I’ll Make a Man Out of You:
Male Higher Education in the Antebellum Era as Seen Through Mercer University

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“This is the season of life, in which we should form our characters, which we should be very careful in doing.”¹ Eugene Mitchell, a student of Mercer University wrote these words in an essay on “Youth,” and it describes the sentiments felt toward higher education during the antebellum era. Young men spent time at a school of higher learning to shape their characters and improve themselves. These schools exposed students to ideas that supported Southern ideals of honor while they participated in organizations that allowed them to question the issues of their age. This education also consisted of learning about the classics and its impact on contemporary America. Mercer University, located in Georgia embodied the purpose of an education at a church institution and how it functioned in all its aspects. Higher education’s curriculum and extracurricular activities in the antebellum era served to transform a boy into a man while reinforcing society’s ideals.

When a boy decided that more education was something he desired, he had a choice to make. Institutions varied in this period and there are two specific distinctions: religiously founded schools and state schools. Church colleges flourished after 1820, and their founders established them to provide education for future ministers but also to provide education in general.² The Protestant south did not fully support higher education for its clergy. However, the Georgia Baptist Convention (GBC), formed by Adiel Sherwood, felt that the knowledge and culture that resulted from education were qualities that trained ministers should possess, even if it elevated the men above their flock. Education brought refinement in addition to Biblical comprehension. Sherwood supported the creation of Mercer Institute in 1833, a manual labor school for ministerial students where the boys paid for their expenses through their work. Mercer

Institute was similar in form to a military school but with more emphasis on religion. In 1839 the GBC reconfigured the institute because of its success into the present day Mercer University. The requirements for attendance did not limit the applicants to those of the Baptist faith but required them to be of good moral character and obedience and to possess basic writing ability.\(^3\) In general, attendees of church-based institutions possessed an enthusiasm for their school because not supporting the school reflected poorly on the church and on the student himself.\(^4\)

State schools had cropped up in the United States since the nation’s inception, and they continued to thrive during this era. These institutions were often well known for their academic reputation which resulted in defensiveness of some students attending religious institutions. Just as in religious schools, the students possessed pride for their college which reflected the grand aspirations they held.\(^5\) The category of state colleges includes military institutions, such as the Virginia Military Institute. These institutes propelled students into lives that were not agrarian by teaching them discipline and a scientific curriculum.\(^6\) State schools in general provided young men with a similar education as that of a religious institution, and the decision to attend either one provided them with skills that would prepare them for their future.

A student needed a basic education prior to their entrance at a university or college. Typically men in this period only received basic education as success in most professions was not contingent upon higher education.\(^7\) A person only needed to continue their education if they wished to enter the fields of medicine, law, politics, engineering, and higher education.\(^8\) By 1850

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4 Pace, *Halls of Honor*, 16.
7 Pace, *Halls of Honor*, 12.
Mercer University’s admission requirements had expanded beyond character and writing ability. Admittance required applicants to pass a “satisfactory examination on Geography; Arithmetic; English; Latin and Greek Grammar; Caesar, Virgil, Cicero’s Select Orations; and Jacob’s Greek Reader: and … be at least fourteen years of age.”\textsuperscript{9} These requirements meant that a student had to prepare themselves with a previous education after deciding that they possessed the desire to further their education. Afterwards, students then typically had to take entrance exams to prove their prowess in the classical languages, algebra, trigonometry, and geometry.\textsuperscript{10} The school might have admitted unprepared students, but acceptance was contingent upon a trial period at the institution. After the trial the “irregular” students could retake the entrance exam and be fully admitted or denied.\textsuperscript{11}

Attending an institution of higher education involved some work and some support. Family contributed to a student’s decision to seek higher education; it appealed to the honor, pride, and self-worth of the student if the family was supportive and valued education. Wealthy planters often sent their children to school as they had the means to do and because it enforced their class status.\textsuperscript{12} In other instances, the family deterred the student through their indifference or even abhorrence of the idea of their son going to school.\textsuperscript{13} The cost of attendance and housing was another factor in the decision. When Mercer University opened, tuition was thirty-five dollars a year, plus eight dollars a month for housing, and the student supplied other items, such as candles and bedding.\textsuperscript{14} The families of the students often helped fund the education.

