

Coeducation at Northwestern:

A History

Northwestern's commitment to equal —
but not separate — educational opportunities
for men and women
began nearly 120 years ago.

by Patrick M. Quinn



*Sarah Rebecca Roland — the only female member of the class of 1874 —
was the first woman to receive a degree
from Northwestern University.*

On January 23, 1884, Chicago's *Daily Democratic Press* reported the remarks of physician, real-estate speculator, and Chicago City Council member John Evans concerning the reasons he and several of his colleagues had established a university to serve the educational needs of Chicago-area residents. Evans, a hard-nosed businessman representative of Chicago's small but aspiring middle class, wasted no words: "It would cost at least a thousand dollars less for each son we may educate in the...university than to send him to Yale or Cambridge."

While Evans was known for his fiscal sagacity, his comments also reveal his notion of whom the University would serve: he made no mention of how much would be saved by educating the community's daughters locally rather than sending them east. Indeed, on May 30, 1850, when Evans and eight associates had gathered in Grant Goodrich's Chicago law office to plan the new University, neither he nor any of his cofounders had any intention of allowing women to attend their institution.

This was not surprising. After all, only 13 years had elapsed since Oberlin College became, in 1837, the first all-male American institution of higher learning to admit women. At the time of Northwestern's founding in 1850 (the University received its charter from the Illinois legislature in 1851, held its first classes in 1855, and graduated its first class in 1859), the idea of men and women attending the same college was rarely discussed; more controversial was the very notion of women attending college at all. Nevertheless, women arguing for their right to an education were finding a more receptive audience in newly settled regions of the United States such as the Midwest, where an egalitarian spirit enjoyed some favor within upwardly mobile social strata.

In fact, in November 1855, just as Northwestern opened the doors of its modest new wood-frame building at Davis Street and Hinman Avenue in Evanston, a women's college began holding classes in a much more impressive structure only a few blocks away. That institution, with more students and faculty than Northwestern had, was not connected with the University, although its name was similar. Called the Northwestern Female College, it had been founded as a profit-making venture by two enterprising brothers, Colonel John Wesley Jones and William P. Jones.

Colonel Jones, who had made a modest

fortune in the California gold fields in 1849, had underwritten construction of the Northwestern Female College in order to take advantage of the new demand for a local institution that could offer a college-level education to the daughters of ministers, attorneys, physicians, merchants, and others who could afford such controversial luxury.

Relations between the two schools, whose names reflected the legacy of the old Northwest Territory, were tense. Members of the University's Board of Trustees, feeling that they had founded their institution on the basis of sheer altruism, resented the crass, commercial venture that intruded upon their haven

along the lake, especially since that venture had the presumptuous temerity to educate women, whose proper place was, after all, in the home.

In 1855 still another educational institution opened in the newly platted town of Evanston. The all-male Garrett Biblical Institute began to offer instruction in its new building, located on what is now Northwestern's Evanston campus. The three institutions, two for men and one for women, in one year had transformed the community of Evanston into the self-proclaimed "Athens of the Midwest."

From 1859 to 1869 Northwestern University graduated 11 classes. During the

Civil War the student body was depleted by enlistments in the Union Army, but student enrollment increased in the half-decade after the war ended. While the University flourished, the Jones brothers suffered severe financial setbacks and the Female College fared badly. As the financial status of the Female College became more precarious, anxious parents from the area began to consider alternative means of educating their daughters.

They did so in a changed climate. The impact of the Civil War had tipped the scales in the debate over whether women should be sent to college. As would happen during World War II, the



Frances E. Willard



Erastus O. Haven was elected the third president of Northwestern University on June 23, 1869. He came to Northwestern on the condition that women be allowed to matriculate.



Physical education at Northwestern University, circa 1880.

absence of millions of men engaged in fighting made it necessary for women on the home front to work on the nation's farms and in its villages, towns, and cities. These new roles assumed by women bolstered their individual and collective self-confidence and clearly demonstrated their capacity to function as equals to men. These factors in turn reinforced the argument that women had both the right and the ability to study at the college level. Still, the debate over coeducation – the education of women in the same institutions as men – was not finally resolved, nor would it be for another century.

By 1869 four basic institutional ap-

proaches to college education had emerged: the exclusively male college, such as Northwestern University; the exclusively female college, such as the Northwestern Female College; an associational or proximity model, such as those that eventually evolved at Harvard-Radcliffe and Columbia-Barnard; and the coeducational college, as pioneered by Oberlin.

It seemed as if an associational relationship might emerge between Northwestern University and the Northwestern Female College, but the long-standing tensions between the two institutions and the precarious financial state of the latter made such a prospect problematic. Fortunately, the events of the next three years ultimately transformed Northwestern from an exclusively male domain into one of the earliest private coeducational institutions in the United States.

At the June 1869 annual meeting of Northwestern's Board of Trustees, the atmosphere was charged with excitement. Eratus Otis Haven, president of the University of Michigan, was visiting Evanston and would attend the Northwestern commencement on the 23d. A 49-year-old progressive Methodist minister, Haven had been a staunch opponent of slavery and had introduced coeducation at Michigan during his tenure as president. On June 22 board member R. F. Queal offered a motion to admit women to the University. The motion was tabled. Next, the election of a new president was postponed until the following day. On June 23 Haven was elected president of Northwestern and the motion to admit women was adopted.

No documentation exists as to what deliberations transpired during the evening of June 22, but according to Frances Willard, "When invited to the presidency of our university he [Haven] said that he would not think of leaving that of the University of Michigan, so much larger and more famous, unless the doors of the Methodist institution [Northwestern] were flung wide open to women."

In his inaugural address on September 8, 1869, the new president articulated his convictions concerning the education of women:

"I cannot doubt that she has an equal claim with man to all advantages of our universities. Universities cannot be duplicated for the accommodation of the sexes any more than churches. There is no sex in learning more than in religion. It is no more proper for

man to determine this question for woman, than it would be for a woman to determine it for man. Science should be free to all. The world demands the development that shall arise from a free participation in the benefits of knowledge and thought. If there are peculiar difficulties growing out of the time of life usually devoted to study in the University, these difficulties ought to be met and removed on the free system of self-restraint and the highest Christian cultivation. I doubt not that before the 19th century shall close, all the best universities in Europe and America will educate both men and women."

It was in the autumn of 1869 that Northwestern admitted its first female student, Rebecca Hoag. In the meantime the financially strapped Northwestern Female College transferred its charter to a group of Evanston citizens who had founded a new college for women, the Evanston College for Ladies. In 1871 the group elected Frances Willard (who would later gain global renown crusading against alcohol abuse) as the first president for the new college, and construction began on a new college building. Willard and Haven discussed plans for cooperation between the new institution and Northwestern, and it appeared as if Northwestern and the Evanston College for Ladies might soon form an association.

But fate would prove otherwise. In October 1871 the great Chicago fire destroyed the prime real-estate holdings upon which the financial stability of the Evanston College for Ladies depended. Construction on the new building stopped, and in 1874 Northwestern absorbed the essentially insolvent college. The University completed the college building, which became known as the Women's College of Northwestern University. Today the edifice serves as Northwestern's Music Administration Building. Also in 1874, Northwestern's first woman graduate, Sarah Rebecca Roland, received her diploma. Northwestern thus became a fully coeducational institution of higher learning, almost a century before its counterparts in the Ivy League. Northwestern's contribution to equal – but not separate – educational opportunities for women and men was a pioneering effort for which its sons and daughters can be truly proud.

—
Patrick M. Quinn is University archivist at Northwestern University.

