

## SEXISM AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

Looking back over the years of public education in Winchester since 1850, one might expect to see gradual progression towards equity in the opportunities, attitude, and treatment for girls and women.



*A late-19<sup>th</sup>-century group of students with their teacher at the Mystic School*

Actually, one encounters a more complex history of education and women in Winchester.

For example, in its report for the school year 1850-51, the School Committee (J. M. Steele, Charles Goddard, and F. O. Prince) stated that “the object of the high school is threefold. 1st. to give young men a thorough business education. 2nd. To prepare young men for college. 3d. To give young ladies that exact knowledge, that complete mental culture which will fit them to become teachers, and to fill and adorn any station into which they are liable to be called.”

While certainly exhibiting differing attitudes toward education for boys and girls, the School Committee nevertheless exhibited great concern for girls’ education, devoting four pages of its report to the subject.

But in 1863, another school committee, composed of five men, set forth the advantages and necessity of a high school by quoting from the 1851 report the first two objects only. To be sure, much of the 1851 report on girls’ education is a disparagement of female seminaries, with which the later committee may have disagreed. However, the appearance of the 1863 report is that high school existed only for boys. The 1851 committee was quite favorable to female education, though they saw different goals for educated girls than for boys.

“The question of woman’s culture lies at the very roots of the tree of liberty. Her influence is great, either for good or evil. It has a moulding, plastic power on all it touches....

“The thing to be desired is that she have the privilege of a complete culture, as woman. That culture which will leave her all the peculiarities of her sex, that will not trespass upon her feminineness, while it gives her the influence of an enlightened and enlarged soul. This, we contend, females do not have [from seminaries]... Their book education amounts to but little...

They do everything artificially....

“We wish to see the real feminine soul under the influence of a complete and appropriate culture.... They should have an instructor whose spiritual culture will bear them upward and onward until their communion with higher things will cause them to look with disdain upon the foolish notions drilled into them by their half-educated female teachers, and, we are compelled to add, too often by their mothers. We wish to see woman more mind-like....

“It is the design of the committee...to make the high school superior for the education of females, to the best young ladies seminaries in the land.”

Not until 1874, when women were first allowed on the School Committee, was such particular attention again given to girls. While both boys and girls attended school, school committees tended to think (or at least write) in terms of boys.

For example, take two excerpts from the 1872 report: “And as the mother, the child’s first teacher, gives form and character to its opening mental and moral life, so it is, onward to *manhood*, the living teacher, more than the book, that determines the successful education of the pupil.”

“Such a reconstruction of our School course...may relieve it from the charge of withholding from the child what *his* capacity, *his* actual thirst for knowledge, and *his* instincts naturally demand.” (Italics added.)

The use of exclusively masculine pronouns may have simply been a convention; however, when women joined the committee, feminine nouns and pronouns were no longer overlooked, as in this excerpt from 1876:

“There are now three courses of study in this [high] school, the regular course of four years, arranged for such *lads and misses* as propose to finish their education, in the main, in the school; the college preparatory course, of four years, designed to fit *boys and girls* for college; and the English course, of three years, for such as wish to pursue only English branches for that length of time.”

Significantly, girls were no longer excluded as candidates for college, either.

A particular interest of the women committee members, however, might look backward to modern minds. While girls were already studying the same academic course as the boys, the women of the school committee wanted to introduce sewing classes for girls. When finally introduced, in the 1880s, industrial education also included carpentry for boys.

## TEACHERS

As with pupils, so were there sexist attitudes towards school committee members and teachers

in the 19th century. Even in 1851, the School Committee preferred male teachers. "In fact," it wrote, "we do not believe much in female teachers, except for children. This is their province. Here they succeed. To train the intellect and the heart of young ladies they are wholly incompetent and unfit... They are not educated, and hence they cannot educate."

If women had been educated better, perhaps that committee would have thought them competent teachers for older students. Still, at the end of the century, although most teachers were still women, men were thought to be preferable for certain positions.



*Group of students at the Washington School with their teacher Jeanette Thompson in the right rear; in the left rear is the custodian Stephen Roberts, a former slave.*

In 1898, the School Committee wrote: "This committee thinks a male principal should be employed in all schools except the primary. A great majority of boys of eight or ten years of age need a man's influence and a man's discipline. Mental discipline and obedience are the most important lessons a child can learn. When a boy or girl has acquired some mental discipline and has learned the lesson of obedience, he or she can study without constant supervision and can pursue some line of independent thought. We believe that men succeed better than women in enforcing a healthy discipline and in developing habits of study and independent thought. We therefore advocate male principals for the grammar and intermediate schools.

"But it is practically impossible to have a male teacher at the head of each school, if we are to have more four-room buildings and many schools, because of the additional expense."

Men were paid better than women. In 1889, for example, the male high school and centre grammar principals were paid \$1,800 and \$1,500. The female principal at the Wyman grammar

school was paid \$600. The highest paid woman that year was the first assistant to the high school principal, who received \$700.

