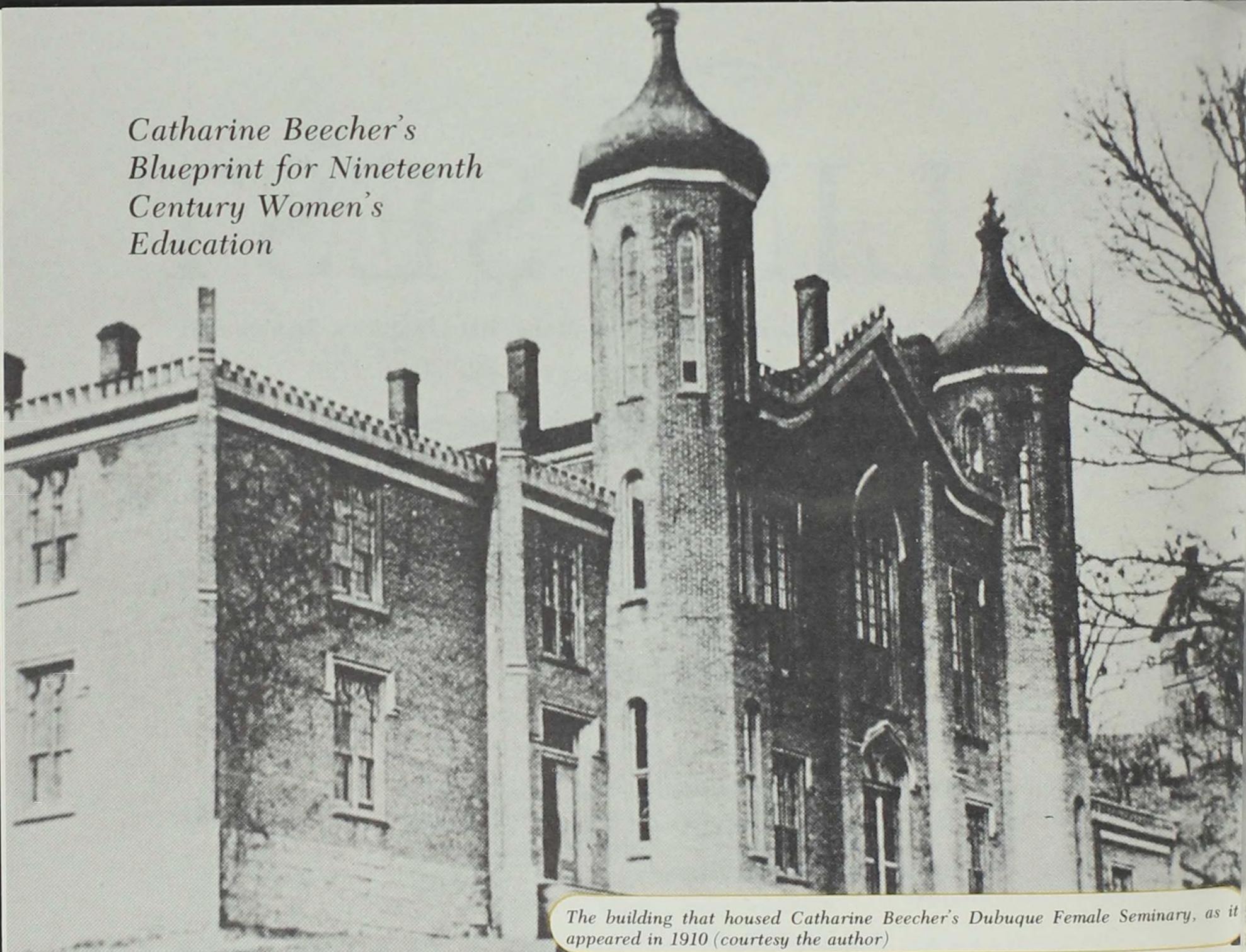


*Catharine Beecher's  
Blueprint for Nineteenth  
Century Women's  
Education*



*The building that housed Catharine Beecher's Dubuque Female Seminary, as it appeared in 1910 (courtesy the author)*

## THE DUBUQUE FEMALE SEMINARY

by Robert E. Belding

Mention education in Iowa in a discussion of the state's history before the Civil War and the image that most often comes to mind is that of a log schoolhouse, a class of about a dozen students ranging from children to young men, and a teacher whose own education extended only a bit beyond that of the students he or she was teaching. Even the oldest Iowa towns along the Mississippi had not progressed far beyond the frontier stage of development by this time, but there were a number of serious attempts to

provide Iowa's population with educational opportunities on a par with the established eastern schools of the time. One of these was the Dubuque Female Seminary, founded by Catharine Beecher in 1853.

