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Iron Fist in the Velvet Glove:
The Myth of Southern Womanhood and
Female Education in Postwar Virginia

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In 1888, Clara Barton told a Boston audience that the Civil War's end saw the American woman "at least fifty years in advance of the normal position peace would have assigned her." Yet, for her Southern sisters, the war brought only starvation and social chaos. Farms and plantations lay in ruins, and one-quarter of a million fathers, husbands and sons would never return from the battlefields to witness the destruction. "Not a living animal, nor a morsel of food of any description" could be found in parts of North Carolina devastated by General Schofield's army, while the women of Atlanta walked sixteen miles to the nearest supply of food. In Macon and Augusta, where women and children led bread riots in their desperate search for food, one soldier reported: "It is a common and everyday sight . . . that of women and children, most of whom were formerly in good circumstances, begging for bread from door to door." "We are all poor together and nobody is ashamed of it. We live from hand to mouth like beggars," explained a former plantation belle.¹ The matrons who once presided over bustling plantations now resided in an occupied territory. On their shoulders had fallen the burden of rebuilding Southern society and restoring the family life their region so revered. Facing "trials that would appal [*sic*] any class of women with less nerve and native cheerfulness," the mothers and daughters of the South "cooked, swept and scrubbed, they split wood, fed horses, milked and watered the cattle, and took upon themselves the duties of not only the servants of the family, but . . . those of the men of the household as well."²

1. Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Bonnet Brigades* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 367; Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 111; James Welch Patton and Frances Butler Simkins, *The Women of the Confederacy* (Richmond: Garrett & Massie, 1936), pp. 244-45; Ina Woestemeyer Van Noppen, ed., *The South: A Documentary History* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1958), p. 324; Nancy T. Konderdt, "Romance and Reality of Defeat: Southern Women in 1865," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 35 (May, 1973), p. 149.

2. Scott, *Southern Lady*, p. 249; Rev. A.D. Mayo, *Southern Women in the Recent Educational Movement in the South* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), p. 25; Patton and Simkins, *Women of the Confederacy*, p. 255.

As the eminent Southern historian Anne Firor Scott indicates, the destruction of the plantation system "significantly altered" the daily lives of Southern women, for Reconstruction transformed their world in three crucial ways. Aristocratic women were reduced to a state of abject poverty and took up the limited number of occupations custom and necessity had opened to Southern women. Former belles worked beside their "cracker" sisters in tobacco plants, textile mills, binderies, factories, shops and schools. The ranks of seamstresses, an honorable occupation for ladies of reduced means, swelled from 17,860 in 1870 to 71,319 by 1890. In city shops, one found "the well-born, well-educated girl side by side in the least attractive pursuits with the 'cracker'," while the New Orleans Woman's Club secured positions for "copyists, teachers, bookkeepers, governesses, musicians, canvassers, agents, collectors, nurses, housekeepers, companions, dressmakers, seamstresses, cashiers, saleswomen." Moreover, war casualties created a "generation of women without men," by taking the lives of a quarter of a million men. The 1870 census revealed a "surplus" of 15,000 women in the state of Virginia alone. Finally, women brought public education to the South with their vigorous leadership in the educational reform movement, for, with thousands of public schools competing for teachers, women looked forward to a reliable source of employment in work thought decent and appropriate for needy young ladies of all social classes.⁴

For the architects of the new age, public schools resolved only one among a host of women's problems. Churches, which women so faithfully attended and supported, owed them a greater voice in religious affairs. The male monopoly in the trades and professions deprived women of career options and diminished their capacity for self-support. Most important of all, new schools and colleges were desperately needed to equip girls and young women with the job skills they were certain to need, "an education that would graduate the daughter better able to teach, to make her own way in the world, to walk abreast with the young women of other portions of the country." The needs of the young scholars were quickly answered as women of the South rallied to the cause; 23 new women's colleges bore witness to their earnest response. One scholarly eyewitness of the reform movement observed:

The real impetus of this important movement was in a thousand homes, where the mother, grandmother, and maiden aunt, who had lived through the life of

3. Scott, *Southern Lady*, pp. 106, 121; Massey, *Bonnet Brigades*, p. 246; Van Noppen, *The South*, pp. 531-32. Out of an estimated 346 economic opportunities open to women in the United States, only 20 to 40 were open to Southern women.

