

A Historical Sketch



Rochester Female Academy



1837-1912



SARAH J. NICHOLS

A Historical Sketch

1837-1912

JANE H. NICHOLS.



ONE of the prerogatives of a historian seems to be the right to begin his story at any date he may see fit. By way of proof I can point you to a History of the Pilgrims that begins with Adam. Possibly the historian hopes in this way to secure a better setting for his narrative. Claiming the historian's right, I shall begin this sketch at an earlier date than 1837, and in order to get the local coloring needed, shall go back to 1802. *

In that year Col. Rochester, Col. Fitzhugh and Major Carroll bought for \$17.50 an acre the One Hundred Acre, or Allan Mill Tract, which lay west of the Gen-

*For many of the items and dates about Rochester, I am indebted to Mrs. J. M. Parker's History of Rochester.

Society, the visit of Lafayette, Sam Patch's jump, the Morgan affair, the erection of the Arcade and of five churches, as well as the erection of most of the mills that made the town famous; the establishment of the High School and of two notable schools for young ladies on the west side of the river. One of these schools was the Misses Black's school, which was held in the Sill building on South Fitzhugh street near Main street, West. The Misses Black were Canadian ladies who had been educated in the Troy Female Seminary. Their school was well attended and very popular, though it is said that "their methods of instruction and etiquette were more English than American." In 1833 Miss Black was married and went to Canada, then Miss Sarah Seward, (afterwards Mrs. General Gould) also a graduate of the Troy Female Seminary, opened a school. After a year this school was moved to a brick building which stood where the First Presbyterian church now stands. You must have noticed that this section of the village—for village it was till 1834—had been the one most sought for for schools and residences. Until 1835 no building had been erected expressly for school purposes, but in 1835-1836 we hear of two new school buildings. One of these was on Alexander street, it was finished in 1835 and to this building Miss Seward's school was moved in October, 1835. The other building for a school, called the Rochester Female

Seminary was begun in 1835, finished in May 1836 at which time the school was opened. It is surely not mere fancy to suppose that the name given this school was suggested by the Troy Female Seminary, or that the style of the building erected was chosen because of the then prevailing fondness for the Greek style of architecture.

The meeting to promote the establishment of this Seminary was held in the Mayor's office, January, 1835. Rochester was now a city you know and Jonathan Child its first Mayor. At this meeting, "It was resolved to raise a sum not exceeding \$4,000 to purchase a suitable lot and to erect thereon a building for a Female Seminary." "The stock to be in shares of \$20 each." "The building to be owned by the stockholders, and to be rented from time to time at a moderate rent or otherwise as they may see fit." "The whole business to be managed by a board of trustees elected by the stockholders." The shares for this new school were taken by such men as J. Child, J. K. Livingston, E. Peck, S. O. Smith, S. D. Porter, Isaac Hills, Levi Ward, E. Lyon, Moses Chapin and others whose names are equally familiar.

The lot selected was on South Fitzhugh street, near Spring. An old historian says, "The lot was eligibly and pleasantly located." It was purchased from Amon Bronson for \$300 cash, a mortgage for \$600 on the lot

was also assumed. The contract for erecting the building was let to Nehemiah Osburn for \$2,890. That he faithfully fulfilled the contract, all who have had to do with the building will testify. For example, in later years when the furnace took the place of the old stoves and the openings had to be cut for the registers, it was found that the floor was made of two layers of boards with a layer of mortar between them. The shingles too, were laid in mortar. Many of you will recollect the names cut into the glass of the windows, proving how good was the glass. The historian before quoted says, "The edifice was in good taste, the second story, one spacious room, well ventilated, well lighted; forming a cheerful, pleasant place for study." We can all bear willing witness to this statement. The chains connecting the pillars were put there, as I've heard, to safeguard the pupils—though I recall that some pupils used them for swings. For whatever purpose they were placed, they gave an air of individuality to the building.

The first board of trustees of the Rochester Female Seminary was composed of Jonathan Child, Moses Chapin, Elijah F. Smith, James K. Livingston, William P. Stanton. Miss Julia Jones was the first principal. Her salary was six hundred dollars a year.