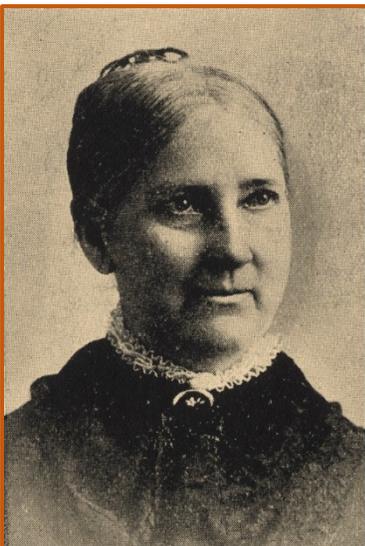
## WOMEN ON THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Women's Suffrage was granted by national amendment in 1920. However, glancing through Winchester newspapers of the 1880s one may there come upon lists of women voters.

The explanation lies with the Commonwealth's passing a law that women who paid property tax be allowed to vote for and serve as members of school committees. In 1874, therefore, women were first elected to the Winchester School Committee. According to a suffragist writing in 1882, "We all know of the grand struggle which was necessary in order to secure the right of women to a position on the School Board."<sup>2</sup>



*Ann B. Winsor, above,  
and Elizabeth Pressey*



That struggle, however, was not recorded in the local papers of 1874<sup>3</sup> when several women's names were first suggested as candidates and when the elections went to Mary Lamson, Elizabeth Pressey, and Ann Winsor.

If one had only a letter written in 1881 to judge by, one might conclude that the presence of women in the government of the town fared well. The unknown author of that letter wrote, "The prejudice against women taking part in political affairs is melting away. Indeed some of our most intelligent men express the wish that women might have the entire control of the schools, but I think it is better as it is—men and women should work together. We need some good lectures on woman suffrage—most women do not understand the subject (nor men either). Many have expressed their willingness to vote on the liquor question could they have the privilege.... The time has been when it was deemed improper for women to mix in general gatherings, but that time has passed and most people acknowledge that society has been improved by the addition of the feminine element."<sup>4</sup>

But that time had not passed. The biggest fuss in the papers occurred in 1882, perhaps stimulated by the creation in December 1881 of a woman suffrage organization in Winchester and the subsequent announcement that the third convention of the National Woman Suffrage Association of Massachusetts would be held in Winchester's Lyceum Hall in June.

In May a scathing denunciation of women on the School Committee appeared, composed (of supposition and hearsay) by an anonymous "Observer."

"Well, we have women on the school committee, and what have we gained? Have they drawn to themselves anything in the nature of increased respect from those of their own sex? ... With a majority...they lose, rather than gain.... 'Better be at home looking after her family, etc.'...

"Men look on indifferently and some say 'Let 'em do it if they like,' and others are disgusted and scratch the women's names off the ticket, while yet a few solemnly go to the polls and vote for women, believing that they are doing the correct thing and that much good will come of it....

"Have the schools gained? It would be impossible to answer this from any basis of actual knowledge, as we have no chance of comparison, but I think no one will assert that anything has been gained, as we should have done equally as well if we had had all men.... I suppose that if there is anything a woman dislikes, it is to be bossed by a woman.... When it comes to women telling male teachers what is what, they probably feel as though a dose of castor oil was being administered, but of course they try not to show it.

"What do scholars think of it? Again we are obliged to find that the majority look on with a feeling of amusement, and pay about as much attention to anything they do or say as they would to a circus, and in about the same spirit....

"I have been told by men who have served on boards where women had a part in the proceedings that many things that ought to have been said, had to be omitted on account of their presence, and much time was wasted on frivolous matters.

"I have heard some say that women had more time and could better attend to visiting schools than men. This fact don't seem to be of any advantage when we come to consider the disadvantage of having them in the schools at all, clothed with any power over the inmates."<sup>5</sup>

At the meeting of the national suffrage association, the above letter was discussed, along with a reply to the argument that "women are indifferent." In 1881, it had been suggested, "The best way to get the full right of suffrage conceded is to vote whenever it is legally possible to do so. The spectacle of women voting is worth more than volumes of abstruse arguments." Yet in 1889 when 160 women were said to be eligible to register, only 29 did. However, as one suffragist replied to "Observer," numbers should not matter.

"Whatever may have been the experience in Winchester in this matter, I know that in Medford, Stoneham, and other towns, women have rendered valuable assistance. It is no argument to say that women should not vote because they will not. If one out of millions should desire to perform an act which is not criminal, is there justice in restriction? If they will not use the ballot, then they cannot do the harm which anti-suffragists pretend to fear.

"Give them the privilege, and let them use it or not, as they like, and it cannot then be said that the most important laws of our country discriminate unjustly."<sup>6</sup>

The Woman Suffrage movement continued in town, but the practice of women serving on the school committee ended in 1887 when the size of the committee was reduced again to three (though women were still allowed a while to vote for school committee members). Following much more "grand struggle" and the passage of the 19th Amendment, women rejoined the committee in 1921.

Many nineteenth-century attitudes are now a curiosity of history. They do point out, however, that there is material for those who pursue women's studies within our own town's history.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Jan. 3, 1992 and March 17, 2000. This article supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> *The Winchester Star*, 9 June 1882.

<sup>3</sup> Since *The Winchester Star* did not come into existence until 1881, a limited amount of Winchester news is available from the *Woburn Journal* and *Middlesex Journal*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 21, 1881.

<sup>5</sup> *The Winchester Star*, 19 May 1882.

<sup>6</sup> *The Winchester Star*, June 9, 1882.