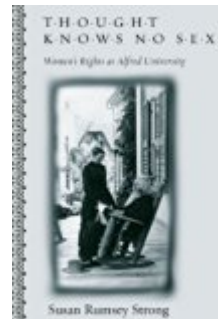


**Susan Rumsey Strong.** *Thought Knows No Sex: Women's Rights at Alfred University.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. xii + 217 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7914-7514-0.



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**Published on** H-Education (April, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

Susan Rumsey Strong has spent much of her life at Alfred University as a librarian, archivist, associate provost, and provost. Her recent book tells the unique history of the university, focusing largely on gender. Strong explores how region, politics, and religion contributed to the foundations of this liberal, coeducational university.

This work is chronological as well as thematic. There are nine chapters and an introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters set the framework for the analysis by reviewing important secondary literature on gender and higher education, Seventh Day Baptist religion, and rural culture in the nineteenth century. Two chapters focus on the students' social lives and women's public speaking. The remaining five chapters tell the story of the development of Alfred University from its founding in 1857 to the early twentieth century, incorporating the university into the history of education and gender.

Alfred began as a secondary school in 1836, developed into an academy, and, finally, became a

university in 1857. Academies were quasi-public institutions that provided secondary education prior to the Civil War. Their definition is somewhat elusive since they lacked uniformity and regulation and often overlapped with common schools and colleges. Strong highlights the importance of the academy as a gateway for the creation of small universities in the nineteenth century and the entry of women into higher education. They were also "in spirit and achievement, America's first engine for mass secondary education" (p. 14).

The building of a school for those who had finished common school was the suggestion of an eighteen-year-old Alfred resident, Amos West Coon, who sought to further his education. He found a college-educated man named Bethuel Church to serve as the teacher, and both recruited students, who would pay three dollars for their education, for their venture. The community supported the school, a board of trustees was formed, and over twenty students were gathered to take part in December 1836. The following year, a

Union College student, ardent antislavery advocate, and Seventh Day Baptist named James Irish was recruited to be the main teacher at the school from 1837 until 1839, when he became a pastor at the Alfred Seventh Day Baptist Church. He was succeeded by his roommate, William C. Kenyon. Strong asserts, "Although the school was already described locally as the 'academy' during Irish's two years, it was Kenyon who is regarded as the founder of Alfred Academy and then Alfred University" (p. 44). Kenyon was a great advocate of women's higher education and a good booster. Enrollment grew from eighty-five students in 1839 to almost four hundred in 1846. The institution expanded to add new buildings and faculty members, among whom was Abigail A. Maxson, a teacher of several subjects and suffragist, who had also studied at the school prior to going to college. In 1849, she was joined at Alfred by Jonathan Allen, another former Alfred student, and they soon wed. Allen and Kenyon pushed to have the institution chartered as a university in 1857, making it the first coeducational college in New York and New England. In 1867, Allen was appointed president, serving until his death in 1892. Kenyon and the Allens were known for their strong support for women's rights and antislavery. The short biographies of these figures offer valuable insights into the lives of lesser-known nineteenth-century reformers.

Alfred was affiliated with the Seventh Day Baptists and built in a period when many small, local denominational colleges were developed. While some later observers have criticized such colleges as offering only a narrow, sectarian education, Strong clearly believes this was a quality institution that greatly enhanced student learning and opportunity for social mobility among its poor and working-class students.[1] Moreover, Seventh Day Baptists valued "independence, lay clergy, opposition to hierarchy, and lack of dogma" and resisted "uniform doctrine, church authority, and ecclesiastical decree." While Seventh Day Baptists did not generally support women's

rights, many of the believers were "democratic, egalitarian, open, and enthusiastic about reform" (p. 26). It was, therefore, possible for the Seventh Day Baptists at Alfred University to have daily chapel and to keep the Saturday Sabbath, while still supporting greater rights for women. Strong holds that the school maintained a "somewhat prickly distance" from the sect, and there were not any ministers on the faculty until the theological department was developed in 1864 (p. 7). She argues that "Alfred was founded in the denominational era but it was most importantly a neighborhood college that, like many others, spread the gospel of education" (p. 8).

In terms of gender, scholars have often pointed to the ironic lack of feminism at Oberlin College and Antioch College (now Antioch University), the first coeducational colleges. While administrators and faculty accepted women to study alongside men, they put limits on women's speech and roles and did not support greater political rights for women in U.S. society.[2] That this gender inequality held at even coeducational colleges attests to the resistance to women's equality in U.S. society. In contrast, the atmosphere of Alfred University encouraged women to be equal participants in college education. University Presidents Kenyon and Allen appeared to have much power to manage the college in a liberal way, granting women much opportunity and freedom rarely allowed at other universities and colleges.