From among the entries in the treasurer's book for the year 1836, we select these:

May 9th, 1836, to cash for 80 chairs.....\$50.00

Sept. 5th, 1836, to cash for 10 settees.....	41.75
Oct. 1st, 1836, to cash for 40 double desks	50.00

These may have seemed large sums to pay, but the articles were well made. They stood the wear and tear of three score years and ten.

The first year was a prosperous one and in November 1836, when a meeting of the trustees was held, the draft of an act of incorporation of the school, under the name of the Rochester Female Academy was presented, and it was unanimously resolved that it be accepted and sent to the Legislature for enactment. Largely through the exertions of Derrick Sibley, the proposed act of incorporation was passed on April 21st, 1837, so, after this long preamble we have reached our first date, 1837.

The first article of the act says, "That the stockholders are constituted a body corporate and politic by the name of the Rochester Female Academy, for the purpose of establishing, maintaining and conducting a literary institution for the education of females in the city of Rochester." The fourth article provides, "That the concerns of the institution shall be managed by six trustees, who shall be elected on the first Monday of April in each year." The twelfth and last article, "That the act take effect immediately upon the passage of the act." Therefore when school opened on the first of May, 1837, it was the Rochester Female Academy, a sketch of which I set

out to write. Miss Julia Jones was the principal and the Misses Doolittle her assistants. The former trustees were re-elected, Jonathan Child being the president and Moses Chapin the secretary and treasurer. A glance at the books kept by Judge Chapin shows the same care and exactness that marked all the work of the trustees. During the year 1837 and the following one much was done to increase the efficiency of the school and to add to its attractive appearance. The apparatus and the case for it were bought and put in place, the book case and many valuable books, and the mineral case and specimens for it were purchased, and also some pictures. The yard was leveled and seeded, some maple trees were planted on the street, some horse chestnut trees in the school yard; a well-house was built over the well which had already been dug. A large wood-house on the alley was built. The fences were painted and the whole appearance was much as it was when we went to school, only the floors of the school rooms were carpeted and there were curtains at the windows.

In January of 1839 the trustees made their first report to the Regents and became entitled to a share in the Literature fund. In this year too, Miss Araminta Doolittle became the principal. She continued to hold this position till July 1856 when she resigned. Just here it might be said that the school year then began on the

31st of August and closed on the 1st of July. At the time of Miss Doolittle's resignation this resolution appears on the secretary's book, "Resolved that while the trustees grant her request, we desire to express our high estimate of her literary and scientific attainments, her correct judgment and deportment, and all those qualities which form an accomplished teacher and manager of a young ladies' school." As Miss Doolittle was for so many years the principal it was natural that her influence should have been marked. From the many stories current it would seem that Miss Doolittle sought to inculcate manners along with other learning. You remember the old English school that charged, "Six pence for them as larns to read," "Six pence more for them as larns manners." I do not find that the Rochester Female Academy charged the extra six pence, but Miss Doolittle's scholars were taught manners. The practice of stopping at the door to drop a curtesy and say "Good night" when leaving the school room originated with her, I believe.

During the years from 1837 to 1856 among the teachers named we find Miss Alice Doolittle, Miss Hale, Miss Marion McGregor, Miss Theodosia Cook, afterward Mrs. Dr. Arner; Miss Ellen Kemp, afterwards Mrs. Dr. Arink. Of each and of all of these many pleasant memories are retained and they did much to promote

the high standards of the school. The teachers not only did their utmost to give thorough instruction, they secured the services of able men to give lectures on special subjects. We read that Professor Chester Dewey of the High School gave several series of lectures on botany before the young ladies and aroused much interest in that subject.

