

10-1-1998

Education and the Rural Middle Class: Limington Academy, 1848-1860

Lynne Benoit-Vashon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Benoit-Vashon, Lynne. "Education and the Rural Middle Class: Limington Academy, 1848-1860." *Maine History* 38, 2 (1998): 104-127. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol38/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

LYNNE BENOIT-VACHON

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS:
LIMINGTON ACADEMY, 1848-1860

The founding of academies in Maine during the early nineteenth-century expanded educational options for rural families, but academies also played an important role in the development of a rural middle class. In her study of Limington Academy, Lynne Benoit-Vachon finds that the school's by-laws, curriculum, course materials, and extra-curricular activities all worked to inculcate middle-class values of hard work, sobriety, self-improvement, and self-reliance in the Academy's young charges – training which would lead many of them into middle-class occupations beyond Limington's borders. Benoit-Vachon, a graduate of the University of Maine, works as Education Programs Coordinator at the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester, NH and is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of New Hampshire where she is writing a dissertation on labor relations in Maine's pulp and paper communities.

On October 8, 1848, fourteen-year-old Catharine McArthur of Limington, Maine, a small farming community in the north-west corner of York county, wrote a letter to her older brother William, who was attending North Yarmouth Academy near the coast. The previous December, a teacher in Limington had started a school which aimed to provide local youth with an education beyond the common school level. Although Catharine was old enough, she did not attend. "Mr. Meserve has quite a large school," Catharine wrote, "I do not go because he said he

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

could not teach me in Cicero or Virgil.”¹ Catharine did not receive her education in the Latin and Greek classics from any public common school. Instead, Catharine’s father Arthur McArthur, a prominent Maine lawyer and former Bowdoin College graduate, took it upon himself to instruct his children in the advanced subjects which Limington schools did not offer.

The lack of advanced education in Limington troubled Arthur McArthur. To prepare his eldest sons, Arthur Jr. and William, for college, McArthur sent them to out-of-town academies. Arthur Jr. had attended nearby Limerick Academy before going on to Bowdoin College in 1847.² William had also attended Limerick Academy but was currently at North Yarmouth. McArthur also realized that the talent and intelligence of his only daughter could not be fully cultivated within the confines of Limington’s common schools. In 1848, he sent away for a catalogue from Mt. Holyoke Seminary, a female college in South Hadley, Massachusetts.³ But Catharine was still too young and could not be admitted for two more years.⁴ There was also the matter of the lawyer’s three younger sons, Duncan, Charles, and Malcolm. Someday they too would have to be sent away to receive an education beyond the common school level.

According to the elder McArthur and many of the town’s most prosperous citizens, the remedy for Limington’s educational inadequacies could be realized by establishing an academy. Since 1820, McArthur and others had discussed the founding of an academy in their hometown, but attempts to procure the necessary subscriptions seem to have floundered.⁵ Nearly three decades later, a letter from Catharine McArthur to her grandfather indicates that, in 1846, attempts to construct an academy had resurfaced and seemed more promising. “They are getting up an Academy here. They have got \$900 subscribed; they want twelve hundred dollars before they commence it.”⁶ Although it would take five more years before Limington Academy held classes and eight years before the school had its own building, many townspeople shared Catharine’s enthusiasm. “It [the Academy] will be a benefit to the village if they succeed in

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

having it,” Catharine wrote to her grandfather, “And it will also be a great advantage to our family for then we shall not have to go out of town to school and it will save the expenses of paying our board.”⁷ Yet the influence of Limington Academy and the reasons for its founding went far beyond any money saved through the elimination of boarding expenses. The time, money, and effort required to construct and operate the Academy greatly exceeded any expenses founders may have incurred by sending their children out of town for an education. During the fledgling years of its existence, Limington Academy served the needs and reinforced the ideology of an emerging, but still amorphous, American middle class.

In *The Culture of Professionalism*, Burton J. Bledstein explores the link between higher education and middle-class formation in America during the nineteenth century. “Higher education satisfied two essential but conflicting needs of the emerging middle-class in America. On the one hand, the middle-class individual identified with the public’s interest and established his credentials as a democrat committed to opportunity for the hard-working, the ambitious, and the meritorious. On the other hand, the middle-class individual asserted his position of leadership and reacted unkindly to criticism and assaults upon his authority from those he considered to be his inferiors.”⁸ Mary Ryan’s examination of family and domesticity in nineteenth-century Oneida county, New York exposes a middle-class preoccupation with character and reputation. The middle-class parents of Ryan’s study sought to instill in their children “the character traits necessary to secure a comfortable social and economic niche.”⁹ In keeping with the tradition of C. Wright Mills’ pioneering work of the 1950s, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, Ryan notes that the mid-nineteenth century was a time of transition from an “old” middle class consisting mainly of artisans, farmers, and shopkeepers to a “new” middle class headed by salaried managers, office workers, store clerks, and other white-collar professions.¹⁰