Catharine Beecher was a member of one of the most illustrious families in the intellectual and religious ferment in America in the antebellum decades. Her father was the prominent Congregational minister, Lyman Beecher, and she was a sister of Henry Ward Beecher, one of slavery's most active opponents, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As a member of a well-to-do New Eng-

land family, Catharine received the standard private education for young ladies of her time, including drawing, painting, and music. But this did not prepare her very well for supervising the large Beecher household after the death of her mother when she was sixteen, a fact that no doubt influenced the strongly practical character of the schools she later established.

In 1824 Catharine founded a very successful private girls' school in Hartford, Connecticut, and in 1832, when her father became the president of the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, she founded the Western Female Institute there. Catharine's health problems and the financial stringency that followed the Panic of 1837 brought an end to the school, though it had flourished for its brief lifespan.

By the late 1830s, Catharine Beecher had become convinced of the need for new educational opportunities in the rough-hewn cities of the growing West, and from Cincinnati she moved on to found the Milwaukee Female College in 1850. While she hoped to make her permanent home in Milwaukee, Beecher also established colleges at Kalamazoo, Michigan, at Quincy, Illinois, and at Dubuque.

Dubuque's 3,000 people welcomed the formation of Beecher's new school with open arms. The city had early gained a bustling prosperity based first on lead mining in the region and later on the steamboat trade on the Mississippi River. Several private schools had been established in the city, but they had proved to be short-lived, and no public school system had yet grown up to replace them. As a result, when Catharine Beecher visited the city on a fund-raising campaign for her school she was hailed as a "household divinity."

The building constructed to house the Dubuque Female Seminary, renamed the Dubuque Female College in 1854, was something of an architectural oddity. With turrets and battlements and lacy spires, it took on an oriental appearance, a fortress-like structure seemingly designed to protect its occupants

from the less-civilized elements of the community and, if necessary, from Indian attack. The Dubuque *Miners' Express* described it as "retired, elevated, healthy and romantic."

Though the oriental style of the College's home might have suggested the opulence and leisure of the pampered upper class, the blueprint that Catharine Beecher devised for her schools emphasized practicality in its list of courses and propriety in its regulations on student deportment. Reacting against her own education in the niceties of social life, Beecher's goal was to train young women who would be proficient teachers early in their lives and efficient homemakers after their marriage. Disagreeing with many of the women's rights activists of her time, she did not intend to provide her students with an education in the then male-dominated professions, but to train



Catharine Beecher (courtesy the author)

them to be successful in the areas open to women in American society at the time.

