

Academies and Iowa's Frontier Life

Robert E. Belding

TWO TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS CHARACTERIZED THE FRONTIER settlements which were first carved from Iowa's soil. One was religious—the established churches of the groups who came to make their homes here. The other—often related to the first—was the very American “academy,” usually a secondary school, which by the 1830s was achieving its popular maturity across the nation.

The word “academy,” denoting a school, is at least as old as Plato's garden school in Athens. But it was Benjamin Franklin who proposed an academy which was to become the first truly American school, tailored to the needs of the masses. In 1749 Franklin outlined what he thought the American academy should be, then he set to work to help establish an academic model in Philadelphia.¹ The practical aspect of his school was its attraction to the youths who were not intending to go to college.

Franklin's school was mainly a trade-oriented institution, serving the varied needs of the young people in his lively port city. Those attending who did not aspire to college settled into the so-called “English Department,” which emphasized the English and other functional modern languages, as well as skills that would help make the student a good, employable citizen. In a bid for respectability, the new institution retained the traditional college-prep department, called “Latin.”

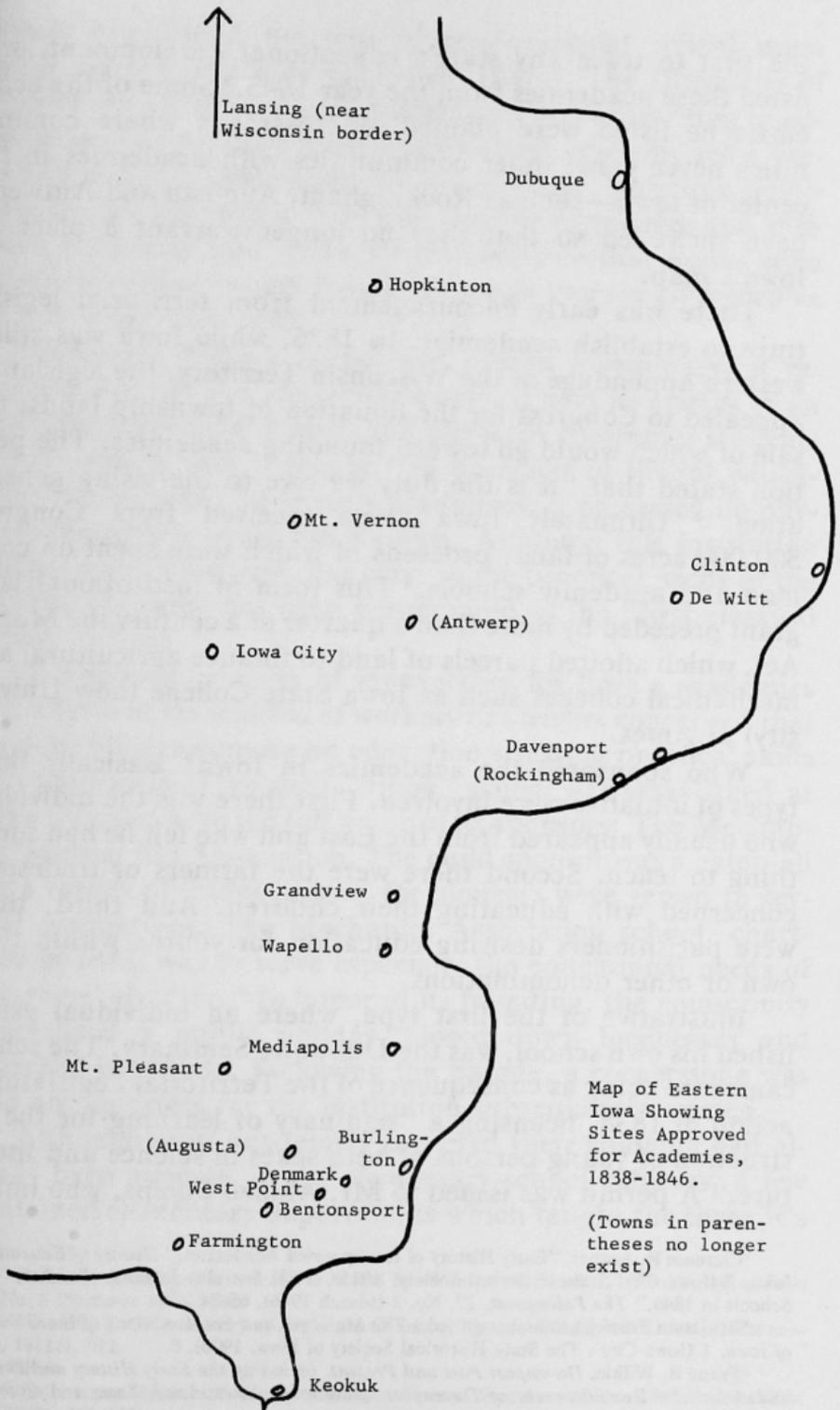
¹Robert E. Belding, “Bases to Franklin's Academy,” *Epsilon Bulletin*, Iowa City : Phi Delta Kappa chapter, 1XL (1965-66), 72; John Hardin Best, “Proposals Relating to the Education of Youths in Pennsylvania,” *Benjamin Franklin on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1962), 126-152.

