

**Budget: A Few Undertakings in Public Education in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cincinnati**

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Cincinnati is a city of arts and letters. In his 1855 volume, *The Schools of Cincinnati and its Vicinity*, John P. Foote writes in breathless exposition:

*The astonishing progress of Cincinnati, in population and in wealth, under such circumstances, excites the surprise, and awakens the attention, of every intelligent visitor who contemplates it, and few can do so, without being led to make inquiries regarding the causes of this wonderful progress; for it is generally remarked, "there appear to be various places on the Ohio with as many, and some—Louisville for instance—with more natural advantages." In the answers to such inquiries, various causes are generally assigned, and they are such as are perceived to be influential. They are such as constitute a part, but not the whole of the reasons for the superiority of Cincinnati to the other cities and towns of the West. A very important and efficient one has seldom, if ever, been taken into account, or referred to in any manner. This is, the early attention that was given to the education of youth, and the continued and repeated efforts for the establishment of institutions for the dissemination of useful knowledge, which has characterized the most influential inhabitants of this city, from the period of its foundation.*

In a Club paper of 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2020, this Member expanded on one point of evidence: the infrequently credited 1840 Cincinnati reconstitution of a Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. The Society's lineage traces to pre-Revolutionary War new world colonies and a starry array of founding fathers. Its eventual successors include vaunted institutions such as the American Philosophical Society. Cincinnati's later populist 19<sup>th</sup> century revival counted fourteen divisions, expanding the work of the Cincinnati College of Teachers into a broader mission and reach. As cited, its goal was the offering of "moral, intellectual and social resources" to the citizenry.

Further substantiation of Cincinnati's enlightenment comes in the various and many educational endeavors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Notably, separate yet interrelated enterprises were

launched by influential leaders and volunteers again and again to serve the goals of the growing city. The 1835 vision for a Young Men's Mercantile Library Association in Cincinnati referenced the 1820 Mercantile Library Association of New York. The east coast predecessor's charter, "to liberalize the minds of that great body of men who form the rising hope of our active and varied commerce," inspired forty-five Ohio and Kentucky merchants and clerks to seed a permanent library in Cincinnati. The Mercantile Library stands strong today as an active agent for social mobility and intellectual advancement in 21<sup>st</sup> century greater Cincinnati.

By 1851, the gathering of the American Association for the Promotion of Science, today known as the American Association for the Advancement of Science and merged with *Science* magazine, came to the riverbanks of Cincinnati. Meetings were held in the aforementioned Mercantile Library and in the Mechanics' Institute. Also as cited by John Foote, the city was credited in the meeting minutes as follows:

*He [Professor Henry of the AAPS] had heard much of the Great West, much of the Queen City, and had come to put his anticipations to the test. He expected to see a boundless magnificent forest world, with the scattered clearings, and log cabins, and energetic New England-descended inhabitants; he thought to find Cincinnati a thriving frontier town, exhibiting views of neat frame houses, with white fronts, 'green doors and brass knockers...'*

Yet Cincinnati of 1851 was not as thought. Professor Henry continues his reportage:

*... instead of this, he found himself in a city of palaces, reared as if by magic, and rivaling in appearance any city of the Eastern States or of Europe. But it was not things of mere stone, brick, and mortar, which pleased him most in the Queen of the West. Imperial Rome had her palaces and noble structures, but in her proudest days she boasted not of a Mechanics' Institute, an Academy of Natural Sciences, a Mercantile Library Association, or of a Young Men's Lyceum of Natural History. These are the pride of Cincinnati, these her noblest works. Grateful as we ought to be, and are, for the kindness and courtesy shown us as members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, we are more thankful to the Cincinnatians for having founded her literary and scientific associations, and for liberally opening her treasures of knowledge to the world.*

Meanwhile, also in 1851, Isabella Baumfree delivered a rollicking speech in another corner of Ohio, amidst the industrial cacophony of Akron, at the Universal Stone Church. A Dutch-speaking enslaved upstate New York Stater by birth in 1797, Baumfree was never formally freed by her enslavers and raised five children in captivity. She resolutely “walked away by daylight...” with an infant daughter and left her economic and social bondage following the 1827 New York Anti-Slavery Law. She found herself in New York City by 1829. Fourteen years of preaching and honing her influence in New York City culminated in a new identity: Sojourner Truth. Her 1851 response in Akron came on the occasion of the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention. It has come to be known as the “Ain’t I a woman” chapter of abolition and suffrage in American anthologies, or alternatively “Ar’n’t I a Woman.” While historical lore challenges the perfect recorded accuracy of the moment, Truth’s presence in Ohio and her rhetorical skill and influence are unquestioned.

