PRIVATE seminaries for young ladies flourished in Pennsylvania during the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, of the hundreds which were in existence for a few months or several decades, very few records remain. In fact, even in the 1930s, very little documentary material dealing with many of these schools could be found. In most instances, newspaper announcements provided the only available information.1

The earliest female seminary in Pennsylvania was established by a Mrs. Rhodes in Philadelphia in 1722, and the first chartered school for young ladies was Poor’s Academy, also located in Philadelphia, which began in 1792. Between 1793 and 1840, dozens of schools for girls sprang up in towns all over the state. One of these was in Washington, Pennsylvania. Organized with forty pupils in 1836, and chartered in 1838, the Washington Female Seminary was judged at one time to be the “most notable in the western part of the State.” The school remained in operation for more than a century, until June 1948. As a secondary school for girls, the seminary for 112 years educated hundreds of young women. A large number of its graduates were prepared for teaching careers. The rapid development of female seminaries was largely a result of the establishment of the public school system in Pennsylvania during the 1830s, which widened the field of teaching opportunities for women. One of the first to sense the advantage of these new developments was Emma Willard, who felt that women of talent could be prepared to teach boys as well as girls all they needed to know, even about languages and higher mathematics.2

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1 James Mulhern, A History of Secondary Education in Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1933), 407. About four years ago a substantial collection pertaining to the Washington Female Seminary came to light. Materials now available include catalogues for the period 1845-1947, alumnae registers, reunion and other commemorative booklets, literary publications, photographs of buildings, students, and faculty groups dating from 1852, early diplomas, baccalaureate and commencement programs dating from 1869, and a small collection of correspondence and other documents. The collection is in the Citizens Library, Washington, Pennsylvania.

2 Ibid., 375-419.
The prolonged success of the Washington Female Seminary can be attributed in some measure to the influence of Emma Willard, for Sarah Foster Hanna, the dynamic woman who took over as principal of the fledgling school in 1840, was a student and friend of Mrs. Willard. Born in Washington County, New York, in 1802, and educated at the Troy Female Seminary, Sarah Foster came to the Washington seminary from Cadiz, Ohio, where she had taught at a girls' school for more than three years. Miss Foster reported that the Washington Female Seminary was "not in a prosperous condition" when she accepted her new post. She took with her from Cadiz nine young ladies as boarders, several of whom were from her native county in New York. Her first session as principal began with sixty students, and the number gradually increased for many years.

Sarah Foster was thirty-eight years old when she came to Washington. A deeply religious person, a devoted and dutiful daughter, she had had to reconcile herself to parental objections to her ambition for an advanced degree in teaching. However, after her mother's death, her father approved of her plans to continue at the Troy Female Seminary. She entered in 1833, at the age of thirty-one. Emma Willard became her trusted and valued friend, and Miss Foster regarded the two years which she had spent with Mrs. Willard and her family as among the most pleasant of her life. From the Troy seminary she went to Cadiz.3

Miss Foster was a large, handsome woman, physically strong and energetic, with a commanding presence. Her keen eyes were penetrating yet kind, and she bore herself as if she "felt the worth of her womanhood and the importance of her mission." In no time at all she had won over the students and trustees of the Washington seminary. In the conservative Washington community, however, some of her innovative plans ran into opposition, but her plea to "just let me try" generally resulted in such success that her wisdom was justified.4 A firm disciplinarian, she dispensed justice with a fairness and tenderness that earned the love and respect of her charges. Her conviction, as she expressed it to parents and teachers, was that God had committed to them an important work, and His words should be their guide: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."5

3 Janet Lourie Brownlee, A Foster Mother or the Life of Sarah Foster Hanna (undated pamphlet, Citizens Library, Washington), 9-10.
5 Brownlee, Foster Mother, 36.
Occasionally she tangled with trustees, but through the years her good sense and judgment usually prevailed. She earned the affection and admiration of most of the men with whom she came in contact. In all her dealings, she was fair and open; nothing so disgusted her as personal meanness. Even in business transactions she tried to teach lessons in good morals; she wanted people to learn to be honest and generous. Her entire life was a protest against pettiness.

A contemporary historian wrote: "A gentleman who knew her habits in this respect always failed in language when he came to speak of them, but looking off to the horizon and with a full sweep of his arms expressed his admiration." So, as she admitted, while she did at times differ with the trustees, "where we could not agree, we yielded sometimes on both sides, and agreed to disagree."

Once Foster was firmly in charge of seminary affairs, she infused the faltering institution with a new energy and vigor. The influence of her great executive ability was at once felt in the growth and prosperity of the school, and in its influence on the community. As the years went by, the excellence of the school increased, and so did its popularity. It soon became one of the foremost institutions of its kind in the west.