This new popular form of secondary education spread rapidly across the United States, catering mainly to immediate vocational needs of local youths. Many were sponsored by religious groups and a few states, such as New York, helped to subsidize academies—even the ones that were church-related. Such states were responding to the urgent call for trained teachers. Some academies were commuter institutions, others housed students in their own dormitories, while still others boarded students from outside the community in nearby farmhouses. Some were for girls only, some for boys only, but more and more through the nineteenth century they turned co-educational. Some were called seminaries or lyceums or institutes or even societies or colleges, but the most commonly understood word for them was “academy.” The bulk of these schools were private institutions thriving in a free-enterprise system, relying on tuition fees for revenue. There were no formal qualifications for the teachers, so that anyone who desired to teach or to run a secondary-level institution could open an academy. Many such schools had only one teacher, and were in existence only so long as the teacher remained in the community. Some New England academies were ultimately converted into exclusive prep schools—something that democratic Ben Franklin probably would have opposed. Most of the private academies, however, were replaced by publicly supported secondary schools, and more than a few in Iowa and other western states evolved into liberal arts colleges. By the time Iowa was beginning to be settled, there were about 6,000 academies in the established states and territories.

As settlers came to the new land beyond the Mississippi, clusters of inhabitants established their own academies. Iowa split from Wisconsin Territory in 1838; by that year ten academies had been approved by the Territorial Legislature, although only two were activated, indicating that our settlers at least aspired to serve the immediate educational needs of their adolescent population.² The accompanying map pinpoints the locations, within the eastern quarter of the state, of the earliest academies planned or opened. It was Clarence Aurner,

²Forest C. Ensign, “The Era of Private Academies,” *The Palimpsest*, 27, No. 3 (March 1946), 75-85.

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Map of Eastern Iowa Showing Sites Approved for Academies, 1838-1846.

(Towns in parentheses no longer exist)

the first to trace any state's educational development, who listed these academies from the year 1845.³ Some of the academies he listed were planted at crossroads where communities never grew; other communities with academies in the center of town—such as Rockingham, Augusta and Antwerp, have shrivelled so that they no longer warrant a place on Iowa's map.

There was early encouragement from territorial legislatures to establish academies. In 1836, while Iowa was still a western appendage of the Wisconsin Territory, the legislature appealed to Congress for the donation of township lands, the sale of which would go toward founding academies. The petition stated that "it is the duty we owe to the rising generation."⁴ Ultimately Iowa alone received from Congress 500,000 acres of land, proceeds of which were spent on common and academic schools.⁵ This form of institutional land grant preceded by more than a quarter of a century the Morrill Act, which allotted parcels of land to finance agricultural and mechanical colleges such as Iowa State College (now University) at Ames.

Who sponsored the academies in Iowa? Basically three types of initiative were involved. First there was the individual who usually appeared from the East and who felt he had something to teach. Second there were the farmers or tradesmen concerned with educating their children. And third, there were parishioners desiring education for youths within their own or other denominations.

Illustrative of the first type, where an individual established his own school, was the Dubuque Seminary. The school came into being as consequence of the Territorial Legislature's action of 1838, licensing a "seminary of learning for the instruction of young persons of both sexes in science and literature." A permit was issued to Mr. Alonzo Phelps, who imme-

³Clarence R. Aurner, "Early History of Incorporated Academies," *History of Education in Iowa*, 3 (Iowa City: State Historical Society, 1915), 3-26. See also Jacob A. Swisher, "Iowa Schools in 1846," *The Palimpsest*, 27, No. 3 (March 1946), 65-74.

⁴Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh (ed.) *The Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa*, 1 (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1903), 8.

⁵Franc B. Wilkie, *Davenport Past and Present, including the Early History and Personal and Anecdotal Reminiscences of Davenport* (Davenport, Iowa: Luse, Lane and Company, 1858), 292.

diately established the type of coeducational school upon which many others were patterned. (Later, The University of Iowa became the first state institution of higher learning to admit women.)⁶ Another feature of this first academy set a precedent and was later widely copied in Iowa. Dubuque Seminary was a corporation, with nine appointed trustees and with stock for public sale. Town records indicate that shares were advertised at ten dollars apiece, although there is no record as to how many were sold.⁷

Although Phelps's school was named a seminary, it remained secular. For convenience only, it held its classes in an available Methodist chapel, and attracted commuter students by advertising that it taught "all branches of liberal education."⁸ Like many other early academies, it possessed no physical property it could call its own. Although this institution did not survive for long, nor cater to the practical needs of the locality, its name has been perpetuated as the "first classical school in Iowa."

The second category of sponsorship for Iowa's academies was a form of association of workers or farmers concerned that its own children acquire an education stressing practical skills and knowledge. One such "union" school was established at Iowa City and bore the full name of its sponsors: The Mechanics' Mutual Aid Association. The guild sponsor was a catch-all for a variety of trades people, for pioneers were versed in several occupations. The Mechanics Association school, chartered in 1842, was to serve especially the educational needs of members' children.⁹ In honor of its founding, the community proclaimed a public holiday, closed down businesses and marched in parade. Following the parade, a cornerstone was laid and quarters for the institution subsequently erected.

Although most academies expected their students had already been exposed to the elementary-school subjects, a few contained elementary departments which taught the three R's

⁶Robert E. Belding, "Iowa's Brave Model for Women's Education," *The Annals of Iowa* 43, No. 5 (Summer 1976), 342.