Bledstein’s *Culture of Professionalism* focuses primarily on American colleges and universities, but many locally founded

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

academies also provided an environment through which the middle class could socialize their children and reinforce valued forms of behavior and thought. Limington Academy's middle-class founders used their school as a vehicle through which they could inculcate ideals of self-reliance, self-improvement, and self-discipline in the minds of the town's children. Academy schoolbooks reinforced the middle-class preoccupation with choosing a career, earning a good living, and achieving a measure of status in society. Course content and Academy by-laws reflected the founders' moral, religious, and educational ideals. The mid-nineteenth century, as Ryan asserts, may indeed have been a time of transition for the American middle class as Limington Academy alumni frequently found themselves in professions quite different from those pursued by their parents, the majority of whom were rural farmers and artisans. Still, this transition was less apparent in rural Maine where ethnic homogeneity, manual labor, and mutual dependence softened class distinctions. Limington Academy, as well as similar institutions, may have contributed to this elusiveness. Economically advantaged students (like the young McArthurs) bound for college and professional careers shared the classroom with less wealthy farmers' children destined for a life of manual labor in the fields of Limington. Whether they became doctors, blacksmiths, wives, or dressmakers, Limington Academy students took many of the same courses, learned from the same schoolbooks, and were instilled with same middle-class values.

Any claim that Limington Academy existed to serve the needs of an emerging middle class would only partially explain the school's role in the community. During an era when westward migration left many rural areas stagnant, Limington Academy brought vitality, prestige and pride to a town whose population was slowly declining.¹¹ Soon after its founding in 1848, the Academy developed a reputation for fine teaching, as well as for the quality of teachers it produced. "A Limington teacher is above reproach" became a regional proverb.¹² By the time the actual academy building was constructed in the village in 1854, 27 percent of the school's student body came from out of town,

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

some from out of state and as far away as Boston.

Limington's middle class was not a mirror image of the nineteenth-century urban middle classes described by historians. Stuart Blumin explores middle-class formation in *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900*, noting that in the larger cities of America, middle-class individuals favored non-manual labor, desired material wealth, became members of voluntary associations, and created their own neighborhoods to distance themselves from inferiors.¹³ In Limington, the predominance of farming, the ethnic homogeneity of the townspeople, and the declining population prevented the rural middle class from possessing the definable characteristics of their urban counterparts. Sixty-four percent of Limington households in 1850 supported themselves through farming.¹⁴ Ethnic variation was limited while racial variation was non-existent. Townspeople worshipped as Congregationalists or Free-Will Baptists, although a small percentage identified themselves as Quakers. Limington's prominent lawyers, doctors, and ministers shared neighborhoods with the town's poorer blacksmiths, shoemakers, and carpenters. Arthur McArthur and his family lived next door to blacksmith Sidney Chick, his wife Lettice, and their three daughters.¹⁵

The rural community of Limington bustled with activity during the mid-nineteenth century. Townspeople traveled back and forth on stagecoach lines that ran daily through the village. Journeys to visit relatives and friends were especially frequent in late autumn after the year's crop of apples, cherries, corn, potatoes, and hay had been harvested. Young Catharine McArthur knew well the ritual of visiting: "The farmer is about his year's work and ready to visit friends," she wrote to her grandfather in November of 1845, "[w]e begin to sit around the social fire-side."¹⁶ Although not an industrial mecca, Limington was located in close proximity to towns such as Biddeford and Saco that teemed with mills, businesses, people, and activity. A day's stagecoach ride southeast would take any Limingtonian to Maine's largest city. "The week after school closed, Papa and I went to Portland. We had a very nice time. I see a great many

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

things that was [sic] new to me. I went on board the English steamer. That was very nice." Written in an Academy schoolbook in 1859, this youthful scrawl of an unknown student indicates that rural inhabitants participated in the urban activity of the day.

The incorporation of Limington Academy in 1848 came at a moment of modest prosperity for the rural farming community. Nestled in the Ossipee Valley, in the northwestern corner of York county, Limington boasted a population of 2,116 inhabitants in 1850, a number slightly smaller than the nearby town of Parsonsfield. Numerous fruit orchards and farms dotted the hilly terrain. Dozens of saw and grist mills took advantage of the water power supplied by the Saco and Ossipee rivers. Local inns provided beds stuffed with corn husks for drivers and their passengers who passed through Limington on their way to Biddeford, Saco, and Portland.¹⁷ Within this bustling atmosphere, the need for an academy in Limington became paramount. Previous attempts to educate the town's youth beyond the common school level proved only temporary and could not adequately prepare students for business or college. In 1848, public education in Limington possessed an aimless, unstructured quality that historian Lawrence A. Cremin found typical of nineteenth century America and "deriving in part from the sheer rapidity of change but also from the extraordinary extent of innovation, formal and informal, temporary and permanent."¹⁸ A letter from a concerned neighbor to Arthur McArthur indicates that many townspeople were determined to prevent the same lack of stability from plaguing the Academy. "I have talked with some of the district," William Edgecomb wrote to McArthur concerning the procurement of an Academy principal, "[T]hey think it best to have an old teacher as we have had so [much] bad luck [in] years past."¹⁹