Foster planned an academically sound program, and a healthful one as well. She herself taught Bible, intellectual philosophy, and composition. In addition to their academic activities, the girls took daily walks in the lovely wooded areas around Washington. Chapel services were held both morning and evening. Nor were the social amenities neglected, for classes in deportment were held on Saturday mornings. Each girl was required to walk the length of the room, make a curtsey, leave by one door, and reappear gracefully through another. Miss Foster herself practiced the social graces, as she entertained frequently and hospitably.

During her second year at the seminary, she was stricken with typhoid fever. A hush fell over the school as the girls went about their activities with a quiet stillness until the crisis passed. After many weeks of convalescence, she again took her place at the head of the table, to the joy and delight of her students. 

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6 Crumrine, History of Washington County, 560.
7 Commemorative and Farewell Reunion, of the Graduates and Teachers of Washington Female Seminary, in Honor of Mrs. Sarah F. Hanna, June 25th, 1874 (Pittsburgh, 1874), 49-51.
8 Ibid., 43.
9 Crumrine, History of Washington County, 559.
10 Brownlee, Foster Mother, 13-15.
11 Ibid., 16.
One of the more interesting events of Foster's early administration occurred in 1843. Important travelers were forever stopping off in Washington during these years — the heyday of the National Road. One of those visitors was a congressman from Massachusetts, the former president, John Quincy Adams. Adams visited Washington on Monday, November 20, 1843, and one of his stops was at the Washington Female Seminary. The reporter who covered the event wrote that the building was “brilliantly illuminated” and recorded a significant exchange of greetings between the principal and the former president of the United States.

It was most uncommon in those days for ladies to make public addresses, but the gracious Miss Foster was an uncommon woman. She delivered a brief but graceful public welcome to Adams. Addressing him as “Revered and honored Sir,” she greeted him most cordially on behalf of the teachers and pupils. She complimented her visitor and his illustrious father for their civic virtues, eminent statesmanship, and distinguished public service; and she noted the fact that, even then, in 1843, “the history of your family is inseparably blended with the history of our country.” Adams replied in his characteristically gallant manner, saying,

This . . . is the first instance in which a lady has addressed me personally, and I trust that all the ladies present will be able sufficiently to enter into my feelings to know that I am more affected by this honor than by any other I could have received.

You have been pleased, Madam, to allude to the character of my father and the history of my family . . . . I came into the world as a person having personal responsibilities . . . . and had then perhaps the greatest blessing that can be bestowed on man — a mother who was anxious and capable to form her children to what they ought to be . . . .

With such a mother and such other relations with the sex, of sister, wife, and daughter, it has been the perpetual instruction of my life to love and revere the female sex . . . .

I therefore conclude by assuring you, Madam, that your reception of me has affected me, as you perceive, more than I can at all express in words, and that I shall offer my best prayers . . . . that this institution especially, and all others of a similar kind, designed to form the female mind to wisdom and virtue, may prosper to the end of time.\(^{12}\)

The good wishes and prayers of Adams were not in vain. The school continued to flourish and prosper, and a great asset soon appeared in the person of a Presbyterian minister from Ohio. In September 1848, Foster married the Reverend Dr. Thomas Hanna, a widower from Cadiz. He came with his five children to Washington. Guests at the wedding included the seminary board of trustees, faculty, town dignitaries, seminary alumnae, and pupils. The latter were

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\(^{12}\) *Washington (Pa.) Examiner, Nov. 25, 1843.*
startled to hear the minister intone, "Sarah R. Foster, do you promise to love, honor, and obey the man whom you hold by the right hand?" Fancy their Miss Foster agreeing to obey anyone! After the ceremony, more than 200 of her girls lined up at the reception, to be received with a warm handclasp and a motherly kiss. In time, Dr. Hanna was chosen as pastor of the United Presbyterian Church in Washington, a post he held until his death in 1864. He was also appointed as superintendent of the seminary, while his wife retained her position as principal. The arrangement apparently worked to the benefit of all concerned. Dr. Hanna was also an instructor in the school, universally respected and loved by the pupils. Mrs. Hanna, who had long since won the admiration and affection of the faculty and students, was a devoted mother to her stepchildren, and the four Hanna daughters were educated at the seminary.