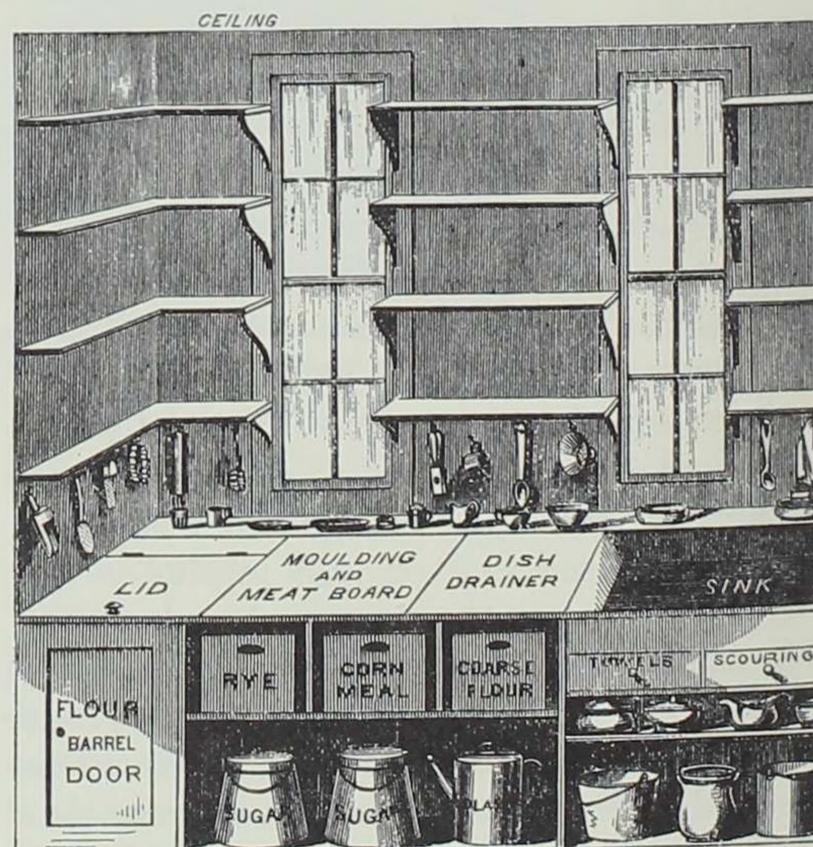
To provide what Beecher considered to be a proper atmosphere for study, the college catalog specified in detail the type of conduct that would be either required or prohibited in the school. One statement on classroom manners, for example, reminded the girls that "movement will be limited to recitation or the exercise of penmanship. The rustling of skirts will not be tolerated." Warnings about corridor behavior were less specific. The catalog, and a notice posted in the hallway, vaguely admonished: "Do not leave anything in the school corridors which will damage your character." A "narrowly modest" mirror was provided in the entry hall, but the students were warned not to tarry before it for more than a minute at a time lest they become vain. They were also warned that such idle games as chess and checkers would not be allowed anywhere on school grounds, and that "without exception females are to contain all emotions of anger, fretfulness and discontent."

Other regulations required that the students appear at school in a drably-colored dress filled out by at least seven layers of petticoats, and to have an umbrella and a proper pair of mud shoes. Headgear was limited to one orthodox bonnet. If jewelry was worn to school, the student was to surrender it to the headmistress upon arrival and to pick it up at the end of the day, along with a firm reprimand. The equipment the students were to supply was fairly simple: an atlas, a Bible, and a copy of Beecher's own text on the operation of a Christian home. Since this work, entitled *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, had already achieved widespread popularity throughout the country, many of the students no doubt simply brought along the family copy from home.

Though the college was a day school and all its students were commuters, Beecher re-

quired the students to eat their noon meal at the school, and her female teachers ate with them to serve as commendable models of table manners. Lunch was, in fact, listed as a non-credit class in the school's catalog.

The severity of the regulations that Beecher outlined for her students gives the Dubuque Female College the appearance of having been a solemn and silent cloister, and indeed Beecher was described by a visitor to her school in Milwaukee as "a kind of lady-abbess in educational matters." But the regulations were not unusually severe for girls' schools of the time. Beecher simply adapted them from her successful schools in the East and from the ideas followed by Emma Willard in her girls' school in Troy, New York and Mary Lyon, who