From July 1856 until April 1858 Mrs. C. M. Curtis acted as principal of the Academy although there is no record in the books of her formal election to that position. In April 1858 Reverend James Nichols, principal of the Temple Hill Academy in Geneseo was appointed principal of the Rochester Female Academy by the trustees, and with his wife, Mrs. Sarah J. Nichols, he assumed the charge. The catalogue for that year gives the names of these assistant teachers, Miss J. Phelps, Miss J. McNair, Miss M. Kidder, Miss A. Parsons, Prof. Surbridge, Prof. Brachet. Some of you may recall these teachers as vividly as does the historian of today. The trustees for this year were Thomas Kempshall, Thomas C. Montgomery, Isaac Hills, H. J. Allis, Levi Ward and Freeman Clarke. Other trustees in later years were Mr. Joseph Eastman, Mr. Oscar Craig, Mr. John Durand, Dr. Howard Osgood and many others whose faces you would recall if their names were mentioned.

Some time in 1858 or 1859 Mr. Nichols was asked to

take charge of a school for boys; he consented to do so and the school was opened in a building on the corner of Plymouth Avenue and Spring Street where the Mogridge block now stands. This left the care of the Academy to Mrs. Nichols and the assistant teachers. In the summer of 1862 when some of the young men who had been in Mr. Nichols' school, or who had come under his influence in other ways, were enlisted for service in the Civil War Mr. Nichols went as chaplain of one of the regiments. Within less than a year severe illness forced him to resign and come home, but he was never again able to take any part in the care of the schools.

In 1865 the first Regents' Examination was held and six girls passed. It is recalled that at this examination, not only had the answers to be written out but the questions had to be copied from the blackboard.

The Academy remained under the care of trustees till 1889 when it was deemed advisable to make some change. Mr. T. C. Montgomery and Mr. Oscar Craig acting for the trustees petitioned the Legislature to pass an act revoking the charter of the Rochester Female Academy, so enabling the school to become private property. The act was passed, Mrs. Nichols bought in the property and thereafter the school was known as Mrs. Nichols' School. A little before this—that is in 1886, Miss Wilbor came to be a teacher in the school and she

continued to teach until her marriage in 1901. The incidents of the years between 1886 and 1892 when Mrs. Nichols died are the ones which many of you are now recalling and living over in memory.

From 1892 to 1903 the school was called the Misses Nichols' School and the events and teachers of those years need no recalling, except to say that in June of 1894 at the Commencement a meeting was held to consider the formation of an Alumnae Association. It was decided to form such an Association and to hold the first meeting in January 1895. From that time two meetings were held each year and these meetings have contributed greatly to the pleasure of all. In 1895 The Travel Club was formed and we who have journeyed together during these years have enjoyed many happy hours and have gained much knowledge.

In 1903 the school was discontinued, the property having been bought by the Second Church of Christ, Scientist. The building was used by them as a place of worship till 1909. In 1910 it was sold to the Rochester Conservatory of Music in whose possession it now (1912) is. And although seventy-seven years have passed since the building was erected, it stands today a strong and stately building.

The sketch perhaps should end here but so many of the persons and things that have entered into the daily life

of the school and have made it precious have been called to mind as I have been writing that I could not forbear jotting them down and giving them to you. No name seems more fitting for these recollections than the one Mrs. J. M. Parker gives her closing chapter, so here is my "Scrap Basket Historical."

Among the teachers of early or of later years do you remember as I do Miss Murdock, Miss Jeffrey, and Miss Field who taught drawing and painting? Can you see Miss Field and hear again the stories she read to us as we drew, though we knew that she was thinking more of what we were doing than of what she was reading? Do you remember Miss Treadwell and the gymnastic exercises? Miss Dwight and the effort she made to teach us to write compositions? Do you recall Professor Morel, Mlle Broussais and Miss Mixer who sought to show us the beauties of the French language and literature, and Professor Robinson, Mrs. Cary and Mrs. Bottum who taught us how to play on the piano. You surely have not forgotten Miss Chapin and Miss Drake.

In the older days Dr. Dewey gave lectures on botany; in later days did not Professor Forbes give lectures and experiments on physics for us at the High School?

