

8-1-1970

Portland's Early Experiments in Adult Education

Donald A. Sears

California State University at Fullerton

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

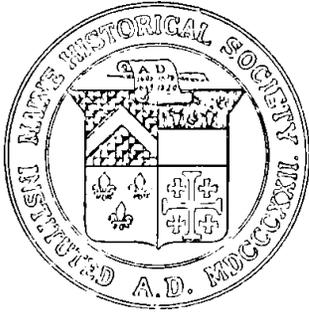


Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sears, Donald A.. "Portland's Early Experiments in Adult Education." *Maine History* 10, 1 (1970): 11-20.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol10/iss1/3>

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.



MAINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
PRIZE ESSAY
1970

Portland's Early Experiments in Adult Education

by Donald A. Sears

By the 1820's the cultural pursuits that had remained for years primarily in the hands of a professional and mercantile aristocracy were being opened to Americans at large. The democratic dream of an enlightened citizenry sharing in government, church, and community activities fostered a demand for universal education. Women, who as a class had previously been confined to home and church and whose education had consisted of the "ornamental" arts, hungered for knowledge. Much of the impetus behind the lecture craze which started in the twenties and reached its height in the years preceding the Civil War came from the women of America. Portland, Maine, followed the general pattern of the country: social and literary clubs for men gave way to debating societies whose public meetings were thrown open to "the ladies;" These in turn were supplanted by general public lectures on science, history, grammar, and education -- in short, the lyceum system of adult education. Running through all this activity was the continuing thread of oratory -- developed in the pulpit and town hall, practiced by leading citizens on the Fourth of July, taught in the schools. By 1840, William W. Story's remark, "The rage of Boston has turned from parties to lectures," (1) was true of nearly every town and village along the Atlantic coast, but especially in New York (2) and New England.

The social aspect of the public lecture, as indicated by Story, should not be forgotten in any attempt to understand the sudden craze. By filling a place midway between the frivolity of supper and dancing parties and the high seriousness of church functions, the lyceum was able to draw from all classes and ages. At first the "aristocracy" might satirize

the over-night popularity of the lecture hall and, from the pinnacle of their own college training, question the motives of many who attended, but inevitably they found themselves involved. Their own motives might vary from one of duty (adding their social prestige to a worthy cause) to a sincere desire to learn more, sometimes to a desire to contribute as lecturers themselves. When, in the winter of 1818, a series of chemical lectures had Portland buzzing, the vacationing Harvard senior, Grenville Mellen, wrote a poem, which for its pictures of the town's excitement and the aristocratic reaction, bears quoting:

The Chemical Lectures

Say, what exalts the soul so high -
What calls the glance of eager eye
In matron grave and younger fry -
 'Tis Chemistry!

What when the short-liv'd wintry sun
Has all the hours of daylight spun
Affords such capacious fun [?]
 Why, Chemistry!

Yes, then in crowd, all rapidly
With beating heart in haste we fly
Unto the great *Academy*
 Of Chemistry!

The beau there laughs and talks, and when
There comes the blaze of Oxygen
Each heart on tiptoe knocks again --
 Strange Chemistry!

Oh yes! tis pleasant there to meet
And leghorn'd Beauty thus to greet --
Lord grant that I ne'er may lose my seat
 Oh! Chemistry! (3)

The social aspect of chemistry may have spoken particularly loudly to the young Grenville, who thought in his lighter moments that London was only worth seeing because Mary Stuart had once "moved her beautiful ankle" in the Tower, (4) but he was far from alone. When the lectures came to an end, he circulated among his friends a "Lament over the Death of the Chemical Lectures." In rhyming couplets this poem poked

gentle fun at the young ladies who attended the lectures because it was the social thing to do. Like their descendents of the 1920's who carried Freud into their daily speech, the girls of the 1820's could not resist employing scientific jargon in all kinds of unexpected contexts. Mellen's poetic comment, while topical, is still amusing:

Throughout the whole town so great the *attraction*
Not one could resist -- no -- not e'en a fraction: -
At first it was good -- then better and better
(The best hain't come yet) -- and so did it fetter
The mind to the subject, no person could lisp, or
Talk sentiment, reason -- make love, or e'en whisper
But his thoughts were conveyed in some Chemical phrase
Sublim'd -- triturated -- in a score of strange ways
.....
You'd fear to approach while the argument rag'd
So great the caloric -- much heat disengag'd. (5)

