

First Person: Liberty to Learn

Web Exclusive!

Because women had small brains, advanced education would only be wasted on them. Such was the reasoning of early American society.

Furthermore, conventional wisdom held, women risked ruining their figures, their complexions and — worst of all — their reproductive capacities by engaging in rigorous mental exercise.

During the 19th century, women increasingly challenged these notions and fought for the right to attend institutions of higher learning. Among the male allies lending support to their cause was writer and editor George W. Curtis.

During the 25th anniversary celebration in 1890 of the founding of Vassar College — one of the first women's colleges in the United States — Curtis challenged the belief that higher education would cause women to abandon their "natural sphere" of domestic duties.

We may be very sure that we shall never know the sphere of any responsible human being until he has perfect freedom of choice and liberty of growth. All we can clearly see is that the intellectual capacity of women is an inexplicable waste of reserved power, if its utmost education is justly to be deprecated as useless or undesirable. ...

And if any skeptic should ask, "But can delicate woman endure the hardship of a college course of study?" it is a woman who ingeniously turns the flank of the questioner with a covert sarcasm at her own sex —

"I would like you to take thirteen hundred young men, and lace them up, and hang ten to twenty pounds of clothes upon their waists, perch them on three-inch heels, cover their heads with ripples, chignons, rats, and mice, and stick ten thousand hairpins into their scalps. If they can stand all this they will stand a little Latin and Greek."
