

The Scotch-Irish of Rockbridge County and the Women's Struggle for Higher Education

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The lives of the colonial people in Rockbridge County in the Shenandoa Valley were different socially, religiously, and economically, particularly in the women's role and education, from the other colonial Americans, even the Virginians just on the other side of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The Scotch-Irish of the Shenandoa Valley dedicated themselves to agriculture, to building mills, to providing an education for their children, to making their homes more comfortable and enjoyable, to "all the arts of peace," and above all, to the sound establishment of their church. These Scotch-Irish Presbyterians were "...conscientious and law-abiding persons; Calvinists of the straightest sect, pious, earnest, grave of demeanor, ...and bent on doing earnest work."¹

Acceptable activities varied between the people of the Tidewater and the early settlers of the Shenandoa Valley. Dinner parties, dances, cards, horse-racing, and the like, all of which were common in the Tidewater region, were re-sented in the Valley.²

Colonial women of the middle and upper classes in the South were much better off than the same classes of women in the North. Slavery relieved many of the Southern women of the manual labor, such as household chores, that the Northern women had to perform. The Scotch-Irish utilized the system of slavery in Rockbridge County simply because

it was the custom of the county to do so. The Scotch-Irish never placed any great dependence upon the system of slavery as other people in the South did simply because their agriculture of livestock and cereal grains did not require slavery on a large scale. Even within the state of Virginia, there were fewer slaves in the Valley than east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the slave-owners in the Valley were much easier on their slaves. The slaves were allowed some privileges as well as some freedom. "They were well clad, and on Sundays the 'biled shirt,' black suit, and white gloves made the darky an object of envy to his brother east of the Ridge."³

The social life in Lexington was informal and mainly centered in the homes, the churches, and the taverns. Every now and then, a group of ladies gathered at someones house to knit and gossip. They talked about many subjects including babies, gardens, chickens, weddings, the schools, the preacher, and the church.⁴

The early settlers of Lexington believed in the "literal and strict obedience to the Scriptures as 'they' interpreted them."⁵ They knew their Bibles well. They maintained a custom of reading the entire Bible every year. They used the old fashioned method of five chapters a day, and seven chapters on Sundays.⁶ Religion played an important role in the Scotch-Irish population. Children were taught to love the Bible and often memorized short verses from it.⁷

The Bible was read in the morning as well as the evenings with the family gathered around the family altar.

Ministry was the most popular professions of the Scotch-Irish of the Valley.⁸ There were few doctors or lawyers in the community. It was the Scotch-Irish influence and support which maintained the religious liberty which eventually spread through out Virginia and then caught on nationwide.⁹ They had been dissatisfied with the hierarchy of the Church of England.

The Scotch-Irish had good intellectual powers and strong wills. Politics "constituted an active interest" in the lives of the people of Rockbridge County. National, state, and local political issues, as well as candidates for office, often entered the conversations of the folks in the taverns and county stores.¹⁰ It was widely written about in the local papers. The Scotch-Irish also served faithfully in the Continental army and in the militia of several states during the Revolution.¹¹ They wanted to uphold their civil and religious liberties.

Women, particularly those of the lower classes, performed most all of the work associated with the house and the field. They had few legal rights and marriage was virtually imperative for survival. For some women, politeness towards her from a man was regarded as an affection, which shows how low women were on the social scale.¹² It is true that all women worked, but the place for the

woman from an aristocratic family, which were not very abundant, was in the house. She played the role of wife, mother, housemaid, teacher, and nurse all at the same time. Any man who valued his social position would never let his wife, or even his daughter, work in the field even in the challenging hard times of the early settlements.¹³

The following "wise counsel" appeared years ago in the "County News," regarding the ideal girl: "A girl should learn to cook, sew, mend, be gentle, value time, dress neatly, keep a secret, mind a baby, avoid idleness, be self-reliant, darn stockings, respect old age, make good bread, keep a house tidy, be above gossiping, humor a cross man, control her temper, care for the sick, make home happy, sweep down cobwebs, marry a man for his worth, be a help-mate to her husband, keep clear of flash literature, take plenty of active exercise, see a mouse without screaming, read some books besides novels, be light-hearted and fleet-footed, wear shoes that won't cramp her feet, and be a womanly woman under all circumstances."¹⁴

Colonial women often tried to improve their status by competing with the upper class. Referring to a visit to his master, a planter in the late eighteenth century wrote: "I was sorry to see his wife act the part of a fine lady in all her wearing apparel, with at least two maids besides her own girl to get dinner and wait upon her; but this I do suppose she did to show respect...."¹⁵ The women often tried to play the part they really weren't.

