cultured, civilized, and Christian societies of Western Europe exemplified the mercantile ideal. From the Western European perspective, the North American continent teemed with both Euro-Americans and Indians who lived at the beginning of the historical cycle, while Europe epitomized the fulfillment of the historical process. Western Europeans believed themselves to have started out as and developed from societies much like the American Indians. From their perspective, colonization served to move indigenous Americans into the next phase of history — a more advanced stage. This same line of thought held that American colonists were barely one rung higher than the Indians on the evolutionary ladder. Throughout the seventeenth century, the colonies could do little more than provide for basic human needs. They were crude and socially impoverished entities of England.<sup>16</sup>

Though Zagarrri placed the first reference to the four-stage theory in Montesquieu's 1748 *Spirit of Laws*, Greene argued that as the seventeenth century drew to a close, contemporary assessments of colonial society often expressed belief in the four-stage theory. Not only was the degree of American colonial civilization assessed in comparison to Western Europe, but differences among the colonies, and over their history were also measured. According to Greene, "in Virginia in the 1690s, people

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<sup>15</sup> Zagarrri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," pp. 197 - 199.

<sup>16</sup> Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, pp. 60, 117.

complained that courts were much more deficient than ‘in former times, while the first stock of Virginia Gentlemen lasted . . .’ These gentlemen had, “‘their Education in England, [and] were a great deal better accomplish’d . . . than their children and Grandchildren . . .’” The later generations were, “‘born in Virginia, and [had] generally no Opportunity of Improvement by good Education.’” Gleaning insights from eighteenth-century works such as Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, St. John de Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, and others, Greene showed that throughout the eighteenth-century comparisons were drawn between the New World and the Old, as well as between the older, coastal American settlements and the outlying pioneer areas. Contemporaries perceived the outlying settlements as uncivilized, stage-one type societies, whereas the older cities and towns had progressed to a more civilized stage of development. Regardless of the degree of development attained by their towns and colonies, however, colonists clung to the comforting vision that no matter how remote, they were a part of the historical design that ensured progress. Over and over again contemporary writers cited the enormous transformation of American forests into fields and, increasingly, into towns. “Such astonishing development, [Edmund] Burke predicted in 1775, suggested that in just one more generation, through ‘a progressive increase of improvement, brought in by varieties of people, by succession of civilizing conquests and civilizing settlements,’ the colonies would be able to achieve what England had developed only after many centuries.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, p.120.

Married to this deep belief in the inevitable progress of history was the ancient concept “that saw ‘*Empire, Liberty and Arts/* With their resplendent Train,’ moving from east to west. ‘The progress of Humane Literature (like the Sun) is from East to West,’ wrote the New England almanac maker Nathaniel Ames in the late 1750s in a familiar passage: having earlier “‘traveled thro’ Asia and Europe,’ it has already ‘arrived at the Eastern Shore of America. . . .’”<sup>18</sup> American colonists believed “that they would in time have their own Homers and Miltons and their own states . . . The future seemed to belong to this newer, fresher, less developed, and more ideal English society in the New World.”<sup>19</sup> Not only did the tide of national history assure progress, but so too did the current of world history.

Amid this rosy glow, however, lived the stark fear that the American colonies remained grossly deficient in many ways (in comparison to England — the only standard that mattered). The most obvious weakness was in education. With every paean to future American greatness, a hollow echo reminded colonists of “the crudity of their society, the insignificance of their art and literature, and the triviality of their affairs.”<sup>20</sup> The second and third generations of families grown wealthy were educated enough to know that their society as a whole fell short of the standard in many ways. As Greene pointed out, “in the later years of colonial rule, after 1750, they became strident advocates of measures designed to hasten the process of social consolidation and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 123-124. Italics in original text.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, ed., *The Rising Glory of America*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 3.



improvement that had been going on since the establishment of the colonies and to bring more coherence, order, and civility to colonial life.”<sup>21</sup> It was clear that though America had progressed beyond the first savage stage of civilization, its failure to cultivate the “arts and sciences” denied it the status of a true civilization such as England. The faults of American colonial society remained niggling doubts in the self-esteem of colonists.

### FROM WEAKNESS — STRENGTH

In the last quarter of the eighteenth-century, however, confidence that independence would mend these faults, and a new argument which reframed perceived defects into assets emerged to shore up American self-esteem. According to Greene, writers such as Thomas Paine converted perceived American weaknesses into strengths. Paine, who emigrated to the colonies in 1774, argued that the aspects of American colonial life which many pointed to as deficiencies, were, in fact, advantages. Greene demonstrated that, “Through his writings, Paine helped to give Americans an appreciation of their own social virtues, inner worth, and what he thought was their superiority over the Old World.” In justifying independence, Paine “held out to them a powerful, self-legitimizing, and exhilarating vision that catered to their own rising feelings of worth and their growing sense that they might yet hold a place of first importance in the unfolding course of human history.”<sup>22</sup> Gradually, the discrepancies between American and British life gained a new perspective. According to Gordon

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<sup>21</sup> Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, p. 166.



Wood, "The very crudities of American society — the absence of an aristocracy, the prevailing rusticity, the relative lack of luxury and polish, the equality — now seemed to be advantages, not deficiencies." Over time and with the emergence of economic success, "colonists began to see themselves as more capable than the English in realizing the values and norms articulated by British intellectuals."<sup>23</sup>

At the same time that Paine was redefining American self-perceptions, "the four-stage theory, . . . 'was beginning to appear as something very like orthodoxy. . . .'"<sup>24</sup> Americans learned of the Scottish Enlightenment not only through the writings of its theorists, but also, according to Zagarri, from "a variety of authors and sources . . . ." From this belief system emerged a large body of writings that staunchly advocated greater educational opportunities in America. These works ranged from highly theoretical to eminently practical. Some authors emphasized the necessity of education in a republic, others argued that education was important to the cause of domestic happiness. All of them emerged from a society that believed it was exceptional. The intellectual construction of America taught these national leaders that America stood on the precipice of becoming a true civilization. The inexorable pull of history, the natural movement of "Empire, Liberty, and Arts," and freedom from Britain were all forces poised to catapult America into its next great phase of development — a true civilization.

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<sup>23</sup> Wood, ed., *The Rising Glory of America*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," p. 197.

These men were cognizant that they had “a blank sheet to write upon . . . the power to begin the world over again. . . .”<sup>25</sup> They all believed that this new civilization must be created carefully and deliberately not only so that it would endure and but also so that its greatness would surpass all other civilizations, past and present. Though they did not share a monolithic vision of the breadth, depth and content of education for Americans, they shared the unshakable belief that to be fully civilized was to be educated. This had profound implications for female education. “The four-stage theory depicted women in a dual fashion,” Zagarri noted, “as an index to and an instrument of social advancement.” As educated men, deeply familiar with Scottish Enlightenment theories, these nationally famous writers of the revolutionary generation trusted that, “The more civilized a society, the higher status its women enjoyed.”<sup>26</sup>

The writings of these national leaders drew their power from Americans’ deepest beliefs about the nature of their society. In mining this force, the authors stirred the ground water of thought concerning education in the early republic. Awakened to the siren call of nation-building, advocates of female education started schools throughout the states and justified their course of action by pounding the drum of “civilization.”

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*. 1776. As quoted in Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, p.135.

<sup>26</sup> Zagarri, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” p. 201.

## FREEDOM NURTURES THE ARTS & SCIENCES

As perceived American inadequacies became strengths, colonists' belief in the exceptional nature of America also strengthened. By the eve of the Revolutionary War, Britain was a convenient scapegoat for a variety of American shortcomings. For many Americans, it was simply inconceivable that inadequacies in the "arts and sciences" were due to flaws in the American character. Blame was attributed to supposedly transient qualities of American society such as the pursuit of wealth and American subjugation by Britain. The belief that "freedom nurtures the Arts and Sciences" spread in the colonies as America prepared for war. With the spread of this belief, the American idea of civilization was forged. National thinkers of this era called on some or all of the themes of this construct. They celebrated the advancement of American civilization, and championed the social, Scottish Enlightenment view of male and female equality that considered women equal because they were companions of men, rather than servants. They compared their new country to other civilizations, past and present, glorious and inglorious. Some of these leaders equated the lack of female education with barbarity, and, finally, they posited the status of women as a touchstone to the degree of civilization present in society.

David Ramsay, member of the Continental Congress and the South Carolina legislature, eagerly blamed Britain for what he believed were American inadequacies. His works included *An Oration on the Advantages of American Independence*, *An Oration in Commemoration of American Independence*, and a two volume *History of the American Revolution*. Claiming that freedom from British oppression would open



up new opportunities for American greatness, Ramsay argued that because the “torpid state of dependence” was over; America was free to exert its genius. Ramsay invoked two themes of the civilization construct. He celebrated the advancement of the American civilization, and he compared American society to other acknowledged great civilizations. He predicted that “the free governments of America will produce poets, orators, critics, and historians equal to the most celebrated of the ancient commonwealths of Greece and Italy.” He recognized that an uneducated America was an incomplete civilization. “May we not therefore expect great things from the patriots of this generation, jointly cooperating to make the new born republic of America as complete as possible?” Reflecting the view that America was the next stop for the course of knowledge, Ramsay rhapsodized that, “ever since the flood, true religion, literature, arts, empire and riches, have taken a slow and gradual course from east to west, and are now about fixing their long and favorite abode in this new western world.” His work was widely read by the Revolutionary generation and helped raise expectations for American accomplishments following independence.<sup>27</sup>

As Ramsay was promoting the greatness of an unfettered America, other national leaders were promoting detailed programs of education. Though these plans

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<sup>27</sup> David Ramsay, “An Oration on the Advantages of American Independence” as printed in Wilson Smith, ed., *Theories of Education in Early America 1655 — 1819*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973, pp. 222 - 229. Ramsay’s oration was first printed in 1778, and later reprinted in 1779 and 1822. Quotations from pages 226, 228, and 229.

varied widely in curriculum, and length of schooling they all shared one characteristic — the inclusion of rhetoric derived from the civilization construct.

### EDUCATION ADAPTED TO THE PRESENT STATE OF SOCIETY

According to historian Mary Beth Norton, colonial education usually began (and often ended) at home, with older siblings regularly teaching younger ones. This was especially the case with farm families. Urban gentry children went to “dame schools” which were established by women more as a means of self-support than as a fount of learning. These schools usually taught the “ornamental arts”: music, dance, fine art, needlework, and handicrafts. The focus was on producing refined ladies, not scholars. Limited instruction in reading, writing, and basic math were sometimes included. Often, this was the extent of a girls’ education.<sup>28</sup>

Both Norton and historian Nancy Cott assert that in the 1770s, barely half of the white female population were literate enough to sign their names. Nevertheless, Kevin Hayes’ recent research argues that colonial women were highly literate. In *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*, Hayes argued that, “Many more colonial women could read than is generally known.”<sup>29</sup> Not only could many colonial women read, but they also read a wider variety of works than has been previously acknowledged. Aside from the culturally accepted practice of reading devotional books, conduct books and the expected treatises on housewifery, colonial women stretched the boundaries to include

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750 - 1800*, pp. 250 - 262.

<sup>29</sup> Kevin J. Hayes, *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*. Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996, p. 4.

novels, travel books, medical books and science books. Many of these women lived at the beginning of the enlightenment movement, in the middle of the eighteenth-century. Their reading patterns suggest that the Enlightenment influence emphasizing the importance of education had already begun prior to the Revolutionary War. Though formal academic education for colonial women was inadequate, women "would not let such limitations bar them from learning. A woman could learn by herself or with other women. Books . . . provided a way for young women to educate themselves."<sup>30</sup>

With the creation of a new nation, education in the United States was reevaluated. The emphasis on education that began with the Enlightenment, intensified as Americans sought legitimacy among nations. As a result, the select group of colonial women whose reading patterns had long been influenced by Enlightenment beliefs gained greater social impact after the Revolution. Because education was a key concept of the civilization construct, and notions about civilization incorporated an elevation of women's status, female education also became key. In the feverish environment of the early Republic, ideas about female education reform that had germinated with the Enlightenment could really flourish.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF EDUCATION REFORM

There were many blueprints for educational systems proposed at this time. Some, such as Samuel Smith's, promoted expansive plans for males that stretched from

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 134.



primary schools through university. Others, Noah Webster's for example, offered a contracted program because, as Webster put it, "life is too short to acquire and the mind of man too feeble to contain, the whole circle of sciences."<sup>31</sup> In spite of each writer's particular slant, everyone paraphrased themes of the civilization construct. The habitual use of the construct strengthened the intellectual link between education and civilization. This link was extended by advocates of female education to include their cause as well. Most commonly, these writers cheered the improvement of American civilization. Additionally, many compared the American civilization to others. The civilization construct was manipulated in support of often flatly contradictory plans for education.

Though Samuel Smith and Robert Coram championed educational plans for boys, their use of the civilization construct is important because it reinforced a rhetorical template for advocates of more universal education that did include girls. Such inclusive plans, authored by Thomas Jefferson, Noah Webster, and Benjamin Rush, recited the belief that the advancement of American civilization rested on education for both boys *and* girls. As the intellectual link between civilization and education grew stronger, so too did the link between female education and the rising star of American civilization.

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<sup>31</sup> Noah Webster, "On the Education of Youth in America" as found in Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965, p. 54.