\textsuperscript{10} Pace, \textit{Halls of Honor}, 20.
\textsuperscript{13} Pace, \textit{Halls of Honor}, 12.
\textsuperscript{14} “Mercer History” Mercer University, accessed October 28\textsuperscript{th}, 2015, https://about.mercer.edu/history/.
The manner and matter of teaching has evolved since the antebellum era. The basis of education provided at that time was the ancient world of Greece and Rome, even at religious institutions. The classics supported the cultivation of a boy into a man and the idea that education raised a man above others. The classical works contained examples of exemplary male leaders and stereotypical women while the grammar instilled diligence.\textsuperscript{15} The works also represented and supported Southern ethics, and as a result the study of Greek and Latin increased in the South while it was in decline in the Northern institutions.\textsuperscript{16} The study of the classics shifted in the antebellum era from solely the grammar to the ancient past as a whole. Educators began to teach context in addition to the works, which allowed the students to draw parallels between the ancient world and their contemporary one. The focus shifted from reading about the ancients to actually reading the ancient texts. The study of epics and tragedy quickly became a staple of the curriculum as educators viewed classical study as a way to better oneself.\textsuperscript{17} As a result of the focus on the ancients, student work from this period was peppered with classical allusions, including in organization papers and in individuals’ essays. Eugene Mitchell included Egypt in his classical studies, but only in regards to its relationship with Greece and Rome. In his description of the degradation of Egypt he references Roman texts: “Where now is Carthage, where reigned once the mighty Dido, and which rivaled in splendor Rome, the mistress of the world?”\textsuperscript{18} The images of the \textit{Aeneid} demonstrate how the students became predisposed to think in classical terms.

Interestingly, a classical education complemented a religious one while also challenging religious beliefs. The emergence of the Homeric Question, which asks who wrote the Homeric

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, \textit{Intellectual Manhood}, 19.
\textsuperscript{16} Pace, \textit{Halls of Honor}, 20.
epics, rejuvenated interest in reading Homer for content instead of purely for a grammatical lesson. Scholars began to regard Homer as the Bible of the Greeks, and students turned to Homer to better their understanding of the world of the Old Testament as the two works are contemporary. However, the idea that multiple people could have written the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* reminded scholars and students of the authors of the Bible, which caused people to question whether the Bible could be as patchwork as the epics or if it was truly a “divinely inspired unity.” This questioning of the Bible was not as favorably viewed in colleges in the Protestant southern states. Students in Southern institutions simply regarded the book as different from the epics because the authors were inspired while those of the epics were not. Educators also sometimes censored the books when they were sexually explicit to protect the young minds that they were trying to improve.19 So although church college curriculums focused on the classics the dominant religion did not allow the work of “heathens” to affect their core religious beliefs.

Education outside of the classroom in the antebellum era was just as essential to the students’ progression into manhood as formal education. Literary societies supplied the most common form of informal education. The first American literary society was founded at Harvard in 1722, and they were prevalent in the United States until the Civil War, after which they were replaced by the popularity of fraternities.20 While bearing the name “literary societies,” these student run organizations combined modern day debate clubs with literary societies. The purpose of the societies echo the purpose of attending a college in general: to turn boys into men. However, the students were the ones creating the laws and procedures that governed the society. In effect, the literary societies served as peer education. As part of the debating aspect of the

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society, the students had to debate one another in a pro-con fashion. These debates gave the students an outlet for their interest about current events as opposed to the classical education they were exposed to in the classroom. The students raised questions that ranged in topic, and they reveal what was important, or at least relevant, during the antebellum era. The student judges of the debates often made decisions in favor of the prevailing public opinion. These decisions reinforced the popular ideas about Southern honor and values.21 The libraries owned by the chapters reflected the literary aspect of the societies. Most societies owned a large number of volumes, and they appointed a member to be in charge of the collection and to fine anyone who did not return a book on time.22 Students utilized these books for the society’s debates and for self-improvement.