Allusion has been made to the existence of a spring in Spring Street, doubtless the well in the school-yard from which many of us have drawn water was fed by

that spring. No allusion has been made to the fact that one of the early graveyards of the village was on Plymouth Avenue near Spring Street. As this was afterwards removed to West Avenue to land owned by Mr. Roswell Hart while he took the Plymouth Avenue lot in exchange and as his lot was directly across the alley from the school-yard it is just possible that the graveyard did once include part of the school-yard. This fact, or some other, gave color to a tradition among the school girls that boxes containg skeletons were in the attic or even in the mysterious closet back of the platform. The door to this closet you know was seldom opened, but the story goes that once when some repairs were being made the door was left open and a ladder left standing in the closet. Here was the opportunity to find out the truth. One of the most venturesome of the girls was dared to go up into the attic and find out. After she had mounted the ladder the spirit of mischief must have taken possession of the others for it is related that they took down the ladder and left the girl alone in that awful place too frightened to find out anything. After awhile either from compunction or compulsion they put up the ladder and the trembling girl came down, the question still unanswered. There was a rumor too that in the cellar the ghosts walked and once one of the daring girls crawled in and was terrified by groans and unearthly noises, these

noises soon ended in suppressed laughter and those ghosts were laid.

Can some of you put yourselves back in fancy and take part again in Mrs. Jarley's Wax Works; The Dream of Fair Women; The Songs of Seven; or in such plays as No Cure No Pay or The Shakesperian Water Cure? And are you seized once more with trembling when your turn comes to recite or play on the piano at the evening entertainments which relieved the monotony of school routine? I wonder if any of you can put yourselves back at your desks and imagine yourselves taking Regents' examinations, or perhaps see the room filled with visitors and hear yourself called upon to give the synopsis of a chapter in Butler's Analogy, or the solution of a problem in Algebra, the translation of some lines in Vergil or Horace, or the demonstration of some theorem in Geometry.

Our school flourished long before there was a demand for school play grounds, but was not the back school-yard a play ground? It surely afforded space for games and races while its trees gave opportunity for climbing. I never heard that the neighbors complained of the shouts and the screams that filled the air at recess time, yet I know that there was no lack of noise.

Among the new things which took the place of the old, though there were not many such, do you remember when the furnace took the place of the old stoves, when

the water was brought into the cloak room and you no longer had to go to the house for a pitcher of water, and then, do you recall when the new piano came? Besides the daily recitations do you remember the crowning event of the year, the graduation exercises at the church and then the reception at the school house with its festal appearance? In the old records there are entries of money paid to boys for carrying chairs. We had a merrier way we formed lines and passed up or down the needed chairs.

Do you remember the chemistry lunches, the picnics, the long tramps for arbutus and other wild flowers, and the tramps to the river gorge to study geology?

And our school had its secret societies, albeit they were not Greek letter societies, there was the C. C. M., sometimes laughingly called by the uninitiated the Cats Catch Mice. We had our school papers too, such as The Academy Chip Basket, Stray Leaves, and The Rose Bud in which appeared the first literary efforts of the scholars in prose and verse. I cannot say that any of these youthful aspirants to fame became noted as writers; (the one famous writer who was once a pupil of the school was Grace Greenwood,) but then sufficient time has not yet elapsed to know whether other names are to be added to the roll of fame.

We did not keep a visitor's book, but some of us keep in memory the almost daily visits during the winter

time of Flash, a neighbor's dog. He used to come up the stairs, push open the door, walk in and lie down behind the big stove and sleep away the hours of the morning in peace. There were other visitors too, more worth remembering, men and women who came to speak to us of things and places worth telling of, as Principal Fairbairn of Scotland, Mrs. Chatterjee and Miss Howland of India, and Mrs. McFarland of Alaska.

Quite as distinct as any of these memories and far more precious, are the memories of the time spent each morning in reading from God's word, in singing and in prayer, memories, too, of the weekly Bible lesson. More than all, memories of the earnest desire of my mother that her scholars might be the disciples of the Master whom she served, by whose spirit she was guided; and sure am I that did she know of the noble women her pupils have become, of the active part they are taking in Christian work she would feel more than repaid for all she tried to do in developing their minds and moulding their characters while they were pupils in the Rochester Female Academy.



ROCHESTER FEMALE ACADEMY

Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County · Historic Monographs Collection
RVT2-Schools-Private-Rochester
Female Academy