

**LIFE AND WORK IN
MIDDLEBURY, VERMONT,
OF EMMA WILLARD**

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Life and Work in Middlebury, Vermont, of Emma Willard by Ezra Brainerd

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MRS. EMMA WILLARD'S LIFE AND WORK IN MIDDLEBURY.

Mrs. Emma Willard is known as the pioneer in the great movement of the nineteenth century for the higher education of woman. To say that she had a genius for teaching, that she devised improved methods, that she wrote admirable text-books, and that she impressed her own high ideals upon the characters of her pupils, is, indeed, great praise. But, it is a still greater glory to have started a movement which has revolutionized the ideas of the civilized world on the subject of woman's education—a movement which has culminated in the founding of grand colleges exclusively for women, and in the admission of women to older colleges on equal terms with men. For it is not too much to say that Wellesley, and Vassar, and their sister institutions on either side of the Atlantic, are the fair fruitage, in time, of those seminal ideas so ably set forth in Mrs. Willard's "Plan of Female Education."

It is interesting to study the origin of such a great movement. It is like tracing some noble river upward to its sources in the distant mountains. When we thus search out the influences that shaped Mrs. Willard's career as an educator, we find that the formative period of her life was the twelve years spent in Middlebury—a period passed over too cursorily in Dr. Lord's biography. We should not, however, overlook the circumstances of her early life in Connecticut; her excellent parentage; the beautiful home-life of her childhood; her two years of earnest study under Dr. Wells; her brilliant success as a teacher at the early age of seventeen. For these facts help us to picture the bright, noble-hearted woman, who, at the age of twenty, in 1807, came to take charge of the Female Academy at Middlebury.

The influences that shaped her character in her new home and called forth her grand ideas regarding the scope of woman's education were from three sources. Let us speak first of her *social* surroundings.

The early inhabitants of Middlebury were noted for their enterprise and intelligence. Up to the close of the Revolutionary War, the Champlain Valley had been for centuries the arena of savage warfare. But

as soon as the cessation of hostilities would permit, these fertile lands were rapidly settled by a vigorous and high-minded class of young men and women from the best families of Connecticut. There was in Middlebury an unusually large number of educated men, graduates of Yale and Dartmouth and Brown. Of their interest in religion and taste in architecture they have left a striking monument in the church edifice that is still standing, with its beautiful groined arches, and its graceful steeple after the Christopher Wren style. Their devotion to the cause of education is evinced by their establishment, before the beginning of the present century, of three distinct institutions of learning: the Grammar School, the Female Academy and the College. The elder President Dwight, of Yale, who made three visits to the town prior to 1810, has recorded in his books of travels his high appreciation of the character of the people and of their educational work. Mrs. Willard herself—then Miss Emma Hart—has given emphatic testimony to the same effect. In a letter to her parents, written during the first year of her residence, she says: "I find society in a high state of cultivation—much more than any other place I was ever in. The beaux here are, the

greater part of them, men of collegiate education.
* * * Among the older ladies, there are some whose manners and conversation would dignify duchesses."

If our limits would permit, we might speak in particular of some of the excellent men and women whose society Miss Hart thus enjoyed. It was her privilege to know the Hon. Horatio Seymour—afterwards for twelve years United States Senator—a man who was earnest from the first in the cause of woman's education, and who gave the land on which was erected in 1802 the "Female Academy," one of the very first school edifices in the country built specially for women. She knew also the Rev. Dr. Merrill, who, on graduating from Dartmouth in 1801, had won the valedictory over his illustrious classmate Daniel Webster, and who for thirty-seven years was pastor of the Congregational Church in Middlebury and a recognized leader throughout the State in matters of education and religion. She knew also Dr. Henry Davis, President of the College, who was eminent for his talents and eloquence and personal address, who was, in 1817, on the death of Dr.

Dwight, elected President of Yale College, and reflected no small honor on Middlebury by declining the appointment. With these men and others of scarcely less character—not yet famous, but in the vigor of early manhood—Miss Hart, the young preceptress of the Female Academy, was called to associate. Her letters and journal show how deeply interested she was in her new life. She has an intense relish for agreeable society; she attends parties and balls during the week, and four meetings on Sunday. She drinks deep draughts of the joyous cup of youth and health. But her strong brain never becomes giddy; there is too much of the Puritan seriousness in her veins. She keeps up her studies in history; she writes poetry; she paints; she criticises sermons; and, withal, conducts a school for young ladies with constantly increasing reputation.

The building where this school was held is still standing; it has been unused for years, but is guarded with religious care by its present owner, a son-in-law of Horatio Seymour. The whole of the second story was one large room, warmed only by an open fire-

place in the north end. For in those days, as Lowell tells us—

“There warn’t no stoves (tell comfort died).
To bake ye to a puddin’.”

But a fire-place did not always bring comfort to the school-room during the severe cold of that Vermont winter. The north wind at times would whistle around the building and penetrate the school-room until they could endure the cold no longer. But the tact of the schoolmistress was equal to the emergency. She would then (so she writes in a letter to Judge Swift) call her girls to the floor, and arrange them two and two in a long row for a contra-dance; and while those who could sing would strike up some stirring tune, she, with one of the girls for a partner, would lead down the dance, and soon have them all in rapid motion. Afterwards they would return to their school exercises.

But in two years she closed her connection with the Female Academy. On the 10th day of August, 1809, she was married to Dr. John Willard. And this brings us to the second phase of her Middlebury life, and to consider the influences of this marriage upon her after-career.