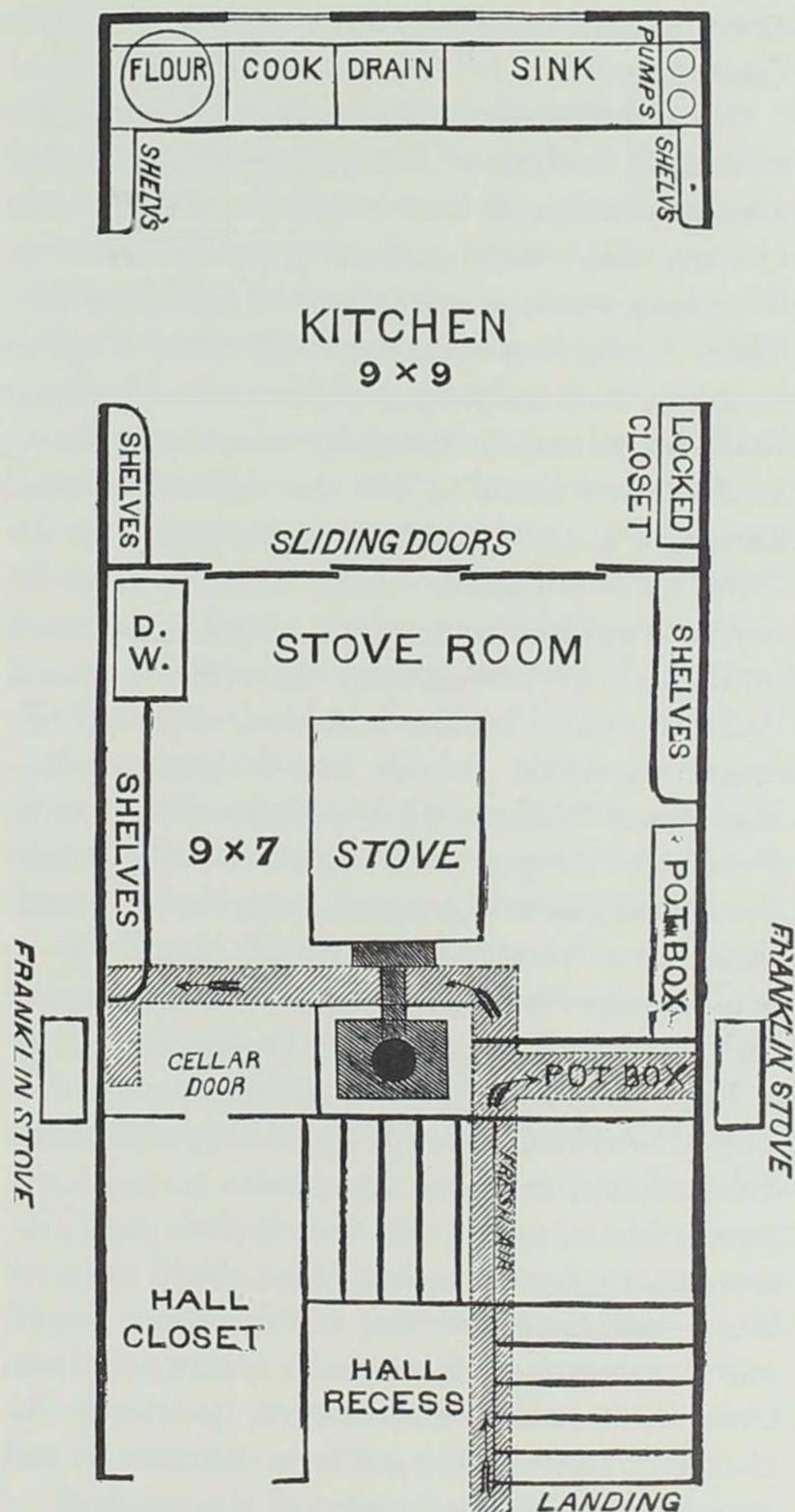
"In most large houses, the table furniture, the cooking materials and utensils, the sink, and the eating room, are at such distances apart, that half the time and strength is employed in walking back and forth to collect and return the articles used," wrote Catharine Beecher in 1869. Here is her plan for an efficient sink and cooking-form, reprinted here from *American Woman's Home*, published by Catharine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe. (SHSI)

had founded Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts.

Since the graduates of the Dubuque Female College were expected to be homemakers for most of their lives, Beecher made home economics the core of its curriculum. And the core of the home economics course was Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy*. This was intended to be an American text on the efficient management of an American home. It was designed to replace the standard European works that had been in use up to this point and that included, for example, discussions of the place of butlers and other domestics in the operation of a properly-run English mansion. Beecher, in contrast, described a home that was to be largely without servants and that therefore needed to take advantage of efficient planning and the labor-saving inventions that were becoming more widespread as the century progressed.

