



Nina Mikhalevsky. *Dear Daughters: A History of Mount Vernon Seminary and College*. Washington: Mount Vernon Seminary and College Alumnae Association, 2001. 239 pp.

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Another Women's School Absorbed

The history of Mount Vernon Seminary and College and its founder, Elizabeth Somers, is a microcosm of U.S. educational history itself and of the story of American women's education across two centuries. Begun in 1875, Mount Vernon Seminary—later Seminary and Junior College (1927), later still Junior College alone (1969), soon thereafter College (1972), and now George Washington University at Mount Vernon College—became incorporated in 1998 into one of the major research universities of Washington, D.C., as a satellite campus of George Washington University and home to certain of GW's programs for women and Women's Studies. Founded on the progressive impulse, the school that was Mount Vernon Seminary, eventually Mount Vernon College, succumbed to the fiscal imperative. Nina Mikhalevsky traces the Seminary's trajectory, with especial focus on the early history of the forward-thinking schools for girls established in the nation's capital after the Civil War.

Elizabeth Somers was born Elizabeth Jane Eddy in 1837 on a farm in Rush County, Indiana. The child of a saddle-pack preacher, who was called to ride the circuit of the raw Western Reserve in the early-nineteenth century, she was a product of the crucible years of the 1840s and 1850s in the United States, where voices for abolition and women's rights changed the attitudes of an emergent generation of young women regarding education and ideals. Somers was schooled and began teaching west of the Alleghenies, in Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and western Pennsylvania. Her marriage during the Civil War, in 1863 (the effective date of the Emancipation Procla-

mation), brought her to Washington, D.C. There a small school begun in her home soon after war's end was officially designated Mount Vernon Seminary in 1875.

What is intriguing about Somers's own education is that she was formally educated at all in the western wilds, when few farm girls in the early 1800s had those opportunities. Mikhalevsky deduces that Somers's mother must have been a person of some formal training herself to have secured that exposure for her daughter. In the 1850s the Eddy family sent their daughter to the Wesleyan Female College in Cincinnati, founded as the Western Female Institute in 1832 by Catharine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe. Although the Beechers had departed by the time Somers was a student there, the Beecher philosophies and curriculum had established "the most demanding and innovative college for women in the West" (p. 16). Wesleyan graduated famous alumnae such as First Lady Lucy Webb Hayes, who was a strong abolitionist, the first wife of a U.S. president with a college degree, and a good friend of Somers in Washington.

The environment of social reform was a fundamental element in Somers's years of intellectual development. Frances Willard, the head of the WCTU, who pushed for women's suffrage as the critical mechanism for enacting national reform legislation, was also a product of a Beecher school in the west. In the late 1850s, Willard became a student of Somers's at Northwestern Female College in Evanston, Illinois, where Somers taught after the completion of her own schooling. Willard and Somers

were dear, lifelong friends, and Willard, who never married, sent her nieces to be educated by Somers at Mount Vernon Seminary.

Mikhalevsky chronicles, with interesting details, the overlapping circles of intellect, reform, education, and privilege within which Somers and Mount Vernon were positioned, decade after decade. Female descendants of U.S. presidents from Grant to Ford attended Mount Vernon, as did daughters of senators, congressmen, cabinet members, and the foreign diplomatic corps. Alexander Graham Bell's daughters and granddaughters were Seminary graduates. Ada Louise Comstock, whose father was in the U.S. House of Representatives from Minnesota, studied with Somers in the late 1800s and then went on to serve as president of Radcliffe College until 1943. A student at Radcliffe during Comstock's tenure, Marjorie Frye Gutheim came to Mount Vernon as a teacher in the 1940s. Gutheim eventually served as the final Dean of the Seminary, until its closing in 1969 after ninety-three years, illustrative of an intriguing chain of linkages back to Somers and Somers's values and philosophies that characterized the school throughout its lifetime.

Mount Vernon Seminary was born out of the nineteenth-century fervor for the education of women, when single-sex women's schools were the route to access. Mount Vernon College graduated its last class in 1999, failing beneath the weight of late-twentieth-century financial pressures and successful feminist politics: women had gained entrance to the very institutions from which they had previously been barred. Over the last decades of the twentieth century, in order to survive, many women's schools either opened their doors to men students or joined larger institutions. Some folded completely. Fewer than a quarter of U.S. women's colleges that were in existence in the early 1960s function in that capacity today.[1] Mount Vernon's history parallels the course of many of the educational institutions founded by women for women.

The junior college phenomenon is another piece of Mount Vernon's past that was in step historically with ideas that informed American educational practice. From its earliest days Mount Vernon was an academically rigorous college preparatory school. Somers developed the curriculum as a six-year program of study to earn the Seminary diploma. The last two years of work were defined as "selected college studies" that came to be called the Seminary's "collegiate course" (p. 18). At the time, the implementation of such an academic structure was

cutting-edge pedagogy. European-educated American scholars advocated as early as the 1850s that the first two years of college should be relegated to high schools.[2] In the 1890s, progressive educational theorist and college president William Rainey Harper bifurcated the University of Chicago's curriculum into a Junior College and a Senior College. The nation's first stand-alone junior college was founded in the state of Illinois in 1902. Mount Vernon's collegiate course graduates who chose to continue their education and go on to university were, at least by the turn of the century, entering college as juniors, or university third-years.[3] In 1927, Mount Vernon Seminary's collegiate curriculum was organizationally restructured and redefined as a two-year junior college program. The Junior College became officially distinguished from Mount Vernon Seminary, which remained a four-year secondary school.