Two hundred and twenty-five miles away in the Ohio River Valley, antebellum Cincinnati’s mid-19<sup>th</sup> century rendering of enlightenment did not yet envision equivalence among gender and ethnicity, even as it sought progressive thought across socio-economic class. The city’s 19<sup>th</sup> century transgressions and recorded defenses of racial and gender disparities in affirmance of basic human rights are marked-- and starkly immoral-- from a 21<sup>st</sup> century vantage. They cannot be erased and still lay within our contemporary social fabric. Thus it is important also to know the institutionalization of such historical inequalities and how social progress manifested in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When in 1833 Cary’s Academy, alternatively Pleasant Hill Academy for Boys, established on Pleasant Hill, it opened a lovely new locale for public education. Farmers’ College supplanted it in the same location by 1846 and College Hill was so named by 1849. Farmers’ College was no sleepy suburban classroom descendent. The educational center had high aspirations of sustainable agriculture both locally and nationally. The college’s president

opened the school by citing that American farms were, “held in trust,” with an encomium to responsible landowners:

*We may not be permitted, then, to impoverish those fields, to make desolate those valleys and plains—in a word—not permitted to commit waste while in the use of our life-estate, against the proper claim of those to whom the reversion belongs, by this prodigal and improvident use of the earth. ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.’ Man is but a tenant for life; and when his life-lease expires, he is morally bound, by contract implied, to surrender the possession of the premises he occupied, in as good a condition as he found them. Hence, for man to commit waste by ignorant and improvident husbandry, is to perpetrate highhanded wickedness against the Landlord, and to inflict a heinous wrong upon His succeeding tenantry.*

With such idealism, it should come as little surprise that the Farmers’ College was also a magnet for faculty and children working for the cause of abolition. The moral choices of pre-industrial agricultural production is centered in the college’s very pronouncements. Farmers’ College eventually served as a safe house on the underground railroad, continuing its service to our better angels.

Next door on the same hill in Cincinnati, 1846 not only saw the transformation of the new Farmers’ College from a former boys’ academy, it also was the opening of the Ohio Female College. Rebuilt after a devastating first fire, the Ohio Female College offered two and four-year degree programs, and even longer courses of study, in a building that proclaimed 92 rooms, four additional buildings for 36 full board students, a music hall, and a chapel. The argumentation for such a grand and ambitious college often cited mothers and daughters; for a civilized Cincinnati to advance itself, the women of the community must both be educated and prepared to educate further their sons and siblings. Yet evidence of such an ecumenical commitment to arts and humanities was rarely articulated on grounds of equal rights or opportunity amidst 19<sup>th</sup> century society. Those rightful notions would arrive later. It is clear however that here was a glimmer of progressive thought in each endeavor. The purpose of the Ohio Female College was as an active construction towards women as the central contributors

to society, its collective education, and the humanistic values of a fledgling place. Germanic educational norms were known and admired.

Alas, after several decades of service, the private Ohio Female College suffered further calamity and the weight of an extraordinarily high academic requirement of years of study and commitment to its highest degrees. In a turn of events that even Tom Wolfe could not have been bold enough to write, by 1872 the college closed and ignobly turned its facility into Cincinnati's first private sanitarium. While the lovely grounds atop College Hill undoubtedly were a respite for the stresses of mental and emotional unease, the founders of Ohio Female College would not have been pleased with the conversion of its institution dedicated to the highest calling of classical education for health and wellness into a cloistered laboratory of mental fracture and substance treatment. The founding vision established by the likes of John McLean, a former U.S. Supreme Court Justice and president of the Board, was immolated by fire and economics, the most dismal science.

What might have been more hopeful for progressive Cincinnatians dedicated to liberal thinking was found in the planned neighborhoods to the north and east. The urban center of Cincinnati was already teeming with new institutions and thought, but with clear parameters around who might be eligible for such benefits. A summer institute, for example, was launched in the leafy railroad town of Glendale for women who sought learning and advancement. The American Female College, later the Glendale Female College, was rigorous in its way under the leadership of a former Ohio Female College president. It too changed character and in later years took on high social standing but its aspirational grounding lost stature as what became perceived largely as a finishing school. For many institutions founded as dedications to elevated place of women in academic thought and intellect, changing social mores over time ultimately conveyed historical transience and fragility that damaged such ventures' permanence.