Mercer University was not exempt from the literary society trend in the antebellum era and boasted two societies of its own: the Phi Delta Society and the Ciceronian Society. Mercer originally only had one, the Franklin Society, but it became so popular that, as the Phi Delta Society members wrote in their first meeting’s minutes, “the Franklin Society is dissolved, and from it two others formed.” The names of these societies reflect the emphasis placed on the classics and desire to imitate the American founding fathers: Benjamin Franklin was the namesake of the Franklin Society, the Roman statesman Cicero of the Ciceronian Society, while the Phi Delta Society meant “lovers of reasoning” in Greek. The two societies at Mercer were rivals and membership in one society could not be given until the student proved he did not have membership in the other. However, the two societies were not very different. Each had its own building on campus, a library, a classical name, and rules based on the defunct Franklin Society’s. The bylaws of the Phi Delta Society explicitly wrote the purpose of the organization:

22 Phi Delta Society. Papers. Mercer University Jack Tarver Library, Macon, GA.
“The purpose of literary and scientific improvement, and is dedicated also to friendship and virtue. Our sole, our undivided aim is the foundation of a high and elevated standard of moral and intellectual character.” 23 These societies aimed for self-improvement.

The questions debated by the two societies help characterize the students by illuminating the impact of their education on their concerns. Both the Ciceronian and Phi Delta Societies asked questions pertaining to their desire for self-improvement. The Phi Delta Society debated whether wealth or knowledge was most conducive to happiness, to which the members decided in favor of knowledge. Their ruling demonstrates how the members placed value onto their education. The Ciceronian Society members discussed a similar question when they debated whether intellectual pleasure was greater than sensual pleasure, to which they decided in the affirmative. The students also raised questions about their nation, often in regards to the classical civilizations. The Ciceronians and Phi Deltas asked many questions about the United States, including “Is the state prison system beneficial to our country?” (No), “Has America done more in the in the field or in the Cabinet?” (Cabinet), “Have the gold miners of Georgia been of any use to the state?” (No), “Should Texas be admitted to the United States?” (No), and “Is it probable that the American Republic will fall?” (Yes). These questions show that the students possessed an interest in current events. The society members also ask questions about morality, both in the past and the present. Their questions of morality range from “Was Queen Elizabeth justified in beheading Mary Queen of Scots?” (No) and “Was Caesar justifiable in crossing the Rubicon?” (No) to “Have the American Indians been justly treated?” (No) and “Is it right to bring Africans over to America to be slaves?” (Yes).24 These students were aware of the events in their country. Unfortunately, the recorders of each meeting failed to note what each side said

23 Phi Delta Literary Society Minutes 1834-1852, Phi Delta Society Papers.
24 Phi Delta Society Papers.; Ciceronian Society. Papers. Mercer University Jack Tarver Library, Macon, GA.
to support their stance so scholars do not know exactly how the students constructed their arguments. The nature of debate forced some students to speak against society’s beliefs. Those arguing the unfavorable side had to speak for minorities regardless of their beliefs.25

Even though the college curriculum instilled strict behavior that the literary societies reinforced, the students still misbehaved regularly. Students’ shenanigans targeted each other as well as professors and other representatives of the institution. The professor had the ability to ridicule a student, which in turn injured the pride of the student in front of their peers. The Southern ideals of honor dictated how students treated faculty and that desire for honor resulted in passive aggressive attacks instead of outright confrontation, and the more crafty a student was the more revered they were by their peers. Antebellum institutions also suffered from cheating. Ironically, cheating was used a way of preserving honor. The students’ desire to preserve their honor in front of their peers often prevented them from following moral rules of behavior.26 Other common misbehavior included things being stolen, rooms left untidy, and spitting. Professor Howard DeVotie at Mercer University wrote to his father in 1858 that “the boys here kick up some kind of mischief every week now and no one can find out who it is.”27 Deterrents to misbehavior included its association with boyhood and not with the actions of a man. The fear of being sent home and antebellum religious intensity also helped guide students to correct behavior.28