Of all the educational plans propounded in the early republic, Samuel Smith's was the most ambitious. In 1796, his essay "Remarks on Education" earned such renown by winning a prize from the American Philosophical Society that it has ever since been known as his "Prizewinning Essay." Historian Wilson Smith noted that since, "many of [the American Philosophical Society] members were deeply concerned for the educational growth of the country, the Society in 1796 sponsored an essay contest on the theme of liberal education 'adapted to the genius' of the new republic." The prize was shared by Samuel Smith and the Reverend Samuel Knox. They "expressed sentiments shared by most far-sighted men."<sup>32</sup> Both men argued for a national, tax-supported compulsory system of education that stretched from the primary grades all the way to the university level, and both advocated educating all boys. Smith heavily laced his speech with references to the four-stage theory of civilization. He reminded his audience that, "From a review of history, it will appear that just in proportion to the cultivation of science and the arts has the happiness of man advanced in the nation which cultivated them." Smith also reflected the American civilization construct at the end of his speech. Predicting the elevation of his civilization, Smith said, "Scarcely a century can elapse before the population of America will be equal and her power superior to that of Europe." Furthermore, Smith believed that, "though it

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<sup>32</sup> Samuel Harrison Smith, "Remarks On Education. . . ." as printed in Wilson Smith, ed., *Theories of Education in Early America 1655 — 1819*, pp. 291 - 305. Quotations from page 291. The original title of this work is obscured by its more commonly known designation as "Samuel Harrison Smith's Prizewinning Essay." It is referred to as such by editor Wilson Smith as well as by the WorldCat bibliographic database.

may be possible for the savage to resist the force of improvement and remain unshaken in his attachment to his original state, yet that man, once civilized, has it not in his power to return to his natural condition. . . .” The happiness of man, “exists in proportion to the cultivation of science and the arts.” For these reasons, “society must establish the right to educate, and acknowledge the duty of having educated, all children.” Though Smith used the phrase, “all children,” he did not include girls in his plan. Because of the “diversity of opinion” concerning female education, Smith despaired of producing a system for educating girls. Instead, he cryptically commented that, “It is sufficient . . . that the improvement of women is marked by a rapid progress and that a prospect opens equal to their most ambitious desires.”<sup>33</sup>

Robert Coram, editor of the *Delaware Gazette*, was another fiery advocate for free compulsory education in the new United States of America. Like Smith, his plan only included boys. His novel argument lambasted the United States for neglecting the education of “civilized man [who] must be acquainted with some art or science, in which he is neither instructed by nature, by government, by his parents, or oftentimes by any means at all.” Outlining distinctions between the savage and civilized, Coram argued that, “in the savage state education is perfect” because it taught boys how to survive in their societies. By contrast, lack of systematized education in the “civilized” United States rendered American men powerless to succeed. “In the civilized state,” Coram stated, “education is the most imperfect part of the whole scheme of government

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 294, 300.



or civilization.” Coram felt that failure to attend to the educational needs of young American males constituted an, “abuse of civilization . . . .”<sup>34</sup>

Though neither Smith nor Coram included girls in their educational plans, their use of the civilization construct, and other references to the four-stage theory of education, further linked improved education to the attainment of true civilization. Rhetoric used by both was also used by advocates of more inclusive education plans, such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster. All prepared and promoted specific plans for education in the new republic.

Jefferson’s 1778 “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” provided schools for “all the free children, male and female . . .” for three years. As historian Wilson Smith noted, “Jefferson’s plan would have opened schoolroom doors at that early date to many boys and girls who otherwise would not even have seen them.”<sup>35</sup> The curriculum included: reading, writing, and common math, as well as Grecian, Roman, English, and American history. Periodically, those boys who excelled in their study were eligible for appointment to further schooling at the state’s expense. There was no special provision for the advancement of girls, but their inclusion with boys at the lower level, and the commonality of curriculum was extraordinary in 1778. This was a crucial conceptual shift. Linking universal education, regardless of gender, to the

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Coram, “Political Inquiries: to Which Is Added, a Plan for the General Establishment of Schools throughout the United States.” as found in Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, pp. 78 - 145. Quotations from pages 82, 113 (italics mine), 139, and 144.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, ed., *Theories of Education in Early America*, p. 232, 233.



attainment of civilization provided a philosophical toe-hold in the American belief system to advocates of female education.

Benjamin Rush made clear in his essay "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," that American civilization was highly dependent upon an educated class of free men. Rush's opinion reflected the civilization construct's tenet that educated women both created civilizations and were a hallmark of them. Though he did not place women's education on the same plane as men's, the fact that Rush also included educated women in his vision of American civilization further married the two concepts in American minds. In addition, Rush's writings validated Scottish Enlightenment theories which recognized that in order for women, "to fulfill their new role as men's friends and companions, they would need to be educated."<sup>36</sup>

Rush's plan for women's education, as articulated in his 1786 essay "Thoughts Upon Female Education," reveals a tacit acknowledgment that the emerging American civilization was different both from other countries and from its earlier self. He urged that Americans, "study our own character — to examine the age of our country — and to adopt manners in everything, that shall be accommodated to our state of society, and to the forms of our government." Critical of the colonial-era education of elite women that stressed ornamental accomplishments, Rush went on, "in particular it is incumbent upon us to make ornamental accomplishments yield to principles and knowledge, in the education of our women." Rush also harked back to the eighteenth-century theory

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<sup>36</sup> Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," p. 200.

that nations shared the same life cycle as the human body; both are born, grow to responsible maturity, and eventually become crippled and die. According to Rush, the corruption of European civilization was ample evidence of its impending death. "In the ordinary course of human affairs, we shall probably too soon follow the footsteps of the nations of Europe . . . the first marks we shall perceive of our declension, will appear among our women." The harbingers of ruin were European, "idleness, ignorance, and profligacy . . ." A neglect of religion, corruption of American language, celebration of "buffoons on the theatre," and indulgence in romantic novels also characterized the downfall of society. With this warning, Rush used a principle of the civilization construct, and proclaimed that female education was not *a* hallmark of civilization, but *the* very symbol of an enduring civilized state.<sup>37</sup>

Noah Webster, "one of the great fathers of American nationality," also equated degree of civilization with degree of education. In his 1790 essay, "On the Education of Youth in America," Webster began by comparing the education in various ancient societies with that of the United States — an argument derived from the civilization construct. Echoing the sentiment that civilizations fulfill a natural cycle from birth, through maturity and into corruption and death, Webster argued that, "while nations are in a barbarous state they have few wants and consequently few arts." For Webster,

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<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic" and "Thoughts Upon Female Education" as printed in Wilson Smith, ed., *Theories of Education in Early America 1655 - 1819*, pp. 240 - 256 and 257 - 265. Quotations from pages 263 and 264 . "Thoughts Upon Female Education" was widely reprinted, finding its way into, among others, *The Rural Magazine* 1798, Volume 1 and the *Universal Asylum & Columbian Magazine*, 1790, Volume 4, page 209.



“rude” nations educate their people to provide for safety, and utility. Thus hunting societies teach hunting skills. As a nation grew more civilized, its educational needs changed. According to Webster, corruption of a civilization was foretold by an education system that emphasized, “show and amusement.” Webster’s plan for educating American boys emphasized practical skills, such as reading and writing English and basic math, as well as the inculcation of virtue. Webster staunchly opposed teaching the dead languages, Latin, and Greek, which he believed to be a useless distraction. Webster further drew on the belief that civilization developed in stages. Regardless of gender, he argued that, “education . . . should be adapted to the principles of the government and correspond with the stage of society.” For girls, Webster advocated a limited education, “young ladies should be taught to speak and write their own language . . . some knowledge of arithmetic is necessary . . . geography should never be neglected . . .” and a “taste for poetry and fine writing.” Webster’s treatise added another prominent voice to the growing chorus that considered some form of educated woman integral to the new American civilization.<sup>38</sup> Though some historians have argued that the conservative nature of his educational plan indicates a limitation on female education, that is not relevant here. Regardless of the educational scope encompassed in the plans proposed by Jefferson, Rush and Webster all of their reasoning is derived from the same root — the civilization construct. This shared

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<sup>38</sup> Noah Webster, “On the Education of Youth in America” as found in Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, pp. 41 - 77. Quotations from pages 41, 42, and 70.



intellectual heritage is what motivated them to advocate any changes in American educational practice, however minor.

Though Smith and Coram tied the civilization construct to male education, Jefferson, Rush, and Webster, bound it to female education. Other contemporary writers were even more explicit. As the young United States attempted to shed the last trappings of its perceived barbarism, and fulfill what many Americans believed was the next natural stage in their society's development, writers such as English clergyman Thomas Gisborne drew explicit parallels between female education and civilization. In so doing, he applied all five tenets of the civilization construct. Gisborne used advancements in women's status as an index for the degree of civilization present in a given society. He argued that women were the social equal of men. He compared his American civilization to others, and elevated educated women as the creator and hallmark of truly advanced civilizations. Finally, he adamantly condemned societies that failed to educate their women.

Gisborne believed that barbaric nations judged a woman's value by her ability to withstand physical toil, while civilized nations elevated women above such hardship. Although Gisborne advocated a conservative curriculum, he was adamant that a civilized society must educate its women. In *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, Gisborne exhorted his readers to, "examine the domestic proceedings of savage tribes in the old world and in the new, and ask who is the best daughter and the best wife. The answer is uniform. She . . . who is most tolerant of hardship and unkindness." While "barbaric nations" judge women by their tolerance for "servile fear

and toil . . . refined nations” are characterized by their “gentler treatment and more reasonable estimation of women. . . . Every improvement in their opinions and conduct respecting the female sex, prepares the way for additional progress in civilization.” Gisborne believed that uncivilized societies cannot fully appreciate “female worth.” His criticism was not restricted to wholly “barbaric” nations, either, “even in our modern era, women’s perfection has been judged solely based on their domestic talent. . . .” Fortunately, he sensed imminent change because, “it has been universally acknowledged, that the intellectual powers of women are not restricted to the arts of the housekeeper. . . .”<sup>39</sup>

Gisborne’s plan for female education was limited. He opposed sending girls to boarding schools because this influence diluted parental control. His curriculum included: English grammar and spelling, geography, “select parts” of natural history, world history, and “popular and amusing facts” in astronomy and other sciences. Two hundred years before *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*, Gisborne detected an increase in educated women in the eighteenth-century. He observed, “in the cultivation of the female understanding, essential improvements have taken place in the present age.” Perhaps he understood that women’s reading had greatly expanded. Additionally, “both in schools and in private families there prevails a desire to call forth the reasoning

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry Into the Duties of the Female Sex*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1974, pp. 16 - 19. Reprint of the 1797 edition. According to Gisborne, “the intention of Providence . . . the course and extent of female duties . . . [and] the true value of the female character” determined her educational needs and therefore the curriculum.

powers of girls into action, and to enrich the mind with useful and interesting knowledge suitable to their sex.”<sup>40</sup> For Gisborne, a civilized society had women who were educated — but not too much — tender, amiable, domestic, and shielded from evils. Such societies limit the work of their women to ensuring domestic harmony and teaching children. Barbaric societies in general are marked by female suffering and toil from which men benefit.

Was Gisborne correct in his assessment of improvements in female education at the close of the eighteenth-century? Historian Linda Kerber argued that though, “improvements in education did come,” overall there remained a widespread contempt for female intelligence. Coverture made sophisticated learning of little use to girls; academic study was seen as self-indulgent for women; and a literacy gap between men and women persisted until the 1850s. Still, Kerber acknowledged that girls of the gentry class began to attend school for longer periods of time, and women began to open “poor but genteel” schools for girls. According to Kerber, however, these schools remained financially unsound throughout their operation. Nevertheless, girls were said to need a better education to insulate them from shallow behaviors and prepare them to be good republican mothers. The ideal republican woman was competent and confident, able to resist the whims of fashion, rational, benevolent, independent, and self-reliant. Since she did not enter the traditional professions, ideally her education taught her to be a good wife and mother, emphasizing vocational subjects such as

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 58.



bookkeeping, though typically including enough academic study to enable her to educate her children (especially her sons). Kerber summed up her analysis of early female education by stating that while boys' schools continued to emphasize the classics, girls' schools accentuated the domestic arts with a few academic niceties thrown in. The result was an education that did not truly expand women's lives because it continued to shackle them in service to their family and their nation, rather than allowing cultivation of the self.<sup>41</sup>

Historian Mary Beth Norton painted a brighter picture of female education after independence. Like Kerber, she too argued that the curriculum at female academies was limited, but she acknowledged that many academies for boys and girls were opened during this era. According to Norton, however, none were co-educational, and very few were in the American south. The biggest change in female education came in American attitudes. In the early Republic, the education of girls became a parent's duty. Daughters as well as sons were expected to improve their minds, and mothers began to urge daughters to study and become clever. Not only did girls eagerly take advantage of the new opportunities for education, but they also began to assess each other's intellects as well as their gentility. The graduates of the early academies, Norton asserted, had a powerful effect on American womanhood. Many of the graduates founded schools of their own and thousands of them taught elementary school.

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<sup>41</sup> Kerber, *Women of the Republic*. pp.188 - 230.