Beecher drew most of her ideas from her own early experiences in running the Beecher family household in Connecticut and Ohio. She had always had a preoccupation—not to say an obsession—with her own health, and as a result her *Treatise* included many valuable recommendations on heating and lighting a home and on a daily program of exercise. Many of Beecher's concerns were, in fact, only beginning to be recognized as important influences on individual health in the mid-nineteenth century, and the popularity of her text went a long way toward promoting them.

In her plan of domestic economy, Beecher indicated that the mother in the ideal home would need scheduled time away from her children, so she urged that they be sent for six hours a day to a nursery school, and later to a common school. (School attendance was not compulsory in most of the country at this time.) At nursery school, which she hoped would be taught by the products of institutions that followed her ideas, children would acquire habits that would be reinforced in the properly run home. Cooperation, self-denial, and benevo-



Floor plan of the kitchen and stove room described in *American Woman's Home*. Glazed sliding doors keep kitchen heat and odors from spreading through the house. (SHSI)

lence were, Beecher maintained, three qualities prerequisite to selflessness and service to God, and these qualities, along with consistency and honesty, would be embodied in the ideal teacher and passed along to her students. Even in the nursery school there would be mental discipline in the form of instruction in

the qualities necessary for molding Christian character.

Beyond home economics, Beecher's plan for educating students at the College also included a range of subjects that would serve them both in their short-term careers as teachers and in their longer careers as informed homemakers. Chief among these was the study of the English language and its proper expression. The girls read, for example, carefully censored classics so that they could select the right models of literature both for their students and later for their own children. Their leisure time as mothers could also be well spent, they were reminded, by poring over the same selected literature. The works included many of the newer American authors, like Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Fenimore Cooper. This, she believed, would not only acquaint the native-born students with their own heritage, it would also help to Americanize the many hundreds of immigrant children found in cities like Dubuque.

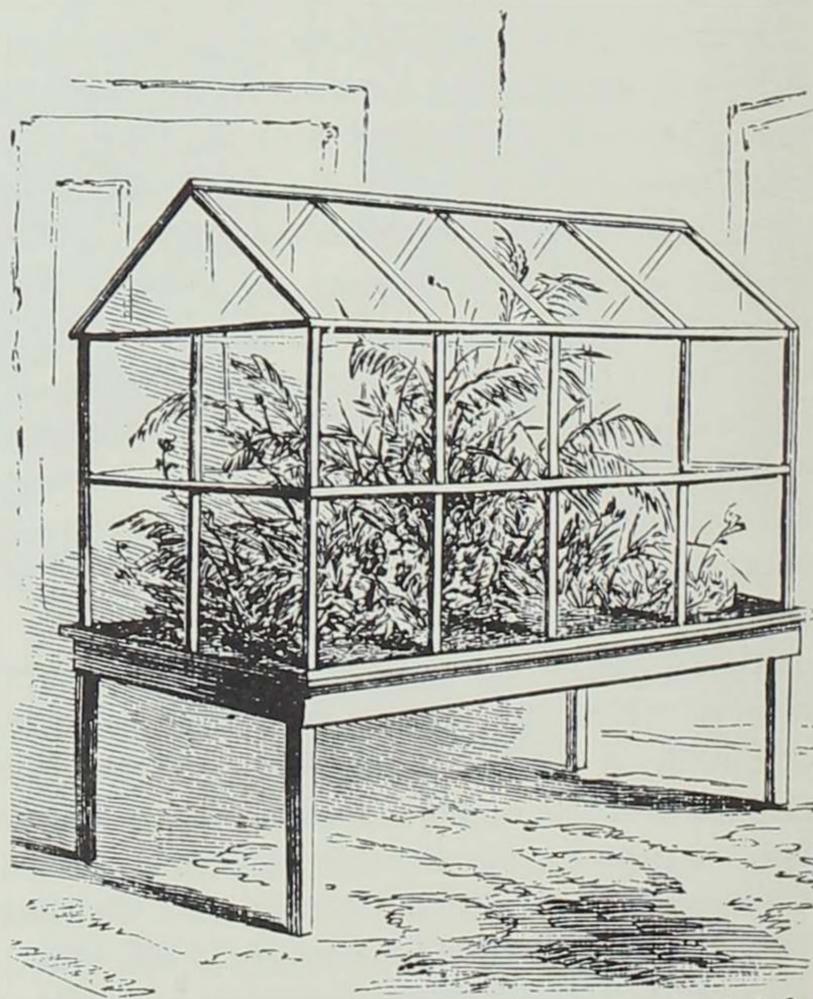
The academy's English instruction also included versification and, lest a wife embarrass her husband in social situations, correct pronunciation. By the nineteenth century, personal correspondence had been raised to an art form, and to insure that her students would enjoy a lifetime of leisurely correspondence from the parlor desk (and to promote the character traits of sympathy, imagination, and perception) Beecher stressed the analysis of classical essays and practice in student composition. There was, however, no room for foreign languages in her prescription for the Dubuque school. She considered strange tongues to be a superfluous adornment suited only to wealthy homes; English should suffice as practical equipment for a Christian home.