Wendy Jean Katz writes in her eloquent 2002 volume, *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati*:

*Women played a role in [these] associations. The paradigm of urban culture's division between home and work depended on gender for its organization. In turn, the gendered distinction between spheres pushed women into identifying themselves as a separate constituency with peculiar interests and the need for representation, associations, and particular skills. School for women were established, from the Cary's Ohio Female College to Catharine Beecher's Western Literary Institute and College of Professional Teachers.*

Katz's text makes an even stronger case for the role of women in social change and voluntarism. She cites occasional circumvention of societal disadvantage and involuntarily constrained identity:

*Reform campaigns drew their critique of society in part from the same "natural" traits of women: piety, morality, and lack of self-interest... The notion of gendered disinterest made benevolence seem not motivated by class interests, despite its basis in developing middle-class standards of behavior. Benevolence itself was a vehicle for middle-class identity to emerge, by its promulgation of certain lifestyles—the nonworking mother, the orderly home, intimate family relationships—as the product of moral rather than economic choices... Catharine Beecher's petitioning of the city council [for her seminary or her school] met opposition within even her circle of friends for its violation of the codes of respectable women's behavior. Women reformers acted instead to affect public opinion through example, prayer, love, persuasion, petitions, correspondence, and in some instance, literature and art.*

If women were held in separate consideration from men in Cincinnati, it is even more evident that freed slaves were given narrow pathways for self-advancement. Lengthy treatises of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century posit that social and economic conditions of Cincinnati, and the nation as a whole, required that freedmen be relocated to Africa in a new movement towards colonization. Such indefensible words and arguments among the empowered found defense as moderate and achievable abolitionism. For a period, Liberia was frequently cited as the social

experiment that would pragmatically remove freedmen and unthinkable questions from our shores.

The American colonizing strain of thought was at the center of mainstream discourse in America. It was far from a fringe hypothesis or theory as we might like to believe in a neat telling of the legacy of our abolitionism. Jeremiah Day, president of Yale University for almost three decades from 1817 to 1846, served as vice-president of the American Colonization Society. Benjamin Silliman, a fifty-eight-year faculty member at the same university co-founded the Connecticut Colonization Society in 1827 with Leonard Bacon, pastor of Church on the Green. All spoke and wrote with vehemence against the founding of a separate college for freedmen in New Haven in 1831. At the Convention of the Free People of Colour in Philadelphia in June of that same year, thought leaders unanimously supported the founding of a freedman's college that included classical studies alongside industrial, mechanical, and agricultural sciences. The college was not to be, however. After sharing the collective vision at Leonard Bacon's church on September 7, 1831, the mayor hastily organized a vote three days later. The resolution cited the proposal as, "destructive to the best interests of the city." The resolutions voting down the college lost by a vote of 700 to 4.

Aside from the committee of influential academics organized to oppose the college, public opinion was also swayed. Social fears were stoked and strategically fomented with fervor. On the eve of the September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1831 vote, the local newspaper wrote:

*If it is necessary to have an African College in Connecticut, may the projectors of it, on mature consideration, conclude to locate it in the town of Cornwall... Cornwall possesses many advantages for such an institution, over other places; and it is not among the least of them, that the ladies of that town readily give themselves, better for worse, and wore for better, to the colored gentlemen.*

With modernized language, these same fright tactics were utilized in 20<sup>th</sup> century America with ill effect to resist social change towards the harder path of human and civil rights. Such

undercurrents still emerge today in neighborhoods and politics in America. The arc of the moral universe is long.

And so, this is the context in which mid-century Cincinnati found itself. The notion of colonization of freedmen to Africa was in the air, as was paternalistic resistance to universal abolitionism on the whole. Few if any institutions of higher education were made available or allowed to be possible for freedmen. Separate public schools for youth did in fact exist and were widely discussed—in part for the competing notions of educating fewer exceptional and promising students or offering less bespoke education available to a wider population. Segregation was simply a granted starting point; the type of education was at issue. By 1858, a Cincinnati convention of African American men and thought leaders gathered in Ohio. Among the many topics suggested were to identify a resolution for the decade-long withheld state taxation needed to operate a school system. Again, such debates and diplomacies regrettably continue to hold purchase in today's political climes.

At the higher education level, Wilberforce University emerged from the Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in 1856, sixty miles from Cincinnati. In part, Ohio succeeded where Connecticut failed. Cincinnati faith leaders were deeply involved in the founding of the college, as was Ohio's Governor Chase. The idealistic joint governance venture could not survive the Civil War, but it did continue under the AME after. Shortly after its founding, the small college already had established women on its faculty. Wilberforce is an active part of national and southwest Ohio's academic circles and marks its 166<sup>th</sup> year in 2022.

Cincinnati's devotion to the arts and letters is often noted through its major institutions: its largest universities, its storied seminaries and temples, and its exclusive entities such as our Literary Club. Yet Cincinnati's distinction may lie deeper within. The continual trials and innovations of its smaller schools and centers of study are historical evidence of the democratic and public value of education held by our city. These societies are rarely noted for launching

egos, entablatures, or industry. They exist because a people chose for them to be, as Mayor Amor Smith Jr. quipped about our Cincinnati Art Museum upon its opening in 1886, “a gift of the people, for the people.”