⁷Franklin T. Oldt, *History of Dubuque County* (Chicago: Goodspeed Historical Association, 1911?), 912.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹"Educational Matters," *History of Johnson County, Iowa from 1836 to 1882*, 2 (Iowa City: NP, 1883), 381-382.

in preparation for secondary-level instruction. The little that is known about the Mechanics Mutual Aid Association indicates that it offered instruction in the basics of reading, writing, and a form of practical arithmetic. This school was designed to serve the needs of a community that was rapidly becoming an important commercial and political center. Many elementary school texts were used for courses taught at Mechanics.¹⁰ Each session of the Iowa City academy was set at three months duration and the "usual cost" was three dollars a session, although tuition for music was vaguely described as "more than three dollars." Life of the Mechanics itself was brief, although its building was subsequently used for a variety of educational purposes.

After its demise as an academy, the upstairs of the building was leased to fraternal organizations or to perpetuate the training of nurses for the Sisters of Mercy Hospital. Before The University of Iowa inherited the abandoned state capitol, it owned no property, and rented the Mechanics building.

Establishment of this initial academy in Iowa City sparked an assortment of similar private schools, and one newspaper editor described the town as "infected with academic mania." Compared to several other towns which fostered only one lasting academy, Iowa City's institutions were inclined to be short lived.¹¹

Another school with underlying pragmatic philosophies flourished in the trade-oriented town of Davenport. It was begun in the early 1850s and advertised its purpose to "qualify young people to engage in the several employments and professions of society and to discharge honorably and usefully the various duties of life."¹² The utilitarian nature of the Davenport Commercial College was embodied in its requirement that all students should combine work experience with their studies. Its graduates were equipped to enter medium-level jobs without further training. Items from its curriculum are noted here because of their contrast with the more classical

¹⁰John R. Munson, "Iowa City Infected with Academic Mania," *Iowa City Press Citizen* July 1, 1976.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Wilkie, *Davenport Past and Present*, 292-293.

offerings of some other Iowa academies. For example, Davenport's course in Double Entry Bookkeeping, described as "applicable to every branch of trade," listed the specific areas for which it prepared students: for wholesale and retail, for forwarding and commission, for banking and steamboating, for joint stock and compound companies, both individual and partnership.¹³ It is apparent from this list that the course was not only comprehensive but reflected the diverse economic demands of Davenport in the middle of the past century.

Two other departments in the Davenport Commercial College today would be labeled a business school. One of these offered "Commercial Calculations" which apparently included business correspondence and commercial law. Another, the "Ladies Department," concentrated on bookkeeping and penmanship. An unusual feature of this institution was that it made no effort to prepare students for college.

Often, sponsors for early academies in Iowa were churches. The Congregationalists and the Presbyterians were particularly interested in education. They had long depended on a college-bred ministry and insisted that schools should be provided in the towns they were instrumental in establishing. By planting their academies, as well as their churches, in several Iowa towns, they were assuring themselves a dependable flow of qualified ministers and missionaries.¹⁴

The academy at Denmark emerges as a fairly representative institution of church affiliation and support. Congregational pioneers came to this prairie hillock eleven miles west of the Mississippi River and near Burlington. Denmark's school was the second academy established in Iowa, and is still recognized as the one which endured more deeply into the twentieth century than other comparable institutions.¹⁵ Indeed, Clarence Aurner accords this academy an entire chapter in his volume on Iowa's secondary education.

The secret of the academy's endurance was partly the settlers' devotion to education. Initial endowment from commu-

¹³Clarence R. Aurner, "Early History of Incorporated Academies," 3; Wilkie, *Davenport Past and Present*, 294.

¹⁴Ruth A. Gallaher, "The Iowa Band," *The Palimpsest*, 11, No. 8 (August 1930), 357.

¹⁵Arthur Woodroffe, "Denmark Academy," *Fort Madison Democrat*, February 26, 1976.



DENMARK ACADEMY.
DENMARK, IOWA.

nity members was impressive. And even though the Denmark academy was merged with the public high school a half a century ago, to this day residue from the academy's endowment is being used to send promising young people of the community on to college.¹⁶

Interest in the rich agricultural area immediately west of the Mississippi was strong among the "Iowa Band."¹⁷ This group of young men had been studying for ordination at the Andover Theological Seminary and migrated to Iowa to establish parishes. One of the group's spokesmen was Asa Turner, allegedly the first Congregational minister to cross the Mississippi. He traveled to Iowa in 1836, and returned to New England with a message to his fellow ministerial students that the West held great opportunities for "stout hearts."¹⁸ Members of the Band came in 1843 to lead congregations in the budding towns of Keosauqua, Bloomington (Muscatine), Burlington, and towns in Van Buren, Henry and Davis counties. Some of

¹⁶Letter, Edith J. Hamm to the author, Denmark, Iowa, November 29, 1976.

¹⁷*Fiftieth Annual Report of the Directors of the American Education Society* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1866), 11. For a full description of the Congregationalists' effort to assure a reliable flow of missionaries and ministers to the west see David F. Allmendinger, Jr., "The Strangeness of the American Education Society," Chapter V, *Paupers and Scholars* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 64-78.

¹⁸Philip D. Jordan, *William Salter, Western Torchbearer* (Oxford, Ohio, 1939), 32.

the band, including Asa Turner, settled just west of Burlington in Denmark.

There were no Danes in this Denmark, a village of Congregationalists; at first the population was too preoccupied with survival to accord their town a name, simply referring to it as "The Haystack Colony" until one settler at a town meeting suggested that the community was mature enough to warrant a name. The story goes that a woman thereupon opened her Congregational hymnal to a tune labeled "Denmark," and thus gave the town its very Scandinavian title. Even before the town had found itself a name from among tunes in the hymnal, the church was built and a school settled into it. The edifice was erected in 1838, and immediately the building became a Sunday church, a weekday school and an evening town hall. This was in line with the layout of New England towns, with a green common in the center and an efficient, multi-use building at one end. This frugal spirit of the Yankees marked the plat of a number of towns in Iowa.