Arithmetic was to be included in the academy's curriculum, using Beecher's own textbook, which employed problems involving kitchen measures and grain bins. But Beecher was careful not to include higher mathematics

in the offerings, because she believed an eastern professor's statement that "the subject would cause women to forsake having children, so charmed would they be with quadratic equations." Nor would she teach philosophy in her school, for she shared the common belief that the subject would certainly weaken the female constitution so that she would be unable to bear normal children.

Though Catharine rebelled against many of the traditional religious beliefs of the rest of the Beecher family, she did include a strong spiritual element in her school's curriculum. The three religious courses were "Evidences of Christianity," "Moral Lessons," and "The Bible." These were required "in order to render all teachers grave," she said. The content of each subject was clearly ordered in sound

*continued page 40*



*Design for a "Ward case," recommended by Catharine Beecher as a way busy homemakers might enjoy "a fragment of the green woods brought in and silently growing; it will refresh many a weary hour to watch it." (SHSI)*

## *The Beecher Family*

The influence that the Beecher family—Lyman Beecher and his succession of three wives and thirteen children—had on American intellectual life before the Civil War can be expressed in three words: religion, education, and abolition. The antebellum decades were a time of ferment in American thinking about these issues, and at one time or another a Beecher could be found at the center of each movement for change.

Lyman Beecher was the most traditional member of the family in his religious views, having been strongly influenced by Timothy Dwight in his years as a student at Yale. Though he was trained in the Calvinist orthodoxy of the New England tradition of Jonathan Edwards, he followed a new school of Calvinism that stressed the freedom of the human will and the religious experience of revivalism. Too conservative for some Congregationalists, too liberal for others, nevertheless he did influence the course of American religious thought, first as a minister in Boston and then as president of the newly established Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati from 1832 to 1850.

