STUDENT LIFE IN SCHOOLS OF THE OHIO VALLEY NINETY YEARS AGO

STANTON C. CRAWFORD AND JOHN A. NIETZ

A group of young people from Freeman’s Landing, Virginia, near what is now New Cumberland, West Virginia, began to attend various boarding schools in 1849. Their correspondence, quoted below, reflects the student life of the schools and gives some information about their educational programs. The institutions attended were Wellsburg Academy, Steubenville Female Seminary, Xenia Female Seminary, Washington College, and Beaver Academy. The first-named was located in Virginia, in what is now the Panhandle of West Virginia, the next two in Ohio, and the last two in Pennsylvania.

WELLSBURG ACADEMY IN 1849–1850

The letters quoted here are those of George McCandless Porter, later a member of the Virginia House of Delegates. He entered the academy at the age of fourteen, having traveled down the river by steamboat. On November 10, 1849, he wrote in part as follows to his sister Mary and their mutual friend Nancy M. Hartford, who were attending the Steubenville Female Seminary:

Last night was particularly set apart for the meeting of the “Wellsburg Lyceum” the question was “Has, Public, Spirit likely to have a bad effect on our, Party, institutions. Your humb[l]e servant, (despite all his eloquence,) being on the affirmative was used upp.

I got here in good time for Wednesday having arrived on Tuesday about dinner—had a glorious trip—worked my passage... I study the following Branches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Easy</th>
<th>Latin—Viri Rome</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>Algebra—davies Elementary</td>
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<td>hard</td>
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1 Preserved by W. A. Crawford of Erie, Pennsylvania, the son of Mary Porter Crawford, to whom most of the letters were written.

2 His grandson and namesake is Prof. George McCandless Porter of the Carnegie Institute of Technology.
The latter takes the lead for Hardness I am getting along first rate I dont
find any trouble in Latin I dont find any stallers in algebra I dont find many
Propositions in my head when I come to recite Geometry—somuch for hard
times.

You may be looking for a Composition from your humble servant in the
course of 3 or 4 weeks And in turn, in the answer to this, I will expect 2 or
3. "The importance of belonging to a Literary Society"—is a very good
foundation—subject or question, for a good sound solid interesting or even
Sensible composition or in other words I thing it is a buckum subject—that is
laying aside the Orful vice intemperance and the exciting topic "which is the
most useful a horse or a cow." . . .

I have got a globe for studying after night. . . . What are you studying—
if either of you are studying Algebra—heres two sums for you

"A man wants to buy 100 head of stock with $100—he wants cattle sheep
and hogs—he is to pay $10 a head for cattle $3 for hogs and $1/2 for sheep
how many of each will he receive."

"Put 22 hogs in seven pens and have an odd number in each pen." . . .
Our society is increasing between 25 & 30 at the academy

On December 10, 1849, he wrote to his sister again, saying in part:

Buck Wheat Cakes are prevalent . . . the Steamer "Too Many Irons on the
Fire" Burst her boilers on last week—all 4 boilers exploded and went plumb
through the "Geometry Class" carrying away four members. Your humble
servant among the rest—only 3 left in the class. The reason why I quit Geo-
metry was for the purpose of facilitating my progress in my other, and more im-
portant, Studies—as I found I had too many studies and as it impeded my
progress, more than any other—therefore I dropt it and consider myself per-
factly right in so doing—Howsomever I took upp in its place Book Keeping
—the object of which is to give you a Knowled[g]e of Keeping Book in a
Scientific manner—and not "to strengthen the mind"

Be prepared to ship on the Jas Nelson on the Friday be 4 Christmas . . .
will have 2 compositions about that time. . . . Subject for my next composi-
tion—Aristocracy

On March 16, 1850, he wrote to his sister as follows:

I have written my composition for the exhibition, and do not expect to
make any alterations on it—the examination however cannot be viewed in the
same light, for not knowing in what part of the book you will be examined,
consequently it becomes necessary that you make yourself perfectly acquainted
with the whole of it, which is not a very easy matter The subject of my com-
position is "The duty of a citizen of the United States, to his country, at the
present time" . . . Our School will be closed on Tuesday the 26th of March
for the space of 1 month. The examination will come off on Tuesday in the
daytime and the exhibition on Tuesday night I expect to go upp the river on
Wednesday the 27th on board the James Nelson. . . .
Steubenville Female Seminary.
[From the diploma of Sepora Porter dated March 24, 1858.]
At present the calculation is—that I will come back next session—and if I
do I expect to study Greek and Latin and perhaps something else. . . .
Please tell Miss Hartford that I would like to be excused from writing that
composition and she would greatly accommodate me by sending one down
If the following will be of any benefit to her she is perfectly welcome to it

The Wonders of America

Who ever seed the beat & the like of Americy fur wundrous wonders

This series of letters ends with one of August 8, 1850, in which we
read: “We have had no Cholera here yet—and are not very particular—as
far as diet is concerned—Roasting ears, Cucumbers—&c—with great
‘Gusto.’ . . .” We shall hear more from George Porter, but this con-
cludes his reports from Wellsburg.