On April 12, 1848, a group of the town's most prestigious citizens gathered at the Limington village schoolhouse to begin formal preparations for the establishment of an academy. The meeting roster included doctors Moses E. Sweat and Samuel M. Bradbury, merchant-traders Gideon L. Moody and Joshua W.

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

Frost, farmers Sewall Thompson and George Small, postmaster Isaac L. Mitchell, state militia general Henry Small, and lawyer Arthur McArthur. The majority of these men were middle-aged fathers of school age children. Many, like McArthur and Mitchell, had sent their children to be educated in out-of-town academies. Two weeks after the initial meeting, the election of an Academy Board of Trustees added a handful of farmers and two ministers to the list of Limington Academy founders.²⁰ An act of incorporation granted to the board on August 8, 1848 by the Maine State Legislature enabled the trustees to act as the Academy's governing body "to establish an institution for the promotion of Science and Literature, and wherein youth may be instructed in the higher branches of education."²¹ This task proved to be easier on paper than in practice; the trustees' plans were crippled by lack of funds. On August 11, 1849, the Board voted to begin Academy classes only if the teacher's salary could be paid by student tuition. The fledgling Academy also lacked another essential ingredient for success: a classroom full of students. Trustees voted to apply to Limington's 12th school district for the use of their schoolhouse, but meeting records do not indicate whether the request was successful. Since Academy classes did not begin for almost two more years, it is likely that either the teacher, the classroom, or the students were temporarily unobtainable.

Limington's ethnic homogeneity, rural location, mixed neighborhoods, and continued dependence on farming would seem to be characteristic of an agrarian, classless society. Yet the founding and operation of Limington Academy during the mid-nineteenth century exposes the existence of a rural middle class. Although most Academy trustees were well off financially, they did not consider themselves a social elite. Even the prominent and prosperous McArthurs identified with a more modest social position. "Mother was very glad to hear that you made a visit at Mrs. Fayles," Catharine McArthur wrote in an 1848 letter to her brother, then attending Bowdoin College, "[s]he says going into the company of that class improves one."²² This passage indicates that Catharine's mother, Sarah McArthur, wife of Limington's wealthiest citizen, considered "Mrs. Fayles" to be in

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

a higher social class than herself or her family, although it is not clear whether the defining characteristic was financial, intellectual or spiritual. Sarah McArthur was obviously pleased that Arthur, Jr. had chosen to keep this woman's company, perhaps with the hope that he would eventually increase his own social status. In mentioning Arthur, Jr.'s actions and her feelings about them to her daughter, Sarah also passed her ideas about class and social position on to Catharine.

Limington's agrarian way of life may have kept prosperous townspeople from becoming too self-important. Professional men still performed many kinds of manual labor, from slaughtering pigs to planting potatoes.²³ When instructing his oldest son on how to run a farm, Arthur McArthur told him, "Get up early if you are desirous of doing much."²⁴ Land still represented the major source of wealth. Such wealth was precarious, however, and depended heavily upon plentiful harvests, favorable weather conditions, hard work, and the help of neighbors and relatives. Agrarian living was not conducive to great amounts of leisure time, the scarcity of which may have been a factor in Limington Academy's slow development. Board meetings were often canceled for lack of a quorum. Absences from meetings occurred most frequently during the planting and harvesting months of May, August, and September.

Academy classes officially began in the spring of 1851. John H. Eveleth, a college graduate from Windham, Maine, served as the school's first instructor. Students paid tuition, but no records survive to indicate how many students attended this first session, how much they paid to attend, or what subjects Eveleth taught. Evidence does suggest that the young Academy served merely as an extension of the town's common schools rather than as a prestigious institution of higher learning. Classes were held in the village schoolhouse since the Academy lacked its own building (Fig. 1). It is also possible that the academic quality of the school did not initially meet founders' expectations. Though Limington Academy was in operation, board member and founder Arthur McArthur still sent Catharine to prepare for Mt. Holyoke Seminary at an academy in Saco.²⁵



Figure 1. The one-room “common school” building in Limington Maine provided a home for Limington Academy before the completion of the academy building in 1854. (Postcard view ca. 1905-10. Courtesy Maine Historic Preservation Commission.)

