



Biographical History of Massachusetts, Vol. 5: Biographies and Autobiographies of the Leading Men in the State (Classic Reprint)

Samuel An; Eliot

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Excerpt from Biographical History of Massachusetts, Vol. 5: Biographies and Autobiographies of the Leading Men in the State

The American colonists were not in advance of their age in their estimate of woman's intellectual capacity. It was still the prevailing opinion at the beginning of the seventeenth century that the feminine intellect was inferior to the masculine and that mental culture would unfit woman for her vocation. There were no public or endowed schools for her benefit anywhere except in convents, and in these the time was so fully occupied with religious exercises that the instructions rarely extended beyond the ability to read and write.

The first settlers of Massachusetts, however, as a class were better educated and more generously disposed than the founders of the other American colonies, and through their superior intelligence and philanthropy they succeeded in organizing an advanced system of public instruction, which, in its natural evolution, has proved of inestimable service in the education of men and women. The wise foresight and generosity of these colonists in respect to education appear in their first communal acts.

As soon as they had satisfied the primal necessities of life in the wilderness - "One of the next things we longed for and looked after" - to quote from their records a characteristic sentence - "was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity." Only five years after the settlement of Boston, the town voted to establish a Latin Grammar School, incited thereto by the subscriptions of forty of its inhabitants. The following year, 1636, the general court voted £400 to establish the first college, - an act made efficacious by the liberality of John Harvard and of many other fellow colonists. Six years later, the selectmen in every town were required to look after the education of children - "for inasmuch as the good education is of singular behoof and benefit to the Commonwealth."

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