In addition to Dr. and Mrs. Hanna, the school attracted a number of talented and accomplished teachers in a variety of disciplines. The first catalogue available, for the academic year beginning in November 1845, listed twelve instructors. Course offerings in the primary class were reading, writing, spelling, geography, grammar, arithmetic, and the history of the United States. First- and second-year studies included grammar, arithmetic, ancient and modern geography with map drawing, ancient and modern history, geology, natural philosophy, algebra, geometry, political economy, geography of the heavens, chemistry, botany, rhetoric, and analysis of the English language. The senior class studied natural philosophy, elements of criticism, analogy of natural and revealed religion, logic, mental and moral science, orthography, reading, calisthenics, penmanship, composition, and scripture history.

The seminary's academic year was divided into two terms, or sessions, of five months each. The first session began in November and ended in March, while the second began in May and ended in September. There were two vacations, one in April and the other in October. Public examinations of the pupils took place during the last weeks of March and September. This arrangement of sessions continued until the sixties, when the standard semester system was instituted.

Pupils were assigned to one of three departments, and tuition charges per session were as follows: senior division, $14.00; junior division, $11.00; and third division, $9.00. An additional fee of $50.00

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13 Brownlee, Foster Mother, 20-21.
covered boarding, lodging, and washing. The school required extra fees ranging from $10.00 to $20.00 per session for French, German, oil painting, piano, and guitar. Smaller charges, from $1.00 to $8.00, were assessed for ornamental needlework, use of musical instruments, vocal music, and Latin. Parents or guardians could, if they wished, pay a flat fee of $200.00 per year, which would include board and "all necessaries connected with it." Interest was charged if payments were not punctual.

The seminary building was three stories high, with forty lodging rooms, a large hall, and recitation rooms. The house was new, and observers considered the rooms to be ideally designed for study and recreation, as well as handsomely arranged for light, air, and comfort. The pupils' quarters were furnished, and the students were responsible for the neatness and order of their rooms.

The board of trustees took a lively interest in their institution, appointing a board of visitors composed of board members and other "gentlemen of the place and vicinity" to visit the school once a month, hear recitations, and advise and consult with the principal on the general interests of the seminary.

Most of the teachers lived in the house, and supervision of the pupils was regarded as parental. The object was "to incite to virtuous conduct by an appeal to the moral sense . . . . The comfort, protection, manners and moral and religious interests of the pupils will be carefully promoted by the Principal, Teachers, and Board of Trustees." Parents were asked to designate which church they wished their daughters to attend. If no special instructions were forthcoming, the girls were required to go to the Presbyterian church regularly with the principal and her family. The school earnestly requested parents and guardians not to furnish their daughters and wards with jewelry or needless articles of apparel.

An engaging glimpse into boarding school life in the 1840s has been provided by a member of the class of 1848, who wrote the following in May 1907, fifty-nine years after her graduation:

Miss Foster brought from Mrs. Willard's school at Troy the monitorial system, which I think was a great success; so truly democratic, making the pupils responsible for the government and good order of the school. I am glad to think that I was a boarding pupil, and enjoyed to the full the benefit of the system. We studied in our rooms. The monitor, or monitress as she was called, visited our rooms every hour and gave us a demerit if we were out of our

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14 Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils in Washington Female Seminary, for the Academic Year, Commencing November, 1845, and ending September, 1846 (Washington, Pa., 1846), 5-19.
Sarah Foster Hanna, 1802-1886. Principal, Washington Female Seminary, 1840-1874.

Washington Female Seminary (razed in 1939)
Faculty, Washington Female Seminary, ca. 1869: Row 1, l. to r.: Prof. Twining, Miss M. A. Harris, Miss M. C. Doyle, Mrs. Hanna; row 2, l. to r.: Miss M. A. Parkhurst, Miss A. E. Watkins, Miss M. R. Williams.

Art class, 1880s
rooms when we ought to be in, or in when we ought to be out. Each girl had to serve as monitress in turn for one day. She had to report to the officer, who was one of the teachers, holding her position for one week.

We had our vacations in April and October . . . a mid-winter holiday of a week at Christmas and a mid-summer one which included July 4th. Our studies were not interrupted and we did not suffer from extreme heat. The house was cool and well ventilated, and I am sure that I was never uncomfortably warm. I am glad, however, that the old-fashioned public examinations have gone out of vogue and instead we have commencements preceded by written examinations.