4. Scott, *Southern Lady*, pp. 106, 110-11.

the awful revolutionary epoch, were toiling, scheming and saving to keep the elder daughter in the best school and impress upon her the fact that at the earliest opportunity she must join the ranks of the helpers to lift up the younger sisters, possibly the brothers of the family.⁵

Matronly toilers and schemers advanced the cause of female education in their women's clubs and in private acts of charity and endowment. Miss Emily V. Mason pledged the proceeds from her second edition of *Southern Poems of the War* to "provide for the women of the South (the future mothers of the country) the timely boon of education." H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women, the coordinate campus of Tulane University, was founded in 1886 through the generous bequest of Mrs. Josephine Louise Newcomb, and soon gained recognition as one of the leading women's colleges in the South. The South Carolina Federation offered eight scholarships to local women's colleges, while clubs throughout the South organized model schools and agitated for better school facilities. When the University of Tennessee finally admitted female students in 1893, the leading women of Knoxville raised funds for a women's building on the University grounds. The philanthropists were duly rewarded when women students took highest honors in the freshman, sophomore and junior classes. Missionary societies, which attracted huge memberships by the 1890's, sponsored boarding schools and day schools.⁶

Female scholars embarked upon a bold new experiment in their maiden schools, for reformers had triumphed in their fight for a practical curriculum. Gone were the ante-bellum classes in china painting, dance and etiquette that once trained ladies for the rigors of courtship. Where fashionable students once acquired "a cheap training in languages, a laborious trifling with the so-called 'accomplishments,' poor music and unaesthetic art," postwar students tackled industrial drawing, design, and telegraphy, skills that would "open the door to a career of industrial activity so essential to the multitudes of young women in the South." As one alumna of genteel schooling reflected:

Wish I had been taught to cook instead of how to play on the piano. A practical knowledge of the

5. Arthur W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family: From Colonial Time to the Present*, Vol. 3: *Since the Civil War* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1919), p. 13; Mayo, *Southern Women*, pp. 54-55.

6. Van Noppen, *The South*, p. 159; Mary Benedict, "The Higher Education of Women in the Southern States," in *The South in the Building of a Nation*, ed. by Samuel Chiles Mitchell (Richmond: Southern Publication Society, 1909), p. 262; Elizabeth M. Howe, "The Southern Girl: A Neglected Asset," *Educational Review*, 33 (March, 1907), p. 296; Charles Forster Smith, "The Higher Education of Women in the South," *Educational Review*, 8 (October, 1894), pp. 288-89; Scott, *Southern Lady*, p. 139.

preparation of food products would stand me in better stead than any amount of information regarding the scientific principles of music. I adore music, but I can't live without eating — and I'm hungry.⁷

Changes in the rights and responsibilities of women were rarely met with gracious resignation, as Southerners of the 1870's demonstrated in the bitter public debate about the woman's expanded role in the workplace and in the home. In 1875, the *Richmond Enquirer* denounced the renowned lecturer Anna Dickinson for telling the city's women they no longer had to "work in silence and obscurity in the home" since there was "nothing to prevent a woman from doing what she will." The *Enquirer* assured its readers, "some of the sentiments she uttered have seldom been heard in this community before."⁸ Dickinson's comments touched a raw nerve in the Southern psyche, for their women represented "the standard for its rallying, the mystic symbol of its nationality in the face of the foe." The South was unique because its women were unique: uniquely feminine, especially moral and exceptionally pure. The mistress of the plantation had been the cornerstone of the plantation system, and many Southerners saw no reason why the greatest prize of their civilization should rattle her chains. So, debaters relentlessly measured the Reconstruction woman against her mythical counterpart on the plantation, a woman eulogized as the "most important personage about the home, the presence which pervaded the mansion, the centre of all that life, the queen of that realm." The mistress set an example for the entire plantation with her cheerful obedience to her husband's will, for the young wife soon learned the lesson succinctly expressed by the 1834 *Southern Literary Messenger*: "never attempt to control your husband by opposition, by displeasure, or any other mark of anger . . . Besides, what can a woman gain by her opposition or her differences? Nothing." Harriet Martineau, during a visit to the South, was not surprised to hear the mistress called "the chief slave of the harem," and the master depicted in this harsh light: "His manners are unequalled still, but underneath this smooth exterior lies the grip of a tyrant whose will has never been crossed."⁹ Because slavery required a stronger dose of male authority, Southern women

7. Mayo, *Southern Women*, pp. 55-56; Katharine M. Jones, *Heroines of Dixie: Confederate Women Tell Their Story of the War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p. 379.