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

With the onset of the 1851 fall term, Limington Academy began to develop its reputation as an academic institution. Part of the reason for this was the trustees' procurement of William G. Lord. Born in Hiram, Maine in 1827, Lord was a 24 year-old fresh out of Waterville College (now Colby College) when board members selected him to be the instructor and principal of Limington Academy. Educated at the Hiram, Limerick, and Norway academies, Lord had taught school while acquiring his education.²⁶ Limington Academy trustees were apparently willing to overlook any previous bad experiences endured by the town's common schools when young, unreliable instructors left their positions after teaching only one term. The hiring of William G. Lord proved a successful gamble. Lord remained head instructor and principal of Limington Academy for forty three years, excepting only a few terms.

Lord's continual presence over the years brought stability and esteem to the Academy. The quality of his teaching became quite well-known in the area. During his occasional absence from his position as Academy principal, William G. Lord served as principal of Gorham Seminary, as a teacher in Ware, Massachusetts and as a lecturer at Dartmouth College.²⁷ Through the years Lord furnished his students with a fine middle-class role model to emulate. An avid supporter of temperance, he was a deacon in Limington's Congregational Church for nearly thirty years. In addition to his teaching career Lord became a leading member in town affairs. At various times in his life he held the posts of town clerk, town selectman, town treasurer, and supervisor of Limington schools.

With the problem of procuring a qualified and reliable instructor behind them, trustees put their energies toward the purchase of land and the construction of an academy building. Funding, however, remained troublesome. Petitions to the Maine legislature for a land grant failed in 1851 and again in 1853. State lawmakers hesitated to give financial aid to newly-founded academies, whose instability often led to failure and wasted money. This may explain why legislators denied aid to Limington Academy until 1861, when the school received a land grant to be

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

shared among three similar institutions in Monson, Monmouth, and Corinna.²⁸

Lack of legislative support in the Academy's early years compelled trustees to rely entirely on the generosity of the public. Roughly one-third of Limington's families donated money or services for the Academy's construction. Harness maker Ebenezer Irish Larrabee, who would later send four of his six children to the Academy, donated ten dollars toward the purchase of a building site from the trustee Rev. John H. Garman. Farmer Rufus Meserve's sons offered their shingles and their carpentry skills during the Academy's construction. Thirty year-old Abigail Thorndike, a minister's widow, gave five dollars to the building of the school's desks and seats. Donated amounts ranged from a high of seventy-five dollars given by Academy trustee and farmer Isaac Dyer to one dollar given by widow Betsy Schermerhorn, whose son George would soon spend three years studying at the Academy. Donations also came from the surrounding towns of Portland, Saco, Biddeford, Buxton, Limerick, and Maine's capital city of Augusta. Trustee records indicate that construction of the Academy building began around 1852 and was finished sometime in 1854. Expenses for the two-story, Greek Revival structure exceeded available donations by \$360 and trustees each contributed twenty-five dollars to pay the remaining debt (Fig. 2).²⁹

The Academy offered four terms of instruction: fall, winter, spring and summer. Fall and spring sessions had the highest attendance rates with many students enrolling in only one term per year. In 1854, 104 out of 142 students attended either the Academy's fall or spring session, but not both. Winter and summer session enrollments remained low throughout Limington Academy's early history. In summer, rural parents depended on their children to help with farm chores. During the winter months, the town's roads often became impassable, creating difficult traveling conditions and lowering winter enrollments. In the winter of 1854, only eight students braved the harsh elements to attend classes at the Academy. In 1859, trustees offered four terms of instruction, but the Academy roster shows that the school operated for fall and spring terms only.³⁰

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

Parents who were willing and able to pay the single term tuition cost of three dollars could enroll their children in the Academy's Primary and General English departments. Courses offered in these departments included reading, grammar, arithmetic, geography, and United States history.³¹ Limington's common schools taught similar subjects. "Town school began today," thirteen-year-old Catharine McArthur wrote in her diary in 1847, before the Academy's founding. "Waistcoat Bullock [Wescott was his real name] teaches it and his sister assists him . . . I study the History of the United States, Geography . . . Arithmetic . . . English, Grammar, and Reading."³² In 1854, twenty-nine students enrolled in the Academy's Primary and General English departments even though the nearby common schools offered a similar, tuition-free education. Enrollments in these departments were limited to children of Academy founders and donors who lived in Limington village, where the Academy was located. Thirteen-year-old Alpheus Mitchell, son of village postmaster and Academy founder Isaac Mitchell, took Primary and General English department courses in 1854. Academy trustee Sewall Thompson also enrolled his two daughters, twelve-year-old Elmira and her younger sister Frances Ann, in these departments.³³

