President E. Henry Fairchild and Berea College's Commitment to Women's Education

by

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Berea College was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century by a singular group of reformers typical of the nineteenth-century reform tradition that swept America. As historian Russel B. Nye notes in William Lloyd Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers, "Nineteenth-century reform touched on almost every aspect of American life--education, labor, politics, debt, war, dress, health, family life, church, prisons, the poor, the crippled, and the unfortunate ... The reform movement had deep roots at home and abroad. Nineteenth-century Americans were direct heirs of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, with its traditions of natural rights, human equality, and human perfectibility." At the same time, "Christianity guaranteed men the right to live as brothers, children of God; a brutally competitive society violated the spirit of Christian ethics. War, drunkenness, poverty, crime, and ignorance nullified these divinely-inspired concepts on which the Republic had been founded." 1

A short reflection on Berea College's present Great Commitments shows that the college founders, like their reformist brothers and sisters all over the nation, had a number of items on their agenda for the perfection of mankind. It is well known, of course, that the Founders, John G. and Matilda Fee, J. A. R. and Elizabeth Rogers, E. Henry and B. Fairchild, and others, were racial equalitarians and wanted an interracial school at Berea. It is also well known that they believed in a nonsectarian Christian religion which called for social action to improve the lot of humankind; that they fostered social arrangements to encourage "plain living and clear thinking," that they abhorred the repugnant vices of tobacco and alcohol consumption and that they were pacifistic in their views on human relationships, both within their own community and among nations.

However, Berea College has never advertised another reformist tradition of the Founders, at the time seen as an important part of the school's purpose for being. We mean, co-education of the sexes. This idea was highlighted by the Founders, especially by E. Henry Fairchild, first president of the college. This has been an unfortunate omission on the part of historians and publicists, for it has led us to distort our self-perception as members of an institution proud of its devotion to many purposeful humanitarian ideals. Historians of higher education and the woman's rights campaign in Kentucky have not been aware of Berea's contribution. In mythology, Transylvania University is credited as the first coeducational college in Kentucky, when in fact, as President Fairchild specifically noted in 1869, Berea College was the first
college "in this State and in the South" to try the arrangement. Transylvania did not go co-educational until 1889, according to John D. Wright in his history of that venerable institution; and even then it had been preceded in that step by the University of Kentucky, which according to historian James F. Hopkins became co-educational in 1880. As for the woman's rights movement, Professor Paul E. Fuller could publish in 1975 a study of the woman's crusade in Kentucky, entitled Laura Clay and the Woman's Rights Movement, and never mention Berea College's pioneering efforts in co-education. Fuller's omission of Berea (the result of our own historical amnesia) is even more remarkable when one considers that Laura Clay's home was in Richmond, only fourteen miles away, and that the organization she founded in 1888, the Fayette County Equal Rights Association, had as one of its major purposes "to advance the . . . educational . . . rights of women." So, let us set the record straight.

The first conscious, forceful public assertion that Berea College had as a major commitment the co-education of the sexes was articulated by President Fairchild when he assumed the presidency in 1869. Berea was then beginning a college program, as part of its larger educational effort, and was changing its name from the "Berea Literary Institute." By 1869, Berea had been an on-again, off-again educational proposition for about fourteen years, and during that time students had been welcomed without regard to sex. Apparently this arrangement owed to a conscious decision by John G. Fee and J. A. R. Rogers, early Founders, for co-education of the sexes was seen by them as one of a number of reformist ideals to foster. In 1858, they drafted a constitution for "Berea College" which, although not saying anything specific about co-education, had declared that the school's purpose was to furnish "the opportunity for a thorough education to all persons of good moral character." When E. Henry Fairchild arrived in 1869 to take up duties as first president of Berea College, two major forces converged in Berea's history to push forward co-education as a specifically articulated and highly important part of the school's educational purpose. First and most important were Fairchild's personal values. A graduate of Oberlin College and Oberlin Seminary, he had by 1869 spent twelve years as a Christian minister in three states and had served for sixteen years as Principal of the Preparatory Department of Oberlin College. His brother, James Fairchild, was president of Oberlin College from 1866 to 1889. The importance of President Fairchild's "Oberlin Connection" for Berea's co-educational program is that Oberlin was a pioneer in co-education, and no doubt Fairchild agreed with those who believed that co-education was the most valid arrangement for college life. One suspects, in fact, that Fairchild would not have taken the Berea presidency had he not been assured by Fee and the other trustees that Berea was committed to this ideal.