8. Massey, *Bonnet Brigades*, p. 354.

9. Irvin H. Bartlett, Glenn Cambor, "The History and Psychodynamics of Southern Womanhood," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2 (1974), pp. 9, 16; William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 163; Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*, ed. by Ben Ames Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 534.

were especially confined in their role and became, as Scott notes, a distinct type among American women. The struggle to free themselves from the bonds of enforced purity and piety was bound to prove long and arduous.¹⁰

But would the same ideal of Southern womanhood that shaped and corrected behavior in the ante-bellum era continue to regulate the behavior of men and women in the new South? Would the liberation of women from the plantation system also free them from its rigid standard of feminine deportment? Scott argues that "when plantations broke up and people began to move to town, the image as a real force in women's lives was doomed."¹¹ Yet the remarkable stamina of the myth in the late nineteenth century is evident in the history of two women's colleges in Virginia. A study of State Female Normal and Randolph-Macon Woman's College in their early years illustrates the paradoxical role the myth of Southern womanhood played in their development, for while both colleges prepared their students for the hardships and responsibilities likely to beset women in the new age, they both insisted that practical education must not violate the traditional sphere of the Southern woman. The ultimate goal of their practical schooling, the cultured wife and the educated mother, remained in perfect harmony with the mythical Southern mistress, that paragon of regional virtue.

The State Female Normal in Farmville, Virginia, was founded in 1883 to rescue scores of destitute women through vocational and teacher training. As Virginia's infant public schools were in desperate need of qualified teachers, students were assured jobs upon completion of their studies. Randolph-Macon Woman's College, founded in 1893 in Lynchburg, Virginia, was the product of a statewide debate on the proper education of a Virginia lady. When the University of Virginia settled the question of co-education by refusing to matriculate women in 1893, Randolph-Macon offered Virginia's women a separate-but-equal course of study. While these colleges served two different classes of women, they shared the ambivalent status accorded rigorous or practical educational institutions for women. Both colleges promised to prepare their students for remunerative work, or at least for the few jobs then open to the fairer sex. Yet both also paid homage to the myth of Southern womanhood, diligently insisting that practical education was not meant to lead to equality of the sexes. Women might be prepared for paying jobs of the decidedly feminine sort, but their education was not to serve as a wedge into male occupations and the masculine world of rough-and-tumble politics.

10. Scott, *Southern Lady*, p. xi.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

Randolph-Macon and State Female Normal were launched as educational experiments amidst a protracted state-wide debate on the most beneficial education for the young women of Virginia. The debaters filled banquet halls with harrowing tales of the consequences of co-education and curricula with "male" subjects. Virginians repeatedly heard predictions that the male and female spheres of influence were breaking down. In 1877, a male educator told the Virginia Education Association that women should not be educated as though they were men:

[Woman's] education should not be identical with man's; but complementary. While his should take especially the direction of languages, science and philosophy, hers should more particularly be based on language, literature and fine art.¹²

In 1894, University of Virginia professor Charles W. Kent warned students at Hollins College that Southern women should not forsake their elevated status on the pedestal for the uncertainties of the man's world. Professor Kent warned his female audience:

The change which is fundamental, is also dangerous. It unsexes women. I am astonished . . . that women are as willing to give up their delicacy and refinement, their modest demeanor and bashful, blushing bearing as to assume the bold, brusque manners of a less accomplished and less polished sex.¹³

Although Southern women insisted that the realities of post-war life, the widespread poverty and destruction of normal social bonds, necessarily expanded the role women played in public life, they assured their audiences that this inevitable expansion of the female sphere would not jeopardize their faithful adherence to the Southern ideal of femininity. A woman educator reassured her colleagues in 1882 that Virginia's fairer sex was cultivating its feminine virtues at the same time women prepared for future employment. She explained:

We would never forget that home is woman's proper sphere, and that her education ought to be so conducted as to make her there a very center of blessedness and sunshine . . . the young women of the present day are not content to be drones or incubi of society. More sensible it is to teach every woman something whereby she may earn a living.¹⁴

12. William Hall Cato, "Development of Higher Education For Women in Virginia," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1941), p. 162.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 122-23.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 121. Actually, the woman's paper was read to the Education Association, as women were not permitted to publicly speak at meetings.