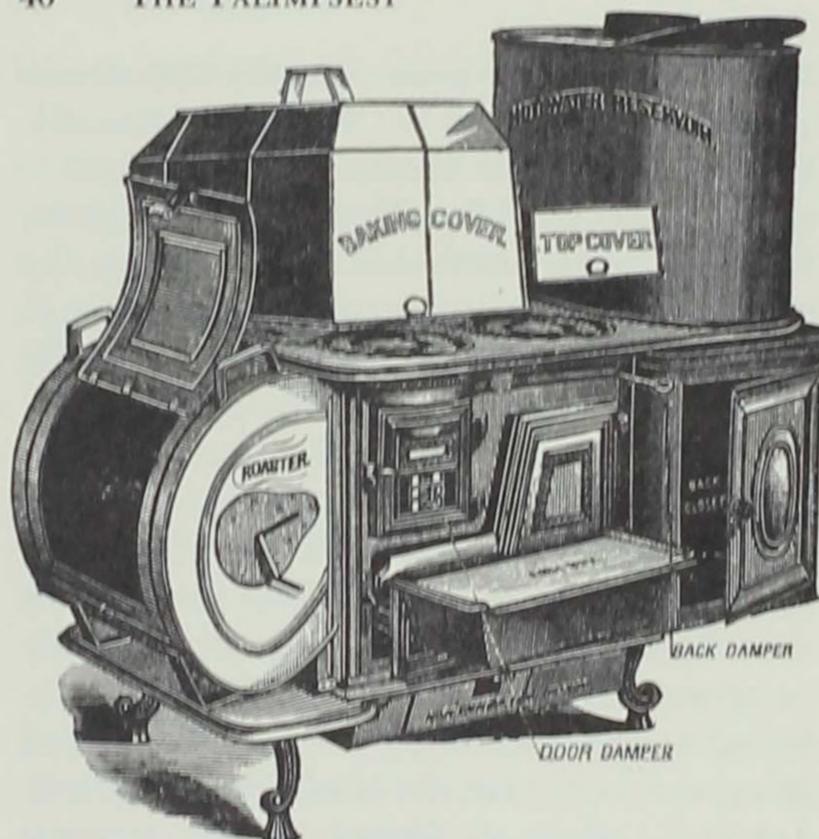
Lyman Beecher expected all his sons to be ministers, and four did in fact become prominent Congregational ministers, though not without a great deal of religious questioning on their part. Henry Ward Beecher was the most influential of the four. Speaking from the platform of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York (he never spoke from a pulpit in his own church), Henry attracted a weekly audience of from two to three thousand people to hear his energetic sermons on a wide range of issues, social as well as religious.

Though the Beechers were a New England family, their influence on education came mainly in the western states. In addition to

Catharine's work in promoting the formation of academies for women in Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa and Lyman Beecher's years as president of the Lane Theological Seminary, the Beechers contributed to expanding the educational opportunities of the West through Edward Beecher's service as president of Illinois College at Jacksonville from 1830 to 1844.

The third area where the Beechers left their mark was in their opposition to slavery. Both Lyman and Henry Ward Beecher denounced slavery in their sermons, taking the position that slavery should be confined within its contemporary limits so that eventually its own internal weaknesses would destroy it. Edward Beecher, too, aided the abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy's efforts in Illinois before Lovejoy's death at the hands of a mob at Alton in 1837. But the Beechers' best-known attack on slavery came from Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Harriet had been strongly affected by the condition of the fugitive slaves she saw being channelled northward through Cincinnati. She wrote her novel later at Brunswick, Maine while her husband, Calvin Stowe, was serving on the faculty of Bowdoin College. When her story appeared in book form in 1852, it struck a spark of public sentiment, selling three hundred thousand copies within a year. Ultimately, it convinced hundreds of thousands of northerners of the moral indefensibility of slavery as an institution.

Perhaps the Beechers' greatest contribution to American society in the first half of the nineteenth century was their enthusiasm for the causes they supported. Many of their ideas about religion, education, and slavery were innovative and experimental, but many others were simply part of the intellectual climate in which they lived. Whether from a church's pulpit, a speaker's platform, or a college lecturer, what the members of the Beecher family provided was the energy to spark people to action, action that they might not otherwise have taken.—Alan M. Schroder



"With proper management of dampers, one ordinary-sized coal-hod of anthracite coal will, for twenty-four hours, keep the stove running, keep seventeen gallons of water hot at all hours, bake pies and puddings in the warm closet, heat flat-irons under the back cover, boil tea kettle and one pot under the front cover, bake bread in the oven, and cook a turkey in the tin roaster in front. The author has numerous friends, who, after trying the best ranges, have dismissed them for this stove, and in two or three years cleared the whole expense by the saving of fuel."—Catharine Beecher, *American Woman's Home* (SHSI)

#### Note on Sources

Sources authored by Catharine Beecher include: "Female Education," *American Journal of Education*, II (number 45); *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (New York: Harper, 1855); *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* (New York: Harper, 1874). Textbooks by Beecher were also consulted, including *The American Woman's Home* (New York: Ford, 1869) and *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (New York: Harper, 1855).