STEUBENVILLE FEMALE SEMINARY IN 1849-1854

Mary Porter, aged 16, was attending this seminary in the fall of 1849. It
was during this school year that she received the letters, quoted above,
from her younger brother, George. On November 22, her mother wrote
a deeply religious admonition:

Dear daughter, I beseech you to adore thy creator for that word which is
a light to your feet and a lantern to your paths. . . . oh make the duties of
his gospel and the calls of his goodness more dear to your heart that you may
glorify him in your body and in your Spirit. . . . and may the Saving grace
of god be Shed around you is the sincere prayer of your affectionate mother.

On December 15, 1851, her brother George wrote from Washington
College, where he was then in residence, a long letter from which a few
quotations are made:

[I] was glad to learn that you were enjoying good health and good
boarding. I am now “enjoying the same blessing”. . . . You have been to
see a Panorama—I cannot say that I have. . . . From the studies, which you
mentioned in your letter, that you were engaged in I came to the conclusion
that you were in the Senior year. . . .

At the end of the year 1851 Mary left the seminary. Her roommate,
Sue Crawford, who later became related to her by marriage, wrote to her
from the seminary on February 26, 1852, as follows:

Within three weeks two of our number have been called away by the
messenger of death They . . . were both boarding in town Misses Pinkerton
and Winters. . . . Miss P. died of typhoid fever Miss W. with consump-
tion. . . .
I will try and give a general account of matters and things since you left here quite a number of girls have followed your example and gone home. . . . Uncle Beatty is now in New York has gone to get new teachers for next session he is to bring the senior class their graduating dresses they are to be . . . very gay the class is now reduced down to 20 Well times are very much as they used to be when you were here especially so far as boarding is concerned but dont be frightened when I tell you we had biscuit for tea one evening and have had flitters for desert twice Mr. Sheply has to suffer from the girls for our boarding This morning in Chemistry we were discussing the properties of yeast and why it caused bread to rise one of the girls asked Mr. S. if baking the bread did not kill the yeast, he replied it did not but decomposition then began to take place the hydrogen began to escape and Lot Raymond replied that she had some bread for breakfast so hard she could not hardly eat it and thought the hydrogen had all escaped out of it You can well imagine the effect it produced on the class. . . . You wanted to know something of the character of my report I had all excellents excepting arithmetic and attention to school rules from your letter I discovered you had learned the result of Dr. B’s visit to our room the morning you left well I hope you did not give yourself any trouble on account of it have not had but the one mark this session. . . . well my report had no deficients had 30 ones in Chem. 22 in Geometry 24 in Hist. It appears to me we have more to do every week than we had the preceding one we have been through the first two books of Geom. three times and the third and fourth once and are now going through the second time have five and six pages to get at a time 8 pages in Chem. reviewing Alex. and Hist. and have from 30 to 40 pages to get at a lesson So you may easily suppose we have enough to do at least as much as we can do well We have only four more weeks after this to prepare for examinations it will be on the first thursday and friday of April The girls are beginning to talk a great deal about the horrid creature. I have not hardly given it yet a passing thought. But do not infer from this I feel myself prepared and think there is no danger of failing far from it You must by all means come down to examination and see all your old schoolmates once more and see how we get along how I wish you would be here as a scholar instead of a spectator. . . . tell Aunt and Eliza to be sure and come down to examination. There is to be a concert on thursday evening which will at least be well attended. . . .

Again, on August 18, 1852, Sue wrote to Mary as follows:

[1] doubt not but that you are spending your time more pleasantly than if you were shut up within these prison walls, feasting on boiled liver and roast beef and the numerous other delicacies with which our table is daily loaded. Oh what a delightful thing to be an inmate of a boarding school. But one consolation is we do not often get much good without being attended with some evil and the knowledge we derive from our books more than compensate for

3 Dr. Charles C. Beatty, head of the school.
our self denials. But what do you think is going to happen for we have had pears several times independent of our dessert. . . . I have drank tea all this session, twice a day, you will be surprised at my quitting coffee but the reason was this, when I came this session the coffee was most miserable it tasted so strong of the copper boilers I found it was injurious and got changed to a tea table. . . .