Another woman educator urged greater generosity in state funding of female higher education because a college education would actually spark a woman's interest in the complexities of homemaking. "We must have training in chemistry, physics, biology and sociology in order to understand the scientific and sociological problems of the home," she wrote. "With this increased knowledge our interest will return to the home."¹⁵

It is hardly surprising to find women educators packaging their demands for a more practical education in sentimental allusions to the home. After all, the well-educated woman of the nineteenth century was often suspected of heinous plots against the sanctity of the home and family. Her detractors were certain that a worldly education would lead to social collapse, abandoned children, or worse, no children at all. To educate women as one educated men would only lead to displaced men and desexed women. By sugar-coating the new woman with a layer of Southern femininity, the proponents of equal education hoped to make the learned woman more palatable. But this unthreatening picture of the educated woman, a woman still feminine to the core, did not quiet critics of rigorous female education, nor did it make Virginians any more agreeable to the presence of women in the man's world of medicine, law or politics.

The hardships of daily life in postwar Virginia rendered meaningless objections to the practical training of women. Many Southern women worked to sustain the most meagre existence, and the rise of the public school system answered their need for jobs. Virginia's Superintendent of Instruction, Dr. W.H. Ruffner, convinced the state legislature of the need for a "reliable source of supply for teachers fitted by education and training for their work."¹⁶ In 1884, the legislature established the State Female Normal to train white women for public school instruction, allocating \$5,000 to build the school and \$10,000 towards its maintenance.¹⁷

State Female Normal opened its doors to 107 pupils in 1884; women from every city and county in Virginia, nominated by their local superintendents, took advantage of the tuition-free education. Students had to be fifteen years of age, and possess a "vigorous constitution, good natural capacity, and of course, a blameless moral character." Applicants were expected to read fluently, "write a fair hand," spell correctly, demonstrate pro-

15. Lillian W. Johnson, "The Higher Education of Women in the South," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh Conference for Education in the South*, (Nashville: Executive Committee of Conference for Education in the South, 1908), pp. 138-39.

16. *Our Alma Mater: Bulletin of the State Teachers College*, (Farmville State Teachers College, 1929), p. 4.

17. "The State Female Normal School, 1884-1899," *Normal Light*, Yearbook of State Female Normal, 1899. (Farmville: State Female Normal, 1899), p. 13.

iciency in arithmetic and grammar and correctly locate the principal cities, rivers and mountains of the world, as well as describe the "leading events" in American history.¹⁸ Students entered the school in either September or February, while public school teachers might attend when their own schools were not in session. A number of teachers availed themselves of this opportunity "while supporting themselves" and "fitted themselves for better work."¹⁹

State Female Normal was "just what it purported to be — a school for the preparation of teachers." In light of this goal, students pledged to teach for at least two years in one of Virginia's schools upon graduation. The college's curriculum prepared the young scholars for the rigors of teaching, though, owing to their own sparse educations, much preparatory work was necessary. The college itself had three departments: the Normal School; the Preparatory School, with primary and grammar courses; and the Model School, where children under ten years of age sharpened the teaching skills of the State Normal scholars.²⁰ The first class of pupils, which Dr. Ruffner found "had been carried over too much surface," was offered elementary courses in English, arithmetic, algebra, physiology, physics, U.S. history, penmanship, geography, drawing and vocal music. Courses were soon offered in school economy, methods of teaching, pedagogy and psychology.²¹ Students advanced through the classes in half-year terms, a process requiring two years. The well-prepared pupil then entered a senior year devoted to education courses and practice school.²² Women received the "Licentiate of Teaching" upon completion of two years, while graduates of the third year received a diploma.²³

With his faculty of eight women and one man, Dr. Ruffner launched the first professional teacher's training course in the state of Virginia. The faculty, all Northerners with the exception of two, taught a bewildering array of courses. Miss Lillian Lee taught everything from math, drawing and bookkeeping to calisthenics, while Miss Pauline Gash instructed her students in general history, rhetoric, elocution, penmanship, English literature and grammar.²⁴ Students were expected to display

18. *Catalogue of the State Female Normal at Farmville, Va., Thirteenth Session, 1896-97* (Richmond: 1897), pp. 26-27.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

20. *Circular of the State Female Normal, August 1, 1887* (Richmond: Baughman Bros., 1887), p. 16.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

22. *State Female Normal at Farmville, Va., First Session*, p. 6; "State Female Normal," *Normal Light*, p. 14.

23. *Circular of the State Female Normal School at Farmville, Virginia, 1895-96* (Richmond, 1897), p. 10.

24. *Circular of the State Female Normal, August 1, 1887*, p. 4.

