

# “Our Bodies — Our Selves”: The Rise of Concern for The Physical Education of American Women, 1776-1865

by  
Roberta J. Park  
University of California, Berkeley

Anyone who has observed the women’s rights movement of the 1970s must surely be struck by the prominence of the interest expressed in sports and physical activity. Among the more visible thrusts of the 1972 Title IX affirmative efforts has been that devoted to athletics and physical education. The other rights of women, it might almost seem, are somehow intimately bound up with expanded attention to their physicality. This is certainly not the first time in America’s history that a connection between women’s rights and their physical needs and abilities has been drawn. When in 1776 Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John, “I long to hear that you have declared an independency — and . . . I desire you would remember the ladies. . . .”, here was the plea which would be heard from women for 200 years. The Declaration of Independence, which set forth the ideological foundations of this new nation, should rightfully extend to members of the female sex. The first sustained American argument in favor of women’s rights is usually held to have been *Alcuin*, the work of Charles Brockden Brown, who argued in 1798 that it was illogical to think that one sex will find physical vigor, suppleness and health more valuable than will the other sex. Judith Sargent Murray, writing in 1790 under the name “Constantia“, deplored the limited education, employment and recreation permitted to women. From the early 1800s onwards, a growing conviction was expressed that women should be accorded social, educational, economic — even political — rights similar to, if not identical with, those accorded men. Care of the body — in particular, proper hygiene and physical exercise — comprised a substantial part of the evolving movement. While a number of men favored and supported improved conditions and expanded opportunities for women, the women themselves constituted the major force of the movement.

Education was the earliest — and possibly the most enduring — cause. From the first decades of the century until the outbreak of the Civil War, many women sought to improve the education provided for their sex. When Emma Willard approached the New York Legislature in 1819 with *A Plan for Improving Female Education* she noted the lack of attention customarily paid to the physical welfare of school girls. In 1821 the British-born Frances Wright — who edited the *New York Free Inquirer*, founded the ill-fated Nashoba community, and opened a free dispensary for health care — proclaimed the propriety of providing women with instruction in healthful exercise and hygiene. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *the American Ladies’ Magazine*, included articles and editorial comments as early as 1828 recommending education and exercise, and she continued this practice when she became editor of the extremely popular *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. William Russell, who began publication of the *American Journal of Education* in 1826, devoted extensive attention to both female education and physical education. His successor, William Woodbridge, did likewise. So did Henry Barnard in his *American Journal of Education*. In the 1830s, and

especially in the 1840s and 1850s, as “women’s rights” efforts proliferated, interest in the health and physical education of women accelerated. Women like Mary Lyon, Lydia Sigourney, Margaret Coxe and Catharine Beecher, while neither “feminists” nor agitators for political enfranchisement, encouraged better education and paid attention to physical education. (Ms. Beecher’s *Physiology and Calisthenics for Schools and Families and Calisthenic Exercises for Schools, Families and Health Establishments*, 1856, were particularly extensive). Active feminists like Margaret Fuller, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, outspoken in women’s causes, also demanded greater opportunities for women to receive proper physical education. Amelia Bloomer’s *The Lily* supported improved physical education and urged the “dress reform” which came to bear her name. Some medical doctors also took an interest in the health and physical education of women, although others continued to view them as inferior beings. Notable for her support was Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from a proper medical school in America, and whose *Laws of Life With Special Reference to the Physical Education of Girls* (1852) reads much like a basic physiology of exercise text for the lay-person, and is an eloquent plea for an expanded program of physical education and hygiene for girls. A variety of medical journals (i.e.: *Boston Medical Intelligencer*; *New England Journal of Medicine*) included comments on the subject of women’s health and sometimes referred to the need for a change of attitude regarding active exercise for women. So did works like the *Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*. With the onset of the Civil War hostilities, efforts for women’s rights were largely diverted to other causes, and it would be several decades before the concept of a substantial, well-planned program of physical education and hygiene for American women would be achieved- (If, indeed, it has yet been fully achieved in 1977).