The greatest news I have to give is we had the pleasure of listening to a course of lectures on Europe last week by Dr. Baird; they were really very interesting took up each country separately and gave a full description of it they were nine in number five in the afternoon or from two to between four and five o’clock four at night or from half past seven until after ten o’clock. You may form some idea of the interest the girls took in them when I tell you there were very few complaints of being tired and poor souls some nights we had to sit three good long hours without moving or speaking I was going to say without breathing. . . . Uncle B. was as cross as a bear; and watched us as close as a hungry cat would watch mice, and kept changing his seat round whenever he would hear the least noise. On the whole we had a great time of it. . . .

This session the same as last bears sad intelligence to many . . . Maggie Chester had a sister died, Annie Black a brother with yellow fever on his way to California. . . .

There is a letter to Mary dated at the seminary on January 21, 1854, from an unidentified “Chriss” who refers to the fact that Sepora, Mary’s sister, is then in attendance. She continues:

It is my last session and I want to have some funn before I leave the holy castel What do you think Unkle Charley will do without me there will be very few old schollars here next session the girls all say they will never come back but for my part I like it very well . . . it is only nine weeks until our school will be out. . . .

XENIA FEMALE SEMINARY IN 1850–1851

Miss Nancy Hartford went to Xenia Female Seminary, Xenia, Ohio, in 1850. She corresponded with Mary Porter, who had been her classmate at Steubenville Female Seminary the preceding year. In the letters she addressed numerous others in extensive postscripts. On October 15, she wrote:

This is the second day since I commenced operations. . . . I could not have been pleased better in any other institution. The lady who boards the young ladies and myself also is a full bred yankee our fare is about the same as at steubenville. . . . You cannot imagine how glad I should [be] if I could see any person from Virginia with whom I am acquainted tell Matthew when he
goes to Cincinnati 0 to be shure and come out to see me it takes but a few hours and costs only $1.90.

On February 5, 1851, she wrote to Mary again:

Our examination will come off in five weeks Emily said she never saw a better class of young ladies than those of this Seminary I can scarcely realize that I have been nearly five months in Xenia When they get the railroad to Steubenville I will come and take tea with you often. The manners and customs of the people here are different in many respects from those to which I have been accustomed for example the manner of dressing the dead insted of having a shroud as with us they are dressed in their best clothes that they have been accustomed to wear while living When at a party we do not sit at table but stand at some distance and take our plates in our hands. I think it is so inconvenient to do we have neither knife nor fork as we never have any meat but cold thin slices we are helped to one thing at a time Imagine yourself standing your plate in one hand with your saucer and cup sitting on it and helping yourself with the other . . . this town has been visited for the two preceeding summer with cholera the lady with whom I board lost two children last summer . . .

WASHINGTON COLLEGE IN 1851-1854

George McCandless Porter, who wrote to his sister Mary from Wellsburg Academy, wrote a series of letters to her from Washington College, Washington, Pennsylvania. From his letter of December 15, 1851, a few quotations referring to Steubenville Female Seminary were made above. This letter continues as follows, concerning his experience at Washington:

The murder trial here was a very exciting one: all most all of the students attended—the result of the trial was the acquittal of Joseph Robinson—a Canonsburg student—But fires here are all excitement and confusion: nor is it a wonder that such is the case. the ground is high and consequently much exposed to wind, and the water is scarce. hence when a fire breaks out, all rush to scene of action, everybody is interested, for the property of all is in danger—it is this that causes so much excitement. . . .

I am now studying the following—Latin, Greek, German, Algebra, Grecian Antiquities, Elocution and Composition—on next Friday night I am to enlighten the folks on the negative of the Question—Do brutes reason—I spoke an original a week or so ago on the “Progress of the Age.” . . .

On January 10, 1852, he wrote the following words:

The vacation given about the beginning of the new year, is now past some 2 or 3 weeks, and all things are going on as usual. I did not go home in
vacation but spent the week with one of my classmates, about five miles from town. I had the finest kind of times. there was good sleighing—plenty of singings, plenty of rabbits, and other game—“plenty to eat” &c. the “folks” were very sociable and do all their visiting after night—they fix up a sled the whole family get into it—go to a neighbours—chat a while—get supper about 10 oclock. and get home about 12 oclock—I was at one or two of these parties and they suit my sentiments exactly. Sleighing after night, by Moonlight, is grand. Social chat is cheering—but the climax of the whole the “Magnum bonum” or “sine qua non” of the affair is the “supper”

The intermediate examination comes off next week. and if report be true will be little harder than the usual recitation.