The Higher English department proved to be the most popular course of study at the Academy. Subjects in this department were designed to provide the area's youths with training beyond the common school level. In 1854, 73 percent of Academy pupils registered in this department.³⁴ Instruction in rhetoric, logic, algebra, and bookkeeping prepared students for the business world. Higher English curriculum also strongly emphasized the sciences. Astronomy, Chemistry, Geology, Natural History, Physiology, and "Moral" Science were offered throughout the Academy's early history. Limington Academy's Classical department furnished college-bound students with the necessary foreign language skills. Pupils read Faust, recited the flowing French poetry of Racine, and deciphered the Latin and Greek texts of Sophocles, Cicero, and Virgil.³⁵ Parents who wished to enroll their children in such advanced courses discovered the



Fig. 2. The trustees of Linington Academy began construction of the Greek Revival Academy building in 1852 and it opened for students in 1854. (Postcard circa. 1905-10. Courtesy Maine Historic Preservation Commission.)

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

cost to be just as advanced. Tuition for the Academy's Higher English department set parents back \$3.75 per child, per term. Instruction in languages cost an additional \$4.50. For the 18 percent of Academy students who, in 1854, took courses in both the Classical and Higher English departments, the total tuition cost for one term rose to \$8.25.

"Ornamental" courses such as music, drawing, and painting were first offered by the Academy in 1854 and were added occasionally to the curriculum in later years. These classes consisted mostly of young ladies and ranged in cost from a low of \$2.00 for instruction in drawing, to \$5.00 for piano lessons, and \$8.00 per term for painting with oils.³⁶ Over half of the young women registered in the Ornamental department in 1854 were also registered in one of the Academy's other departments. A few students even took courses in the Ornamental, Higher English, and Classical departments, bringing the possible tuition cost to \$16.25 per child, per term. For parents sending more than one child to the school, higher education could get expensive. An average of 2.5 children were enrolled in the Academy by parents who utilized the institution.³⁷ Tuition costs ensured that only the area's most economically advantaged families could afford to furnish their children with an academy education.

Academy founders often pursued their own interests at the expense of free education. Subjects in the Academy's Primary department resembled those offered in local common schools, thus hindering enrollments in this department. By 1859, only seven out of the institution's 109 students took Primary department courses. Rural parents apparently did not see the point of paying to give their children an academy-based, common school education when similar instruction was available nearby for free. As a result, trustees voted to request that Limington's school districts not hold classes while the Academy was in session.³⁸ In addition, Academy founders had not given their support to the primitive "high" school begun by a local teacher in 1848. Evidence suggests that this school offered courses beyond the common school level, but because the teacher was not qualified to instruct students in Latin or Greek, many prosperous towns-

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

people and later Academy founders considered this form of higher education inadequate and replaced this free education with a tuition-based institution. By establishing Limington Academy, founders had proved to be strong advocates of education. But education for whom? Academy supporters, founders, and trustees honored values of democratic fairness and freedom of opportunity, yet their actions against local free education suggest a more rigid attitude. Trustees, however, did not succeed in carrying out their agenda at the expense of free education. Limington's common schools continued to operate while the Academy was in session. As a result, the Primary department disappears from Academy catalogues after 1859.

Examination of the Academy's patronage reveals the degree to which the rural middle class dominated secondary schooling in Limington. During the early years of the school's existence, property still served as an important gage of wealth and class status in many agrarian communities. Farm laborers, sawmill and gristmill workers, and blacksmiths who owned little or no property remained among the town's poorest inhabitants while farmers with substantial acreage were among the wealthiest. This does not imply that there were no wealthy blacksmiths or poor farmers in Limington, or that the town's wealthy farmers were so well-off as to be "self-sufficient" The more land one owned, the more help one needed during times of planting, haying, and harvesting. However, an analysis of the censuses of Limington in 1850 and 1860, which list the value of real and personal estate owned by each household head, indicates that financial well-being was positively influenced by the amount of land one owned. Use of these censuses in conjunction with Academy rosters and subscription lists provides further insight into the class status of the school's patrons. The average property value of those families who donated money to Limington Academy was \$2,062, much higher than the town average of \$1,259. Limington families with greater wealth were more likely to take an interest in the Academy since they were better able to afford tuition. Families who sent their children to the Academy proved to be slightly better off financially than average, with a property

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

value average of \$1,450.³⁹ Hometown students of the Academy were most likely to be children of farmers, although blacksmiths, shoemakers, store owners, innkeepers, and carpenters also sent their sons and daughters to the school.

Limington's farm laborers owned little or no property and worked for the town's land-owning farmers. They did odd jobs around the farm, helped during times of planting, haying, and harvesting, and were the most underrepresented occupation of parents with academy-bound children. During the 1850s and 1860s, only 12 percent of Academy students were the sons and daughters of Limington farm laborers. Because of the school's tuition costs, farm laborers who patronized the Academy during this period could not afford to give each of their children the benefit of an advanced education. Farm laborer Moses Welch and his wife Hannah sent only their son Charles, the oldest of seven children, to study at the Academy in 1867.⁴⁰ Most farm laborers and their families did not send any children to Limington Academy. Although it is difficult to determine whether these farm laborers and their families represented a "lower" class in Limington, they were largely excluded from the activities of the Academy and the values and ideals it engendered.