Mellen's satiric comments were made, we should recall, in 1818, nearly ten years before the lyceum movement was to sweep the country. They would not have been written later, for they belong not to the period of large and inclusive lecture societies, but to the period of exclusive clubs. Portland had its share of such clubs devoted to conviviality and literature: the Ugly Club of 1816 and the Paah Deuwyke Club of 1817-1823. But a change was soon to occur. The founding of the Portland Mineralogical Society in 1821 heralded the new popular interest in science. By 1828 young men still formed clubs, but these were not the literary coteries of the previous decade. With science on the lecture platform and literature becoming a profession instead of an avocation, the clubs of this later period concerned themselves with debate, oratory, and politics.

The Portland Forensic Club, the first and longest-lived debating club of the new era, was started some time in 1828 (6) as a private self-improvement society for young men, but in its second year opened its meetings to the public. This same year, 1829, the club received stimulus in another direction from James Furbish, teacher of languages at the Portland Academy. In an open letter to John Neal, Furbish had called for the establishment of a young men's paper to be above party bias and strife; for, he felt,

It is high time for the young men of Maine to wake up and speak out in a voice that shall be heard up every river, and over every hill and plain through our state. (7)

In August Furbish had his paper in the *Experiment*. To this, members of the Forensic Club contributed articles that had been read and corrected at meetings. The editor, James Purington, secretary of the Portland Lyceum and later principal of the high school, chose as his motto "Know Thyself," a phrase less descriptive of the paper than Furbish's suggested "Political Truth and Honesty."

The group of serious young men who met for weekly debates and who furnished copy to the *Experiment* were concerned with educating themselves for social and political activity. Typical of them was Charles Holden, for a time secretary of the Forensic Club. His schooling had ceased when at fourteen he had been apprenticed to Thomas Todd, printer; but Holden in 1830 became an editor of Todd's *Eastern Argus* and saw his need for more training in politics, writing, and public speaking. The Forensic Club and its organ, the *Experiment*, were used as a means of acquiring the skills he needed in his work. The results of this practical self-education were almost immediate: in 1831 Holden gave the Fourth of July oration in Portland, and was soon running for public office. He was successively alderman, member of the school board, and member of the state legislature and senate. This was in the American pattern of success; the will to win devised methods of mass, adult education - education of a practical sort for practical people. (8)

The topics of weekly debate (9) in the Forensic Club confirm our thesis of the practical bent of the educational impulse. All but two of the topics discussed in the fall of 1829 had contemporary, political urgency. On the national level, debates revolved about the problem of territorial expansion. "Should," they asked, "the United States purchase Texas?" Or, on a broader scope, "Is the present extensive territory of the United States favorable to the tranquility and permanency of the government?" Recollecting the "hung" election of Adams in 1825, they tackled the still-unsettled problem of the Electoral Colleges, questioning the advisability of a constitutional amendment to place the election of the president directly in the hands of the people. Local issues of city versus town government, the licensing of shop-keepers, interest and usury laws, and bankruptcy laws were studied. Interestingly, the sole literary question was a conservative renewal of the "battle of the books": "Is the literature of the present day less distinguished for originality and invention, than that of the age of Elizabeth?"

The social element was a strong factor in the success of the Forensic Club this year. "The ladies" had been admitted to all meetings, and in December a joint meeting with the

Lyceum gave a chance for the oral "publication" of five orations and three poems. The conviviality of this gathering was predicted by the irregular and satirical journal, the *World in a Nutshell* (December 18, 1829), which expected that the members would "sit down...to a supper of whale soup, and drink and be merry until three o'clock in the morning."

Through the winter months of 1830 the debaters gradually widened their areas of interest. The topical ("Should the mails be delivered on Sunday?") gave way to philosophical speculations on the morality of the founders of the country in colonizing "without the consent of the Aborigines," the possible justification of duelling, the comparative merits of capital punishment and life imprisonment, the inconsistency of slavery and the principles of American government, and the expediency of the establishment of a "congress of nations, at which all national disputes should be adjusted." This latter, modern-sounding question no doubt arose from the Northeastern Boundary Dispute then being arbitrated by the Netherlands. All of these topics reflected a willingness to examine actual social conditions against the light of humanitarian ideals, and reveal a spirit of liberalism and reform among the younger Portlanders.