Again, on August 30, 1854, he wrote:

I send you to day a copy of the Commencement exercises—and if the river is low I wish you would come out here in the carriage & take me home. . . . The next session here will be from 1st Nov to the last of Dec. & then a vacation of 2 weeks. . . . The question for Contest has not been determined yet, but will be in the course of two weeks. . . . This is the last letter I will write you this Session, its only 4 weeks now till the end of it. . . .

The commencement program to which he referred had been arranged for 9 a.m., Wednesday, September 27, 1854. On the preceding Sabbath morning, the baccalaureate sermon had been given by the president of the college. The same evening, a sermon to the Society of Religious Inquiry had been given by Rev. M. W. Jacobus. On Tuesday evening there was an address to the literary societies by Prof. H. R. Lee, LL.D. The commencement program itself was opened and closed with prayer, and there were eighteen items of speaking, interspersed with twenty-one seasons of music. There was an English salutatory, a Latin salutatory, and a Greek salutatory, but one valedictory sufficed. Among other topics discussed, we find “Our National Integrity,” “The Political Arena,” “Woman in History,” and “Freedom, an Innate Principle.” Degrees were conferred on seventeen candidates.

BEAVER ACADEMY, ABOUT 1863

William David Porter, who later became successively district attorney of Allegheny County, judge of the Court of Common Pleas, and judge of the Superior Court of Pennsylvania, was graduated from Beaver Academy, Beaver, Pennsylvania. On April 21 of a year that was probably
1863 (from collateral evidence) he, about thirteen years old, wrote the following to his sister Mary:

I suppose you are living on the fat of the land these times as it is the season for maple sugar & goose eggs. I was at home about two weeks ago. . . . I went to Wheeling with Father and got my clothes and did not stop at home as I was coming back. . . . I went up to Fannies [Pittsburgh] last Friday and came back on Monday. . . . I went to see the glass blowers twice, the first night it payed very well but the second as I went with the expectation of seeing something different . . . and it was exactly the same it did not pay. . . .

I will give you a sketch of our school there are six of us including the teacher certainly not a very large school but then we may make up in ability what we lack in numbers, as for boarding the bill of fare is very short. . . . I want you to reserve that goose egg full of sugar for me.4 . . .

By 1863, when William David Porter’s letter was written, the academy was reduced in size and faced financial troubles. It closed in 1870.

COMMENTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Nature of Academies. A clearer understanding of the above excerpts written by students attending these academies may be gotten if one understands the nature of academies in general. Academies developed in America following the time that the Latin grammar school failed to meet approval here. The grammar school was too narrow both in purpose and curriculum to meet the growing educational needs of America.

The first fully recognized academy in America was The Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia, commonly known as Franklin’s Academy. Benjamin Franklin was largely responsible for its opening in 1751. It was chartered in 1753. By 1800 thirteen academies were founded in Pennsylvania, eleven in Massachusetts, and eight in New York. The academy movement gained its greatest impetus, as far as founding new ones was concerned, during the 1830’s, when the ideas of democracy

4In the collections of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania there are two printed programs of Beaver Academy “Exhibitions.” The “Exhibition of Beaver Academy” of September 27, 1844, opened with prayer. There were sixteen select orations, five original orations, two original essays, two dialogues, and eleven seasons of music. There were about thirty participants, including Matthew S. Quay. The “Exhibition of the Franklin Literary Society” of September 25, 1846, listed six select orations, five original orations, one original and one select debate, two dramatic scenes, one dialogue, a valedictory, and ten seasons of music. There were about thirty-five participants.
and of universal suffrage were gaining marked influence. In numbers, the peak was reached about 1850, when there were 6,085 academies with 263,000 students in the United States. It was not until 1900 that there were as many as 6,000 high schools here, even though the population was three times as large in 1900 as in 1850.

The academy arose to meet the demands of the middle class. Its purpose was to provide a secondary education satisfying several objectives—preparation for college, a general education for everyone, and pre-professional and professional training. For example, it trained most of the teachers of the period, and offered courses in surveying, navigation, and bookkeeping.

The early academies were only for boys. In this they followed European practice. Later, separate schools, commonly called female seminaries, were founded for girls. After 1830, in order to get larger attendance, many would admit both boys and girls. Even then the boys and girls often would attend classes in separate rooms and be forbidden to talk to each other except on stated occasions.