Limington Academy students had their lives both loosely and tightly regulated by the trustees. To foster self-reliance and self-discipline, course studies and exercises were made optional. "It is designed that the scholar, as early as possible, shall learn to rely entirely upon himself, without regard to teacher or book."⁴¹ Trustees viewed perseverance and industriousness as qualities essential to success in the world and the Academy was structured to foster these qualities. If students learned early that success could be achieved through ambition, merit, and hard work, they would carry these character traits with them into society. Although democratic in appearance, the trustees' leniency proved to be a subtle method of asserting their authority. Studies may have been optional but it was "understood that there are certain studies and exercises which it is for the interest of all to pursue, and that the scholars, as they have opportunity, will attend all to such."⁴² Inattention to studies was not really an option.

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

Academy by-laws regulated student life in more direct ways. The principal and his teachers reserved the right to “survey” and discipline students in and out of school. Attendance every Sunday at a church of one’s choice was expected. Swearing, disruption, disrespect, or “gross immorality” could result in possible suspension or expulsion. Students’ moral behavior greatly concerned Academy trustees. On February 19, 1855, board members discussed the possibility of having an annual public exhibition put on by the school’s students. Such an event would permit scholars to showcase their academic abilities by reading essays, performing short skits, reciting poetry, singing, or playing musical instruments. Trustees were apprehensive, but agreed to permit the exhibitions “so long as they did not desecrate the house of God nor offend the feelings of the most rigidly moral or the most scrupulously religious.”⁴³

Academy textbooks also reinforced middle-class ideals. George S. Hilliard’s series of readers, published in Boston between 1857 and 1860 and used in Limington Academy’s General English department, consistently emphasized themes of career choice, self-improvement, and social mobility. Authors incorporated many business terms, metaphors and didactic anecdotes into the texts’ poems, essays and speech excerpts. The author of a passage entitled “Rules for Success in Business” informed young readers that “[a] truly well-mannered man is he who is courteous to the poor as well as the rich . . . The man who will cringe to a wealthy capitalist is likely to be a tyrant to his own dependents.”⁴⁴ This passage suggests that Hilliard’s readers considered their audience to be not poor or rich, but somewhere in between.

Excessive wealth was portrayed negatively in Hilliard’s schoolbooks. “Would you for instance be rich?,” asked the author of a passage titled “On Inconsistent Expectations,” “Do you think that single point worth the sacrifice of everything else? . . . Those high and lofty ideals you brought with you from the schools must be considerably lowered.”⁴⁵ Hilliard’s readers encouraged the achievement of material success but not if it was achieved without moral scruples. Since great wealth was amassed

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

only by compromising one's morals, settling for a more modest, "middling" social position would prove more rewarding.

The many science courses in Limington Academy's curriculum paralleled a national educational trend in nineteenth-century America. During the 1850s, Limington Academy offered courses in Astronomy, Physiology, Geology, Natural History, and Chemistry.⁴⁶ Burton J. Bledstein charges the emerging middle-class with the responsibility for this trend toward scientific study: "It became the function of schools in America to legitimize the authority of the middle class by appealing to the universality and objectivity of "science." Higher educators convinced the public that objective principles rather than subjective partisanship determined competence in American life."⁴⁷ The middle class valued a social system in which any individual could achieve personal and material success. Society did not favor certain groups. The objectivity of science reinforced the middle-class world view and thus became a subject worthy of study.

How did these sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious bombardments of middle-class ideology affect Limington Academy students? Young scholars who tramped through the halls of the Academy during the 1850s often strained against the strict regulations of conduct. On December 12, 1859, trustees voted to study the appropriate uses of Limington Academy's schoolhouse because students and townspeople had been utilizing the building for less than desirable purposes. Since its construction, the Academy, like many church meetinghouses, had served as a community center of sorts, playing host to special lectures, picnics, parties, political speeches, and academic exhibitions. Sometime during 1859, however, certain individuals had engaged in card-playing and dancing within Academy walls. To discourage what they regarded as "immoral" behavior, trustees voted on December 27, 1859, to limit the use of the Academy building to "lectures and exhibitions which shall tend to the advancement of knowledge."⁴⁸ Other uses included political addresses when requested by two or more trustees, and morally acceptable social gatherings in which refreshments served as the

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

“subordinate rather than principle object.”⁴⁹ Also admissible was the local Sons of Temperance exhibition, “Drama of the Drunkard.”