"modest, dignified and affable behavior, as becometh ladies." Eight hours of sleep, starting no later than ten p.m., and one hour daily exercise were hard and fast rules. Communication by "word or sign" was strictly forbidden during school hours. President Ruffner received the pupils on the first Friday evening of every month; on other Friday evenings students might receive gentleman callers, "properly introduced," until ten o'clock.²⁵

As the 19th century drew to an end, State Female Normal was a solid and well-respected institution in the state of Virginia. By the 1897-1898 session, the school trained an average of 256 teachers a year, and after 14 years of operation, the school had graduated 2,000 Virginia women.²⁶ State Female Normal also offered its students vocational training through courses in dress-cutting, telegraphy, stenography and typewriting. As Dr. Ruffner explained to his fellow educators in 1884, the Normal School offered poorer women a unique opportunity to prepare for one of the few professional careers open to women. The school addressed a crying need, as Dr. Ruffner said, because the number of indigent women in Virginia was "pitiably large."²⁷

Despite the admirable reputation enjoyed by the State Female Normal, students and administrators criticized the state for neglecting Virginia's women. On one occasion, Dr. Ruffner angrily told a gathering of county school superintendents that the State Normal received the smallest appropriation of any state college. While the University of Virginia and the Virginia Military Institute received \$30,000 in 1884, and the Colored Normal School received \$20,000, State Female Normal was allocated only \$10,000. As Virginia's public schools needed 4,000 more teachers and this was the only school supplying white "professional instructors," Dr. Ruffner concluded that the legislators' opposition to jobs for white women accounted for their neglect. Dr. Ruffner told the superintendents, "it is hard to understand why the white teachers of Virginia and the white women of Virginia should be thought of so little comparative importance."²⁸ The college president begged his colleagues to support increased funding for the State Normal and to "awaken" the legislature to its "shameful neglect" of Virginia's women. He concluded with the plaintive observation: "How strangely they have been neglected by the ruling sex."²⁹ In 1899, a Female Normal student reiterated Dr. Ruffner's angry

25. *Longwood College: 75 Years of Teacher Education* (Farmville: Longwood College, 1961), p. 3.

26. *State Female Normal School at Farmville, Virginia, 1897-98, Fourteenth Session* (Richmond, 1898), p. 3.

27. *State Normal, First Session, 1884-85*, p. 18.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

comments about the meagre funding, suggesting that the "extreme slowness of conservative Virginia to adopt new ideas, especially in women's education," was responsible for the state's neglectful ways. Still, the woman found her alma mater had done much with very little. Female Normal represented "the steady growth of more liberal ideas in our State, with the promise of much better things hereafter."³⁰

The "extreme slowness of conservative Virginia" indeed explains the public's failure to recognize the new age for women. The myth of Southern womanhood, with its insistence that women were destined for motherhood and matrimony alone, certainly posed a challenge to those Virginians seeking a practical education for women. But even the liberal proponents of equal education paid lip-service to the myth, using it to justify their work to skeptics. As Dr. Ruffner explained, employing the myth:

...[women] dictate our social habits, they rear our children, they refine our tastes, they conserve our morals, they keep burning the fires of religion. Everywhere in our daily life are found the skillful hand, the ready mind, the quenchless heart of woman. And yet, has there ever been any public recognition of her inestimable claims upon society? Men make provisions for their boys out of public funds, and for themselves too — how wretchedly small has been the share doled out to her who deserves everything.³¹

Dr. Ruffner's reverent plea for recognition of woman's "quenchless heart" perfectly expressed the traditional view of proper sex roles. He asked that women be rewarded for their excellent custodial care of the home and family, that women receive better training and just compensation in the female sphere of home and hearth. He did not challenge the exclusion of the "skillful hand" from every profession, save teaching children, nor did he suggest that equal education would equalize opportunity for the sexes in the Old Dominion. Each expansion of their sphere, be it teacher training or curriculum reform, included the reassurance that women would apply new skills and knowledge to their "natural" sphere of maternity and matrimony. Thus, the development of feminine skills did not threaten the separate spheres of men and women. The meagre financial support given State Female Normal exemplified Virginia's "extreme slowness" and the myth's success in restraining women's efforts to expand practical employment training.

Randolph-Macon Woman's College came into being in the heat of a controversy over the state's obligation to educate its

30. "State Female Normal," *Normal Light*, p. 17.