Working as teachers offered educated women independence and self-sufficiency and became an acceptable, temporary position for young women before marriage.<sup>42</sup>

Thomas Gisborne was not alone in recognizing the expansion of female educational opportunity that was underway. His contemporary, Judith Sargeant Murray was correct when she noted in 1798 that, "female academies are every where establishing." Documenting Murray's assertion in 1982, scholar Lynne Brickley uncovered a total of, "361 secondary-level schools for girls established throughout America prior to 1830."<sup>43</sup> The institutions in her list had curricula that covered a wide variety of subjects, including: "geography, history, English grammar, composition, rhetoric, the sciences or languages." Brickley did not include schools whose curriculum was limited to ornamental or rudimentary subjects. Interestingly, many of these academies had larger enrollments than comparable male schools. Brickley offered the following comparisons: Sarah Pierce's Litchfield School (female) had 58 girls study during the 1802 summer term and 140 students in 1816; Phillips Andover (male) enrolled 23 boys in 1810 and 100 in 1817. "The Patten sisters taught some 4,000 girls in their Hartford, Connecticut school between 1785 and 1825," Brickley asserted. Furthermore, "Mary Balch had 100 students in her Providence school in 1812..."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, pp. 263 - 290.

<sup>43</sup> Lynn Templeton Brickley. "Female Academies Are Every Where Establishing": *The Beginnings of Secondary Education for Women in the United States, 1790 - 1830*, p. 48.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

After only one year in operation, enrollment at the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia numbered over one hundred students.<sup>45</sup>

Brickley's evidence points out the shortcomings of histories that have typically denigrated the earliest female academies. She argued that, "All recent historians of women's education have discredited the number of academies for women founded before 1820..."<sup>46</sup> The data gathered by Brickley refutes the claims of other historians on several fronts. She documented the following: there were an ample number of female academies in the American south prior to 1830; the exodus of northern, female school teachers to the south began before 1820; and the existence of a large number of female academies, "which lasted many years, had large enrollments, were known beyond their local area, and evolved highly academic curricula."<sup>47</sup>

With Brickley's detailed research and Haye's information concerning colonial women's reading patterns in mind, Kerber's analysis of female education in the early republic may be overly pessimistic. Norton's assertions that there were no co-educational institutions and few schools in the south also may be overstated. Nevertheless, both historians recognize that opportunities for women to receive a formal academic education grew after American independence.

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<sup>45</sup> Ann Gordon, "The Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia," in Carol Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *Women of America: A History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> Brickley, *"Female Academies Are Every Where Establishing."* p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 49. See Appendix A.



The growth in female academies, and explosion of civilization construct rhetoric may have made the cultural changes underway in America seem overpowering. David Ramsay was among the first writers who argued, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, that American greatness would flourish as a result of independence. Ramsay expressed American hopes that the historical process would lead inescapably to the dawning of a true civilization in America. Ramsay's expression of hope and belief was swiftly followed by writings that promoted education as a characteristic of true civilizations.

Following Ramsay, Smith and Coram believed that universal, male education was a critical component of any civilization. Their writings helped strengthen the conceptual link between education and civilization. Though they both excluded girls from their educational plans, their use of language derived from the civilization construct helped make it familiar and powerful. Both Coram and Smith believed that for civilized societies the pull of education was irresistible. Their writings further entrenched this faith in the American mind.

That three very famous Americans — Jefferson, Rush, and Webster — included girls in their plans for education suggests that a conceptual shift in American self-perception was underway. Americans believed that they were evolving from the old, provincial, colonial America to the beginning of a new, modern, “civilized” United States. Thomas Jefferson saw universal education as an integral part of the new civilization. His inclusion of girls strengthened the conceptual link between educated females and status as a civilized nation.

Webster and Rush furthered this link by proposing plans that dealt with female education at length. By constricting or at least carefully structuring female education, Webster and Rush provided intellectual peace between the existing cultural resistance to educating women and the unrelenting desire to become truly civilized. Webster and Rush were more candid than Jefferson, Coram or Smith, however, in associating American civilization and the education of women. Both drew brief comparisons between other civilizations and America based on the degree of education attained by women in each society. Their work reiterated the civilization construct's tenet that provided a direct conceptual link between civilization and the education of women.

The direct relationship between female education and civilization was made explicit by Thomas Gisborne. For Gisborne, societies that did not educate women were absolutely barbaric. Just as the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers did, he connected the treatment of women with attainment of civilization. The equation was simple: those societies that valued women for the amount of physical labor they could endure were savage and those that educated women, isolated them from manual labor and valued their influence in society were civilized. The expansion of women's education in the early republic was celebrated by Gisborne. He regarded it as a sign that the final shackles of barbarity were falling away from modern society, clearing the path for a new civilization.

The intellectual construct which taught that societies evolved into civilizations and that America was poised on the precipice of a true civilization simmered beneath Gisborne's rhetoric. America was different. Since colonization, European immigrants

believed themselves distinct from the civilizations of the Old World. The colonists may well have been wrong in this belief. Nevertheless, with the beginning of the Revolutionary War, this belief became an ambition — a desire to fulfill the mandate of the historical process. In their hunger to fulfill the historical process, Gisborne and his contemporaries created what ironically they believed was inevitable; a civilization that valued female education.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE EDUCATORS

Political leaders were not alone in using the power of the civilization construct. Teachers and administrators of early female academies also tapped into the powerful American ambition to rank among the most civilized nations in history. According to Kerber, educators' rhetoric and motives were grounded in republican motherhood ideology — a creation of the American revolutionary generation. Zagarri, however, argued that Scottish Enlightenment philosophies were adopted and modified by Americans, who used them as a spring-board for the creation of republican motherhood. Republican motherhood, in turn, justified the expansion of female education in the early republic. Neither is wholly accurate. Close analysis of writing by early educators reveals that the civilization construct was a powerful factor in the establishment of early female academies.

In the eighteenth-century, Americans perceived the United States as a potentially advanced civilization. Because of this perception and American ambition to rank among the greatest nations, the civilization construct created powerful rhetoric in that era. As time passed, however, American perceptions of the United States changed. A burgeoning belief in the legitimacy of the American civilization, bolstered by success in the War of 1812 and huge territorial expansion, resulted in waning authority for the civilization construct in the American mind. By 1820, Americans no longer felt that they had to defend their civilization at every turn. Historians, such as Jan Lewis, have

argued that motherhood did not become the focus of education reformers until early in the nineteenth-century.<sup>48</sup> The prevalence of civilization construct rhetoric in the writings of early educators supports this argument. This shift may have propelled education reformers to adjust their rhetoric as well.

At the dawn of the republic, however, the justification of America as a legitimate civilization was a constant refrain. The power of the civilization construct changed the behavior of late eighteenth-century Americans whether they willed it or not. This chapter explains the power of the civilization construct in educators' minds and its use in their rhetoric. Through the writings and speeches of the trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy, educators Simeon Doggett, John Hobson, and Emma Willard, as well as an advertisement for a female academy in Virginia, it becomes clear that those whose livelihood required public acceptance of female education relied heavily on the civilization construct.

## RISE AND PROGRESS

On December 18, 1794, the trustees and students of the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia entered the sanctuary of the Methodist Church for a ceremony celebrating both their own achievements and the greatness of their young Republic. They were joined by the, "lady of the President of the United States; the members of the House of Representatives of the United States; [and] the members of the Assembly of this State"

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<sup>48</sup> Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic." pp. 688 - 721.

as well as their families. According to an observer the spectacle, "was truly magnificent, and exhibited incontrovertible demonstration that valuable learning will never want patrons, in this land of liberty."<sup>49</sup> Eight young women graduated and others received "premiums" for scholarly excellence. In the seven years since John Poor had opened the doors of the Academy, his school had prepared many similar young women for what they believed was a new and more civilized society.

As the argument over female education blazed across America, the trustees of the most renowned women's academy of its day, the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia, continually cited the needs of a legitimate civilization in justifying the education of young women. Men of national reputations and disciplined minds, the trustees of the Academy enjoyed the status of being among America's most elite families. Virtually all of the Academy trustees were college graduates and several were also trustees at the College of Philadelphia. Others such as Ashbel Green, Henry Helmuth and Samuel Magaw served both as trustees at the Academy and professors at the College. The catalog also included statesmen such as Jared Ingersoll, Pennsylvania's Attorney General and delegate to the Constitutional Convention, as well as Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Mifflin.

The students of the Young Ladies' Academy also possessed important family ties. Samuel Meredith, the Treasurer of the United States sent his daughter Mary to the

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<sup>49</sup> James Neal, *An Essay on the Education and Genius of the Female Sex. To Which is Added an Account of the Commencement of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia, held the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, 1794.* Philadelphia: Jacob Johnson & Company, 1795, p.14.



Academy. Dolly Willing, daughter of Thomas Willing — President of the Bank of the United States — accompanied her. Likewise, Alexander Hamilton's daughter Mary attended the Academy in 1787. Many of these young women won prizes for academic excellence, as did Ann McKean (daughter of Pennsylvania's Chief Justice) in 1787. Within a single year of opening, over one hundred students attended the school.<sup>50</sup> As the trustees noted in 1794, the school attracted scholars from locations as diverse as "Cape-Florida, Georgia, Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New-Jersey, New-York, Connecticut, Rhode-Island, Massachusetts-Bay, the Province of Main, Nova-Scotia, Canada, from several of the West-India Islands, and from various parts of the state of Pennsylvania, but the greatest number from this city."<sup>51</sup> Despite their geographic diversity, they all shared one concern: the improvement of their minds.

The national debate over women's role in society manifested itself in curriculum disputes among the trustees. Although the 1791 charter specified that the school be "used for the education of female pupils . . ." the curriculum resided in the hands of the trustees "in such manner as [they] shall direct." When the YLA opened in 1787, the curriculum included: geography, arithmetic, English grammar, spelling and reading.

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<sup>50</sup> Ann Gordon, "The Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia," in Carol Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *Women of America: A History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979, pp. 70 - 71, 79.

<sup>51</sup> *The Rise and Progress of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia: Containing an Account of a Number of Public Examinations and Commencements; the Charter and Bye-Laws; Likewise a Number of Orations Delivered by the Young Ladies and Several by the Trustees of Said Institution*. Philadelphia: Stewart & Cochran, 1794, p. 5.

Within three years the catalog also included rhetoric and composition.<sup>52</sup> To further his vision of female education Benjamin Rush developed a short course of lessons on natural philosophy and chemistry.<sup>53</sup> The twelve lectures included seven on theoretical chemistry and five on chemistry applied in the domestic sphere. An understanding of how oxygen affects temperature, fireplaces, cellars, and the overall wholesomeness of the home typified his instruction. Rush delivered his lectures only once, at the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia in October, 1787.<sup>54</sup> Expansion of the curriculum continued over the years. The catalog for 1801 included astronomy.<sup>55</sup> Even at its most limited, the curriculum represented a significant break from the mostly ornamental pursuits generally prescribed for elite young women in colonial-era dame schools. The fluidity allowed by the charter's language helped to bring the national debate over women's education into the speeches delivered by the trustees. Rather than limit themselves to private discussion over the appropriate curriculum, the trustees used the end-of-semester public examinations as an opportunity to win converts to their vision of women's education.

Benjamin Rush, a co-founder of the YLA, gave the first public speech at the Academy on July 28, 1787. Assembled before him were the students, their families, and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 38, quotation on 57.

<sup>53</sup> In an advertisement announcing the founding of the academy, Rush is listed as a "visitor". His name does not subsequently appear in lists of visitors (also known as trustees). *Pennsylvania Gazette*. May 10, 24 and June 21, 1786.

<sup>54</sup> Marion Savin and Harold Abrahams, "The Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia." *History of Education Journal*, 8, (1956) p. 65.

<sup>55</sup> Savin, "The Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia," p. 60.



other trustees. Rush's speech did not adopt the bombastic language used by some of his contemporaries, but he did invoke the civilization construct in subtle ways. In opening his speech, he referred to "the state of society, manners and government" as a determining factor for the mode of female education. Zagarri pointed out that, "for the Scots, as well as for other Enlightenment thinkers, 'manners' carried important implications. 'Manners' did not simply mean proper etiquette or correct social deportment; it connoted ideas of individual morality and personal character . . ." <sup>56</sup>

Rush went on to carefully set America apart from Great Britain by saying, "that the education of young ladies, in this country, should be conducted upon principles very different from what it is in Great Britain, and in some respects, different from what it was when we were part of a monarchical empire." This calm delineation between America and Great Britain, and the American civilization past and present supplied the ideology for his prescribed curriculum which included English reading and writing, handwriting, "some knowledge of figures," geography and history, vocal music, dancing, and Christianity. Instrumental music, a foundation of colonial female education, was specifically excluded by Rush as a waste of time and money. Following his curriculum plan, Rush continued, lamenting the transplantation of "British customs, with respect to female education . . . into our American schools and families." He rallied his listeners to "awaken from this servility — to study our own character — to examine the age of our country — and to adopt *manners* in every thing, that shall be

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<sup>56</sup> Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," p. 201.



accommodated to our state of society, and to the forms of our government.” The belief that every civilization is capable of decline as well as advancement was also implied toward the close of his speech. “In the ordinary course of human affairs,” Rush despaired, “we shall probably too soon follow the footsteps of the nations of Europe in manners and vices. The first marks we shall perceive of our declension, will appear among our women.”<sup>57</sup> This comment, particularly, reveals the civilization construct’s intellectual connection between a nation’s stage of civilization and the status of its women. Rush clearly saw the new American society as a distinct civilization with peculiar needs.