Subjects of a more personal nature also appear. It was inquired whether men are more indebted to nature or to their own exertions for success and reputation, and the American answer upheld the self-made man. When the relative happiness of the married and the celibate was analyzed, the "champions of independence 'stood few and faint.'" (10) The only literary topic, and this was really a moral one, was bluntly phrased. "Is it to be regretted that Lord Byron ever wrote?" No trace of the results of this debate remain, but it seems certain that not all condemned Byron; we recall that John Neal had two years previously referred to Byron as "the chief among poets." (11)

A connection with the Portland Lyceum (a library and reading room) had been established by occasional joint meetings, and in the spring of 1830 the two organizations added public lectures to their activities. To start the new system, the Rev. Nichols gave on May 31 a lecture on the history of such clubs and presented a plan for future growth in Portland of the lyceum idea. (12) For later meetings the club drew upon such Portland worthies as William Cutter, James Brooks, C. S. Daveis, and William Willis. The subjects ranged from political economy, through the early history of Maine, to poetry. By 1831 the Forensic Club had arrived at a formula which it was to pursue through the following decade. Each Friday a crowd of ladies and gentlemen listened to a dissertation or an essay

which preceded the debate of the evening.

The way had been shown by the Forensic Club, and while it remained the largest and most distinguished adventure in self-education, the 1830's brought many other organizations into existence. The Second Parish Church by 1836 was sponsoring a coeducational "Pnyxian Club" and was soon rivalled by a young men's society at the High Street Church; both were debating societies. Of a more special nature was "The Court," organized in 1837 to give students of the law a chance to argue and preside over typical court cases. In the same year the "Jeffersonian Legislature" was formed with the aim of "improving its members in public speaking and parliamentary usages." (13) Each member "represented" a particular Maine town, and bills were drawn up, debated, and voted upon in careful parody of contemporary legislative procedure. All of these clubs had as their goal the training of citizens for a democracy. Because the emphasis was on debate and public address, the topics discussed concerned politics in its moral, social and legal ramifications. The clubs often held open meetings, but by their nature benefited most the participating members, the young men of the town.

To reach a more general segment of the people, public lectures were developed into the lyceum programs of the 1830's. Unlike many New England towns, Portland seems not to have associated itself formally with Josiah Holbrook's lyceum movement. The cause of this aloofness can be partially found in Maine state-consciousness. While always ready to copy the cultural lead of Boston (for example, in the establishing of a Portland Lyceum and a Portland Sacred Music Society), Portlanders preferred to borrow the idea and not the form, and to develop in accordance with their own conservative and stubbornly independent desires. Thus they joined heartily in the lecture craze, but withheld themselves from becoming a northern outpost of Holbrook's circuit. A second reason for independence is more superficial but equally weighty. Along its own lines Portland had arrived at a system to satisfy its needs for information and education, the combination of debating societies and public lectures.

In the 1820's a good deal of interest centered about improvement in grammar and speech. In 1821 one G. A. DeWitt gave a popular course in the art of improving the memory, (14) a subject which impinged on questions of verbal facility. This was followed in 1823 and again in 1826 by lectures on English grammar by Charles Green, a teacher in the Portland schools, whose grammar book was used in Maine for many years. (15) In the latter year Green was assisted by a Mr. Roberts, who

conducted classes in how to overcome stammering. (16) During this same period, however, the interest in science was mounting. We have already noted the chemical lectures of 1818 that set the town agog. In 1822 Parker Cleaveland of Bowdoin College gave a winter course in chemistry and was succeeded in 1824 by a Dr. Porter, whose eighteen lectures at fifty cents each filled Beethoven Hall. (17)

In 1828, a young graduate of Bowdoin Medical School came to Portland and was soon busy on the lecture platform. This was Isaac Ray, remembered for his pioneer work in the legal problems of insanity. It was in Portland that, as a struggling young doctor supplementing his fees by lecturing, Ray first presented himself as an authority in "medical jurisprudence." (18) His first lecture series, on "animal economy," was reworked into dialogue form for John Neal's *Yankee* (1828), where it ran serially, and was later brought out in book form as *Conversations on the Animal Economy*, Portland, 1829. "This very clever young man...learned, accurate, accomplished," as Neal referred to him (*Yankee*, November 19, 1828), gave further lectures on natural history and medical jurisprudence before moving to Eastport, Maine.