Although Mikhalevsky does not attempt to set the school's developments within the larger context of educational social change, the analogies are there to be drawn. Mount Vernon's history as a case study is well presented and documented, with photographs, first-person accounts, school publications, and the writings of Somers and subsequent heads of school. Mikhalevsky's bibliography is small but thorough. Intended to be more a coffee-table volume for alumnae of the school, the book is not footnoted to cite its sources, which historians will find frustrating. *Dear Daughters* is a good read nevertheless, rich with information for those interested in women's history, even for those with no connection whatsoever to the school.

A significant omission, however, in this treatise on an important seat of women's ideas and learning in the nation's capital, is the lack of any direct exploration of Mount Vernon's agency or that of Somers who was clearly connected to powerhouses within the women's movement, in the push for women's suffrage. Included in the book is an MVS student's photograph of the Alice Paul-Lucy Burns Woman Suffrage Procession in Washington on March 3, 1913, prior to Woodrow Wilson's first inaugural. Among the thousands of people who thronged Pennsylvania Avenue on the day of that historic march were obviously Mount Vernon women. Women's historians will be struck by the fact that inquiry into Mount Vernon's role, participation, teachings, and student-faculty activism in the dominant women's issue of the era was not pursued in this volume.

Also never explicitly addressed in *Dear Daughters* were issues of ethnicity and diversity at Mount Vernon.

It goes without saying that race and class lines were tautly demarcated in education during most of the years of Mount Vernon. Those lines of differentiation were unbreached at Mount Vernon Seminary and Junior College during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, the entrenched years of Jim Crow. Surprisingly, then, from the late-nineteenth century, when Somers herself was alive and directly running the school, are the unanticipated photographs of various Mount Vernon students whose features suggest greater ethnic breadth than might be expected given the era. Daughters of foreign diplomats attended Mount Vernon, and Mikhalevsky notes that daughters of wealthy Jewish families were admitted to Mount Vernon when often they were not admitted to other schools. Washington civil rights leader, first president of the National Association of Colored Women, and NAACP charter member Mary Church Terrell wrote in 1940 that young African-American women of position had years earlier openly been able to attend exclusive preparatory schools in the northeast. In the twentieth century, however, attendance at those same white schools of privilege was no longer possible if young African-American women's ethnic backgrounds were divulged.[4] An examination of how Mount Vernon historically handled enrollment of students of color would be worthy of open inquiry, especially given tantalizing photographs of MVS students from the school's M Street campus days in the *Dear Daughters* volume. Mount Vernon's daughters in its final three decades certainly came to include the daughters of all Americans.

The financial difficulties of operating a small school of excellence were ultimately insurmountable for Mount Vernon. The special challenges Mount Vernon faced, however, may have been more unusual than was typical. The school struggled to survive wars, economic depressions, and social change, as did other schools, but unlike most others, Mount Vernon had to rebuild from the ground up repeatedly: within its first seventy-one years, Mount Vernon occupied five different campuses in the District of Columbia. Particularly devastating was the U.S. Navy's confiscation of Mount Vernon's entire Nebraska Avenue campus in 1942 during World War II, giving the school less than a month to vacate. Mount Vernon reeled for years from the effects of that blow. That the federal government sequentially and specifically targeted and absorbed girls' schools for the war effort is no small footnote of women's history; the subject has not received the research and exposure it deserves.[5]

Further adding to Mount Vernon's financial concerns was the unanticipated impact of the Board of Trustees'

decision in 1965, with the school not yet twenty years at its fifth campus, to terminate the Seminary in order to expand the Junior College. Mikhalevsky chose to sidestep the raw emotions generated by such a course of action. Ninety years of the Seminary's alumnae base were substantively undermined in terms of development dollars by that single decree. Not all Seminary graduates, of course, held similar viewpoints on the closing of the Seminary; some supported the Board's plan for focus on the development of the Junior College. However, another significant discontinuity compounded Mount Vernon's organizational and economic challenges.

The tone of Mikhalevsky's book is uniformly cheery and positive, suggestive of the need for perhaps a corrective balance from additional perspectives. Nevertheless, *Dear Daughters* is a substantial contribution: it documents the history of a school for women in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it personalizes the school by integrating the stories and voices of young women who were educated there; and it adds dimension to our overall knowledge of women's education in the United States. Mikhalevsky has compiled and interwoven an impressive body of information. The volume is both relevant social history and respectful school history. A feeling for the soul of the school is preserved through her words. The memory of Mount Vernon is well served in this historic record.

Notes

- [1]. Women's College Coalition, May (2004).
- [2]. Hugh Ross, "University Influence in the Genesis and Growth of Junior Colleges in California," *History of Education Quarterly* 3 (1963): p. 143.
- [3]. Faith Bradford, *Elizabeth J. Somers, November 5, 1837-June 8, 1924: A Memoir* (Norwood: Plimpton Press, 1937), p. 23.
- [4]. Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* ([Washington, DC: Ransdell, 1940]; reprinted North Stratford: Ayer, 1998), pp. 287-94.
- [5]. In the Washington area, in addition to the Mount Vernon campus on Nebraska Avenue, which the Navy still occupies, Arlington Hall College just across the Potomac river in Virginia became an intelligence facility during World War II and today houses the National Security Agency. In Forest Glen, Maryland, in Montgomery County just outside of the District of Columbia, National Park College was taken by the Army as an annex to the Walter Reed hospital complex during the war. The Na-

tional Park campus was designated surplus property by the Army in 2001, and GSA has been in the process of disposing of it. For a proposed business-residential development plan, see "Preservation News," *Preservation* (May/June 2004), pp. 14-6.

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