She recalled other pleasantries of life at the seminary:

How well I remember the good housekeeping . . . the cleanliness, the good, abundant food . . . . My room, number 12 in the wing, the dear little wood stove, and the wood so promptly and freely supplied; how easy to keep our fires going! In our room we had a dip tallow candle supplied every night in a clean tin candlestick with a pair of snuffers. At ten o'clock lights were out and the officers bade us good-night. We slept well in our comfortable feather bed, placed over a straw one in winter; in summer, the order was reversed. We never dreamed of woven wire springs and iron bedsteads, but our beds were just as soft and pleasant, and the rising bell rang all too soon to arouse us from our slumbers.15

Two disasters marred the first decade of Mrs. Hanna's administration. In November 1848, a fire broke out in a newly constructed wing of the building. Upon hearing the alarm, the court in session in Washington hastily adjourned to permit judges, juries, and attorneys to join three fire companies and a bucket brigade in fighting the fire. During the height of the crisis, the unflinching Mrs. Hanna moved about methodically, while all about her others were tossing everything out of the windows with reckless abandon. As usual her very presence inspired confidence, and she soon had helpers carrying out books and furniture from the library. She then turned her attention to rescuing laboratory equipment and pianos. Exhausted firefighters, many of them girls and women, forgot their own weariness as they watched her working tirelessly alongside.16 When the fire was out, the young ladies were placed with families in town, care being taken by the principal to "remove them as far as possible from the temptation of the presence of the masculine element." 17

The house was quickly rebuilt, and the school continued to grow and prosper. It was sufficiently well established to survive another catastrophe in 1850, when an epidemic of scarlet fever broke out among the boarding pupils. A number of them became very ill, several died, and Mrs. Hanna closed the school for a time.

15 The Scroll 2 (Feb. 1908) : 2-3.
16 Brownlee, Foster Mother, 22.
17 The Scroll 5 (June 1911) : 53-54.
With peace and tranquility restored, school life returned to its accustomed routine. While one early graduate has given us a report somewhat tinged with nostalgia, another alumna, a member of the class of 1860, wrote in 1921 a clear-eyed reminiscence of her boarding school life in the 1850s, and of the austerity which prevailed at the time:

... there were no carpets on the stairs, halls, or anywhere, except in the parlors and teachers' rooms. There were no pictures on the walls; no furnace heat, only open grates for soft coal fires; no gas or electric light, only tallow candles, one for each two students to study by, and two on each dining room table; no bathrooms, no gymnasium.18

Conditions at the school probably did not improve much during the 1860s as the effects of the Civil War were felt in Western Pennsylvania. The class of 1862, for instance, was very small; it had only seven day pupils and two boarders. At one point, most of the able-bodied men of the town went off to fight near Chambersburg, and the diplomas issued that year lacked the signature of the secretary of the board. In Washington there was, as yet, no natural gas, no water system, and no electricity.

These bleak years were personally distressing to Mrs. Hanna. Her husband died in 1864. In addition, many seminary alumnae and friends lived in the South. With characteristic generosity, however, she presented a blanket to each soldier going off to war from Washington and sent supplies to the sick and wounded.19 During these trying years, as she had through the other crises which had beset her school, Mrs. Hanna moved about her duties in her stately and dignified fashion. She continued, as always, to dress elegantly, gowned in lustrous black silk with a velvet cape, heavy gold watch chain, and handsome lace cap with lavender ribbons.

Always regarded with awe and affection by pupils and alumnae alike, Mrs. Hanna was singularly honored by her school when a large number of alumnae responded to her invitation to attend a twenty-five-year reunion at the seminary on June 27 and 28, 1866. By this time, the Washington Female Seminary had graduated 469 students. They had come from thirteen states, the District of Columbia, and Canada. All but six had graduated during Mrs. Hanna's tenure. Charlotte LeMoyne Wills, a graduate of the class of 1841, and a daughter of Dr. Francis J. LeMoyne, one of the founders of the seminary, was throughout her long life one of the most articulate

18 Ibid. 15 (June 1921) : 29.
19 Brownlee, Foster Mother, 33.
and active alumnæ of the seminary. Remarks made by Mrs. Wills at this reunion were perceptive and prophetic. In referring to the progress which had been made in the education of women since her class of eight had graduated in 1841, she observed that the number of studies had increased, the range was wider, and the course was more thorough. She went on:

It is now admitted, and felt, that women must have an extensive and solid education, to fit them for the proper discharge of their important and responsible duties; and still further progress will be made. The time will come, and is not very distant, when girls shall receive as liberal education as boys; when great and noble careers shall be open to all who are fitted to follow them; when the woman, whose duty and necessity requires her to earn her own living, shall not be obliged to choose between the schoolroom, the needle, and the wash-tub; but may be guided by her capabilities and her natural tastes . . .

When women are prepared to maintain a position of equality, it will be readily acknowledged that they are the equals of men, in rights and intellects; and their civil and political influence will be found as beneficial and refining in the State, and in society, as their social and religious influence has proved.

Then, universal suffrage will follow universal freedom, no longer restricted by color, or race, or sex, and we shall all be alike before the law, as before our God.  