31. *State Normal, First Session, 1884-85*, p. 9.

women. While the decision to establish Randolph-Macon preceded the public debate, the woman's college was shaped by the issues that fueled the controversy. In 1890, Mr. R.G.H. Kean, a member of the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia, sponsored a successful resolution granting women certificates as they passed the University's "graduation examinations." Although their certificates were equal to diplomas, women never graduated from the University, so three years later, a faculty committee proposed three means of educating Virginia's women: a superior women's college, on the order of Bryn Mawr or Vassar, supported by state or private money; co-education, or opening all state facilities to women; and a co-ordinate or separate-but-equal college for women.³² Public opinion, Philip Alexander Bruce suggests, was opposed to the creation of a Southern Vassar on the grounds it was too expensive an undertaking for the state. The Board of Visitors and the faculty of the University of Virginia voted in 1893 to retain an all-male student body, ending any hope of state co-education and reflecting the lack of public support for "granting the same opportunities to women as to men for the acquisition of higher education."³³

Randolph-Macon Woman's College was the best example of separate-but-equal education envisioned by the advocates of superior women's education. The College offered a rigorous curriculum that rivalled that of the University of Virginia, maintained strict standards for admission, and awarded both the bachelor of arts and masters of arts degrees. The new institution quickly earned a national reputation as the leading women's college in the South.³⁴ Randolph-Macon was the embodiment of the strange compromise Virginia negotiated with the proponents of equal education for women, for the administration of Randolph-Macon praised the equal education of men and women while calling for preservation of the special treatment of women students. Although women might step down from their pedestals to enter the laboratory and the lecture-hall, their education must not tempt them to cross the forbidden boundaries into male occupations.

Randolph-Macon's trustees set out to correct the long-standing tradition of too little money, shoddy facilities and haphazard courses that prevailed in Southern female education.

32. "Correspondence Respecting the Admission of Women to the University of Virginia, 1893," *Virginia Pamphlets*, 43, n.d., p. 29, 1; Phillip Alexander Bruce, *History of the University of Virginia, 1819-1919*, II, (New York: MacMillan, 1920), p. 88. By 1890, over 65% of all American colleges and universities were co-educational.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

34. The college was classified as a Division A college in the U.S. Commissioner of Education 1893-94 *Report*. Randolph-Macon was one of three Southern women's colleges so designated, along with Sophie Newcomb and Goucher College for Women.

Thus when trustees of the Randolph-Macon system (which included a men's college in Ashland, Va. and two boy's preparatory schools) were offered land in Lynchburg, they accepted only after committing the school to an initial endowment of \$100,000.³⁵ Dr. William W. Smith, the first president and a man strongly committed to the reform of female education, visited prominent Northern women's institutions to discern models of excellence for the college. From the opening session, therefore, students enjoyed the best facilities its founders could provide, including an astronomical observatory, a gymnasium with "appliances for physical culture," and chemistry and physics laboratories.³⁶

The trustees' commitment to excellence in female education, however, was not meant to expand the worldly opportunities for young ladies. The Board of Trustees represented the Virginia and Baltimore Conference of Methodists, who fervently hoped to instill piety and Christian charity in the hearts of the female scholars. While the Methodist Church did not support the college financially, it urged Church members to send either their donations or their daughters to the worthwhile cause. Dr. Smith discovered in the Methodist Church doctrine:

The Church's view of man logically demands the highest education of all, male and female, since we do not educate merely to increase the power to get gain, but to ennoble.³⁷

Women students experienced a thorough ministering to their souls with daily prayers, Bible classes conducted every Sunday by faculty members, weekly Y.W.C.A. meetings and church attendance in the local parishes. As one college publication explained, "Reverent worship without cant, earnest religion without fanaticism is our aim."³⁸

The founding fathers also believed the women of Virginia ought to have a college that would rival any men's college in the South. As Dr. Smith explained:

The need of such a college has been apparent. With five or six endowed colleges and two universities for men in Virginia, there was no institution in the State, nor indeed in all the South, with similar equipment

35. Roberta D. Cornelius, "Randolph-Macon Woman's College: Its Origins and Development," *The Iron Worker*, Winter, 1951-52, p. 2. The Rivermont Land Company of Lynchburg donated the 20-acre site, plus a gift of \$60,000 in stock and \$40,000 for the building fund.

36. *Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies: Catalogue for 1898-99, Announcement for 1899-1900* (Lynchburg: J.P. Bell, 1899), p. 84.

37. "The Randolph-Macon System," *Randolph-Macon Woman's College Archives*, Box, "Earliest Years," n.d., n.p.

