

School Physical Activity Programs for Antebellum Southern Belles

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Health and education of southern girls were often debated during the antebellum period. Since women were protectors of the moral and spiritual fiber of families, teachers of young children, and managers of domestic affairs, educators increasingly stressed the need for healthy, educated young women. Though southern female education remained centered in the home, over 200 private schools were founded before 1860. Few school catalogues or records remain, but evidence indicates that physical activities were included in some school curricula.

Gardens, playgrounds, and groves surrounded schools where girls skipped rope, played games with sticks and hoops, took walks, and played games of base and third man for recreation. Georgia Wesleyan Female College constructed a "Female Gymnasium" and Richmond Female Institute, Patapsco Female Institute, Le Grange Female College, and Wesleyan Female College provided indoor recreation rooms for use during inclement weather. In 1836 Alabama Female Institute, instituted calisthenics accompanied by music; soon other schools followed. During the 1840's schools increasingly required daily physical exercise which was fulfilled in various ways, from a brisk walk five times round the grove twice a day at St. Mary's to calisthenics, walks, dancing, horseback riding, and games and sports in other schools.

Educators disagreed on the merits of organized exercise. Augusta Female Seminary wanted "no scientific jumping — no running by rule and laughing by square," but stressed participation in "natural" play. Some writers disdained physical education because it had no utilitarian purpose or would make unsexed Amazons. Physical exercise proponents stressed that calisthenics would not make girls ungraceful or unlady-like, but would aid in correcting their debilitating weaknesses and make healthy females. They considered physical activity as an integral component of a southern young lady's education.

Three schools, Patapsco Female Institute, South Carolina Female Collegiate Institute, and Georgia/Wesleyan Female College provided models of improved mental and physical education for girls in the South. Strenuous academic curricula were developed including varied physical exercise activities including daily supervised sport and calisthenic classes.

Though physical education was found listed as part of the curriculum in only thirty schools, there was evidence of growing concern for the health of young girls and the need for regular physical exercise. Physical and mental exertion increasingly were combined to form the educational training of proper Southern belles during the antebellum period.