Charter for the enduring academy, granted by the Territorial Legislature, was issued five years after the town was settled, and it was time for the town fathers to restate their ecclesiastical and educational link by noting that "faith, fellowship and personality are developed and perpetuated together." Once the town had acquired its name, the school was granted the title, The Philandrian College of the Town of Denmark. The word "philandrian" as applied to the institution most likely referred to the elective nature of its curriculum.

From its inception the academy was far more liberal than others of the area. Trustees could appoint their own president and schoolmasters. The fact the institution itself could award whatever degrees it saw fit was indicative of the laissez-faire enterprise of the frontier. On the day that the Territorial Legislature granted approval of this academy, it licensed seven other academies in Iowa. All were to accommodate both sexes, and all were to espouse the liberal arts. Each was to be governed by seven trustees. These were liberal qualities, but Denmark's academy went even further by stating that persons of every religious denomination should be granted admission.

This tolerance, which had a bearing on the academy's title, marked the institution through the years and smoothed its ultimate transition to a public school.

Another "freedom" generally shared by all academies of the time, but certainly pronounced at the Denmark institution, was the array of electives in the curriculum as well as the encouragement of students to cross curricular lines to take subjects outside a prescribed course. Even the college prep students were to take practical courses from the English Department while pursuing their classical studies. This could not have happened in equivalent schools in the East where college preparation was rigidly prescribed.

Unlike many frontier academies, the one at Denmark enjoyed healthy enrollments from the start. Its first catalog, issued in 1855, listed 105 students, with forty-four from "abroad," which referred to boarders from beyond the immediate community. During the Civil War years it contained females almost exclusively, for the boys of the area were quick to volunteer their services to the northern cause. Subsequently, the "philandrian" element was to return, for the 1866 catalog of the school listed 200 students representing sixteen states and balanced between the sexes.¹⁹

Ben Franklin's concept of his pampered institution as popular and trade-oriented was not to be a strength of Denmark's academy. A survey in 1900 of what became of alumni indicated that almost all of the institution's graduates went on to college, then into the professions. They did not all enter the ministry, for by the turn of the century two eminent geologists who helped to build our railroads and a number of university presidents were identified as graduates.

The Denmark institution eventually suffered the fate of most academies in the early decades of our present century. Publicly supported secondary schools, which had been introduced in Iowa as early as 1856, were rapidly replacing the

¹⁹While on a visit to the now unincorporated town of Denmark on September 18, 1976, the author was accompanied by Arthur Woodroffe, at one time a student of the academy, to the town's bank vault which contained sheaves of documents pertaining to the academy's history. It is from these materials that the writer was able to acquire figures from minutes and catalogs of the institution as well as a copy of the fine sketch of the academy. Woodroffe, as the town's "academic scholar," shared his broad knowledge of the subject generously with the author.

sponsored academies, and by 1911 there were only twenty-five philandrian students left. The following year the academy was integrated with the township high school.²⁰

From its inception the academy had built an endowment to supplement the modest tuition fees of about a dollar a week. The endowment had come from land sales to town developers, plus a surprising accumulation of "butter and egg" money from citizens of the community. Thus in 1912, when the school was meshed with the township's public institution, the school building was already the property of the academy, but the principal's salary was henceforth to be paid from the academy's on-going endowment funds.

In 1924 Demark's midwinter display of pyrotechnics was to "heat the January air"—its venerated academy building burned to the ground. The present school in Denmark was constructed on the foundation of the earlier academy, still standing today in an open area which can readily be imagined as the original "common." Other consequences of the fire brought improvements to the community. Out of the ruins came establishment of Denmark's first volunteer fire department. The school reaffirmed its affiliation with the Congregationalists as it moved classes temporarily into the church basement. The sum of \$18,000 from the academy's endowment fund was donated toward rebuilding the school on the remains of the original institution.

ANOTHER LONG-LASTING SECONDARY SCHOOL of eastern Iowa proved to be almost as tenacious as Denmark's. It was popularly known as Howe's Academy, opened in Mount Pleasant in 1844 and eventually supplanted by the town's public school in 1917. The success of Howe's has been attributed to its parade of "genetically talented" teachers, who were able to communicate the subject matter with finesse.²¹

Samuel Luke Howe moved to Mount Pleasant from Ohio in 1841; he appeared in town trailing behind him a series of outstanding successes in turning out teachers in the Buckeye

²⁰Arthur Woodroffe, "Denmark Academy," *Fort Madison Democrat*, February 26, 1976.

²¹John Drury, "Howe's Academy," *This is Henry County, Iowa*. (Chicago: Inland Co. 1956), 7.



"Old Steam Mill," Howe's Academy, was located on east Monroe St. in Mount Pleasant. The site is now occupied by a high school complex.

State. One report indicates that he very likely established the first academy in Iowa.²² In Mount Pleasant he set to work building a rude log cabin, and immediately resumed teaching there while occupying it as his home. His very own teaching method, already proven successful in molding competent Ohio teachers, had been packaged and carted aboard his wagon to Iowa and it apparently arrived intact.

Within his first year in Iowa his school proved to be so popular that he moved it to more commodious quarters—an assigned section of the Henry County log jail. From that confining environment the school again moved under the ecclesiastical halo of the town's Presbyterian Church. While there, his personal academy was converted in name to the lofty title, Mount Pleasant High School and Female Seminary. After his academy's stay "among the church pews," Sam Howe moved it to its first permanent building, which was occupied by the school in 1847.