Academy students created a youth culture that conformed to trustees’ middle-class standards. Scholars formed debate clubs and literary societies, recited Shakespearean passages at Academy exhibitions, attended special lectures on magnetism, electricity, and astronomy, and practiced the refined ritual of calling card exchange.⁵⁰ Though not a student at the Academy, Catharine McArthur became involved in the publication of the debating club’s student newspaper. “The contents of the paper are miscellaneous pieces written by the scholars of the Academy and various other individuals...”, she added in a letter to her brother William.⁵¹ Yet Academy students’ time could not always be directed toward leisurely and scholarly pursuits. Many students worked as farm laborers, helping their families with the planting and harvesting of crops. Young women assisted their mothers with the upkeep of the homestead, cultivated the backyard vegetable or flower garden, sewed articles of family clothing, and helped with the farming chores. Youthful dreams and careful preparations for the future often had to wait until the considerable tasks involved in running the family farm had been accomplished.

Limington Academy alumni often chose to pursue professions quite different from those of their parents. Sons of farmers and blacksmiths became doctors, teachers, and clerks. Daughters of farmers, like Catharine McArthur, became teachers. Many of these professions became symbolic of the middle-class individual. By 1890, over half of Academy alumni were scattered over various parts of the United States. Daniel Moody (Limington Academy, 1852), son of farmer Benjamin Moody, graduated from Dartmouth Medical School in 1877 and returned to Limington to practice medicine. Other aspiring physicians from the Academy continued on with their studies at Bowdoin Medical School, New York’s School of Homeopathic Medicine, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Baltimore, Maryland. Asa Boothby, Jr. became a teacher and moved to Fulton, New

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

York. Marcus Meads graduated from Dartmouth College in 1872, married fellow Academy alumnus Christina Maria Manson in 1873 and moved to California. Caroline A. Chick left the Academy at fifteen, tried her hand at dressmaking at age nineteen, married Dr. Royal T. Cleaves of Bridgton, Maine, and in 1890 resided in Cherokee, Iowa. Twenty-eight former students enlisted to fight in the Civil War; only fourteen survived.

Other Academy alumni stayed in the area, continuing the agricultural and artisan traditions of their parents. Many became leaders in town affairs. In 1890, ten out of sixteen members of the Academy board of trustees were alumni.⁵² Some carried on the family business. Charles E. Dimock (Limington Academy 1859-60, 1868-70, 1875) became a partner in his father's clothing business and in 1877 his shop employed up to twenty workers. Leonard F. Waldron (Limington Academy, 1851-1853) joined his father's prosperous sleigh and carriage-making business in Limington village. Charles H. Adams (Limington Academy, 1868), son of farmers Winburn and Nancy Adams, pursued business courses at the Commercial College of Bryant and Stratton in Boston. He later returned to York county and in 1891 was elected to the Maine State Senate.⁵³ It is impossible to determine if the paths chosen by Academy alumni chose to take would have been similar if they had not continued their education beyond the common school level. Nevertheless, students may have left Limington Academy a little better prepared for business, college, careers, and the rigors of middle-class life because of academy training.

The founding and development of Limington Academy exposes some possible class distinctions in rural New England during the mid-nineteenth century. Although there were exceptions, the school's supporters distinguished themselves from their fellow townspeople both occupationally and financially. Academy patrons were most likely to be property-owning farmers and prosperous artisans, while the children of poorer day laborers and mill workers rarely appeared in the school's rosters. The board of trustees included Limington's wealthiest and most respected farmers, artisans, and professionals, many of whom

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

wanted to prepare their children for college or business careers. Founders like Arthur McArthur hoped that a local academy would alleviate the cost of sending sons and daughters to distant schools. Control over the Academy also meant that founders could supervise the socialization of their children. Even the most elementary reading books taught the etiquette of social position and the importance of choosing a career.

McArthur and the other trustees valued self-reliance, democratic fairness, and freedom of opportunity. However, when free education threatened the existence of the Academy's primary department, trustees quickly sought to tighten their control over the Limington's common schools in a way that limited educational opportunity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the rural middle class, like its urban counterpart, was an evolving entity. After the Civil War, towns such as Limington experienced dramatic population losses that may have compromised the existence of a rural middle class. Limington Academy continued to prepare local students for careers and opportunities that could only be fulfilled elsewhere. Still, it is important to acknowledge that middle-class ideals and beliefs found expression through the establishment and early development of Limington Academy, and that the school does not represent an isolated example of the relationship between education and class formation. Limington Academy was only one of hundreds of similar institutions that sprang up around the country during this era. A closer examination of the academy movement can only add to our knowledge of the composition and the character of the American middle class.

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

NOTES

¹Catharine McArthur to William McArthur, 8 October 1848, McArthur Papers, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME.

²Limerick Academy, founded in 1808, was located approximately six miles away in the neighboring town of Limerick.