Another reason why the co-educational commitment finally became an open topic of conversation in 1869 was because Berea was
beginning a college program, and President Fairchild felt this experiment in higher education might be "novel" for the incipient college's Kentucky and Southern clientele. Therefore, he thought it needed explaining, and Fee and Rogers obviously agreed with and supported him in the explanation.) Said Fairchild, "Young ladies and misses are admitted to all departments, and recite in the same classes with the young men and boys. This feature of the school is by no means novel or experimental" in other places, but may be viewed as such by some Bereans. "So fully has this been established that more than twenty colleges, nearly all that have been established at the West within fifteen years, have incorporated this feature. But as it is a new thing in this State and in the South generally, it may be well to notice some of the advantages and supposed dangers of this arrangement." 5

Consequently, President Fairchild in his inaugural address in 1869 emphasized Berea College's commitment to co-education of the sexes and explained the reasons why. His address, in its present printed form in the Berea College Archives, is almost nine pages long, and in it he emphasizes eight of what he calls "the main characteristics of the school, as at present constituted," all of which receive his "hearty approbation." Among these characteristics, as might be expected, are support for racial integration, for enrolling students from poor backgrounds, for nonsectarian Christian values, for activist social work in the uplift of downtrodden humanity through political action, for Christian concern toward all persons as children of God and for a comprehensive educational program that embraces "all grades, from the Primary Department to the College Proper." What surprises us, however (because it has not been emphasized in the twentieth century), is that Fairchild gives a great deal of attention to Berea College being "a school for both sexes." In fact, he lists this characteristic as the second point in his speech, and the only thing he finds more important is the comprehensiveness of the educational program. Therefore, Berea's commitments to racial equality, serving the poor, even Christian education, are subordinate in Fairchild's address to this one. He gives more space to co-education than to any other topic, expounding on it for almost three of nine pages. The only other commitment declared lengthily is interracial education, and it receives only a page and a half. We may conclude, therefore, that President Fairchild believed this commitment to be very important. 6

In explicating his commitment to co-education, Fairchild lists seven reasons why such a program is important and benign. First, he notes, "it is economical. When the equipments are all provided for a college of young men, an equal number of ladies may be admitted with little additional expenses. By the enlargement of a single building, and the addition of one or two teachers, they are provided for." Second, the program tends to foster "good order." By this, President Fairchild meant that male students would be forced by female company to exercise "decorum and propriety of behavior. Rowdyism, the natural result of separating young men from the society of ladies, is almost unknown and impossible in a
school of both sexes." And as for the dangers of "concupisence," says Fairchild, they are actually reduced in a co-educational setting—as long as students are "allowed such a measure of social intercourse as their natures demand." (He would not have included co-educational visitation in dormitories as "natural" part of social intercourse between unmarried men and women.) A third advantage to co-education, notes Fairchild, "is found in the incitements...to faithful study," for it is a far greater trial for a student to fail in recitation, in the presence of twenty or thirty companions of both sexes, than before a less number of his own sex." It is true, says Fairchild, that some persons believe women unable "to cope with [men] in the severe studies of a thorough course," but "a few years of experience would dissipate such notions."7

The fourth advantage of co-education for Fairchild is the providing of a "social culture" that is "as essential to the highest usefulness as learning itself; and a culture which neither sex can acquire, in its highest degree, alone." By this, we believe he means learning social graces, manners and general politenesses that mark a cultured person. Fifth, Fairchild sees co-education as giving students "opportunities for the cultivation of vocal music far superior to those which either sex can enjoy in separation." This higher quality music would then add "interest to every religious meeting, every public literary exercise, every social gathering where music is appropriate, and every meeting for daily worship. Those who have had long experience of these advantages can never be persuaded to relinquish them." Sixth, says Fairchild, "such a school gives much more interest to a community than a school of either sex alone. Such a school added to any [community] greatly improves...its Sabbath-schools and Bible-classes; its prayer meetings and social gatherings; its life, energy, zeal and sense of responsibility; whereas a large school of either sex alone...would disturb the natural balance of society, and make everything one-sided and unsatisfactory." Moreover, such a school not incorporated with the community is a one-sided affair of itself, and having few, if any interests in common with community, becomes naturally and almost necessarily antagonistic." Finally, says Fairchild, co-education is advantageous in "that it gives to young ladies a more profound and thorough education than they are likely to acquire in a female seminary. Their teachers in their advanced studies are college professors, and their classmates regular college students, both important consideration." So, with all these things in favor of co-education, Fairchild was confident that doubts about the system among parents of potential lady students would be dissipated after "a few years of observation." and that the program would be a resounding success.8