This institution with the lengthy title soon became known across the Mississippi as Howe's Academy, but partly because of its severe appearance it was affectionately called by its alumni and close friends the "Old Steam Mill." This title was reinforced by the often-heard statement from those who had

²²*The History of Henry County, Iowa*, (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1879), 430.

attended that it contained a "pressure method, rapid and exact, in stamping out a pattern of good teachers." Actually its single building is said to have once been a mill.

In these early days of success Howe's was firmly established as an enduring institution. Its successful and enthusiastic human products were its best publicity. Sam Howe, in the style of his day, proudly sired a large family of seven children, of whom five were males. He claimed to possess teaching genes, for at one time or another all his offspring taught with him under this academic roof, and his contagious method, severely prescribed for all who ever taught for him, was disseminated wherever his children were to settle, either in other parts of Iowa or in Michigan or California.

Progressive features of Howe's Academy included encouragement for the student's voice in all aspects of the school's governance, a schedule tailored to the needs of each individual (which meant there was a generous array of electives), and a relatively large faculty to offer the program. At that time the average number of faculty per academy was two, and many such institutions had only one. Yet from the start, Howe's Academy had at least five instructors, although it must be admitted that four out of five of these answered to the name of "Howe."

By contrast to many of the secondary schools of the region, which were open only when harvesting was over and before spring crops were sown, Howe's (or more accurately Howes') Academy operated across the entire annual calendar, with no holiday breaks. Other schools were in session when weather permitted, or when a master was available to teach. Howe's accepted students at any time during the year. Students were given the freedom to select a curriculum of their choice.²³ Tuition was established at between six dollars and nine dollars per ten-week session, depending on courses selected. Another attractive characteristic of the academy was that it offered a variety of evening courses, especially for farm youths kept busy in the fields or family kitchen during the daytime. From the start, Howe proudly pursued what he called an aggres-

²³Robert E. Belding, "An Iowa Schoolgirl—1860 Style." *The Palimpsest*, 58, No. 1 (January-February, 1976), 3.

sively coeducational program, mainly turning out male and female teachers for the common schools of southeast Iowa. One of Howe's earliest disciples, John Van Valtenburg, became the first principal of The University of Iowa's pioneering Normal Department.²⁴

Howe wrote that his technique "differed from all others in the world, for it accomplished so much in so short a time." Each potential teacher was said to be trained "individually and in concert." Each could do his own work and could explain reasons for doing it. His students could perform samples of teaching and exhibit acquired skills in front of the class. Any student who collapsed from this traumatic exercise was asked to step aside for another to take over. Later the student would try again, and ultimately there were few, if any, failures in such a method.²⁵

The curriculum offered, from top to bottom, was extensive. Seniors selected from among class offerings in trigonometry, logic, Latin, Greek, mental philosophy, political economy, natural theology, and evidences of Christianity.²⁶ This list suggests that Howe's school may have been a moral institution, yet it did not profess dedication to turning out ministers and missionaries. Juniors selected courses from among the offerings of Greek, geometry, rhetoric, universal history, astronomy, American literature, botany, and zoology. The final three items of the list had already been tested and proved effective in eastern women's academies. The sophomores selected from among the subjects: history of the United States, higher arithmetic, physical geography (another invention of girls' schools), algebra, English grammar, physiology, chemistry, natural philosophy, and Latin. Freshmen took subjects most useful to elementary-school teaching and ones which carried on most naturally from their earlier, common-school instruction. Their buffet included orthography, reading, ob-

²⁴Clarence R. Aurner, "Howe's Academy," *History of Education in Iowa*, 3 (Iowa City, Iowa: State Historical Society, 1915), 46.

²⁵Harry Good and James Teller, "Colleges for the People," *A History of American Education*, 10 (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 280.

²⁶John Ely Briggs (ed.), "Comments by the Editor—The Course of Study," *The Palimpsest*, 10 (Dec., 1929), 443-44.

ject lessons (an import from the German kindergarten), mental and written arithmetic, geography, and English grammar. Moral lessons were required of every student "in order to render all teachers grave," and Latin was required of all freshmen because Howe had proclaimed it as "so much clear gain to the student . . . that it was offered free of charge in order that all might enter it."

The Mount Pleasant High School and Female Seminary enjoyed a crest of popularity and success just a century ago, and in the very decade when Samuel Howe died. At that time the institution contained upwards of 350 students per year, most of them attracted from within the state of Iowa.²⁷