The men who worked in the fields used out of date agricultural methods on rocky soil which necessitated hard work from sunrise to sunset. Distance from markets, poor roads, and limited transportation facilities increased the difficulty of selling their agricultural and manufactured products.

The general health of the people of Rockbridge County left a lot to be desired. While the active outdoors life combined with favorable climatic conditions appeared to give them a strong and vigorous atmosphere, their opportunities in these respects were constantly upset by their overuse of liquor, lack of sanitational knowledge, unbalanced diets, and excessive hours of work.¹⁶ Although they were sick quite often, the mortality rate was not high.

It was well known throughout the colonies that the Calvinists, whether the Puritans of New England or the Presbyterians, were the first to promote higher education. The Presbyterians had a policy that they conduct education to the interest of the general public rather than to the interest of their denomination.¹⁷ They guaranteed a "freedom of conscience."¹⁸

The Scotch-Irish purpose of education in the eighteenth century was aimed at religion. They wanted people to be capable of reading the Bible. Ministers were the only people to perform any formal teaching. Although the Scotch-Irish had a zeal for education, this "zeal for education

must not be confused with a desire for liberal learning."¹⁹

The early Scots had no desire to expand their minds to literature, arts, and the speculations of philosophy.

"The point of education was to train one to become a minister..., and this meant expounding the Bible according to the reasoned theology of Calvin's Institutes."²⁰

Universities continued to be schools for the ministry, whose curriculum consisted of theology and dialectic.

The purpose behind seeking a degree was not always to save one's souls, especially now, since learned professions gave a man position, prestige, and power.²¹

According to Dr. Lyan G. Tyler, due to the conditions of Virginia society, "...no developed educational system (public school formation by the government) was possible, but it is wrong to suppose that there was none."²² The educational system provided for education through private academies. Education in Virginia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was general for boys and girls, but the literacy rate of men was higher than that of the women. Generally, women in the eighteenth century (excluding the lowest classes) were able to read, write and keep accounts.

"It was the Hanover Presbytery that named the Liberty Hall Academy and furnished it with teachers, students, and financial and moral support."²³ When Liberty Hall moved to Mullberry Hill, the Presbyterians handed over the

supervision of the institution to a board of trustees. William Graham's students gained mental discipline and "sound ethical training" through their work at Liberty Hall.²⁴

The Revolution caused a change in the character of the once innocent boys. This caused William Graham to lose a lot of his zest for the liberal education of young men.²⁵ "They were no longer the moral, unsophisticated boys of the ante-Revolutionary period in the Valley, where the fashionable vices of the world were hardly known."²⁶ Many were corrupted when they were sent to camps and upon their return, they passed along those vices to their peers. A generation of profane swearers, card players, and regular "hell-raisers" arose.²⁷ Eventually it was decided to let the students live in houses in town, hoping their rudeness would decrease. They were anticipating on the females to provide a healthy influence.²⁸

Until the mid-eighteenth century, there was a "strong opposition to literary education for girls...."²⁹ It was believed that girls should learn about household duties along with how to raise a family. It was basically accepted that a girls realm of knowledge would never equal her brothers.³⁰ She was only expected to study courses of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some critic of women's education believed that education was physically damaging to women and they would get "brain fever."³¹ They believed women's minds could not handle such hard courses as would be encountered in

higher education.

Girls generally did not go to school for as many years as boys, simply because the girls had much to learn from working around the house and in social behavior. The curriculum of the female institutions that did exist was virtually the same as the men's with a couple of exceptions.³² The women's schools substituted French for German and added Music and art to their curriculum. The girls also learned drawing and etiquette which would help the girls succeed in social life.