Both Kerber and Zagarri saw Rush’s comments on female education as the standard-bearer of republican motherhood ideology. Though he certainly dealt with the role of mothers in a republic, the undiluted strains of the civilization construct were equally present. Strikingly, Rush was virtually alone among YLA trustees in discussing motherhood. His rhetorical lead was abandoned by the other trustees, most of whose speeches differed in both tone and content. While Rush’s speech is addressed primarily to the gentlemen present, virtually ignoring the young women, most of the other trustees addressed the students directly. Additionally, the other trustees used kind, paternal language and often reassured the young women who had not won premiums, or

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<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts Upon Female Education* . . . as found in Smith, ed. *Theories of Education in Early America, 1655 - 1819*, pp. 257 - 265. Italics mine. For Rush, harbingers of decline included: idleness, ignorance, and profligacy. Churches would be neglected, romantic novels would proliferate, silly entertainment would eclipse thoughtful discourse, and American English would be blighted by “French and Italian” words.

perhaps exhorted them to emulate more successful students. Because of these differences, and Rush's knowledge that the trustees planned to print his speech, it is probable that Rush's address was primarily aimed not at the young ladies and the trustees, but at the larger national audience.

In responding to Rush's speech, John Swanwick's main purpose was to advocate the addition of musical training to the curriculum. His argument, delivered before the members of the Academy in 1787, unfailingly rested on celebrating civilized nations. "If we enquire into the state of manners and society in Europe," he asserted, "we shall find the most polished and respectable nations all admitting and prizing instrumental music, as a very valuable branch of education . . ." Swanwick continued, citing the greatness of France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and "that [nation] from which we ourselves have descended. We have seen them of late celebrate the anniversary of Handel, with a pomp and magnificence unknown to former ages." Music, he argued, was an art "whose influence, no nation, savage or civilized, can resist . . ." Summoning his *coup de grace*, Swanwick cited ancient Greece, a powerful image of an advanced civilization in the minds of his contemporaries. He reminded his audience that Polybius, "a grave historian, eminent for solidity of judgment, ascribed the humanity of the Arcadians to the influence of this art; and the barbarity of their neighbours, the Cynethians to their neglect of it . . . The heroes of ancient Greece were ambitious to excel in music . . ." Indeed even the venerable Plato, according to

Swanwick “considered music as an object of vast importance in society.”<sup>58</sup> Swanwick completely disregarded motherhood. Instead, he relied almost exclusively on his contemporaries’ ambition to reach the fourth stage of civilization.

Accompanying Swanwick’s speech that day was an anonymous poem, *On the Prospect of seeing the fine Arts flourish in AMERICA*. Throughout, ran a belief in the imminent greatness of the new Republic:

Oh haste the day, on swiftest pinions haste,  
When arts and manners shall adorn the waste;  
When woods deserted, or where Indians rove,  
Shall form the statesman’s, or the poet’s grove; . . .  
The foreign emigrant, repose once more,  
Upon a civiliz’d, a tranquil shore;  
Where chang’d the scene, from what the Bard foretold,  
His new abode shall far excel the old. . . .

See quick approach that period of renown,  
When poetry shall add her laurel crown;  
To those rich honours, which our country grace,  
And form the glory of her brilliant race.<sup>59</sup>

This glorification of a civilized people steeped in liberal education provides an apt summary of the ideology which motivated the founding of the Young Ladies Academy. It is a theme which appeared again and again throughout the lifetime of the school.

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<sup>58</sup> John Swanwick, *Thoughts on Education, Addressed to the Visitors of the Young Ladies’ Academy in Philadelphia, October 31, 1787. At the Close of the Quarterly Examinations, by John Swanwick, One of the Visitors . . . To Which is Added; a Prayer, delivered on the Same Occasion, by Samuel Magaw. . . .* Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1787, pp. 17 - 20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32 - 36. Uppercase in original text.



At the June, 1789 examinations, the Reverend Doctor James Sproat (who served as president of the board) began his speech with remarks on the growth of education in America since the Revolution. His speech is notable not only for its theme, but also for his use of gender-neutral language. He spoke of, “the education of American youth,” before moving specifically to female education. “The education of youth in the various branches of useful knowledge,” he began, “appears to be highly important, by the attention paid it, among all nations in a civilized state.” He reminded his audience that, “all polished nations have been peculiarly careful to found and support seminaries of learning . . .” Continuing his use of gender-neutral language, Sproat praised his country because, “great attention has been paid to the education of American youth, since our memorable revolution; colleges, academies, and public schools have been erected in almost every state in the union . . .” Sproat forecast a coming golden-age in America, asserting that, “certainly the cultivation of letters, is one mark of the progress of society toward its most improved period, and I doubt not, will be productive of much good to this rising empire.”<sup>60</sup>

Sproat and the other trustees keenly understood their role in the creation of a rising American empire. Being a trustee of the Academy, while certainly an honor, meant a great deal of work and a significant allocation of time. Quarterly ceremonies, quarterly examinations, and special meetings of the trustees — all of which necessitated attendance — occupied a significant part of their time. In the spring of

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<sup>60</sup> *Rise and Progress*, p. 24.

1792, three special meetings were convened in addition to the two days devoted to examinations and one to the awards ceremony.<sup>61</sup> These men were volunteers and fulfilled careers in politics, medicine, law and in the university in addition to their work for the Academy. They committed six days in a three month period solely to the business of the school. Only individuals dedicated to a cause — in this case a belief in the advancement of the new American civilization — would have worked so hard.

Secretary of the Young Ladies' Academy Doctor Benjamin Say, whose daughter Molly attended the school, addressed the young ladies in December, 1789. Taking a slightly different tack from Reverend Sproat, Doctor Say's address to the young ladies reminded them of their good fortune. Say echoed the sentiment that, "women should be grateful to live under these conditions."<sup>62</sup> "You are all young," he reminded them, "and have advantages which you ought highly to prize above numbers of others who are brought up in great measure in a state of ignorance . . . Observe them, how unenlightened their minds . . ."<sup>63</sup> The elevated status of women was a hallmark of a fourth-stage civilization, and a tenet of the civilization construct. The comparative beneficence with which American women were treated, especially their increasing chances for academic education, was considered proof of America's advancing fortunes.

In 1794, any fear that America might be a second-rate civilization withered before a commanding speech delivered by trustee James Neal. Not only did he reflect

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 63 - 67.

<sup>62</sup> Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," p. 208.

<sup>63</sup> *Rise and Progress*, p. 31.

Enlightenment convictions about civilization but he also mirrored Enlightenment philosophers' belief that in fourth-stage societies, men and women were equal. As Zagarri noted, "Such language seems anomalous given the fact that women at this time enjoyed no political rights and only limited legal rights." It is important, however, to use the term as the Scots did. "Men and women, the Scots believed, were . . . partners in the progress of humankind." Despite inequities that seem glaring in hindsight, because women were no longer servants of men, but were acknowledged friends and companions, they were considered equal by many.<sup>64</sup>

Neal's audience included Martha Washington, the members of the United States House of Representatives, and the legislators of the Pennsylvania Assembly. He blasted them with every rhetorical armament he could muster. He opened by reminding his audience that, "Refinement of manners was gradually introduced in to the world, through the almost imperceptible gradation of literary knowledge. . . . Gothic rudeness, and barbarity of manners, were disrobed of their disgusted appearance, before the beatific sunshine of wisdom." He lamented that in the past, "the female mind remained uncultivated. . . ." Neal attributed this to men who were, "incapable of appreciating the intrinsic worth of those to whom they were indebted for the most essential part of their enjoyments." From Neal's perspective, the United States was advancing beyond this stage of civilization. Fortunately, "When admitted to an equal participation of the illuminating beams of science we observe women rising to the most conspicuous and

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<sup>64</sup> Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," p. 207.



enviable state of eminence.” Invoking the belief that men and women were social equals, he had no doubt that if women attained an education such as that available at the Young Ladies Academy, they would “surprise the world with the meridian lustre of unrivalled genius. . . it is needless to expatiate farther, observation will sufficiently evince the truth.”<sup>65</sup>

Neal also reflected the belief that in a fourth-stage civilization female education was necessary to ensure the happiness of knowledgeable men. Indeed, according to Enlightenment theory, men of sense and education could not possibly be entertained by women who lacked the same attributes. Neal again used the civilization construct to condemn those who denied the importance of female education, Neal asked his audience, “whence proceed opinions so inimical, so unfriendly to social happiness and virtue?” Persisting, Neal answered his own question with, “Derived from whatever source they may, they are most assuredly the spurious offspring of perverse ignorance, and subversive of real happiness.” Shifting his focus to the eight young women who were to graduate that day, he reminded them that:

You go from hence, brighter, more perfect ornaments of society, fully calculated to render happy beyond expression, those who participate with you, the ineffable advantages, inseparably connected with refinement of manners, and a cultivated mind.

While the colonial-era concept of elite ornamental womanhood required the vocational education available in dame schools, Neal’s new concept of ornamental woman required

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<sup>65</sup>Neal, *An Essay on the Genius and Education of the Female Sex*, pp. 1 - 4.

a broader, more academic education such as that available at the Young Ladies' Academy. Though Neal and the other trustees considered educated women to be crucial to the happiness of men, passages like this one indicate that they also believed that all of society would benefit. The "general diffusion of knowledge" was without doubt advantageous to everyone. For this reason, Neal requested that the Pennsylvania Assemblymen present for his speech provide a grant of public funds for the support of the Academy. According to Neal, "Such a grant would confer credit on the enlightened public which they represent, and redound to the inexpressible honor of this city, as well as the United States. . ." Such rhetoric, common in educators' speeches, reveals a canny appeal to Americans who longed for recognition of the American civilization's legitimacy.

John Swanwick also spoke at the 1794 graduation. "The institution of seminaries for the PUBLIC instruction of young ladies in the various branches of polite literature is for aught I know, one of the singularities which mark this happy country," he said. His speech, though short, was full of rhetoric drawn from the civilization construct. Swanwick believed that America was a content and prosperous country. Referring to the Young Ladies' Academy, he asked, "may we not congratulate America on this new proof of her civilization and look up to [the community] for its future support and protection."<sup>66</sup> Swanwick also argued the Enlightenment conviction that

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<sup>66</sup> Neal, *An Essay on the Genius and Education of the Female Sex*, pp. 22 - 23. Uppercase text is original.

educated women acted to “improve and refine the manners of men.”<sup>67</sup> He reminded his audience that, “the influence of the fair sex over our modes of thinking and of acting has been in every age the theme of poets and historians.” Swanwick did not specify whether women influenced men as mothers, or wives. Perhaps he saw their influence throughout society, and as a result of every role women fulfilled. Like Neal, Swanwick showed concern for the proliferation of “the arts and sciences” throughout the country. He, too, called upon the Pennsylvania legislature for public funding of “schools throughout the state. . . .”<sup>68</sup>

At the climax of the 1794 graduation, the students sang an ode written by an unidentified Dr. Dwight. Probably, the author was Dr. Timothy Dwight a well-known Calvinist clergyman turned ideological writer. Titled, *Columbia*, it gave no doubt about the prevalence of the civilization construct at the school. It began by calling for Americans to rise to their potential :

Columbia! Columbia! To glory arise,  
The queen of the world, and the child of the skies:  
Thy genius commands thee, with raptures behold,  
While ages on ages they splendors unfold.  
Thy reign is the last and noblest of time; . . .

The celebration of American civilization as the most splendid of ages and the, “noblest of time” came directly from the civilization construct tenet that ranked societies according to the degree of civilization attained by each. The song went on, celebrating the potential greatness of Americans:

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<sup>67</sup> Zagarri, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” p. 201.

<sup>68</sup> Neal, *An Essay on the Genius and Education of the Female Sex*, p. 23.



New bards and new sages, unrivall'd, shall soar  
To fame, unextinguish'd when time is no more.  
To thee, the last refuge for virtue design'd,  
Shall fly, from all nations, the best of mankind; . . .

Such glorification of American genius was another teaching of the civilization construct. Not only would American genius expand, but it would also overwhelm all other earthly kingdoms:

As the day spring, unbounded, thy splendor shall flow,  
And earth's mighty kingdoms before thee shall bow; . . .

Columbia! Columbia! To glory arise,  
The queen of the world, and the child of the skies.<sup>69</sup>

The ending refrain called Americans to reach their potential, celebrated American superiority over other civilizations and enshrined it in, "the skies," a reference to heaven.

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<sup>69</sup> Song from Neal, *An Essay on the Genius and Education of the Female Sex*, p. 24. According to historian Emory Elliot, Timothy Dwight's (1752 - 1817) writings, "illustrate how an established Calvinist clergyman perceived the new republic and how he used inherited rhetorical forms . . . to try to guide the nation during and after the Revolution." Furthermore, Dwight painted an image of, "the virtuous woman whose example, wisdom and teaching [were] the foundation stones of the American future." From Emory Elliot, *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725 - 1810*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 55 - 80. Quotations from pages 55 & 80. Historian Robert Spiller noted that Dwight "was president of Yale and the writer of many weighty theological and patriotic poems, sermons, and tracts." Dwight contributed poetry and prose to Mathew Carey's *American Museum* and Noah Webster's *American Magazine*. From Robert Spiller, *The American Literary Revolution, 1783 - 1837*. New York: New York University Press, 1969. Listed in Lynne Templeton Brickley's catalog of early coeducational academies are, "Timothy Dwight's Northampton Academy, Northampton, Massachusetts," founded in 1778, and "Timothy Dwight's Greenfield Hill Academy, Fairfield, Connecticut" established in 1781. Lynne Templeton Brickley, *Female Academies Are Every Where Establishing*, p. 87.