Not all the lecturers in Portland were of the calibre of Parker Cleaveland or Isaac Ray, for there were Zenas Campbell and his cyclical theory of History (1833), Miss Clarke on "history" (1828), and Mr. Ingraham (19) on sacred geography (1832). Soon, moreover, a new kind of lecturer began to appear, the lecturer of national reputation who had dedicated real talents to the cause of public education. There was Dr. Henry McMurtrie, author of scientific textbooks and translator of Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom* (1832), who came to popularize zoology in 1833; and Emerson's "poet of bran bread and pumpkins," Sylvester Graham, who in 1834 brought his gospel of health through diet and exercise to the people of Maine. (20)

For a season Portlanders became interested in the philosophy of education. The James Furbish who called for the establishment of an unbiased newspaper lectured in 1828 on education as a science in which the cooperation of the father and mother with the teacher is vital and essential. Neal reported that the lecturer was "so correct" that he had mispronounced only one word, saying "learn'd man" instead of "learned." (21) In 1831, under the direction of the Portland Academy, a series of lectures on education was presented. (22) The Rev. Jason Whitman, an author of guides for adolescent boys and girls, in the opening address re-emphasized Furbish's plea for "reciprocal interest between parents and instructors upon the subject of education." John Neal spoke on "School

Discipline," perhaps drawing on his boyhood memories of his mother's schoolteaching days; and a Professor McKeen argued for "Physical Education."

All other subjects paled, however, in the mid-thirties before the new science of phrenology. Starting in Vienna, home of mental medicine, phrenology was carried by Spurzheim through France and Great Britain, whence it spread to America. The extent of interest is shown by the founding in 1833 of the Boston Phrenological Society and by the publication in Boston of a journal, *Annals of Phrenology* (1833-1836?) by Messrs. Marsh, Capen and Lyon. Exponents of the science nested in Boston and made flights to the surrounding towns. A Silas Jones was the first to excite Portland by two visits in 1834. Following his path came D. D. Smith and T. Barlow in 1835. Smith was a showman who gained public attention by a free lecture, introducing a course costing "for gentleman and lady \$1.00 -- each additional lady 50¢" (23) His special bid for female patronage was wise, for it was among the ladies that phrenology found its strongest devotees. Barlow presented himself as scientist and literary light. To the newly organized *Portland Magazine* he promptly contributed an essay on education, notable for its confused seriousness, and a poem called "Lake George." (In the copy of this magazine at the Maine Historical Society, a contemporary hand has judged Barlow's poetic extravaganza in a single word -- "Nonsense!") This well-rounded "professor" also lectured on anatomy and physiology before moving on.

In spite of a strong tinge of charlatanism about the Barlow's and Smith's of phrenology, Portland was captured by the cult. Before the death of Spurzheim in 1832, five hundred dollars had been collected to bring him to town. Even the sceptical John Neal had been convinced by the performance of Silas Jones; (24) and Ann Stephens, editor of the *Portland Magazine*, was so thoroughly converted to phrenology that she willingly gave space to verbatim reports of phrenological lectures and advance notices of coming worthies.

The practice of Mrs. Stephens was typical of the effort made by the literary journals and magazines to join in the educational movement. John Neal's *Yankee* had contained many articles repeating and reinforcing the subjects of public lectures. We have already noted his serialization of Isaac Ray's work on "animal economy." In the *Portland Magazine* (1834-1836) this policy was extended by Mrs. Stephens, who solicited her friend James Furbish for articles on education and on his hobby, the public press. From Neal she got art criticism, and from various anonymous contributors essays on

botany, philology, and the geology of Portland. Thus the Portlander who wished to further his education had in the thirties the journals to supplement the debating clubs and "lyceum" lectures.