The Ann Smith Academy was a classical school for girls and opened in 1807 in Lexington. It was the only school of its kind in the state of Virginia and was intended to put the "finishing touches" on the girls education.³³ The curriculum of Ann Smith Academy included the following: "reading, orthography, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, chemistry, grammar, compolition, belles-lettres, algebra, geometry, astronomy, and use of the globes, natural history, natural and moral philosophy with all that is needed to complete an English education. Also Greek, Latin and French languages, music, instrumental and vocal, drawing, oil, ivory and miniature painting, fancy work, etc."³⁴

In 1839, plans were arranged so the girls who were advanced in science could attend classes at Washington College, "accompanied, of course, by their chaperones."³⁵

There was a difference of beliefs in higher education for women between the Easterners and the Westerners. Most Midwestern and Western state universities were coeducational when they opened in the mid-nineteenth century. The South's conservatism may be reflected by the fact that it was not until the 1920's when the first girls were admitted to a southern university(UNC).³⁶ Even then, they were chaperoned to classes and required to sit in certain areas. They were even excluded from graduation ceremonies.

Pre-Revolutionary women only taught in elementary schools or served as tutors. Women did not teach in colonial colleges, but this does not necessarily mean that they were not on campus. "The Reverend Edward Halyake, President of Harvard College, entered in his diary under the date of April 22, 1762, 'Miss Landman began her business as college sexton.' "³⁷

Only two artifacts relating to women have been found at Liberty Hall. A small thimble and a possible heel plate from a shoe are the only two artifacts found believed to have been from women of that period. I believe these artifacts could have come from visitors of the Academy. People not associated with the institution probably visited, possibly to see their son, This is quite possible since many of the students were from other areas. I seriously doubt many females, if any, ^{and anything to do with the institution} unless perhaps she was a guest lecturer or the like. Besides, if any women had anything to do with the institution, a greater number of artifacts

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possible
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relating to women would have turned up.

The Scotch-Irish lead an informal social life and believed in a strict interpretation of the Bible which they were well educated on, They were a passive group who was politically active and took up arms to fight for their civil and religious freedoms. The role of women depended upon her social and economic classification. Education was leaned towards religion and women finally began to be included in the advanced levels. The two artifacts found at Liberty Hall are probably from a female who was not associated with the institution since so few artifacts found relate to women out of the thousands of artifacts dug up.

FOOTNOTES

¹John Esten Cooke, American Commonwealths: Virginia A History of the People. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1890), p.325.

²Henry Boley, Lexington in Old Virginia (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, Publishers, 1936), p.8.

³Alexander S. Paxton, Memory Days (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908), p.16.

⁴Ibid. p.35.

⁵Boley, p.16.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Paxton, p.33.

⁸The Scotch-Irish in America: Proceedings and Addresses of the Seventh Congress at Lexington, Virginia, June 20-23, 1895 (Tenn.: Barbee and Smith, Agents, 1895), p.92.

⁹Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, New Series, vol.X. (Worcester: Published by the Society, 1896) p.53.

¹⁰Louis J. Paetow, ed. The Crusades and other Historical Essays (New York: F.S. Crofts and Company, 1928), p.341.

¹¹Proceedings, p.54.

¹²James G. Leyburn, The Scotch-Irish (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), p.32.

¹³Leyburn, p.263.

¹⁴Boley, p.167.

¹⁵Curtis P. Nettels, The Roots of American Civilization (New York: F.S. Crofts and Co., 1938), p.447.

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

¹⁶Paetow, p.361.

¹⁷Sadie Bell, The Church, The State, and Education in Virginia (Philadelphia: Science Press Printing Company, 1930), p.240.

¹⁸Ibid. p.313.

¹⁹Leyburn, p.74

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Carl Holliday, Woman's Life in Colonial Days (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.,1922), p.77.

²³Scotch-Irish, pp.101-2.

²⁴Ibid. p.103.

²⁵Boley, p.39.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid. p.40.

²⁹Nettels, p.447.

³⁰Edmund Morgan, Virginians at Home: Family Life in the Eighteenth Century (Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 1963), p.17.

³¹Anne Firor Scott, ed. The American Woman: Who Was She? (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p.59.

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

³²Mrs. I.M.E. Blandin, History of Higher Education of Women in the South Prior to 1860 (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1909), p.18.

³³Boley, p.77.

³⁴Paetow, pp.343-4

³⁵Boley, p.77.

³⁶Page Smith, Daughters of the Promised Land (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p.224.

³⁷Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, Colonial Women of Affairs (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), p.97.

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