38. *Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies: Catalogue for 1898-99*, p. 85.

and advantages for women.³⁹

Randolph-Macon proudly advertised the verdict of Southern educators who found the college had indeed met the high standards of male colleges in the state. As Dr. Page, Dean of the Faculty of the University of Virginia, observed, "I have no hesitation in saying that the Bachelor of Arts degree represents an education at least as broad and deep as that of any excellent men's college in this State."⁴⁰ Dr. J.L.M. Curry, a renowned authority on Southern education, praised Randolph-Macon as "in no whit inferior to the best colleges for men in Virginia or for women in the United States." The college's catalogues frequently told the reader that it represented the "only one in the South offering to our women a course equal to that given by our best colleges for men."⁴¹

Randolph-Macon's faculty, students and curriculum were selected with an eye to the North's women's colleges, and an eye to Southern men's colleges. The first faculty members, twelve distinguished scholars, included the college physician, Dr. Smith, who also served as president, four scholars who had studied abroad, and three who had been college administrators; all had completed advanced university work or its equivalent in art or music schools. Faculty members were encouraged to teach courses only in their fields of expertise, a corrective to the traditional spectrum of courses given by one burdened teacher.⁴²

When the college first opened its doors in 1893, with a lone building and a field crisscrossed with gullies and dotted with a pine and persimmon tree, seventy-seven women embarked upon the most liberal experiment in female education ever seen in the state. From its first session, Randolph-Macon boasted a thorough and demanding curriculum. The college offered a complete array of the sciences, including physics, biology, chemistry and geology, each with lab work. In 1897, Dr. C.G. Ragland, hired by the college to teach chemistry, praised the chemical labs as the most complete in any institution south of Harvard.⁴³ A local newspaper commented that the science equipment rivalled any of the Southern men's colleges and was certain to attract young female scholars "who have been accustomed to go to more distant institutions for advanced work in science." Randolph-Macon was also the only institution in the South, outside of Johns Hopkins University, to offer

39. "The Randolph-Macon System," n.p.

40. *Ibid.*; "What Graduates Will Get," Randolph-Macon Woman's College, pamphlet in President's office, n.d., n.p.

41. "References," Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Archives, Box, "Earliest Years," n.d., n.p.

42. Cornelius, "Randolph-Macon Woman's College," p.3.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

psychology with laboratory work.⁴⁴ In addition to its strong science department, Randolph-Macon offered Latin, Greek, French, mathematics, mineralogy, moral philosophy, pedagogical courses, elocution, physical culture, music, astronomy, hygiene, psychology, philosophy and art. Students might earn the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Letters or the Master of Arts. The B.A. and B. Lit. required a minimum of four years of course work; the B.A. candidates had to distinguish themselves in French, German and chemistry and B.Lit. candidates in Latin, German and chemistry, also with distinction.⁴⁵

Although the educational reformers of the 1870's called for the practical education of women for bona fide careers, few professions and occupations were open to Southern women by the 1890's. But, Randolph-Macon's curriculum did prepare women for what jobs the Civil War had opened to them: teaching positions and Civil Service posts. The college prepared future teachers with the latest pedagogical classes while the Lynchburg City Schools offered classroom experience. A college pamphlet told aspiring teachers they would do well to enroll at Randolph-Macon because "Its leading position will cause it to be applied to for teachers by hundreds of schools and colleges. Its diploma will be a guarantee of employment and its degree candidates must naturally command the highest position in the South."⁴⁶ Students interested in history were likewise assured that "an understanding of the principles of history," when combined with courses in political economy, would prepare the women for "taking the doctor's degree, or to entering the work of journalism, education, charity organization, or the civil service." Yet, Dr. Smith expressed the hope that few of Randolph-Macon's students would ever utilize their academic skills in a career. He understood that a few exceptional women, like Maria Mitchell or Frances Willard, "may rightly study for the M.D. degree and practice medicine," or that women might pursue a law degree or a doctorate, but the "great majority" were destined to be wives, mothers, homemakers. Since the "great majority" of women would choose the home for a career, a "broad, cultural" preparation would certainly suffice.⁴⁷

44. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

45. *Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Catalogue, 1893-94*, p. 7; *Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies: Catalogue for 1898-99*, p. 86. The B. Lit. was discarded after 1900.

46. "What Graduates Will Get," n.p.; *Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies: Catalogue for 1898-99*, p. 80; "Professional Education of Teachers: Special Courses at Randolph-Macon Woman's College," President's Files, n.d., n.p.; "What Graduates Will Get," n.p.

47. *Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies: Catalogue for 1897-98*, p. 8; M. Carrington Shields, "Historical Sketch of Randolph-Macon Woman's College," *Southern Association Quarterly* (November, 1939), p. 6.