The Beaver Academy was a typical "public" institution. According to James P. Wickersham,

Beaver Academy, Beaver, chartered in 1800, was a County Academy or Public School managed by trustees elected by popular vote. The State had granted in 1791 five hundred acres of land for the support of such an institution. The land was located near the town. In its early days the Academy was a noted centre of intellectual light, later its prosperity became somewhat spasmodic, and finally, after an existence of about three-quarters of a century, the property was placed in the hands of the school board of Beaver borough to establish and support a public high school open to children from the county at large.5

Bausman records that female students were first admitted in 1844, "and about ten years later the school was divided, the boys reciting in the Academy building, and the girls in a building in another part of the town."6

The Steubenville Female Seminary which Mary Porter attended was a typical private institution. It opened on April 13, 1829, and is said to have been the first seminary for young ladies in what had been known as the Northwest Territory. It was established by Rev. Charles C. Beatty, then pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Steubenville. An active interest in the management was taken by Mrs. Beatty, who had been Miss Hetty Elizabeth Davis. She was born within the present limits of Pittsburgh, her father's farm being what is now the Allegheny Cemetery.

Academies were usually formed in one of three ways: by a stock company, by a religious denomination, or as a private enterprise. Those founded by stock companies rarely declared dividends, the stock being sold merely as a means of raising money to build the building and get the school started. The control of these varied with the types. The denominational and stock company types were usually controlled by a board of trustees.

The support of academies was derived in various ways. Tuition, subscriptions, endowments, and lotteries were the most common means of support. Many academies provided boarding facilities from which additional subsidies were derived. Since all of them charged tuition, the poor could not attend. Hence, many had small attendance. As mentioned in one of the letters, only five attended the Beaver Academy in 1863. However, some successful private academies were a rich source of income to their owners. Rev. Beatty of the Steubenville Female Seminary, for instance, was able to make public benefactions amounting to half a million dollars.

After 1860 the academy movement began to wane. By that time all northern states had public-school systems, and the people objected to paying taxes for the public schools and also tuition to the academies. The demand was for the public-school systems either to offer more advanced subjects or open high schools, in order that the children might get free the type of work for which they formerly had to pay tuition in the academies.

The curriculum of the academy. Numerous interesting remarks were made in the above letters regarding the subjects studied by the students.
Latin, Greek, algebra, and geometry were definitely mentioned. George Porter confessed failing geometry and substituting bookkeeping, "the object of which is to give you Knowledge of Keeping Book in a Scientific manner—and not 'to strengthen the mind.'" These remarks reveal two educational conceptions widely held at that time. First, that a real education consists of the mastery of the old classical subjects, such as Latin, Greek, and mathematics. Secondly, that the mastery of other subjects, such as bookkeeping, does not furnish *disciplinary training*. In other words, the psychological conception concerning learning was that of "formal discipline," for which the old classical subjects provided training.

In addition to the so-called disciplinary subjects on the one hand and the non-disciplinary or "useful" subjects on the other, most academies taught numerous other subjects. Natural philosophy (physics), astronomy, English and debating, geography, and history were popular. In fact, many academies would teach any subject the students wanted and could pay for. In regard to the curriculum, the academy was a democratic institution in contrast to the Latin grammar school.

**Student Activities.** These letters are interesting from the standpoint of what students discussed around 1850 in comparison with what they might have discussed were these letters to be written today. Certainly, letters written today would freely mention the results of the intrascholastic games of football and basketball, and tell about the "proms" and the latest movies. The academies of that day had no organized sports and few social events of the types common today. Dancing or even the comingling of boys and girls in any way in school were largely taboo.

The most emphasized extra-curricular activity in most academies was the literary society. Elocution and debating seem to have been vital activities to provide the students with an outlet for their enthusiasm and spirit of competition as well as with practice in public speaking, an accomplishment considered very important for the future leaders of society in a period when public questions were being debated in democratic ways. The subjects for debate were frequently naive, as for example, the "greater usefulness of the horse or the cow," yet they provided the elocutionary practice desired by the students.

Another activity mentioned in these letters was the examination. Ref-
ference was made to invitations being extended to outsiders to attend. This seems unusual to us today. However, these examinations were largely oral, and so took on the nature of a public spectacle. At the same time written work and other products of the students would be put up for public exhibition. Perhaps some of the compositions on exhibit, both Latin and English, were written by students from another school and secured through the clandestine exchange system, as these letters suggest.

*Matters of Health.* It is shocking to us today to read frequent references to illnesses and deaths caused by infectious and contagious diseases. These, no doubt, are more or less true reflections of the nature and condition of health matters during that period. Cholera, yellow fever, consumption, and typhoid fever are mentioned as usual and accepted.

Finally, the letters referred to one matter of perennial interest to students attending any boarding school yesterday or today, namely, food. In regard to eating, human nature has not greatly changed since 1850.