It is, of course, one thing to make a fine speech about a commitment, quite another to put a program into action. Let us examine the record of the Fairchild administration from 1869-89 (when he died) to determine whether he succeeded in implementing co-education of the sexes at Berea. The record is spotty, for the Berea College Archives contain little information on the Fairchild
administration, but there are enough tantalizing hints to suggest that the program, in terms of the sexual norms of the late nineteenth century, was successful. Some practices and attitudes during Fairchild's years to the modern Berean might appear discriminatory, but in the context of their times were not considered onerous to the vast majority of Kentucky or Southern women—even those who called themselves fighters for woman's rights. (For corroboration of this point and for further elaboration, refer to Paul Fuller's study of Laura Clay.)

As President Fairchild organized the administrative structure of Berea College in 1869, he created four departments for the school: Collegiate, Normal, Preparatory and Ladies'. The Collegiate Department was the most rigorous, with a four-year curriculum for a bachelor of arts degree that included Greek, Latin, trigonometry, algebra, botany, literature, logic, philosophy, rhetoric, mineralogy, astronomy and history. Next in difficulty was the curriculum of the Ladies' Department, designed specifically for women but not required of all Berea women. Courses in this program, taught in three years and leading to neither degree nor diploma, included algebra, English, Latin, botany, history, geometry, French, trigonometry, surveying, logic, philosophy and Christianity. In the Preparatory Department, both men and women students could follow various programs of remedial studies in preparation to enter either college or the Ladies' Department. In the first year of Fairchild's presidency, there were 205 men enrolled at Berea and 102 women, a ratio that remained fairly constant between the sexes over the next several years. Four men matriculated in the college program, while only one woman chose that route. Seven women were enrolled in the Ladies' Department, and the rest of the student body were in Normal, Preparatory, high school or elementary curricula. Over the next three or four years, male enrollments in the college curriculum increased to fifteen, while female enrollments remained at one. Most women entering Berea's higher education program chose to enlist in the Ladies' courses or in the Normal curriculum (the latter designed to prepare elementary and high school teachers). No men chose to enroll in the Ladies' Department, and in fact they were not allowed to do so. Fairchild's arrangement of the Berea curriculum in this way was an inheritance from his days at Oberlin, and neither he nor anyone else at Berea seemed perturbed at first by academic "segregation" of the sexes at Berea in the early 1870s. One reason for the lack of concern, obviously, was that throughout this period women were free to matriculate in the college program—and one did—if they were academically qualified (that is, knew Greek and Latin) and so chose.

Regarding living arrangements for Berea's women students, Fairchild sought diligently from his first days as president to see that female living quarters were improved and put on a permanent basis. One early great success in building at Berea was collecting money for and overseeing the erection of Ladies' Hall, the name of which was later changed to Fairchild Hall in his honor. In 1877, Berea College proudly boasted in its promotional
literature that "Ladies and gentlemen, white and colored, are ad­mitted on equal terms, and receive the same considerate treatment . . . The government of the school is paternal, not arbitrary . . . The Ladies' Hall, built of brick and three stories high, is capa­ble of accommodating one hundred young ladies, and is one of the best finished and most elegant buildings . . . in the country." Fairchild was proud of his efforts at co-education and used this commitment to advertise the equalitarian nature of Berea College to the country.

The regulation of everyday lives of Berea women was placed by Fairchild under a "Ladies' Board of Care," composed of Mrs. Matilda Fee, Mrs. Elizabeth Rogers and Mrs. Maria B. Fairchild. Everyday problems were handled by a Lady Principal, the highest female officer of the college (and a position similar to a "personnel dean" today). This was not an academic position for it had no teaching responsibilities, and therefore the job carried a much lower salary than did professorships. While faculty members received compensation of $1,000 to $1,200 per year, the Lady Principal received only $400, and at least one complained to the Trustees that Berea had a sexist salary scale, however, we note that female faculty members in the 1880s apparently received the same salaries as male counterparts.