In 1899, members of the college's Washington Literary Society learned why the college should not train women for careers, but refine their unique gifts of purity and piety. E. Edith Cheatham informed the Society:

We have not yet outgrown the belief that college training is unnecessary unless the woman is to have a profession. Yet the place where of all others we find most need for the best trained college woman is the home. Woman must compass in herself a trinity: physical well-being, because she is the mother of the race; mental well-being, because she must train the youth of the country; spiritual well-being, because she is given souls to save.⁴⁸

The young woman's speech epitomized the new South's compromise between the myth of Southern womanhood and the modern, college-educated woman. The college's advertisements revealed this peculiar marriage of myth and social reality when it declared its intention, on the one hand, to prepare women for the possibility, however remote, that they must support themselves. Her education, then, should rival the best education given to men in the South, and the curriculum should be as extensive and modern as the Northern women's colleges. On the other hand, the college promised to preserve those unique qualities that made the Southern woman so special "without sacrifice of that modesty and feminine grace for which they are so justly admired." In its plea for funds, Randolph-Macon simultaneously looked backwards and forwards asking: "Will not the friends of Education in the South build upon this foundation a worthy rival of the colleges for women in the North, rivalling them in facilities for culture, while preserving the Southern type of womanhood?"⁴⁹ Although Dr. Smith, in a progress report on the college, spoke of "fully developed facilities," in the same breath he warned, "We must educate our women, but it should be done under environments in harmony with Southern ideas of womanhood." In 1896, Randolph-Macon boasted it rivalled the best Northern colleges for women, but added, "we may hope, while securing equal scholarship, to preserve the peculiar charm of our Southern type of womanhood."⁵⁰

The myth of Southern womanhood fell with equal gravity upon all classes of women. Both the impoverished State Female Normal students, using their free education to better their lot,

48. E. Edith Cheatham, "College Men and Women," *Maconiana*, 1899, (Lynchburg, 1899), p. 42.

49. *Randolph-Macon Woman's College Catalogue, 1893-94 and Announcements, 1894-95* (Lynchburg, Va., 1894); *Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies: Catalogue for 1898-99*, p. 123.

50. "The Randolph-Macon System," n.p.; *The Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies, 1895-96* (Lynchburg, 1896), p. 56.

and the Randolph-Macon students, paying dearly for the best Southern education money could buy, wrestled with the code's distorted image of their lives. The myth reassured Virginians that one trademark of ante-bellum society survived the war; the Southern belle lived on as the perfect picture of feminine piety, purity and cheerful submission to white, male authority. For the Southern woman living in the real world where men seemed to dictate the boundaries of female employment, the myth was a troublesome barrier. Virginia's women made the best of the omnipresent code, therefore, even turning it to their purposes. Virginia's reformers used the iron fist in the velvet glove, a technique largely responsible for the successful reform of female education. The reformers softened their demands for equal education with the soothing assurance that women merely wanted training for maternity, school teaching, and other vocations within the female sphere. Who could condemn the well-educated mother, the teacher trained in child psychology, the Christian woman armed with theological discourse in her soul-saving mission? Women's colleges could expand infinitely without threatening the male monopoly on law, medicine and the thousands of other concerns thought appropriate for the "less polished" sex. Randolph-Macon women studied four years of science in a curriculum as rigorous as the all-male University of Virginia, but this equality in the laboratory and the classroom was justified by the homemaker's need for chemistry and physics courses, useful information in any modern kitchen. After all, the myth promised to be a permanent rein on female ambitions to tamper with the "natural" order of things.

Cautious reformers slightly modified the rigid segregation of male and female spheres; their attempts were circumspect and carefully guarded. As one student and later professor at Randolph-Macon Woman's College recalled, "In the heart of some 'so-called' old-fashioned people there was great fear as to what would be the nature of the finished product, this sort of superwoman . . ." ⁵¹ The "superwoman" justified her need for employment, her study of subjects once reserved for her brother, and her responsibilities as a citizen, as well as a mother and wife, with the assurance she would not challenge her brother's privileged access to the marketplace and town hall. The myth of Southern womanhood slowed, but did not reverse, the controversial expansion of her postwar responsibilities. Virginia's women expanded their educational opportunities behind the protective shield of the myth. They learned to disguise the iron fist with the velvet glove, for, as one columnist in the *Southern*

51. Shields, "Historical Sketch," p. 2.

Home Journal warned, "'ef she is obliged to wear the britches for the good of the family, her skirts ought to be long enuf' to hide 'em."⁵²

52. Betsey Bittersweet, Column, *Southern Home Journal*, Jan. 4, 1868, p. 8. Betsey Bittersweet's column was a regular feature in this postwar weekly. However, it is possible the name is a pseudonym and may even represent the work of a male writer.