

MQ #3517

Mount Holyoke Female Seminary Friendship Quilt, 1854 Blandford Historical Society

On November 8, 1837, when Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley opened, students arrived to find many chambers yet unfurnished. Supporters of the school nailed down carpet, begged and borrowed spoons and bedsteads, stuffed pillows, and stitched quilts in the last rush of the long, hard-fought battle to establish this institution of higher learning for women—the first permanent college-level school for women in the nation. Inspired or cajoled by founder Mary Lyon (1797-1849), rich and poor alike across New England gave what they could toward her cause, despite a terrible economic depression and the diatribes of those who believed that educating women was a waste of time and even dangerous to society.

A more determined woman than Mary Lyon perhaps never lived. Growing up in a poor and fatherless family in the Massachusetts hilltown of Buckland, Mary struggled to gain an education. Recognized early on for her exceptional intelligence, she taught at a number of schools and eventually became associated with others who were committed to educating girls and women, including Zilpah Grant, Emma Willard, and Catherine Beecher. But it was Mary Lyon's vision to establish a college for women that was endowed and not dependent on a single, dynamic personality for its success, a revolutionary idea in the early nineteenth century.¹

In 1854, Emiline Cross graduated from Mount Holyoke and friends from school and from her home in Blandford made this basket-block friendship quilt to honor her accomplishment. Penned on the block of Elizabeth "Lizzie" Hanmer, the phrase "Sharer in all the joys and sorrows of Holyoke life" hints at the fond friendships, academic challenge, religious devotion, homesickness, and hard physical labor experienced by the early students at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. The school consisted of a 100-room building housing both classroom and dormitory space for approximately 300 students and teachers. To convince unbelievers that women could handle both scholarly pursuits and traditional housekeeping duties—as well as to save money and keep tuition costs down—the students did all the cleaning and cooking at the school.

Letters in the Mount Holyoke College archives written by students in this period reveal their appreciation for the opportunity to receive an excellent education, which included courses in astronomy, botany, chemistry, philosophy, rhetoric, history, algebra, geometry, and Latin. As has been true for students throughout history, the academic demands caused great anxiety, but comfort was found in food: "Tell Mother she does not make her Peach pies right, she must come here if she wants to eat a peach pie; the crust is put into a deep plate and the peaches wiped and put in whole so that it makes a delightful pie," Anna Walker (Class of 1852) wrote to her brother. (One hopes he had enough tact not to pass along the message.)

¹ See: Elizabeth Alden Green, *Mary Lyon and Mount Holyoke: Opening the Gates* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1979).

The letters also reveal the sorrows of seminary life, often with a wry sense of humor. Not every student appreciated the requirement to attend church on Sunday and to spend an hour every day in private devotions. Charlotte Mead of the Class of 1853 noted that with such spiritual attentiveness, "...truly one ought to be holy here." In addition to their rigorous academic course and daily worship, students were expected to attend to their housekeeping duties for about 70 minutes every day. Some students did the baking and cooking, while others scoured knives, wiped crockery, swept the classrooms, or even scrubbed the toilet seats. Every student hauled firewood daily from the basement up to the little Franklin stoves in their rooms, which may have been as far up as the third floor. Anna Benton (Class of 1850) noted that it was "90 stairs" from her room to one area of her work duties. Required daily calisthenics and frequent outdoor walks proved that women's bodies were capable of enduring protracted physical exertion, just as their minds could withstand protracted study. Hikes up to the top of Mount Holyoke, for which the school was named, were more pleasant—the beautiful view of the Connecticut River Valley was popular with tourists and artists, as well as students.

So regimented and full were the hours of each day that Anna Benton wrote to her aunt: "I never lived in such a hurry in my life. ...it seems some days as if I should go crazy..." Many students wrote of the lack of time to get all their chores and studying done. Mary Elizabeth Dewell (Class of 1850) went so far as to write a lament, "I have no time," to fulfill her weekly composition requirement. Her wish for more hours in the day belies the notion of a slower-moving lifestyle in the past: "Where is time! Oh could I but meet with some one, that would tell me where it might be found, how quick would I avail myself of the opportunity..."

The bells signaling "retiring" (9:45) and especially the time to get out of bed in the morning caused particular anguish. Frances Harback of the class of 1854 moaned in her letter to a friend, "...it is but half past five in the morning—now don't you think that it is too bad to rouse a poor body out of bed so early?" She also felt terribly constrained by the innumerable rules: "... and oh the rules that we have it is enough to kill any one..." While Anna Benton eventually became accustomed to the rigors of Holyoke life, Anna Walker, Charlotte Mead, Mary Elizabeth Dewell, and Frances Harback did not stay long enough to graduate. Indeed, whether due to exhaustion or lack of money, most students attended the school only a year or two and did not graduate, making Emiline Cross's accomplishment all the more notable.

Lizzie Hanmer, "sharer in all the joys and sorrows of Holyoke life," may well have been Emiline's roommate. Roommates particularly developed a close bond. As was common practice in earlier centuries, they shared a bed as well as a room. Anna Walker noted that roommates walked "with their arms around each other (that is the way you always see them walk no matter where)..." Like so many of her classmates, Lizzie did not graduate from Mount Holyoke, but went on to be a teacher in Wethersfield, Connecticut. At least two other friends who signed Emiline's quilt had careers as teachers: Frances E. Tower who earned a master's degree and taught at Rutgers, and

Mary Ellen Wilder, who moved to the Midwest and married a fellow teacher.² Emiline married Edward L. Tinker in 1856 and bore two sons, but died young in 1863. She is buried in Plainville, Connecticut.

Mount Holyoke Female Seminary became a college in 1888. Today, 2100 students from 70 countries attend this internationally renowned school for “Uncommon Women,” and while they no longer have to do the cooking or sweep the classrooms, they do still enjoy the view from the mountain that shares the college’s name.

[Please note that the author has not yet examined this quilt in person. This essay may be altered to include information gathered from a direct observation of the quilt after it is borrowed for photography. Also, this is one of several friendship quilt essays that will be preceded by an essay putting the friendship quilt fashion into historical context.]

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² Information on students provided in: Mount Holyoke College Alumnae Association, *One Hundred Year Biographical Directory of Mount Holyoke College, 1837-1937* (South Hadley: Alumnae Association of Mount Holyoke College, 1937).