

The Eastern Legacy: The Early History of Physical Education for Women

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The early history of physical education for women is filled with many remarkable people. both women and men, whose lives had an impact on thousands of students. An amazing aspect of the Eastern Legacy is the intricate connection among all these people and the interweaving in establishment and development of programs. To understand this so-called peoples' network it is necessary to start at the beginning.

The first person who must be mentioned is Mary Lyon. With the support and guidance of Professor Edward Hitchcock of Amherst College, the father of renowned physical educator, Edward Hitchcock, she took a bold step in 1837 and founded Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. considered by some historians as the first women's college in the country. From the beginning Mount Holyoke required not only calisthenics as part of the curriculum but another feature that required physical output - domestic work. Exercise was the main motive for its inclusion, even though there was no denial it was an economic saving. Also, the students were required to walk one mile daily. The calisthenics were replaced by Dio Lewis' gymnastics when the teacher of calisthenics was sent to Boston to take lessons at Dio Lewis' Normal Institute of Physical Education in 1862.

In 1865 Matthew Vassar, a wealthy brewer, founded Vassar College in order to perpetuate his name. The original plans for the college included both a gymnasium and a riding school. Dio Lewis' gymnastics was mandatory for the students and the riding lessons were available at an additional cost.

Henry Durant. a member of the Board of Trustees at Mount Holyoke. founded Wellesley College in 1875, not to perpetuate his name as Vassar had done. but to serve the Lord in a benevolent way. Durant was a firm advocate of physical training and students were encouraged to row on the lake and exercise in the gymnasium.

In the same year, 1875. Sophia Smith gave the money for a new women's college. Smith College. in Northampton. From its first year Smith College was committed to regular exercise. When the college opened, physical education was on a par with the other departments, and the teacher of gymnastics was a former pupil of Dio Lewis.

Dudley Sargent was also extremely influential in the Eastern Legacy. since he was a true advocate of not only physical education for women but women participating in active sports. Consequently, his pupils were always well acquainted with the latest activities and usually installed them in their respective institutions. Sargent's exercises and the equipment he designed soon became known as the Sargent system, a system based on the needs of the individual and not for an entire group as the other systems. More than 5000 people. the majority of them women, attended his Sargent Normal School and his Harvard Summer School.

Another school that played a prominent role was the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics under the leadership of Amy Morris Homans. The Boston Normal School of Gymnastics contrasted with Sargent's School as its main purpose was to train teachers of Swedish gymnastics.

The graduates of the Sargent Normal School, the Harvard Summer School, and the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics spread the word and liberalized the traditional calisthenics and gymnastics at the established women's colleges. For example, Harriet Ballintine, a pupil of Sargent's became Director of the Gymnasium at Vassar College and another pupil, Eliza Clarke, became Director of the Department of Physical Training at Mount Holyoke College. Constance Applebee who demonstrated the game of field hockey at the Harvard Summer School in 1901 also introduced the game at Vassar, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe and the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics before becoming Director of Athletics and Physical Education at Bryn Mawr.

When Smith built a new gymnasium in 1891, it contacted Amy Morris Homans at the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics for a teacher. She sent one of her pupils, Senda Berenson, who not only revitalized the program at Smith but became nationally known due to her involvement in the new game of basketball. All former teachers at Smith had been products of Dio Lewis.

By the early 1900's the Eastern Legacy soon passed to other sections of the country as graduates of the professional schools in Boston left the area. Furthermore, more professional programs were being established in colleges and universities, and new philosophies and programs emerged as a result. But it is important to remember that even though women's higher education started later than higher education for men, it was the early women's colleges that led the way in required health and physical education. One of the reasons was to combat the cries of the skeptics that women could not do college work. More importantly, though, the leaders of each of the early colleges for women sincerely believed in the concept of exercise and health.

From Mary Lyon to Amy Morris Homans there was change and progress. Programs developed from calisthenics to the new gymnastics of Dio Lewis to the Sargent system and then Swedish gymnastics to sports and games. Facilities expanded from small halls to magnificent gymnasiums and dress changed from full bulky outfits to more scanty free-flowing costumes. The groundwork had been established and over the years many changes occurred in physical education. The leaders who followed built on the foundation of programs established at the early women's colleges and the early professional schools - that is the Eastern Legacy.