

3-1-1946

The Era of Private Academies

Forest C. Ensign

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ensign, Forest C. "The Era of Private Academies." *The Palimpsest* 27 (1946), 75-85.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol27/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Era of Private Academies

Throughout the recorded history of men, the training of adolescent youth, especially of boys, has been a major community interest. Iowa offers no exception to this rule. Prior to 1838, when the fringe of settlements west of the Mississippi broke the apron strings that bound them to the land of the Badgers, at least ten academies or seminaries had been authorized in what was later to be the Commonwealth of Iowa. To be sure, only two of this first planting bore fruit; yet before Iowa's first public high school was finally organized in the year 1856, more than a score of private academies and seminaries were in operation.

The academy movement had almost reached its peak by the time Iowa entered the Union. Beginning in Pennsylvania a century before Iowa's statehood, taking deeper root in Massachusetts, thriving mightily in New York, then sweeping westward into the new States as they were carved from the national domain, this movement, one of the most vital and beneficent of the many that characterized the young nation, had culminated in the founding by 1850 of more than six thousand recorded academies or non-public secondary

schools in the United States and an uncounted number of smaller institutions.

Some of the older States, such as Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York, and several of the newer ones, notably Ohio and Indiana, made their academies semi-public by contributing generously in money or lands to their support, but the extent of public encouragement in Iowa was limited to chartering almost any plan for education.

Local districts in Iowa soon took over the elementary school work, but private schools long furnished secondary and college work. Often the line between the two was indefinite. These schools took their students as they found them and, for the most part, permitted them to take any courses they desired and could carry. These academies and colleges were sometimes sponsored by individuals, many were founded by churches, and a few were planned by associations of workers or farmers.

Half a dozen of these independent institutions had begun their service before Iowa entered the Union. At Yellow Spring in Des Moines County, a school appeared as early as 1836, with definite secondary work in an incorporated academy by 1844. Ambitious young men from the East dreamed of a college here, possibly a university, and one, Nathan R. Leonard, came from Yellow

Spring to cast in his lot as professor of mathematics in the infant State University of Iowa.

At Grandview in Muscatine County, a school was reported as early as 1836, small and unincorporated, but finally evolving into what was widely known for a decade or two as the Eastern Iowa Normal School. A little school in Dubuque, chartered in 1838, catered to the youth of that locality for a brief period. Hither came young Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., brilliant, dapper, well educated, twenty-two, and in this mining town of twelve hundred he taught for a year or two. This has been called "the first classical school in Iowa".

Most famous, perhaps, of all the unincorporated institutions on the secondary level was Howe's Academy at Mount Pleasant, organized in 1844 and continuing in vigorous operation until 1917. Neither the founder of this school, Samuel L. Howe, nor his son, Seward C., who followed him as proprietor-principal, was a profound scholar, but both were superior teachers and both were able to impress their assistants and their students that teaching and learning were quite the most important things in the world. It is significant that John Van Valkenburg, first head of teacher training at the State University of Iowa, was prepared for college here under the direction of Samuel L. Howe, himself.

Denmark Academy, one of the church-sponsored institutions, was connected with the celebrated "Iowa Band", that group of devoted young ministers affiliated with the Congregational and Presbyterian churches who came out to Iowa in 1843, with the ambition that each one should found a church and all a college. Grinnell is, of course, the college which grew out of their labors, but that is another story.

Denmark Academy was incorporated in 1843 and two years later instruction began in a little single-story building which served as church, school, and public forum. A two-story stone building was erected in 1848 and a second in 1866. After the Civil War when young men who had left their classes to join the colors were coming back, two hundred and seventy students were registered, coming from no fewer than fifteen States and Territories.

Those who loved the Denmark Academy, and there were many, were spared the mortification of seeing it fade away as so many others before had done. In 1924, the limestone building burned. A movement had been on foot for some time to develop here a consolidated public school and shortly after the fire, a district was formed, a fine new building was erected, and the public and private forces of the community joined in what is

legally known as the Denmark Academy-High School.

There were at least eight academies in Van Buren County, four or five bidding for students at the same time. At the little town of Bentonsport, for example, once famous for its woolen mills, is a small, two-story building which has been in use since 1870 as a part of the public school system. It was erected in 1851 by five prominent citizens for a private academy at the cost of three thousand dollars. A scholarly gentleman, John W. Allen by name, was the first principal here. His school won quite a reputation, attracting students from a wide area. One, William E. Mason, became a United States Senator from Illinois, and another, William A. Clark, became one of the world's greatest producers of copper, the millionaire Clark of Montana.

One of the academies founded by an organization of workers was the Mechanics' Academy, started in 1842 by the Mechanics' Mutual Aid Association of Iowa City. It had a "Male Department" and a "Female Department", with tuition ranging from a dollar a month for elementary subjects to \$5.00 per month for music. The institution was later abandoned and in 1866 the Iowa General Assembly donated the land to the University which later built a hospital on the site.

In the middle counties of Iowa which were being settled in the decade preceding the Civil War private schools were also organized, some of which developed substantial foundations, continuing in operation into the early years of this century. One of these was the New Providence Academy in Hardin County. In 1908 it was a friendly little school of eighty or ninety boys and girls working happily under their headmaster, Albert F. Styles, his sister, and an assistant or two. Well it might be a friendly school for it was founded in 1869 by the Society of Friends. It had been hoped that running expenses could be met by tuition, but always, Mr. Styles says, the financial life of the Academy was one constant struggle for existence. Education is, indeed, a good investment in character, but not in money.