All of these sources of information drew heavily upon the school teachers (Furbish and Green), the literary lawyers (Neal and William Willis), the journalists (Charles Holden and James Brooks), and the emancipated ladies (Ann Stephens and Elizabeth Oakes Smith). By the end of the decade, the little group which had centered around Neal and Willis had succumbed to the combined effects of the depression of 1836-37 and the lure of New York. The dispersion was swift. James Brooks entered New York publishing; Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Stephens were in New York by 1837, already started on their long literary careers. Henceforth Portland was to draw its lecturers from outside the state and to slip into the general pattern of the national lyceum system. The experiment in local culture had come to an end.

But the effects of Portland's experiment are discernible in the decade of the 1840's. Both Ann Stephens and Elizabeth Oakes Smith, espousing the reforms and "causes" of the day, became active in the lecture halls of the seaboard states. John Neal, while residing in Portland, made forays to New York to lecture on the rights of women, (25) and Neal Dow was soon to stump the country preaching the evils of drink. Portland was no longer able to develop its culture in isolation, as its sons and daughters scattered to larger and more remunerative areas of activity. Local pride softened into national consciousness and Portland's scheme of adult education merged into the larger plan of the lyceum circuit.

-----NOTES-----

- (1) Quoted in Robert E. Spiller *et al.*, ed., *Literary History of the United States*, N.Y., Macmillan company, 1948, I, 231.
- (2) For New York activities, see Frank L. Tolman, *Libraries and Lyceums*, N.Y., Columbia University press, 1937, pp. 75 ff.
- (3) Manuscript book prepared for his wife, pp. 15f, and located at the Maine Historical Society Library (Two stanzas omitted at the end).
- (4) Letter to John Neal, March 20, 1824.
- (5) Manuscript book prepared for his wife, p. 18.
- (6) The earliest reference to the club is a notice in the *American Patriot*, January 9, 1828; yet the "first anniversary" was not celebrated until April 16, 1829 (*Family Reader*, April,

1829), while John Neal (*Yankee*, February 12, 1829) adds further confusion by mentioning the "formation of a Debating Society" in 1829. Neal was probably giving a garbled version of the fact that the year-old society had recently opened its debates to the public.

(7) *Yankee*, February 12, 1829.

(8) For facts about Holden, see D.C. Colesworthy, *School is Out*, Boston, 1876, p. 399.

(9) These were printed in the *Experiment*, 1829-1830.

(10) *Experiment*, April 24, 1830.

(11) *Rachel Dyer*, Portland, 1828, p. 27.

(12) *Family Reader*, May 31, 1830.

(13) Manuscript record book for the years 1837-1839 at the library of the Maine Historical Society.

(14) *Independent Statesman*, October 5, 1821. The series of lectures was repeated at least twice.

(15) See *Independent Statesman*, June 21, 1823; *American Patriot*, November 17, 1826; and D.C. Colesworthy, *School is Out*, p. 352. Charles in 1825 changed his name to Roscoe G. Green.

(16) Interest in elocution and proper pronunciation is evidenced in the *Experiment*, October 17, 1829, where a long table of words compared the pronunciation of the local clergy (accepted as authority by the Forensic Club) and Walker.

(17) *Independent Statesman*, December 24, 1824.

(18) The *Dictionary of American Biography* states that Ray's *Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity* is still an accepted authority in court.

(19) This may be Joseph Holt Ingraham, the voluminous novel writer who was born in Portland in 1809.

(20) A third such lecturer, Mary S. Gove (Mrs. Nichols), exponent of water cures and love fulfillment, was probably in Portland in the late 1830's. At any rate, her *Solitary Vice, an address to parents...*, was printed in Portland by the Journal office in 1839.

(21) *Yankee*, September 24, 1828.

(22) See *Eastern Argus*, January 17 and February 22, 1831.

(23) *Argus*, May 16, 1835.

(24) *Portland Magazine*, I (October, 1834), 21-22.

(25) See Windsor Daggett, *A Down-East Yankee from the District of Maine*, Portland, A. J. Huston, 1920, pp. 41-51, for an account of Neal's New York speaking.

Donald A. Sears, winner of Maine Historical Society's first annual Prize Essay Contests, is a Professor of History at California State College at Fullerton. A native of Maine, Dr. Sears has been a member of the Society for twenty years.