As the decade of the 1870s began, Mrs. Hanna’s days as principal drew to a close. On March 28, 1874, she wrote to the president of the board of trustees, saying that, after thirty-four years as principal of the seminary, she felt it was her duty to resign her post, effective June 25. Accepting her resignation, the board, in a letter signed by all of its members, reviewed her tenure as principal in most glowing terms and observed that “the institution, into whatever hands it may pass, will always be associated with your name.”

Immediately upon learning of Mrs. Hanna’s approaching retirement, a large number of alumnæ of the seminary swung into action and organized a “Social and Literary Reunion” to be held at Seminary Hall on Thursday, June 25, 1874, at 10:00 A.M. Invitations went out to all alumnæ and former teachers.

More than 300 guests assembled in an elegantly decorated Seminary Hall on the appointed day to do honor to the retiring principal. Speeches were delivered, letters were read, gifts were offered — a handsome watch and chain, a silver salver with ice pitcher and goblets — and Mrs. Hanna, taken quite by surprise and overcome with emotion, graciously received all. Then, in a touching address she reviewed her life’s work and her plans for the future.

20 Quarter-Centennial Reunion of the Graduates of the Washington Female Seminary, 1866 (Pittsburgh, 1866), 3-10.
21 Reunion, 1874, 4-5.
The long and distinguished career of Mrs. Hanna prompted an extraordinary evaluation of her character by a local historian of the period:

Mrs. Hanna's influence in the community was greater perhaps than that of any other citizen ... due ... to her character and strong personal force. She made her home in the seminary a place of social power as well as of mental instruction ... she succeeded in accomplishing so many things in a community that responded but slowly to appeals in behalf of enterprise. When she advised street-crossings, she set the example of putting down some herself. When she sought the establishment of a cemetery, she enforced her counsel by liberal help.

Taken all in all, she has been one of the most useful and conspicuous of Washington County's citizens. 22

The trustees began a search for a new principal with their customary vigor and thoroughness. Their diligence was rewarded when they obtained Miss Nancy Sherrard, a native of Steubenville, Ohio, as Mrs. Hanna's successor. Educated at the Steubenville Female Seminary, she had taught at Blairsville, Pennsylvania, Louisville, Kentucky, and Fort Wayne, Indiana. At the time of her election as principal of the Washington seminary she was vice-principal of the Steubenville seminary.

Miss Sherrard's tenure was almost as successful as Mrs. Hanna's, and it endured for twenty-three years. Like her predecessor, she enjoyed a harmonious relationship with trustees, faculty, and students. Physically and academically, the school continued to grow. A new wing was added in 1884. In that year there were 140 students, 60 of whom were boarders.

Miss Sherrard's competent administration came to an end in 1897. But with her departure, the seminary administration appeared to lose stability. No fewer than seven principals walked across the school's threshold during the next thirty-five years. In contrast, the two administrations of Mrs. Hanna and Miss Sherrard covered fifty-seven years.

In 1897, a new four-story school hall was built, complete with gymnasium and a 400-seat assembly hall. A college preparatory course was added, and the seminary approached the turn of the century in apparently sound financial and academic condition. By 1915, however, the school was beginning to encounter severe financial difficulties. Successive fund-raising campaigns met with only modest success, and the fiscal miseries continued unabated during the twenties. Final-

22 Crumrine, History of Washington County, 559-60.
ly, in June 1932, the trustees voted to close the institution because of the critical financial situation.

Disappointment and dismay were so widespread among the faculty that they persuaded the trustees to reopen the seminary as a day school and junior college. The old charter was flexible enough to permit this program. The trustees agreed, but offered no guarantees of remuneration. Salaries had to be paid out of any profit over necessary expenses.

The Washington seminary continued to operate under these conditions for sixteen more years. Problems of accreditation and housing resulted from the crippling financial situation. Requirements for endowment were never met, and the junior college was never fully accredited because of the financial deficiencies. Housing was a problem also, because in 1939 the seminary buildings were sold to Washington and Jefferson College to satisfy claims for indebtedness. During its last nine years of existence, the struggling school moved three times.

Finally, at the end of the Second World War, educational costs began to climb more sharply than ever. The board wrestled with the twin problems of finance and accreditation, but money-raising campaigns met with little success. In December 1947, the administrative staff resigned, and the trustees gave up. The one-hundred-twelfth commencement in June 1948 was the school's last.
IN COMMEMORATION

GIFTS

IN MEMORY OF

JOHN JAY HEARD

FROM

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Mr. and Mrs. Charles Baton

Mr. William Wallace Booth

Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Dodds, Jr.

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