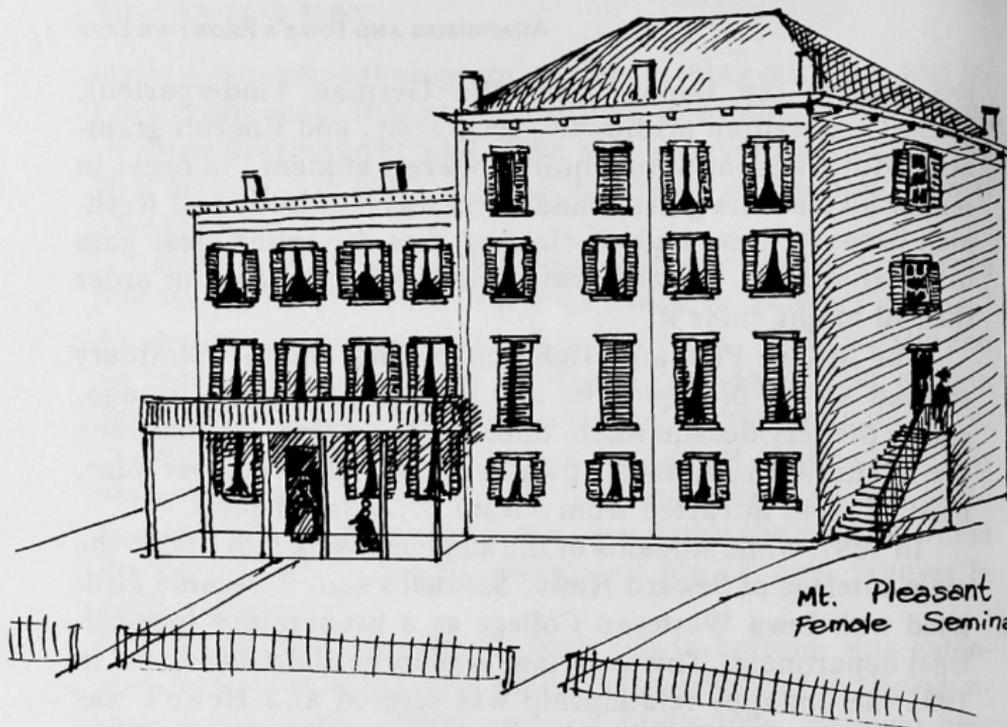
In 1897, while students of the academy were still under the main tutelage of Seward Howe, Samuel's son, it became affiliated with Iowa Wesleyan College as a preparatory (pre-college) department. This marriage was to be short-lived, for in 1902 the unhappy relationship was severed and Howe's was once again an independent institution concentrating on turning out potential elementary-school teachers. In the meantime his bulky mill had been dismantled, so Seward Howe moved his school into an accommodating church.

The established title, "Old Steam Mill," was retained for the school until its demise in 1916. Like almost all private academies, it was replaced by the public high school which today stands on almost the exact site of the steam mill. Howe's unalterable prescription for teaching became outdated when Iowa began requiring teacher certification with a requisite for education beyond secondary level for all new teachers.

MOUNT PLEASANT'S OTHER SECONDARY SCHOOL, the Female Seminary, was different from Howe's Academy in terms of philosophies and functions. Discipline above all else was emphasized at the girls' school, whereas Howe's school emphasized the course content.²⁸ The seminary was indicative of the general run of exclusively female institutions that believed in regulating every waking hour of the girls' lives.

²⁷Louis T. Jones, "The Planting of Quakerism of Iowa," 4, *The Quakers of Iowa*, (Iowa, City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1914), 133.

²⁸Briggs, "Comments by the Editor . . .", 446.



Drawing by Alison Beldi

The Mount Pleasant Female Seminary's assigned plat of ground in the community was in the southeast corner, next to what was already the "asylum" which later became the state's Mental Health Institution. Certainly the females in their seminary were as confined as the inmates of the asylum, for the peripheral walls were high. The list of prohibitions was stern, reflecting the despotic administration. If girls came to the campus with expensive jewelry or dresses, these were to be closeted or confiscated.²⁹ Confectionaries of any sort were listed as contraband and conducive to ill health. Any money brought from home for books was deposited with the principal, and was drawn on only for books, thus keeping it out of the hands of the girls. Reading allowed for the girls was severely controlled, with no more than sixty minutes per week to be spent on unassigned literature.

All out-of-town students were required to take their board and room at the school so that there would be complete control over their behavior. Weekend visitors were limited, with

²⁹*Catalog of The Mount Pleasant Female Seminary, 1864-1865, 11-12.*

none allowed on the Sabbath; the only gentlemen permitted to communicate with the "inmates" had to be bona fide fathers or brothers, and even then such communications were restricted. As would be expected, church attendance was compulsory and the band of females was escorted properly in columns by one of the school's instructors. Nor were the girls to peer out their windows or laugh on the Lord's Day.

The Female Seminary got under way about twenty years after Howe's Academy opened for business. The "tender Seminary" opened in 1863, and according to its first catalog, it housed eight resident instructors plus the principal. The curriculum was severely for "delight and adornment" and thus was more a finishing school, preparing girls for quiet domesticity rather than for a career in the world beyond the home.

According to the school's first catalog, the head was a Reverend E. L. Belden who held a masters degree in addition to his clerical credential. Beyond him, the faculty was almost exclusively female. Three lady teachers were responsible for the classes in the Literary Department and there were two more in Music. A woman was listed as teaching French (a courtly amenity rather than a useful language for trade purposes), and Mrs. Belden, with or without proper qualification, comprised the Art faculty. The solitary male, aside from being the pastoral head, did all the German teaching. Unlike the Howe's open curriculum, there were no electives whatsoever at the Female Seminary. The Seminary in its first year listed seventy-nine registrants of which one hundred percent were females. Eleven/sixteenths of these initial students were "majoring" under the two vocal and instrumental instructresses in music. The Reverend Belden not only assumed the full principalship in 1864, but the building which had been a hotel, had been sold to him. Thus, from the start the school had its own substantial structure, which was a landmark at the town's east portal. After an addition in 1864, students and faculty reported that they were enjoying "copious quarters." A mark of excellence in the new structure was its philosophical and chemical apparatus and maps.

The Seminary had a compact succession of pastor-principals. It closed quietly in 1879 because of a severe decline in enrollment. It is a tribute to Iowa's adaptable, frontier climate that a town the size of Mount Pleasant, with a population a hundred years ago of less than 4,300, was able to support two such different academies as Howe's and the Female Seminary.