Society did not restrict higher education in the antebellum era to only a small percentage of male students. One estimate of higher education attendance for this period is that between

26 Pace, Halls of Honor, 16-27.
27 Howard DeVotie, DeVotie to Father, October 11th, 1858. Letter. John McIntosh Kell Family Papers. MS 2323. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Library.
28 Williams, Intellectual Manhood, 32-37.
thirteen and twenty-one percent of American men and women were educated at schools in 1850. This number shows that women also pursued additional education even though it was limited in comparison to male education by society’s expectations for women. Women could receive higher education in the antebellum era at seminaries and academies. Only a handful of women’s colleges opened before the Civil War. However, the education of women at these seminaries and academies did not differ entirely from that of men. Education polished women’s reasoning and rhetorical skills while instructing women in the importance of citizenship’s rights and obligations. Curriculum emphasized reason in addition to the “affections”. The “affections” or “sympathies” connected the student to their empathic self, which was considered a trademark of an elite woman. Female students also participated in literary societies outside the classroom that raised the same questions about morality and life that men did, although Northern schools boasted more active societies than Southern. The class of the girl’s family also restricted her access to an education. Just as male higher education reinforced societal ideals of honor, women’s education emphasized class divisions and gender roles. The antebellum era contains varying opinions about the education of women. The education of male students’ impacted their view of women’s education and the role of women in society. Classical texts presented the students with stereotypes of women as they portrayed them with specific feminine traits that appealed to Christian morality. Women were expected to be emotional, and the Roman “self-sacrificing matrons” were ideal.

Women were a topic debated by Mercer’s literary societies. These questions included their manners, society’s obligation to support them, their value, and their role in politics. While the Phi Deltas allowed women the “privilege of attending public dinners,” they did not decide in

29 Kelley, Learning to Stand and Speak, 32.
31 Winterer, Culture of Classicism, 95.
favor of women being allowed to vote in elections, although the wording made the decision sound unclear. They also decided that the “beauty of a young woman is more attractive than riches.” The Ciceronians also raised questions about women, including “if the law as proposed in the last Legislature for securing a women’s property to herself is beneficial.” This debate continued into a second meeting before the President of the society “waived any decision,” which demonstrates how the young men in the society called into question the traditional views of women. The students also seemed unsure of their role in supporting women as the question of “ought Bachelors be taxed to support old maids?” was asked multiple times by the Ciceronian Society and the answer changed each time. The male students also had opinions on the education of women. The topic of women’s education was asked during one of Mercer’s Phi Delta Society debates: “Is it right that female colleges be planned as male colleges?” The decision was made in the affirmative. The debates show that the students’ views of women were not as uniform as it typically seems but rather that they questioned the role of women and their rights.32

A boy sought education in the antebellum era for a higher purpose than merely learning skills for a job. The manner of education enforced obedience while transforming the boy into a man. The world of students exposed them to honor and pride amongst their peers, and the two types of institutions did not differ significantly in the deliverance of classical education. Literary societies prompted students to condition each other through reading and debate, and they were the precursors to Greek life on college campuses. Even with the literary societies to keep each other in check, misbehavior was rampant on campuses across the nation, and each boy balanced reasons to and to not cause mischief or cheat. Education separated women from men in this period of their lives, and it perpetuated the traditional roles found in the classical and Hebrew texts that the students studied, although the students already questioned these roles. Overall,

education exposed students to ideas that reinforced the world around them and they sought to become men through the structure they faced in every aspect of their education. This period was a time of improvement that prepared students for the rest of their life, or as Eugene Mitchell eloquently put it: “This is the season of improving our mental abilities, for our minds are young and tender, and can be bent to any way, in which we want them to be….In short, Youth is the happiest part of our lives.”

33 Eugene Mitchell, “Essay on Youth.”
Bibliography


John McIntosh Kell Family Papers. MS 2323. Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.