The surviving addresses that were delivered by the trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy span seven years. The speeches are uniformly characterized by the five qualities derived from the civilization construct: first, the speakers celebrated the advancement of American civilization brought about by the creation of female seminaries; second, the trustees used other civilizations, ancient and contemporary, as benchmarks for American progress; third, all of the speakers invoked the Scottish Enlightenment concept of male and female equality — despite women's political and legal disenfranchisement; fourth, they condemned to barbarity those who denied women an education; and fifth, the status of women was seen as a criterion of and contributor to civilized society. The trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy consistently maintained a clear purpose. They believed that the alternative to advancement toward the fourth-stage of civilization was degeneration and destruction of the Republic. Also, they wanted the world community to recognize the United States of America as the legitimate advanced civilization they believed it to be. They were determined to ensure that their country would someday rank among what they considered the two greatest civilizations ever — Ancient Greece and Rome.

Almost as much as what they did say about the needs of a dawning American civilization, what the trustees did not say reveals their motives. No one spoke concretely about the future. The students were celebrated for their accomplishments. Both students and trustees spoke at length and abstractly about the necessity for female education. The young women remembered fondly their time at the Academy. Praise was heaped upon John Poor and the trustees. But no one, save one miserable student



who lamented a bleak future followed by death, spoke of the young ladies' future life beyond the Academy's walls. There are two possible reasons for this omission. Perhaps there was a general confusion over an educated woman's genuine place in society and the exact dimensions of her public role. Such confusion may have led to widespread bewilderment concerning her future. Alternatively, tension between the civilization construct's emphasis on the elevation of women's status and existing customs that limited women's role in society may have acted to circumscribe discussion of the future. Everyone knew that a public role was not a viable option (and many would have opposed such an idea), yet there was unanimous ambiguity over what the young women should *do* with their educations. Though the need for model republican wives was a common abstract theme, it was only addressed in the abstract. No one directly prescribed this role for graduating students. In addition, apparently no one thought about motherhood.

Historian Margaret Nash also noted the glaring absence of motherhood in the trustees' speeches. She commented that, "For the last fifteen years, historians have used republican motherhood as the primary explanation for the expansion of female education immediately after the Revolutionary War." Furthermore, Nash cited three reasons why the rhetoric at the Young Ladies' Academy should have been thick with republican motherhood: first, the school was co-founded by Rush, the supposed father of the ideology; second, the Academy "was a new project, in 'the capital, not only of the American Enlightenment, but also of the American culture,' . . ." therefore the rhetoric reflected the "most current thought on female education;" and third, given the



controversial nature of female education at this time, “we would expect the new Academy to couch its image in the most acceptable terms.”<sup>70</sup> If republican motherhood had the power during this period that has been attributed it by historians, then surely such rhetoric would have appeared more frequently in the speeches delivered at the school. Kerber argued that, “motherhood was discussed almost as if it were the fourth branch of government . . .”<sup>71</sup>

In fact, language favoring the concept of republican motherhood was mostly absent from the discourse at the Young Ladies’ Academy. Instead, the language of the civilization construct pervades every speech. Of the twenty speeches delivered at Academy functions between 1787 and 1794 by both trustees and students, only three contained any form of republican motherhood. All three were delivered to national audiences, rather than to just the students, their families and the trustees. This may indicate that motherhood was not an issue in the day-to-day life at the Academy. One of these was Rush’s “Thoughts Upon Female Education,” which gave modest attention to the role of mothers. Rush, however, was a national figure who knew he was speaking to a national audience. He anticipated publication of his speech, and may well have been motivated by another debate.<sup>72</sup> The second occurrence, and the only other speech by a trustee resembling republican motherhood ideology, came in John

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<sup>70</sup> Margaret Nash, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 17, (Summer 1997) pp. 171 - 191. Quotations from page 171, 181.

<sup>71</sup> Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, p. 200.

<sup>72</sup> Rush, *Essays: Literary, Moral and Philosophical*, pp. 44 - 54. Rush was aware before he delivered his speech that the trustees planned to publish his remarks.

Swanwick's 1794 speech before the graduating students and a large number of dignitaries — again a national audience. In referring to education he said, “[the fair sex] will of course recommend it to their children, and all the obligations contained in the invaluable name of mother, will be secured as a bulwark round our inestimable constitution.”<sup>73</sup> Student Ann Harker delivered an oration at the same assembly. Her speech is the only other evidence of republican motherhood. Halfway through a speech heavily laced with the civilization construct she said, “The domestic cares, connected with the rearing of the tender offspring, is the arduous task of our sex. The education which we receive, should be calculated to render us capable of the employment.”<sup>74</sup> And that was it.

Aside from Rush, there were only two stunted references to republican motherhood — both delivered before a national audience. These are dwarfed by the oratory drawn directly from the civilization construct. Though the construct drove the trustees to found and maintain a large female academy, it did not, however, answer the practical question, “what next?” As a consequence, no one discussed the future in concrete, prescriptive terms, and any concept related to republican motherhood was largely absent.

“THIS DOUBTLESS IS A TRAIT OF BARBARITY . . .”

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<sup>73</sup> Neal, *An Essay on the Genius and Education of the Female Sex*, p. 23.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy were not alone in using the civilization construct to justify female education. Simeon Doggett, Unitarian minister and later principal of the coeducational Bristol Academy, published his essay, "A Discourse on Education . . ." in 1797.<sup>75</sup> First delivered as the convocation at the opening of the Bristol Academy, his essay began with a clear delineation between savage and civilized societies. "While some of our fellow creatures are roaming in the gloomy forest as beasts of prey . . ." he wrote, "or exulting, with barbarous pleasure, in the excruciating torture of captive enemies: while millions are dragging out a miserable existence in the dreary countries of ignorance and despotism . . . we, my friends . . . are this day convened by an occasion connected with everything great and valuable to man."<sup>76</sup> Doggett betrayed his deep belief in the inevitable progress of humanity by revisiting this theme later in his essay. The "moulding hand of education" was directly responsible for "civilized life." The "savage in the wilderness" was "destitute of all the arts of civilized life . . . His intellectual powers lying unexercised and undirected, his ideas, his language, and his knowledge are confined within the small compass of his chase." Doggett lamented over "the heart . . ." which was "constrained to weep over millions of the human race who through the deficiency of education are low sunk in barbarity." According to Doggett, though, living in a civilized society provided no

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<sup>75</sup> Bristol Academy of Taunton, Massachusetts is listed as a coeducational institution in Lynne Templeton Brickley, *Female Academies are Every Where Establishing*, p. 88.

<sup>76</sup> Simeon Doggett, "Discourse on Education." as found in Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, pp. 147 - 165. Quotation on page 149.



guarantee of producing civilized Americans. The “tear of humanity is . . . started to see many of our brethren . . . through the neglect of education and by bad example in a situation almost as pitiable as that of the roving Tartar.” Education produced an, “infinitely different . . . character . . . in him all the noble powers and capacities of human nature are improved and exalted and still progressing.”<sup>77</sup>

Comparing allegedly savage humans to their civilized neighbors, a doctrine of the civilization construct, was not sufficient. Doggett explicitly invoked that theme of the construct which used other civilizations as a gauge of American advancement. While the “blessings of education” raised “the improved and civilized nations of Europe . . . above the roving tribes of Africa,” he deprecated the “dark ages” which produced the “ridiculous doctrine of the divine right of kings.” America, alone, provided a shining example of the influence of education. “Convinced of the vast consequence of literature,” he explained, “our pious ancestors gave the earliest attention to the education of their youth.”<sup>78</sup>

The education of female youth was of particular concern to Doggett. He began this part of his speech by citing the influence of mothers upon their children, then quickly linked republican motherhood directly to the promotion of “civilization” in America. Doggett seemed to believe that female education would advance civilization in part because women would be better able to educate their children. This was best done by educating women, thereby raising their status as well as the status of American

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 155, 156.

society among nations. Again, this theme harks to the power of the civilization construct. Considering the value of education, Doggett found it, “surprising . . . that, in this, one half of the human race have been so basely neglected. . . . This doubtless is a trait of barbarity.” Doggett went on to implicate physical labor as another trait of barbarity. He sounded an increasingly common theme for contemporary writers, “In the savage state, where strength is honor, the delicate female is depressed far below the dignity of her rank.” Continuing, he said, “As civilization” advances “in families and nations, female education gains ground, ladies assume their proper rank and command respect. Happy am I,” he celebrated, “to observe this trait of barbarity in our country rapidly wearing away.” Looking to the future, Doggett hoped “that [the] glorious era [would] soon commence when a virtuous and refined education shall adorn the fair daughters of America . . .”<sup>79</sup> As was true for so many of his colleagues in the new female academies, Doggett saw the educated woman as evidence of an advancing civilization. Indeed how these women applied their academic knowledge beyond the gates of the campus was entirely open to question.

John Hobson supplied another example of the disconnect between abstract theory and practical reality. Hobson was a Philadelphia educator who in 1799 published his, *Prospectus of a Plan for Instruction for the Young of Both Sexes, Including a Course of Liberal Education for Each*. Printed to promote Hobson’s school, the tract begins with the familiar bow to the advancement of American civilization — the first

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

principle of the civilization construct. "The progress of nations has marked the power of education . . . We have the instrument within our grasp: dark, dissolute and guilty, will be that nation that has not virtue to use it." He continued, invoking the second maxim of the civilization construct by his comparison of America to other nations, "It is no longer necessary for the man of reflection to enquire what conferred on Athens and on Rome its ancient celebrity . . ." "What distinguished Egypt for its literature and its science," he asked "when Greece and Rome ranked with Barbarians?" Hobson persevered in ranking the nations, past and contemporary, by the degree of education present in each society. Turning to America, Hobson asked, "What but the advantages of education can prevent the gloomy irksomeness of rustic solitude, or . . . advancing decrepitude? . . ." "All civilized nations," he argued, "now perceive [education's] influence; all ranks desire to secure its advantages; and no man forms an exception to this observation, but he who is a slave to the most puerile inattention, or fallen into the stupor of gross depravity." <sup>80</sup>

His prospectus remained gender neutral throughout the first section, which described the philosophy and place of education, and Hobson's day-school, in the republic. He wrote, "to cultivate the understanding of young people is the precise object of a day-school. . . . That the minds of youth should be prepared for the future scenes of active life, by a fixed course of liberal education, is allowed and acted upon by

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<sup>80</sup> John Hobson, *Prospectus of a Plan of Instruction for the Young of Both Sexes, Including a Course of Liberal Education for Each*. Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1799, pp. 9 - 10.



all orders in society.” Empathizing with the parents of his students he lamented that he was “deeply anxious to qualify *my own children* for the chequered scenes of life . . . upon what principles ought their course of education be founded?”<sup>81</sup> Close examination reveals that though the context of this section allowed the use of a male modifier, Hobson chose neutral language instead.

It was only with the introduction of his curriculum plan that Hobson suddenly dropped females from his previously inclusive language. In this section, Hobson abruptly shifted tone. He consistently chose male modifiers even though context permitted neutral language. Hobson’s curriculum ensured, “that he [a student] should write . . . that he should manage numbers . . . that he should be acquainted with . . . history.”<sup>82</sup> Though the title includes the “. . . Young of Both Sexes . . .” girls are only abstractly present in the section that Hobson wrote as an attempt to justify the establishment of his school. After the introduction, Hobson moved on to specific information about the structure, curriculum, and methods employed at his school. Here, girls are absent, even though Hobson’s curriculum mirrored that used at other contemporary female academies. “Every young gentleman” Hobson assured parents, “should have a place assigned for . . . his hat, books, &c.” Additionally, Hobson promoted academic subjects as preparation for futures in law, medicine and trade — all fields closed to women.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 11, 12, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

At the very end of his prospectus, Hobson once again included girls, “corporal punishment for the youth of either sex . . . is seldom necessary . . . I am sorry to add, that until our children are brought up with more rational ideas of liberty and independence, the apprehension of some punishment is rendered necessary.”<sup>83</sup> For Hobson, education was central to the concept of civilization, but when it came to specifics girls were dropped from his system. This indicates two possibilities. Perhaps Hobson believed that educated women were essential to the advancement of civilization, but like the trustees of the Young Ladies’ Academy, he remained unsure of the practical application for their instruction. Alternatively, maybe he was hostile toward female education and superficially included it in his prospectus merely to capitalize on the power of the civilization construct. Either interpretation points to the power the civilization construct held for those wishing to affect social change.

Though a close reading of Hobson’s work allows either interpretation, the language of an 1805 advertisement is transparently patronizing. Regardless, it too is evidence of the cultural force inherent in the civilization construct. The advertisement appeared in the *Richmond Enquirer*, and carried the large-print and bolded heading:

**EDUCATION & POLITE ACCOMPLISHMENTS  
FOR YOUNG LADIES**

At Williamsburg, Virginia

Though there are no further surviving records of the school, the advertisement promoted, “Mr. Anderson’s institution for the instruction of young ladies . . .”