THE 1850S WERE MARKED BY RAPID population growth in central Iowa. Following patterns of settlement, academic institutions trailed the frontiersmen west. Most academies were short-lived, but some of the denominational institutions in central Iowa outlasted all but a few of their eastern Iowa counterparts. For example, there was the Cedar Valley Seminary, established by the Baptists in Osage.³⁰ It was founded in 1862 and, as though to demonstrate the town's urgent need for such an institution, it enrolled thirty-one students that first year. It became even more celebrated to our academic map when its first master, the Reverend Alva Bush, retired and passed his well-established Cedar Valley Seminary into the capable hands of Colonel Alonzo Abernethy, who came to the position after maturing service as Iowa's State Superintendent of Schools and with active membership on the State Board of Regents.

While most academies saw masters come and go, the strength of some central Iowa academies was demonstrated in the tenure of their masters. The founding master of Cedar Valley Seminary remained for eighteen years, and his successor for twenty-one. Thus, unlike so many academies which suffered from lack of dependable masters, incomes, and students, the one at Osage continued with confidence until ultimately the tax-supported high school was to snuff it out.

A remarkable innovation of this Cedar Valley Seminary was its erection of one of the first school gymnasiums west of the Mississippi. Inasmuch as the school pioneered in this amenity, it developed intramural sports and used this as an

³⁰J. F. Clyde and H. A. Dwelle (eds), "Educational Interests—Public and Other Schools," *History: Mitchell and Worth Counties, Iowa* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1918), 65-66.



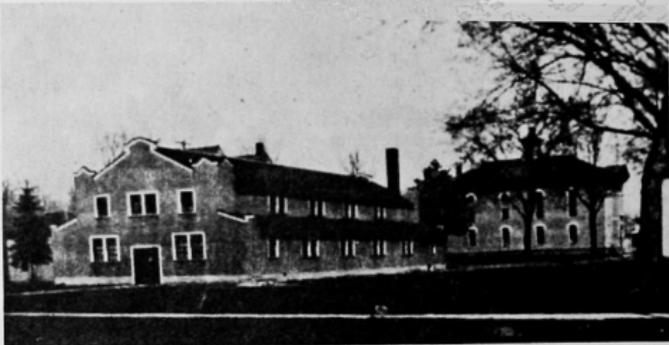
"Old Central"—the main building of Cedar Valley Seminary in Osage. Photo taken in 1881, showing faculty and graduates. Hamlin Garland is one of the graduates in this picture.

advertised lure for students. There is no clear evidence that the bait worked, yet all students participated, and in line with the prescientific psychology of the day, all students developed their "character" through participation. Such socializing qualities of character as cooperation, competition and fair play were said to be "disciplines" developed through sports.

A curricular offering shared with other academies of the time was debate. The side-by-side existence of two departments—the college-prep Latin and the more practical English—provoked this formalized argumentation. Whether the debate was intramural or with other schools, the sense of fair play, of cooperation and competition were components adding up to character, the "discipline" shared with whatever activity transpired in the school's gymnasium.

The most heralded accomplishment of the Osage school was the eminence of some of its graduates.³¹ Among them were Hamlin Garland who became the "prolific prairie historian," the Honorable Fred Faville who rose to become justice of the Iowa Supreme Court, Chauncey Colegrove, a successful pedagogue who wrote books concerning both sides of teacher's desk (the teacher's and the pupil's), and Dr. Charles Chase, a

³¹Ensign, "The Era of Private Academies," 82.



Cedar Vally Seminary Gymnasium, built in 1915, had an athletic room 70 x 32 feet, studios for the Music Department, and a stage for Glee Club concerts, oratorical concerts, etc.

prominent civil engineer who ultimately was invited to work in Washington.

Another persistent academy of central Iowa was established in 1869 by the Society of Friends. The "New Providence Academy" was to become the most attractive secondary school in Hardin County. The school represents much of what happened in other isolated academies. Here was a rough-hewn life in the wilderness, and the building as well as its pupil contents reflected the jagged nature of the environment; both were said to be encrusted with Iowa's coarse soil. The schoolmaster was responsible for smoothing the unshorn edges of his youthful charges. The academy teacher was a relatively cultivated person, often a college graduate with an education that might hopefully rub off; in the classroom he always stood on a platform above his pupils as a model of "improvement" and many of the courses offered were intended to refine girls as well as boys. Versification (reciting memorized poems and occasionally composing rhymes), declamation (public speaking), orthoepy (proper pronunciation) and orthography (which could build a more or less useful vocabulary) could all be applied specifically to this end. When there was a residence hall, such as existed ultimately at New Providence, social graces were cultivated in day-to-day extra-curricular activities; institutional rules indicate that teacher often ate with resident students and was responsible for supervising their manners. The "regulated rendez-vous of the sexes" such as social dances and stodgy parties were intended to refine adolescent habits and speech. A. F. Styles, headmaster of the school in the early part of our century, is quoted as saying "In a country



"Old Central" (Cedar Valley Seminary) as it appears today. It is the home of the Mitchell County Historical Museum.

like this, education is the most potent factor in dignifying its homes and elevating its citizens."³²

In the extreme western counties of Iowa few academies were established. There were two good reasons for this: first, then, as now, there was far less population to be served; second, the public school had already replaced many of the academies by the 1860s and 70s—by the time that settlements matured and were ready for schools in the western area. For awhile both LeMars and Sioux City contained their own private secondary schools, but neither enjoyed the popularity or success of their better-known equivalents to the east.³³ In both cities, academies were eventually converted to public high schools.