On one occasion, the president of Oberlin asked Allen how he dealt with women speaking in public, and Allen responded, "The most natural way in the world." When describing this quotation, Strong claims, "Egalitarianism seemed natural because it was rooted in factors associated with these people's childhood homes--their farming origins, family structure, and the regional economy--as well as in the ideology of natural rights. Shared labor, a dense kinship network, a separatist denomination, independence from that denomination, liberal theology, a secular mis-

sion—all combined to support an explicit ideology of equality in this early collegiate environment” (p. 173). Granted that the Allens would be considered quite liberal and known to associate with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, how prevalent was this egalitarianism, which was “associated with these people’s childhood homes”? Did the students abide by this same egalitarianism in their rural upbringings, in the “homogeneous villages with little stratification” from which Strong claims they came (p. 172)? She holds, “Mutuality, expressed most clearly in the Allens’ lives, also dominated the rural educational community at Alfred University, where men and women shared work, reform values, and common goals, as families shared work on their farms” (p. 6). Here, Strong buttresses her argument with the scholarly work of Nancy A. Hewitt (*Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* [1984]), Joan M. Jensen (*Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women* [1991]), and Nancy Grey Osterud (*Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* [1991]) on rural egalitarianism. This conception challenges the ideas of “true womanhood” and separate spheres ideology, which held great sway in the early historiography of women.[3] In short, scholars of these concepts depicted women as essentially located in the home, while men worked and were public figures. Certainly the leaders of Alfred, in the burned-over district of nineteenth-century New York, acted in ways that opposed certain aspects of the separate spheres ideology. While the popularity of the small college might attest to an acceptance of its core principles, and parents did struggle to send their daughters to the college, whether this rural egalitarianism was a widespread ideology is still to be debated.

Evidence of gender equality and opportunity for women is found in several places. Strong highlights that “women attended in large numbers, found intellectual females on the faculty, and were schooled not for subservience, but independence” (p. 2). Strong’s key evidence of this gender

egalitarianism is the presence of on-campus public speaking in the 1840s onward. Literary societies that practiced oratory and debating flourished at Alfred, as the groups did at most colleges in the nineteenth century. Yet, at Alfred, women participated together with male counterparts in an open forum. At a time when women’s public speaking was censured, they did truly have a voice at this institution. Antioch did not allow public speaking for women, while Oberlin did not allow women to speak in their courses before men. Even Vassar College, in 1865, did not encourage oratory or debating. This is a great example of nineteenth-century women’s public speaking, and a consideration of Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere would add to the analysis of this important advancement at Alfred.[4]

Over their decades at Alfred, the Allens promoted women’s rights through education and the campus culture. Indeed, the place of women at Alfred certainly contrasts with that of colleges that were slowly integrating women and the contemporary notion that higher education for women was unhealthy, emasculating, and dangerous for society. Both male and female students at Alfred criticized Edward Clarke’s 1872 book, *Sex in Education*, that disparaged women’s higher education. Yet there was not a consensus, and certain trustees and students opposed some liberal ideas and actions. One particular instance was in 1871, when an invited lecture by Julia Ward Howe was protested by Pastor Nathan V. Hull, certain influential citizens, and then students. While the Allens and many students wanted the suffragist to speak on campus, it was moved to nearby Hornellsville.

Significantly, Alfred had a strong sense of community. Family connections in the college were strong; students often had relatives attending Alfred or living in the town of Alfred. Moreover, students often boarded in homes in the community, where there was a wholesome social life. While separate spheres may have been loosened

at the university, and women's education was certainly promoted, the presidents and other interested parties were known for prohibiting the mixing of students on campus, outside of recognized functions. Students, for their part, schemed to get around this restriction, hoisting young men up several flights to the women's dorm from the building's exterior, using a rope and a large basket, while the men were known to put up little ropes to trip the snooping authorities. There was also a bell schedule, which enforced a strict schedule for sleeping, eating, and studying, and a daily chapel lecture. Despite these restrictions, Strong asserts that women and men had informal, peer relationships that defy the descriptions of cross-gender relationships prevalent in women's history written in the 1970s and 1980s.

Strong's book is of great value to the study of academies and early nineteenth-century higher education and gives an interesting depiction of the lives and beliefs of the reformers who led the institution, as well as the students, while portraying the unique political climate of the community. In this work, Strong takes on many fields of historical inquiry, including gender, higher education, and religion, combined with an institutional history of Alfred University. Alfred's leaders truly emerge as reformers who were generally successful at fulfilling their gender egalitarian visions and promoting women's educational and social advancement.

#### Notes

[1]. For criticism, see Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); and Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). On social class and early colleges, see David F. Allmendinger Jr., *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975).

[2]. On the place of women in coeducational colleges, see Jill Ker Conway, "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States," *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1974): 1-12; Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and John Rury and Glenn Harper, "The Trouble with Coeducation: Mann and Women at Antioch, 1853-1860," *History of Education Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1986): 481-502.

[3]. The most influential works are: Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74; Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1-29; and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

[4]. Mary P. Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth Century America," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 259-288; and Ruth H. Bloch, "Inside and Outside the Public Sphere," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2005): 99-106.

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**Citation:** Kate Mazza. Review of Strong, Susan Rumsey. *Thought Knows No Sex: Women's Rights at Alfred University*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

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