Social regulations imposed upon Berea women by the Trustees, faculty and president through the Ladies' Board of Care and the Lady Principal were only marginally stricter than those required of men. Everyone, male or female, was absolutely barred from use of tobacco or alcohol in any form whatsoever, from swearing or vulgar conversation or from breaking "the laws of common morality." No Berea student was allowed to frequent local grocery stores, taverns or "other places of public resort" nor could they partake of the society of any person or group of persons which the faculty considered "of immoral tendency." All students were debarred from joining "secret societies" like the Masons and they were strictly admonished to adhere to study hours" from 7:00 a.m. to noon, from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., and from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Any student leaving town had to receive permission from an appropriate officer of the college, and men and women could not go out together "for a walk or idle, or attend social gatherings, without permission from the appropriate authorities." Every Berean, man or woman, was required to attend church services and Sunday school on the Sabbath, a weekly religious chapel on Tuesday, another weekly Bible exercise at some other arranged time, daily morning prayers in dormitories and collective evening prayers in the Chapel. Specific regulations applying only to women students were: 1) that they were to be in their rooms at 7:30 p.m. during Fall and Winter Terms and by 8:00 p.m. in Spring Term (men were required to be in by 10:00 p.m. year-round); and 2) that ladies were not to receive gentleman callers except at such hours and under such restrictions as the Ladies' Board of Care designated—"and only in the public parlor where they board." As President Fairchild and his faculty gathered experience with
their curriculum in the early 1870s, they became uncomfortable with arrangements for women they had more or less inherited from Oberlin. In 1875, therefore, they totally rearranged the curriculum, so that while they kept their four original Departments—Collegiate, Normal, Ladies' and Preparatory—these Departments now became administrative conveniences with no particular curricular content. In fact, the new curricula after 1875 were Classical (college), Classical Preparatory, Literary, Literary Preparatory, Normal and Special Normal. Hence, the earlier Ladies' Department curriculum disappeared, and while all women at Berea were administratively still under the Ladies' Department, this arrangement was for regulating their lives outside the classroom. In sum, Fairchild had consciously chosen to integrate women completely into the academic life of the college. Thereafter, in all of Berea's public relations literature and catalogues, there was a specific statement of clarification to the public on this matter: "No separate course of study is arranged for ladies, but members of the several departments recite together whenever their studies are the same." With this reorganization in 1875, we believe, women were so entirely incorporated into all the curricula of Berea that the college became fully and truly committed to its own stated ideals on co-education of the sexes. 13

In conclusion, we can say with some confidence that Berea College under President E. Henry Fairchild pioneered in the state of Kentucky and in the South in equal co-educational access to higher education for the sexes. That this was a commitment which Fairchild took seriously is seen by the emphasis he gave it in his inaugural address and in his programs over the next twenty years. That it was for him at least of equal importance to Berea's other commitments may be seen in the way he thrust it to the fore as a cornerstone of his administration. Certainly Fairchild's Berea colleagues and friends recognized his commitment and were in full agreement with it. When Fairchild died in 1889, people at Berea, including L. V. Dodge, Kate Gilbert and A. G. Titus, issued a memorial in honor of the man, asking contributions be made to Berea's educational program in his memory. They most wanted this kind and gentle scholar to be remembered for mediating "the transition [of Berea College] from 'reconstruction times' to times of stable peace," and for carrying "the 'experiment' of co-education and of 'mixed' education to assured success. Only after Fairchild's death did Berea begin suffering the loss of memory about the institution's commitment to co-education that has continued to the present day.
FOOTNOTES


3. Board of Trustees Minutes, Berea College, September 7, 1858, 31, Berea College Archives.

4. Biographical information on E. Henry Fairchild comes from "A Memorial to Pres. E. H. Fairchild," by L. V. Dodge, Kate Gilbert, et al., and from an undated, unsigned memoir, both in Fairchild Papers, Berea College Archives.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. *Catalogues of Berea College, 1869-72*, Berea College Archives; *Annual Circular of Berea College*, [June, 1875], Fairchild Papers, Berea College Archives.


11. Board of Trustees Minutes, Berea College, June 29, 1877, 118, Berea College Archives; *Annual Circular of Berea College*, [June, 1875], Fairchild Papers, Berea College Archives.