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

Anderson, who presumably composed the text, wrote that his school was, “formed in the bosom of a society distinguished for intelligence and refinement.” For this reason, the school “enjoys peculiar advantages of situation.” This last sentiment was an explicit use of the civilization construct’s maxim that constantly ranked different societies according to their perceived degree of civilization. Anderson hoped to play on the residents’ ambition to place among the most esteemed cities in the United States. The announcement leads with this fawning sentiment:

Whilst the enlightened period in which we live dawns with benign influence on female improvement, and parents every where become emulous to obtain for their daughters, the advantages which polite education confers, an establishment calculated to gratify this amiable and just solicitude, cannot fail to excite interest and meet approbation.

In further exalting Williamsburg’s “distinguished” society, the advertisement continued, “As the seat of a justly celebrated university, and the residence of many families of the first distinction in our country, Williamsburg presents a scene propitious in the highest degree to mental and personal accomplishments; . . .” Not only that, but, “no place has superior claims to attention” as a site appropriate for the “improvement of young ladies.”<sup>84</sup> Again, the civilization construct influenced Anderson’s argument that Williamsburg was more civilized than other cities because of its enlightened support of female education. According to the advertisement, not only was the United States of America a true, fourth-stage, civilization, but Williamsburg was also more advanced

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<sup>84</sup> Anonymous advertisement, Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 April 1805, Virginia Cities Collection, Williamsburg Folder 32, Swem Library at The College of William & Mary. Williamsburg, Virginia.



than others cities in America. Once again the fortunes of a civilization and those of its women were linked; educated women were both a cause and an index of advancing civilization.

## SCHEMES OF IMPROVEMENT

Prolific use of the civilization construct by first-generation educators also filtered down into the second-generation. Those who started academies at the dawn of the republic strengthened the civilization construct through constant use. It provided compelling justification for their work and prompted social change. It remained a powerful construct into the early nineteenth-century.

Emma Willard attended the Berlin Academy in Connecticut from 1802 to 1806. She subsequently taught in two academies before founding her own in 1814. She is most famous for her Troy (New York) Female Seminary, which she founded in 1821. It was, in fact, the third female school established by Willard.<sup>85</sup> In 1819, Willard gave a public speech aimed at the members of the New York legislature. It extracted rhetoric from the civilization construct as well as from republican motherhood ideology.

Her speech suggests the beginning of a conceptual shift away from the civilization construct and toward an greater emphasis on moral motherhood. According to Linda Kerber, the late eighteenth-century concept of motherhood was infused with political meaning. Women had the power to direct the moral development

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<sup>85</sup> Frederick Rudolph, "Emma Hart Willard." in *Notable American Women*, 3, pp. 610 - 613.

of male citizens, and this influence was believed to give them ultimate responsibility for the future of their children and the new nation. Kerber argued that in the decades immediately following the revolution, the creation of virtuous citizens required well-informed mothers.<sup>86</sup> Historians Jan Lewis and Ruth Bloch argued that motherhood was not the primary focus for revolutionary-era Americans.<sup>87</sup> Lewis places the rise of republican motherhood rhetoric around 1830, rather than immediately after the Revolution as Kerber asserted.<sup>88</sup> Willard's speech, as well as the lack of republican motherhood rhetoric present in the records of the Young Ladies' Academy, seems to support Lewis' analysis.

As time went on Americans no longer felt compelled to defend their legitimacy as an advancing civilization. In the early years of the infant United States, perceived inadequacy compelled Americans to great rhetorical lengths in an effort to obtain vindication. With time, however, American confidence in its status among nations grew. As a consequence, the influence of the civilization construct diminished in proportion to increased American self-assurance. Its waning power necessitated the creation of a new intellectual justification for female education. Advocates of female education increasingly turned to changing American beliefs about motherhood for

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<sup>86</sup> Kerber, *Women of the Republic*. pp. 228 - 229.

<sup>87</sup> See Ruth Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785 - 1815." *Feminist Studies*, 4 (June 1978) pp. 100 - 126; Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," pp. 689 - 721.

<sup>88</sup> Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," pp. 689-721.

support. Not only did motherhood supply the needed authority to their cause, but also it answered the lingering question, “what next?” No longer were reformers and educators left with no practical application for their students’ educations. In the early nineteenth-century, motherhood became the reason and the practice for female education.

The republic was thirty-eight years old when Willard gave her speech and five presidents had peacefully succeeded one another. The Louisiana Purchase had added 827,192 square miles of territory. Recent victory in the War of 1812, and the addition of nine new states — extending the western border to Illinois and Louisiana — enabled a growing sense of stability and legitimacy.<sup>89</sup> Americans finally perceived that their actions, rather than their bombast, conveyed them the coveted status of a true civilization.

Willard hoped to convince her listeners that female education deserved, “the aid of the legislature. . . .” Like James Neal and John Swanwick, the trustees of the Young Ladies’ Academy who had requested public financial support, Willard spoke powerfully. Unfortunately, also like Neal and Swanwick, she was unsuccessful in raising the desired funds. Her speech is characterized by the same themes as the speeches given before the Young Ladies’ Academy. Three of the five concepts derived from the civilization construct are present in her speech: first, Willard asserted that the advancement of American civilization would be brought about by improvements in “the female

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<sup>89</sup> Charles Van Dorn, et al, eds., *Webster’s Guide to American History*. Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C Merriam Company, 1971, pp. 671, 677, 767.



character;" second, she argued that only "barbarous and despotic" nations deny women an education; and third, she assumed the Scottish Enlightenment sort of social equality between men and women.

Unlike Neal and Swanwick, however, Willard was not ready to congratulate the United States for its support of female education. She attempted to gain legislative support by pointing out that, "Civilized nations have long since been convinced, that education, as it respects males, will not . . . regulate itself, . . ." For this reason, Willard argued, "[civilized nations] have made it a prime object, to provide [men] with every thing requisite to facilitate their progress in learning: . . ." Unlike male education, Willard noted that "female education has been left to the mercy of private adventurers; . . ." This weakness could, according to Willard, bring about the downfall of the republic. She reminded her audience that, "In those great republics, which have fallen of themselves, the loss of republican manners and virtues, has been the invariable precursor, of the loss of the republican form of government." "But is it not in the power of our sex," she asked, "to give society its tone, both as to manners and morals?"<sup>90</sup>

While Neal and Swanwick celebrated the United States as a fourth-stage civilization, Willard denied America that status. America was little better than the "barbarians [who] have trodden the weaker sex beneath their feet . . ." She asked,

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<sup>90</sup> Emma Willard, *An Address to the Public: Particularly to the Members of the Legislature of New-York, Proposing A Plan for Improving Female Education*. Middlebury, Vermont: J.W. Copeland. 1819, pp. 4, 7, 50.

“where is that wise and heroic country, which has considered, that our rights are sacred, though we cannot defend them?” In reply, she said, “History shows not that country.” Lest the legislature be too ashamed, she reassured them of American potential. History “points to the nation, which, having thrown off the shackles of authority and precedent, *shrinks not from schemes of improvement . . . but . . . would rather lead than follow in the march of human improvement.*”<sup>91</sup>

Sensing that the civilization construct may not have been sufficiently moving for her audience, Willard also resorted to republican motherhood rhetoric. Her use of both constructs was a savvy attempt to bridge the insecurity of the infant republic and the burgeoning American sense of competence. She asserted that improvements in female education would raise the character of men. “As evidence,” she pointed out, “that this statement does not exaggerate the female influence in society, our sex need but be considered, in the single relation of mothers.” As mothers, “we have the charge of the whole mass of individuals, who are to compose the succeeding generation. . . . How important a power is given by this charge!” Speaking of the future, Willard demanded, “And who knows how great and good a race of men, may yet arise from the forming hand of mothers, enlightened by the bounty of [America]?”<sup>92</sup> Willard’s ideas dwelt on the role of motherhood far more than any other of the first-generation educators examined here. Even given this, the strains of the civilization construct still endure in her language. It had long been a powerful construct in American culture, through both

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pp. 59, 60.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 5, 60.

the colonial era and the early republic. Powerful ideas fade slowly, often mingling with newer concepts. This was the case with the civilization construct. Though the echoes grew increasingly faint over the years, it was still powerful enough — years after it was first explicitly used to justify female education — to warrant its use before the New York legislature. Only in the face of a declining effectiveness did advocates of female education reform turn from the civilization construct to an alternative argument.

Throughout the earliest days of the new republic, the civilization construct was cited again and again by educators. In the first twenty years of the republic, the use of the familiar civilization construct granted some legitimacy to infant female academies in an often-hostile environment. Educators at female academies had to muster every rhetorical sword available to shore up support among their customers and deflect the criticisms of their opponents. Their livelihoods depended upon a substantial degree of general acceptance of their work with young women.

Speeches and writings left by these educators each contained at least one of the five themes derived from the civilization construct: one, a celebration of the advancement of American civilization brought about by female education; two, use of other civilizations, ancient and contemporary, as benchmarks for American progress; three, declarations of male and female equality — despite women's political and legal disenfranchisement; four, they condemned to barbarity those who denied women formal academic learning; and five, the standing of women was a determinant and cause of civilization. Often educators drew on several of these themes in a single speech, moving from one to another in what became a familiar pattern for their audience.



The civilization construct, whether used in genuine faith, for material purposes, or as a means to reform, powerfully changed American society. It justified the creation of early female academies, which in turn contributed to a new American womanhood. Some of these women, such as Emma Willard and Catharine Beecher, moved out into the world and founded seminaries of their own. Surviving records from the young women who attended these seminaries show that they emerged from their academy experiences profoundly changed.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE STUDENTS

The young women who attended the early female academies were bombarded with the civilization construct from the moment formal education began. Nevertheless, that could not guarantee that they either absorbed it or that it meant anything to them. As all children do from time to time, they may have simply tuned out their elders. This chapter seeks to determine how meaningful the construct was to the girls whose lives it changed. Were they aware of its power? Did they understand their place in the conceptual shift which legitimated female academic education for the first time?

Historian Mary Beth Norton theorized that the Revolutionary era was a time when women's self-esteem was improving. Norton asserted that during the Revolution, many women had managed their husband's affairs, some had taken on a brief, but public, political role, and republican theorists emphasized women as the source of all virtue. After the Revolution, marriages became more egalitarian and fathers began to give daughters more say in choosing their husbands. Couples cooperated in controlling conception in order to spare the wife's health, and marriage grew to be seen as a mutual responsibility leading to mutual happiness. In this atmosphere, Norton theorized, women grew increasingly willing to challenge traditional beliefs about female inadequacies. They noted counter-arguments in their diaries and letters and responded

to magazines that published essays they deemed offensive. This, Norton contended, was the genesis of the drive to improve women's education.<sup>93</sup>

The civilization construct complemented the developments cited by Norton. It advocated an important and dignified role for women. Women were considered social equals in the sense that they were the friends and companions — rather than the servants — of men. Additionally, women's situation in society was both a determinant and an index of civilization, and female education was prized by many. All of these ideas augmented changes in women's self-perception. For young women just coming of age in the post-revolutionary era, the influences cited by Norton as well as the civilization construct were timely. Often, however, the social change cited by Norton and the tenets of the civilization construct were in direct conflict with accepted social mores regarding women's place. Surviving evidence indicates not only students' awareness of the power behind the civilization construct, and their willingness to use it, but also the tension created by the conflict between elevated status for women and restrictive social customs. Speeches and compositions by girls at the Young Ladies' Academy and in one anonymously published essay reveal a knowledge of American civilization rhetoric as well as familiarity with its intellectual roots — the Scottish Enlightenment. Recall, too, that Emma Willard was a student of an early academy. Her use of the civilization construct rivaled the trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy in its proficiency.

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<sup>93</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, pp. 228 - 255.



In addition to the civilization construct, the students' speeches held other common themes. Discourses on the importance of Christian piety, as well as fond memories and tearful goodbyes to schoolmates were common. One student also used the opportunity to share her feelings about what it meant to be a woman in the early Republic. Not surprisingly, her feelings were often in conflict and her ideas discordant. The presence of such conflicting ideas within her speech indicates either intellectual confusion about her place in a changing society, or perhaps antagonistic convictions just barely checked at the podium. Another student used her speech to rebel against the cultural taboo that proscribed a public, political role for women. It is clear from their language that some young women of the Academy were negotiating the multiple meanings of womanhood in the early Republic

The surviving evidence, however, only proves the students' willingness to use the construct within the context of the ongoing public debate. Whether they felt personally involved as an agent of what they perceived to be their advancing civilization is difficult to ascertain and remains fertile ground for historians to explore. Though no private letters from students at the Young Ladies' Academy seem to have survived, limited examination of letters written by young women who attended other academies did not reveal such sentiments.<sup>94</sup> Most letters were addressed to parents or siblings and

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<sup>94</sup> The following manuscript collections were consulted: at the Library of Congress — Bancroft/Bliss Papers; at the College of William & Mary — Barraud Family Papers, Blair/Banister Family Papers, Cabell Family Papers, Dew Family Papers, Garth Family Papers, Overton Family Papers, Page/Saunders Papers, Powell Family Papers, Skipwith Family Papers, Tyler Family Papers, Watts Papers; at the Virginia

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were restricted to a recitation of daily events at school, and requests for money or personal articles. The pragmatic nature of these letters generally did not seem to lend itself to sweeping political declarations.