Other sources include: "Catharine Beecher," in *The Educated Woman in America*, ed. Barbara Cross (New York: Teachers College Press, 1965); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Mae Elizabeth Harveson, "Catharine Beecher, Pioneer Educator" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1932); *Dubuque Miners' Express*, May 16, 1853; and a catalog titled *Dubuque Female Seminary, Circular* (Dubuque, 1855).

Beecher fashion and their combined effect was intended to "stuff the cranium with moral and mental nourishment." If anyone questioned these outcomes at the time, their words apparently did not survive. Indeed, faculty and students who might not have agreed with these elevated purposes would not have been attracted to the institution in the first place.

Required chapel attendance complemented the array of Christian courses. As a starter for each day it "ignited" the program and invariably included choral exercises, scripture reading, prayer, and a brief religious exposition—always conducted by Beecher herself when she was in town. Her own puritan background echoed in her printed warning that "all light conduct in the sanctuary is offensive to God." Monday's chapel service reflected the honor system practiced among the students, as a show of hands indicated who had attended church the previous day.

Women's schools were the first to teach biology (that is, health) apart from medical training. Young ladies were perceived as frail vessels, and Catharine's own health was a never-ending concern for her. Again, much of the contents of her course reinforced what she had written in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* and included directions on how to care for the sick at home and how to treat the grandmother who could usually be found rocking in front of the domestic hearth or the newly invented cookstove.

Health training extended into required calisthenics, which again was not a Beecher invention but was a standby of women's education in general. Beecher had deliberately situated her Dubuque school on an embankment to assure that all the girls began their day with a lofty climb. Against the cliff at the back of the school was an open-air grove—inside an impenetrable fence—where girls breathed deeply and drilled by the numbers. The importance placed on calisthenics reflected Beecher's belief that "Soul, body and mind are like a single musical

chord which must be struck in unison."

Whether training her students in home economics, English, religion, or health care, Beecher was fully prepared to adopt new approaches to teaching and to modify educational theory to fit the needs of the practical situation. At the time that she was developing her first seminary for girls in New England, Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Barnard of Connecticut were airing the pedagogical views they had developed from their observations in Europe. Later, Calvin Stowe, her sister Harriet's husband, discussed his own Prussian views on education when the Beecher family was living in Cincinnati. From them, Beecher adopted the concept of the necessity of actually *training* competent teachers, a German import, and Europe's new psychology of classroom management. In adopting the idea of instructing students first in concrete and familiar notions and later moving on to more abstract and less familiar concepts, for example, Beecher started her geography instruction with the local environment and worked outward to the area, the state, the nation, and ultimately the world. Another aspect of the new psychology from Europe insisted that students should understand rather than simply memorize the content of their courses. This novel idea she also pressed upon the teachers in her school. Some of the components of Beecher's eastern plan for ladies' education were not, however, suitable to the western frontier, so she quickly adjusted them to the social environment that surrounded her institution. Wherever she taught, Beecher minimized theory in favor of practical application.

Catharine Beecher's guidance was needed to

direct the female academies she had founded in the West, but as the 1850s wore on she spent less and less time there. She was determined to operate them as endowed institutions in order to maintain their tuition rates at levels that would open them to more than simply the children of the wealthy. But local funds to create the endowments often could not be found, so Beecher was forced to spend more and more time in the East on fund-raising expeditions. Finally, in 1859 she returned permanently to the East to retire and to regain her health, and her Dubuque school expired "quietly like a gentle woman."

But her impact on the West was not to be erased. Her principles of home economics were added to those of other pioneer women of her day, and they left their impact on many private academies and public schools across the country. In her retirement years, Catharine Beecher recorded her *Reminiscences*. In these she quotes letters from her graduates indicating that the noble intentions of their headmistress had been fulfilled. The social and cultural movements they became involved in spread far beyond their expected employment as teachers and "wives both immediate and enduring." Some led in the establishment of municipal libraries, city parks, and improved schools. Some raised a call for public nurses, and a few graduates became nurses themselves without further training. They demanded clean and paved streets and refurbished neighborhoods. As middle-class wives they stood behind many community betterment projects. On the whole, they found that there was little discrepancy between Catharine Beecher's principles and their application to life beyond her schools. □