Another mid-Iowa academy was the Cedar Valley Seminary. The village of Osage had made a bid for the county seat of Mitchell County and a courthouse and a jail had been erected, but this had failed to entice the government from the rival hamlet. When the Cedar Valley Baptist Association met at Waterloo in September, 1862, Reverend H. I. Parker laid before that body an offer from the town fathers of Osage to loan the jail and courthouse gratis should a seminary of learning be established there. The offer was accepted

and in January, 1863, the Reverend Alva Bush opened Cedar Valley Seminary with one assistant teacher and a student body of thirty-one. After five or six years of free use of the building, Osage won the county seat and had need of her buildings, so in 1867 the board of trustees incorporated the institution, and a dignified two-story building was erected in such a workmanlike manner that it is still in use, a unit in the public school system of Osage to which it was deeded in 1922.

In 1881, after eighteen years as principal, Mr. Bush died at his post. His place was taken by Colonel Alonzo Abernethy, a veteran of the Civil War and a man of affairs, with a superior record in war and in peace. He had already served three terms as State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Iowa, was for many years a member of the Board of Regents of the State University, and had sufficient material means so that he had no need to worry about a livelihood.

Colonel Abernethy held the principalship of Cedar Valley Seminary for twenty-one years, resigning in 1902. In his long administration he was able to build up on the Iowa prairie an academy resembling those in which New England took such justifiable pride. In these years arose a definite demand for more practical studies in response to which a commercial department appeared. Ath-

letics, too, began to take a place of some importance in the better secondary schools, and Cedar Valley anticipated the need by providing an adequate gymnasium years before even some of the excellent Iowa colleges had made such provision for health and recreation.

The real contribution of the Cedar Valley Seminary was in the youth who were nurtured there, youth who in maturity served their State and nation well, among them, to name half a dozen, such men as Hamlin Garland, Frederick F. Faville, David F. Call, Willard F. Eaton, Chauncey P. Colegrove, and Dr. Charles S. Chase.

In the extreme western counties fewer academies were to be found, though even there private and community elementary schools usually preceded public schools by several years. Some quite noted private secondary schools were established, also, even as far west as LeMars and Sioux City.

Most of the Iowa academies sponsored by Protestant churches and lay groups were coeducational, though in the early stages of the movement girls were sometimes segregated in a "female department". Even those who favored the higher education of girls were not always convinced that coeducation offered the proper solution of the problem, and several attempts, a few of them successful, were made to establish separate sec-

ondary schools for girls. One of the most interesting ventures occurred in Dubuque.

A group of men and women, inclined to sponsor such a project, were encouraged by Catherine Beecher, sister of the great Henry and the still greater Harriet Beecher Stowe, who came that way in the year 1853. Within the year the cornerstone of a building was laid and the Dubuque Female Seminary was soon a reality. Miss Beecher paid Dubuque a second visit in 1855, and on behalf of the Woman's Educational Association of New York and New England she pledged \$20,000 toward endowment and equipment providing certain conditions were met. Apparently the conditions were not met for the pledge was never paid and in a few years the building passed into other hands.

One of the most successful of the girls' boarding schools in Iowa was St. Agatha's Seminary of Iowa City. This school was founded in the year 1864 by an order of Catholic Sisters of Charity. In 1877 there were nine teachers in residence and as many as 175 students. By the turn of the century the school had become largely local in character and soon after it was discontinued.

As Iowa celebrates her centennial, there are in the State several well established private secondary schools for girls, all but one under the direc-

tion of the Roman Catholic Church. The exception is St. Katherine's School in Davenport, opened in September, 1884, under the direction of Reverend William Stevens Perry, Bishop of Iowa for the Protestant Episcopal Church.

The academies of Iowa, established to fill the gap in education before the organization of public high schools, were strikingly alike. Except in a few cases they were coeducational and the chief, if not the only, means of support was a tuition fee, sometimes a few cents a week for small children and a dollar a week for secondary students. In most cases the number of classes taught by each instructor would be appalling to the modern high school teacher.

Historical records indicate that as many as a hundred non-public schools that would now be classed as secondary were put in operation during the years before high schools became numerous. It seems probable that at least as many more small academies and "select" schools played their part in Iowa's educational adjustment. In addition, it should be borne in mind that the colleges maintained preparatory departments, often called academies, even after the turn of the century.

In the year 1911, the few private academies remaining were given a serious jolt when the State enacted legislation providing for the payment of

tuition at a public high school for every youth who wished to enter high school and was prepared to do the work, but who did not reside in a district maintaining such a school. This legislation practically eliminated the private secondary school as an individual or community enterprise. Forty years ago twenty-four non-public secondary schools — academies, seminaries, normal schools — were accredited by the State University of Iowa. Today only six of these are in operation.

Widely distributed throughout Iowa, however, are more than a hundred relatively new non-public secondary schools which are now accredited by the University and associated institutions of higher learning. These are sectarian schools, usually in connection with elementary schools, maintained by religious organizations, for the instruction of the children in their parishes.

Except for these schools the century of educational evolution has seen public agencies take over all education in the primary grades, most of the secondary school work, and approximately half of the non-professional college work. In education, as in many other fields, private initiative has been supplanted by government agencies, all within the hundred years of the State of Iowa.

FOREST C. ENSIGN