“AND IF TO READ, WHY NOT TO SPEAK?”<sup>95</sup>

The Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia required each student to face quarterly examinations and at times to address the public. Although long established as requirements for male students, both were novel approaches to female education. The public speaking requirement, in particular, was extremely unusual in the 1780s and 1790s. It directly contradicted accepted social maxims that forbade female public speaking in front of mixed gender audiences. The students were acutely aware of this tension.

In opening the first speech ever delivered by a woman at an Academy function, Ann Loxley began a pattern that every other female speaker followed. She appealed for forgiveness and understanding, saying, “[I] trust that all who are present will with candour excuse my undertaking.”<sup>96</sup> From 1790 to 1794, a total of nine speeches were delivered by young ladies of the Academy; without exception, they all began with

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<sup>94</sup>(...continued)

Historical Society — Beverly Family Papers, Byrd Family Papers, Robert Lewis Papers, Myers Papers, Preston Papers, Woololf Papers.

<sup>95</sup> From a speech by student Molly Wallace. *Rise and Progress*, p. 73.

<sup>96</sup> *The Rise and Progress*, p. 39.

repentance. Loxley, however, did not dwell on the novelty of her undertaking. Her apology was brief and had the air of necessity rather than sincerity.

Other students were not so comfortable in their public role. In 1794, Ann Negus began her address reluctantly, referring to it as “her lot.” Most students spent a mere paragraph of printed text in rendering their apologies. In comparison Negus’ apology was profuse; it covered five paragraphs of printed text. She hoped to retain her modesty as much as possible because to forfeit it would show a temerity “most unbecoming.” Finally, she wanted her audience to know that her address was a requirement of the Academy. In no circumstance would she ever *volunteer* as she “should consider the most elaborate apology insufficient to extenuate such a violation of female delicacy.”<sup>97</sup>

At the opposite extreme lay an address given by Priscilla Mason in 1793. Her apology constituted one of the least sincere ever delivered. She allowed that, “A female, young and inexperienced, addressing a promiscuous assembly, is a novelty which requires an apology, as some may suppose.” The rest of her speech made it clear that she did not suppose such apologies were necessary. She went on to argue that “the free exercise of this natural talent [public speaking] is part of the rights of woman. . . .”<sup>98</sup> Mason left the distinct impression that she would gladly “violate female delicacy” by volunteering to speak whenever necessary.

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<sup>97</sup> Neal, *An Essay on the Education and Genius of the Female Sex*, 29 - 30.

<sup>98</sup> *Rise and Progress*, 90 - 91.



Another defender of woman's right to speak publicly was Molly Wallace whose valedictory address in 1792 challenged the logic of denying woman the podium. How else were women expected to hone the skills of speech, she demanded. No one denied that women should be taught to read in the best manner, so why not learn to speak properly? Though she stopped short of allowing women to "harangue at the head of an Army, in the Senate, or before a popular Assembly," she argued that there were certain venues (which remained unspecified) where a woman might enunciate her thoughts. These venues were limited to a "properly selected audience" since a "promiscuous and indiscriminate one . . . would be absolutely unsuitable. . . ."99

Wallace's words and those of her fellow students revealed a variety of feelings about women's public role. A few, such as Ann Negus, were genuinely nervous and fearful about delivering their speeches and only did so because it was required of them. Most of the students acknowledged their unique position and then easily forayed into their speech. Only two (Mason and Wallace) thought that the cultural prohibition against their display was an undue restriction. Between these two young women, however, there was disagreement. Wallace's position on female speaking was considerably more conservative than was Priscilla Mason's. Mason did not prescribe the composition of the audience or limit a speaker's topic. With a Wollstonecraft-like zeal she steadfastly defended a woman's prerogative to speak anywhere on any topic.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 73 - 74.

Negus' speech and those of her classmates survive because they were published by the trustees of the Academy as a promotional tool. They provided evidence of the school's effectiveness at developing poised, highly educated young ladies. Given the purpose, one might think that the speeches were carefully scripted by teachers or heavily edited before publication. Upon examination of their content, however, this possibility appears unlikely. The young women were often quite frank and controversial in their stated opinions. Remember that Priscilla Mason, an outspoken salutatorian, claimed the right to exercise, "female eloquence" as "one of the rights of woman." Furthermore, she railed that "The Church, the Bar, and the Senate are shut against us. Who shut them? Man; despotic man, first made us incapable of the duty, and then forbid us the exercise." "Let us by suitable education," she continued, "qualify ourselves for those high departments — they will open before us." Though that passage was surely provoking, the following reference to Saint Paul would definitely have been removed had the trustees edited the students' speeches:

Contemptible little body! The girls laughed at the deformed creature. To be revenged, he declares war against the whole sex: advises men not to marry them; and has the insolence to order them to keep silence in the Church — : afraid, I suppose, that they would say something against celibacy, or ridicule the old bachelor.<sup>100</sup>

Despite its sarcastic tone and blasphemous sentiment, Mason's speech — and others that were equally contentious — were apparently given and printed unaltered. The speeches were allegedly published because, "The novelty of a Female Academy

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<sup>100</sup> *Rise and Progress*, pp. 93 - 95.

established by a Charter of Incorporation, on account of its being the first in the United States, and perhaps in the world, has led many of its advocates in this city, to request a publication of this kind.”<sup>101</sup> The title, “Rise and Progress” intimates that the goal of the trustees was to demonstrate the abilities of their students, rather than to authenticate their femininity.

### “THE PROPER DIRECTION OF THE FEMALE MIND”

All of these young women explicitly linked the tenets of the civilization construct to women’s education. At times, however, the changes in women’s status that were observed by Norton, and the rhetoric of advocates for female education clashed with social mores that restricted women’s public role. Throughout their formal educations, these young women were indoctrinated with the belief that they were a crucial part of their nation’s opportunities for advancement. They were pushed to study hard, win prizes, and publicly demonstrate their competence — behaviors that many in their society condemned. Their education was superior to the majority of other American women and a good many men. Despite this, there was no real hope of any public role for them. The resulting tension between the drive to excel and the restrictive social rules can be heard in one of the speeches given by the students of the Young Ladies Academy.

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<sup>101</sup> *Rise and Progress*. Introduction.



Ann Negus, who was ashamed of having to speak publicly, was grateful to have been, "rescued from the vortex of dissipation, or the whims of fancy," by virtue of her, "regular and classical education." In beginning her speech she apologized profusely and then explained her ancestors lack of "classical" education by summarizing the four-stage theory of civilization. While celebrating the existence of the Academy, she stated that founding it any earlier than 1787 would have been "forced and premature." For her, female education was a luxury that marked only the most civilized countries. In thanking "her tutor," John Poor, she stated, "you well knew of what importance the proper direction of the female mind was to the community." Everything in the first half of her speech indicated that she was grateful and excited by the expansion of her mind.

Toward the end of her speech, however, knowledge that her future did not offer further opportunity for self-exploration clouded her thoughts. She expressed despair over woman's small niche. The circumscribed role that she knew lay ahead for herself and her classmates was the bane of their existence. "To men, many opportunities occur, of extricating themselves from misfortunes," she asserted, "and though the remainder of their lives should be a prey to excruciating disease, they still feel a pleasure from the remembrance of their former actions. . . ." Continuing, Negus predicted that, "when they die, their grateful country raises a monument to their praise." For women, however, Negus foretold a different fate:

But such is the nature of our misfortunes, that we have none of their endowments to support these with fortitude, nothing so soon sinks the mind into hopeless despondence, as contemptuous neglect.

In contrast to her earlier excitement for learning, the end of her speech shows that she was disturbed by the lack of control women had over their lives. Negus believed that woman's happiness was established on a shaky foundation. "Few of our sex are destined to continue long in possession of the power of regulating our own conduct, and those to whom we resign our liberty, too frequently confer in return, hatred and contempt . . ." Was it any wonder that women were victims to "gloomy discontent and hopeless sorrow?" In ending what was the Academy's darkest valedictory address Negus lamented women's lot in life, "to suffer accumulated wretchedness, till at length disease, the usual concomitant of silent and excessive grief, comes to their aid, and by degrees terminates their existence."<sup>102</sup> The two themes of her speech were so incompatible, it could have been delivered by two different women. Though Negus cheerfully celebrated women's expanded educational opportunity, she despaired the limitations on their future.

The unreserved Priscilla Mason went beyond a justification of female education in her speech. She began in a radical tone, proclaiming woman's right to speak publicly, ridiculing men who denied women an education and demanding that women be given access to "the Church, the Bar, and the Senate." Her sarcastic and angry manner directly rebuked prescriptions for female modesty in word and deed. Following her demand for opening public institutions to women, she bitingly asked, "Who shut them? *Man*; despotic man, first made us incapable of the duty, and then forbid us the exercise.

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<sup>102</sup> Neal, *An Essay on the Education and Genius of the Female Sex*, p. 29 - 36.

Let us by suitable education, qualify ourselves for those high departments — they will open before us.” Mason plunged on, mocking those who included women for small matters while still telling them to “sit down at my feet and learn” when issues of real importance arose. At the close of this shocking speech, Mason exhorted her audience to support the establishment of a female Senate that would “give dignity, and independence to our *manners*; uniformity, and even authority to our *fashions*.” Mason was not speaking of etiquette and clothing. “We cannot be independent,” she argued, “while we receive our fashions from other countries; nor act properly, while we imitate the manners of governments not congenial to our own.”<sup>103</sup> Indeed, as Zagari pointed out, “for the Scots, as well as for other Enlightenment thinkers, ‘manners’ carried important implications. ‘Manners’ did not simply mean proper etiquette or correct social deportment; it connoted ideas of individual morality and personal character . . .”<sup>104</sup> That Mason advocated the creation of a female Senate that would regulate American morality and character validates Ruth Bloch’s assertion that virtue had become feminized. It also gave women a central, public role in maintaining American independence. Mason went beyond the accepted model of woman as either republican woman, or the purveyor of civilization. She asserted female equality without reservation.

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<sup>103</sup> *Rise and Progress*, p. 90 - 95. Emphasis added.

<sup>104</sup> Zagari, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” p. 201.



## “THE PROGRESS OF THEIR REFINEMENT”

If the faculty gave students the intellectual freedom to speak as they saw fit, then their words can serve as candid evidence of their thoughts. Even if the students' speeches were prescribed or edited before printing, the fact that they were worded as they were is further evidence of the pervasive authority of the civilization construct. Its use by both students and faculty demonstrates its effectiveness for both generations. Also like the educators, the students surely invoked the civilization construct with varying degrees of sincerity. Doubtless, some students mouthed the words they knew their elders wanted to hear. Others, such as Ann Harker, showed a degree of familiarity with Scottish Enlightenment philosophy that only personal interest could have spurred.

Harker, whose 1794 salutatory oration came virtually undiluted from the Scottish Enlightenment, began by expressing her gratitude that the “enlightened audience” inspired her with confidence. Attributing the “happiness of social and domestic life” to the “acquisition of knowledge,” Harker invoked the civilization construct by reminding her audience that:

It is observed by lord Kaimes, that the treatment of women is always meliorated in proportion to the progress of civilization and refinement. In this age of reason, then we are not to be surprized, if women have taken advantage of that small degree of liberty which they still possess and converted their talents to the public utility.

Harker also referred to the Scot's belief that men and women are complementary equals. She did not want her audience to conclude that she wished men and women to share the same duties. For women, “the human mind should then be nearly [the] object

of our attention. The variety of passions which agitate the breast, with their nature, operations, regulations, and government, deserve the serious care of every female.”

Harker held high expectations for those who engaged in “rational conversation.” These citizens should “be acquainted with the situation and manners of our own, and of other countries, and to be able to trace the progress of their refinement from earlier ages, . .

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Harker was not alone in lecturing her audience concerning woman’s place in an enlightened civilization. Eliza Shrupp, the 1791 valedictorian, gave a speech that also briefly referred to the civilization construct. Shrupp compared America to “the condition of many nations, where ignorance sways her leaden sceptre, . . .” She reminded her listeners to be grateful for the “many precious seasons allotted us for acquiring a sufficient competency of human learning.” Furthermore, she dismissed the failures of past nations. She remarked that, “Whatever has been the infelicity of former ages, the present possess the most ample means, and exhibit the best models for education.” In speaking about education in general, Shrupp argued that, “Many benefits are derived to mankind from improvements in grammar, geography, philosophy, and the

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<sup>105</sup> Neal, *An Essay on the Genius and Education of the Female Sex*, pp. 14 - 20.

polite arts: And as the [ascent] is rendered smooth and easy, shall not our sex be ambitious of gaining the summit?"<sup>106</sup>

Shrupp's classmate, Molly Wallace, also felt lucky for the privilege of attending the Young Ladies' Academy. In her 1792 address, Wallace said, "We must be sensible, that we are favoured with opportunities of improvements, of which thousands of our sex are denied."<sup>107</sup> Whether Wallace was referring to women in other civilizations or other American women denied the opportunity to learn cannot be determined. Nevertheless, her comment demonstrates the belief that advanced civilizations were highly beneficent to women. As Zagarri put it, "Women should be grateful to live under these conditions."<sup>108</sup> Priscilla Mason, was also adamant that education was a woman's right. Rather than express her gratitude at her fortune, Mason used the authority of the civilization construct to angrily denounce men who, in the past, "denied women the advantage of a liberal education; [and] forbid them to exercise their talents on those great occasions, which would serve to improve them." Such men, Mason ranted, "doomed the sex to servile or frivolous employments, on purpose to degrade their minds, that they themselves might hold unrivall'd, the power and pre-eminence they had usurped." Acknowledging the advances recently made, however, Mason relented and

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<sup>106</sup> *Rise and Progress*, pp. 49, 50.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>108</sup> Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," p. 208.



said, "Happily, a more liberal way of thinking begins to prevail. The sources of knowledge are gradually opening to our sex."<sup>109</sup>

Ann Negus also use the civilization construct in her speech. She opened with an extensive explanation of how the four-stage theory of civilization affected female education. In referring to the early stages of colonial American society, Negus said:

Such being the state of society among our ancestors, the mode of education of women was such, as was peculiarly fitted for them, in a life thus early destined to assiduous care and unremitting industry. Time could not be spared for the acquisition of that kind of knowledge, which, however desirable, was rather more ornamental than useful.