³Founded in 1837 by Mary Lyon, one of America's leading advocates of women's education, Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary specialized in preparing young women for the teaching profession. For more information on Mt. Holyoke, see Arthur C. Coles' *A Hundred Years of Mt. Holyoke College: The Evolution of an Educational Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940).

⁴Elizabeth Ring, *The McArthurs of Limington, Maine: The Family in America a Century Ago, 1783-1917* (Falmouth, ME: The Kennebec River Press, 1992), 39.

⁵Olive M. Chick, *A History of Limington Academy, 1848-1948* (Cornish, ME: Webb-Smith Publishing Co., 1948), 7.

⁶Catharine McArthur to William Miltimore McArthur, 12 April 1846, McArthur Papers.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1976), 123.

⁹Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 142.

¹⁰See C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951); Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 167.

¹¹Between 1850 and 1890, Limington's population dropped from 2,116 to 1,092.

¹²Robert Taylor, *The History of Limington, Maine: 1668-1900* (Norway, ME: Oxford Hills Press, 1975), 81.

¹³Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁴*Census of Limington, Maine* (1850). This percentage represents the occupational distribution of household heads only, and may be skewed by the presence of widows and elderly persons. The percentage of individual males who worked as farmers may have been higher.

¹⁵*Census of Limington, Maine* (1850). During this period, many censuses were not tabulated alphabetically, but were taken as the census official walked from home to home. This method of census-taking provides insight into the composition of rural neighborhoods.

¹⁶Catharine to William Miltimore McArthur, 14 November 1845, McArthur Papers.

¹⁷*Census of Limington, Maine* (1850). For information on Limington's mills, see Taylor, *History of Limington*, 88-113. See also Blanche Cole, *Grandma Spins Downeast Yarns* (Portland: Fred L. Tower Co., 1953), 10.

¹⁸Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 12.

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

¹⁹William Edgecomb to Arthur McArthur, Sr., 8 January 1848, McArthur Papers.

²⁰Limington Academy, *Records of the Board of Trustees of Limington Academy* (hereafter *Trustee Records*), 12 April 1848; 27 April 1848.

²¹*Trustee Records*, 20 November 1848.

²²Catharine to Arthur McArthur Jr., 17 July 1848, McArthur Papers.

²³Ring, *The McArthurs*, 33-36.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 36.

²⁵Chick, *History of Limington Academy*, 6.

²⁶*Biographical Review of the Leading Citizens of York County* (Boston: 1896), 448.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Chick, *History of Limington Academy*, 17.

²⁹*Trustee Records*, 4 December 1854.

³⁰Limington Academy, *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Limington Academy* (1854), 5-8, (1859), 3-6, 11. The school catalogue for 1854 listed the name of each student, the department in which he/she was registered, and the terms attended. The 1859 school catalogue provides information about term attendance only. No other Limington Academy catalogues published between 1850 and 1860 contain such information.

³¹Limington Academy, *Catalogue* (1854), 10.

³²Catharine McArthur Diary, 1847-1856, 6 December 1847. McArthur Papers.

³³Limington Academy, *Catalogue* (1854), 5-8. During the mid-nineteenth century, Limington consisted of several different neighborhoods: Limington Village, North Limington, South Limington, East Limington, Nason's Mills, and others. Some of these areas had their own post offices, churches, schools, and businesses.

³⁴Limington Academy, *Catalogue of Officers and Students* (1854), 10.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷This figure was determined by checking Limington's census records with the Academy's *Fourth Decennial Catalogue*, which lists the names of all students who attended the academy between 1850 and 1890, as well as the years of their attendance. This figure may be somewhat skewed toward a larger number since it does not take non-resident students and their families into consideration. Local families were more likely than non-local families to send their children to Limington Academy. Still, the figure of 2.5 is valid since the majority of Academy students came from Limington.

³⁸Chick, *History of Limington Academy*, 12.

³⁹*Census of Limington, Maine* (1850). This Census lists occupations and real estate values of the town's inhabitants.

⁴⁰Limington Academy, *Fourth Decennial Catalogue*, 1850-1890, 34; *Census of Limington, Maine* (1850).

⁴¹Limington Academy, *Catalogue* (1859), 7.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³*Trustee Records*, 19 February 1855.

⁴⁴George S. Hilliard, *Second Class Reader* (Boston: Hickling, Swan and Brewer, 1857), 21.

⁴⁵George S. Hilliard, *First Class Reader* (Boston: Hickling, Swan and Brewer, 1857), 492.

EDUCATION AND THE RURAL MIDDLE CLASS

⁴⁶Limington Academy, *Catalogue* (1853), 10.

⁴⁷Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 123.

⁴⁸*Trustee Records*, 27 December 1859.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Ring, *The McArthurs*, 62.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²Limington Academy, *Fourth Decennial Catalogue*, 1850-1890, 4.

⁵³*Biographical Review*, 23.