The year 1911 saw state legislation which was to bring a slow but certain death to Iowa's academies. In that year it was voted to provide tuition money to all students attending school beyond their home district. While in 1906 there had been twenty-four more-or-less healthy academies in operation across the state, forty years later, when Iowa celebrated its centennial year, the number had dwindled to only six.

³²A. F. Styles, "The New Providence Academy," in William J. Moir (ed.), *Past and Present of Hardin County, Iowa* (Indianapolis, Ind.: B.F. Bowen and Co., 1911), 120.

³³J. S. Shoup, "Educational Interests," and J. Werni, "Educational," *History of the Counties of Woodbury and Plymouth, Iowa* (Chicago: A. Warner and Co., 1890-1891), 100-102, 452-454.

In simplified terms, the history of the academy's conversion to the public high school or liberal arts college in Iowa is a capsuled bit of the western world's school history. The overall evolution of occidental education, whether it be in England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Russia, or the United States, reflects the transfer of church-run schools to institutions sponsored by governments. Most of the academies in Iowa had been run with some form of church support and control, and within the state's first hundred years of existence these schools came overwhelmingly under public, non-denominational control. Academies certainly have made valuable contributions to our present-day public schools. Serving as more than a cornerstone to our present high schools, they have frequently been referred to as transitional institutions, essential girders between our Latin schools which prepared an elite few for college, and the all-embracing high school.

It was Thomas Jefferson who not only helped to break the elitism of education by his democratic pronouncements, but encouraged what he called an "open west." The academy beyond the Mississippi, with its lack of restrictions on curriculum or method, or who should be taught, came to Iowa only a quarter of a century after Jefferson's reference to western openness was uttered. These prairie institutions were to be tailor-made to the needs of the area far more than they could have answered the economic demands of a more entrenched eastern seaboard. The churches or organizations or individuals who erected many of them perceived them as embodiment of a humane, Christian responsibility. The advocates of academies wanted to make sure that the schools would not only implement the urgent tasks of ministers and missionaries, but assure a well-prepared armament of trades people to fill the demand for local jobs and to help stabilize the population. In fulfilling this grave responsibility, many facets of adult life were addressed.

Iowa benefitted from its moment of history by adopting a matured and proven form of academy. It brought these institutions to its rich soil a full century after Franklin's *Proposals* had issued from his Philadelphia press. The freedom to innovate did not deter the application of lessons learned from the

mistakes and proven strengths of more easterly models. Just as American high schools strive to do today, the academies' curriculums anticipated fulfilling many aspects of life—the morals and customs and commerce and practical arts, as well as the religious. Before the high-level agricultural and mechanical colleges came to the scene, academies had already introduced electives or required courses in natural history, gardening and farming—courses that could be put to immediate use in the area. Indeed, students who had not yet finished their courses were often snatched up to utilize their skills on the nearby farms or factories. Even field trips and concrete teaching aids were tried in the academies and occasionally “re-invented” for application in the public schools. All this was a proving ground for what was to be converted to public education.

There is a close parallel between the academies and present-day community colleges.³⁴ The dual function of the former and the latter institutions is apparent, with academies committed to college preparation through their Latin Departments and community colleges offering what is called the “College Parallel Programs” which prepare students aspiring to transfer to the junior year in liberal arts colleges. Also the functional English Department of the academies has today an equivalent in what is called the “Career Programs,” leading after two years of instruction directly into community employment. As in the former academies, the two-year community institutions provide schedules tailored to the needs of local businesses and industries. This is frequently done through contracts between firms and colleges to train or retrain in specific vocational competencies. Thus while some academies either contributed their buildings to form the public high schools of the state, and others were jogged upward to become liberal arts colleges, the function and type of courses offered in the academies can be seen in the recent offerings of the community colleges.

The functional education of the academies worked. The

³⁴Robert E. Belding, “Parallel Institutions: The American Academy and the Community College,” *The Clearing House*, 51, No. 7 (March 1978), 316-318.

success of their human products became visible as bankers, and people of commerce and professional individuals, railroad executives, and factory managers blossomed from these institutions. The institutions formed an important part of women's emancipation from domestic chores as academies became coeducational and as women entered the ranks of employment. Yet the academies were so effective that they rendered themselves redundant by helping to prove that popular education could work without breaking the public budget; before they expired they contributed a great deal to the success of the Industrial Revolution.

This has been only a sampling of how private initiative or interest groups such as the trade guilds or churches brought academies to the Iowa scene. The exercise in separating the three initiatives was designed to facilitate the description. Ultimately, however, this tripartite categorization may be as fruitless as it is misleading, for without the cooperation and meshing of individual enterprise with the concern of interest groups, the prairie academies would hardly have thrived or fulfilled their function.

A quality common to most historic accounts, and which compels us to read them, is the uncertain cloud of nostalgia that attends facts and reminiscences from our past. With our time-saving conveniences and our shortened work weeks we have time to dream over—even admire—the uncomplicated fight for survival of our ancestors. Typically frontier, character-forming qualities, gained by starting from scratch and seeing things through, are inherent in those who planned and peopled our academies.

Editor's note: Professor Belding has published two previous articles concerning the history of education in Iowa: "Iowa's Brave Model for Women's Education," *The Annals of Iowa*, 43, No. 5 (Summer, 1976); and "An Iowa Schoolgirl—1860s Style," *The Palimpsest*, 58, No. 1 (January-February 1976-77).

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