In her own time, "real patriots" showed regard for their country by undertaking projects, such as the Young Ladies' Academy, that had a real benefit for "mankind."<sup>110</sup>

The Young Ladies' Academy was not the only female seminary that had students who were well-versed in the civilization construct. An anonymous essay written, "By a young Lady, a Student in a Seminary in Beekman-street, New-York," was published in the *New York Magazine* in 1795. She admits to being, "struck with amazement to observe the material difference in the education of the sexes." Referring to American success in winning the Revolutionary War, she was hopeful that, "since the Americans have bravely established their liberties . . . we hope their modesty will keep them from exercising that despotism over us, which they so openly despised in their master." Ably demonstrating her familiarity with the civilization theory, the author excused man's, "sovereignty over us in the former ages . . ." because "it was through

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<sup>109</sup> *Rise and Progress*, pp. 90 - 95.

<sup>110</sup> Neal, *Essay on the Genius of the Female Sex*, pp. 32 - 33.

ignorance. For whilst in a state of slavery what else could be expected?" Now, of course, she reasoned, men "wish to see the fair sex on an equal footing with themselves, enjoying all the blessings of freedom."<sup>111</sup>

This writer, as well as the students at the Young Ladies' Academy clearly absorbed the civilization construct. Again and again, the students compared the past and the present, making frequent use of the second principle of the civilization construct. Sometimes the comparisons were to the benefit of the United States, and sometimes they served to point out continuing deficiencies. They also used the other four themes of the civilization construct. They cheered what they believed to be advances in the American civilization, and expressed the belief that men and women were complementary equals. They knew that educated women such as themselves were believed to be both a cause of advancing civilization and a hallmark of it. And finally, "barbarians" who deprived women of opportunities for learning were denounced. At some level, then, they understood that the civilization construct was changing American society. In turn, they knew that they were a part of the social change. Even students who did not specifically invoke every aspect of the civilization construct still recognized that their new opportunities, "would call forth all that is human — all that is *divine* in the soul of woman."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> "On Female Education." *New York Magazine*, 5, (1795) pp. 569 - 570.

<sup>112</sup> *Rise and Progress*, p. 95. Italics original.

At the same time the students attempted to negotiate the restrictions placed on American women by their culture. For Ann Negus, the tension between the important role women held according to the civilization construct and existing social limits resulted in a sense of doom. Priscilla Mason, however, defied the bounds of cultural law and advocated an important and public role for women.



## CONCLUSION

Recent histories of women have attributed the expansion of female educational opportunity in the early republic to a variety of causes, among them: republican motherhood, religion, and social ambition. Another contributor was a tangle of beliefs about the nature of history, time, and civilization that I have called the civilization construct. It was composed of five basic tenets: one, the celebration of the continually improving American civilization; two, comparisons made between the American civilization past and present as well as between the United States and other nations; three, declarations of male and female equality — despite women's political and legal disenfranchisement; four, denunciations of societies that deprived women of an education; and five, the use of female status in a given society as a gauge for and cause of civilization. All of these messages appear in the public conversation concerning female education in the early years of the republic.

The civilization construct emerged from the hybridization of European Enlightenment ideas and the American colonial experience. Enlightenment beliefs merged with daily experience to create a new faith that America was different. This belief, regardless of its accuracy, shaped the behavior of colonists and provided the conceptual basis for advocates of female education in the early United States. The Scottish Enlightenment four-stage theory was a crucial contributor to the American civilization construct. Colonists believed that they were progressing through the stages of civilization, and that the New World was the next stop in the global progression of

learning. Despite this faith in the future, they also lived in fear of failure. The tension created by their ambition to succeed as a civilization and a pervasive awareness of their shortcomings, particularly in the “arts and sciences,” drove the slow expansion of education in the eighteenth-century. The arguments of Thomas Paine and David Ramsay accelerated this proliferation of learning by converting perceived American weaknesses into strengths. By the eve of the Revolutionary War, the perception of the colonies as “crude and socially impoverished entities of England” had been turned on its head.<sup>113</sup> The inexorable pull of history, the natural movement of power and culture from east to west, and freedom from Britain were all said to be forces poised to catapult America into its next great phase of development — a true civilization, surpassed in its greatness by no other.

The philosophers of the infant United States promoted a wide variety of educational plans. Though these plans varied widely in curriculum, methods, and length of schooling they all shared one characteristic — they all cited the civilization construct in attempts to gain support from legislatures and the public. Though Samuel Smith and Robert Coram advocated education for boys only, their arguments reinforced a rhetorical template used by advocates of more universal plans of education. The plans that did include girls, submitted by Jefferson, Rush and Webster, were heavily laced with the civilization construct. Though some historians have argued that the conservative nature of these educational systems indicates a limitation on female

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<sup>113</sup> Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, p. 117.

education, that is not the point. Regardless of the educational scope encompassed in the plans proposed by Jefferson, Rush and Webster all of their reasoning is derived from the same root — the civilization construct. This shared intellectual heritage motivated them to push for expansion of female education, even though to our modern eyes it seems rather puny. Their work was joined by Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, which was explicit in linking civilization and female education.

Gisborne used all five themes of the civilization construct in his work. He celebrated the advancement of civilization, and used other societies as a benchmark for progress. He argued for the equality of men and women, though he supported women's continued legal and political subordination. He strongly denounced barbaric societies that did not elevate women to the status he thought they deserved, and argued that educated women advanced the cause of civilization.

Gisborne and the other national leaders were joined by educators in their use of the civilization construct. The civilization construct, as well as republican motherhood, religion, or an elevated social standing, drove teachers and administrators to educate girls. The contemporary perception that America had great potential to rank among the most civilized nations and an American ambition to achieve this celebrated status afforded great power to the civilization construct. The trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia certainly tapped into the power of the civilization construct. Their speeches continually cited the needs of a true civilization in justifying the education of young women. The trustees did not rely on republican motherhood



rhetoric, as might be expected at the school co-founded by Benjamin Rush. Rather they relied mostly on the civilization construct. It was not only the speeches at the Young Ladies' Academy, but also the poetry and music that drummed home the glorification of American civilization. The surviving documentation of the Young Ladies' Academy is distinctly characterized by the five themes of the civilization construct. Throughout the life of the Academy, the trustees maintained a clear purpose. They wanted the world community to recognize the United States of America as the legitimate advanced civilization they believed it to be.

The prominence of civilization construct rhetoric at the YLA is further accented by the lack of republican motherhood language. Aside from Rush, no one concretely discussed the future. There was either a general confusion about an educated woman's place in society and the precise extent of her public role, or controversial ideas were smothered to preserve harmony. Confusion may have led to ambiguity over the practical purpose for the fine education girls received at the Academy. The trustees certainly did not emphasize motherhood. Of the twenty speeches delivered by students and trustees, only three contained references to republican motherhood ideology. Rush's speech was one, Swanwick's lone sentence another. The third brief mention came in a student's speech. All three comments are dwarfed by the quantity of rhetoric derived from the civilization construct.

The trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy were not the only educators to use such rhetoric. Simeon Doggett, the head of a coeducational academy, made liberal use of it in his 1797 speech. His fiery oration betrayed his ministerial roots, as he lambasted

savage societies that relegated women to uneducated, physical toil. Doggett was very absolute about the line between savage and civilized society. He compared societies throughout time and across distance based on their perceived degree of civilization. He used every facet of the civilization construct in his speech.

Like Doggett and the trustees of the Young Ladies' Academy, John Hobson included girls in his educational plan. Also like his colleagues, Hobson referred abundantly to the civilization construct in his prospectus for an academy. Hobson, however, was less clear than the trustees of the YLA as to women's exact purpose in school. Though he abstractly included girls in his plan for education, they were noticeably absent from specific curriculum specifications. Either he really had no clear vision of the purpose for educating women, or he was actually hostile to female education and only included girls abstractly in order to curry support. Regardless, he capitalized on the power of the civilization construct.

Finally, perhaps the least sincere use of the construct came in an 1805 newspaper advertisement. This bootlicking solicitation painted Williamsburg, Virginia as the apex of civilization in America. According to the advertisement, not only was the United States of America a true, fourth-stage civilization, but also Williamsburg was more advanced than other cities in America. For this reason, Anderson's Williamsburg female academy was ideally situated.

Whether these educators were driven by a true belief in the civilization construct, or were merely manipulating its power for professional gain, the evidence they left behind is clear. The civilization construct was constantly used because of its

strength, and in turn was constantly strengthened because of its use. It remained a powerful construct into the early nineteenth-century, when the frequency of its appearance in the rhetoric of that era declines. Emma Willard, however, still used it in her speech to the New York Assembly in 1819. Her words, however, suggest that a conceptual shift was underway. As Americans grew more self-confident in their world standing, the power of the civilization construct waned. They may no longer have needed words to defend their pride. They now had succeeded on the world stage several times over. They had doubled their territory, peacefully handed power through five administrations, won the War of 1812, and added nine new states to the Union. Though Willard's speech was full of civilization rhetoric, it was equally full of republican motherhood ideology. The waning power of the civilization construct necessitated an emphasis on another intellectual justification for female education; republican motherhood, which supplied both a rationale and a practical application for female learning.

The female academies of the late eighteenth-century, founded by men who were driven by the civilization construct, powerfully changed American society. The construct spurred the creation of these early female academies, which in turn created a new American womanhood. Not only were the students' lives profoundly different from what they might have been without the academy influence, but evidence also suggests that they were aware of the changes underfoot. The civilization construct complemented other empowering social changes of the post-Revolutionary generation. As Norton documented, women's self-esteem was gradually improving. For the young



women of this era, these influences were powerful. The students at the Young Ladies' Academy, in particular, reveal that girls were aware of the civilization construct and were willing to use its power. Emma Willard, a student of the first academies, certainly mastered its rhetoric. She was not alone. Ann Harker displayed a stunning familiarity with Scottish Enlightenment thinking. Her classmates, Eliza Shrupp, Molly Wallace, and Priscilla Mason also invoked the five principles of the civilization construct. Obviously, theirs was not the only female academy that taught girls the tenets of the civilization construct. An anonymous student used the construct effectively in a 1795 essay published in the *New York Magazine*. On some level, then, the students understood that the civilization construct was changing American society.

Additionally, the construct complicated their perception of womanhood. The traditional restrictions of woman's domestic role often chafed after such an extensive education. The students were left to balance the ambitions excited by their education and the limitations imposed by their culture.

Many graduates of the first academies often went on to found academies of their own. As the corps of educated women grew throughout the nineteenth-century so too did their influence. Ironically, in their attempts to create a true fourth-stage civilization, the men behind the first female academies were the catalyst for a society they would not have recognized.

APPENDIX A  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS FOR FEMALES ESTABLISHED PRIOR TO 1820.<sup>114</sup>

STATE	FEMALE	CO-EDUCATIONAL	TOTAL
Maine	11	20	31
New Hampshire	3	19	22
Vermont	2	0	2
Massachusetts	19	30	49
Rhode Island	3	0	3
Connecticut	8	12	20
New York	7	2	9
<b>NORTHEAST</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>136</b>
New Jersey	1	4	5
Pennsylvania	31	11	42
Delaware	1	0	1
Maryland	1	0	1
<b>MID-ATLANTIC</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>49</b>
Virginia	10	0	10
North Carolina	28	15	43
South Carolina	4	3	7
Georgia	7	6	13
Mississippi	3	2	5
Alabama	3	0	3
Louisiana	1	2	3
Tennessee	4	0	4
Kentucky	13	0	13

<sup>114</sup> Brickley, *Female Academies Are Every Where Establishing.* pp. 82 - 92.



<b>SOUTH</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100</b>
Indiana	1	1	2
Ohio	4	1	5
Missouri	0	1	1
<b>MIDWEST</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>293</b>

Brickley acknowledges that her, “criteria for establishing that a school was of ‘secondary’ level are arbitrary and probably have resulted in some mistakes.” Any school whose name included the word “academy” or “seminary” in its title was included. Additionally, schools with curricula that included the following subjects were added to the list: “geography, history, English grammar, composition, rhetoric, the sciences or languages.” Brickley’s sources included: “old histories of education, women’s histories, town histories, old journal articles, and even books on schoolgirl art and needlework.” There was a significant variation of materials from state to state depending upon the availability of documentation and the methodology of historians. Some states, such as North Carolina boasted extremely thorough information, others, such as New York, did not. Records for Connecticut supplied only partial information on many schools which Brickley was, “unable to document as to sex, date of establishment or curricula . . . These schools are not included on the list, but illustrate the fact that [her] list is probably ‘the tip of the iceberg.’”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., pp. 49 - 50.



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