CHAPTER ONE

“The Pioneers: Women at the State Normal School of the Ninth District, Indiana, Pennsylvania, 1875-1900”

Indiana Normal School was in its youth when the class of ’79 was graduated. We were the pioneers sharing the privileges and privations of our time...

We had wise instructors who were in love with learning and eager to impart it.”

Laura Christy. Berkeley, California. 1925. Memory Book of Correspondence and Remembrances. MG 24: Jane Leonard Collection, IUP Special Collections and Archives

Background

Sarah Gallaher, a graduate of Indiana State Normal School (ISNS), wrote that the one-room school she attended in the mid-1900s served seventy to eighty-five students below “high school attainment.” In age, they ranged from “from six minus to twenty-one plus,” and this situation was not uncommon. http://www.archive.org/stream/indianaalumninew1934indi#page/5/mode/1up

Teaching in such ungraded schools offered many challenges, but paid little and required little or no professional certifications or degrees. In fact, instructors in such settings often had no training beyond that which could be gained in such settings.

The teacher in this setting was most commonly a woman. Teaching was one of the few professions open to respectable women in the first part of the century. By 1864, women made up the majority of teachers in many states, including Pennsylvania, causing educational scholars to
comment on the “feminization” of the teaching profession.

Educational reformers lamented the quality of education in the schools. But what could be done to improve the instruction in the rural schools that dotted the state? A commonly voiced remedy for this sorry state of affairs was to provide better access to professional instruction in teaching. Professional training beyond the common school was available in colleges and universities, but it was expensive and beyond the means of most women and men who desired further preparation.

The salaries of teachers were also notoriously low, (female teachers were paid even less than male teachers) and were not attractive to college graduates.

The most accessible means of professional training for teachers were teacher’s institutes. These workshops gave teaching professionals opportunities to learn new methods from instructors with more expertise. They were offered across the states in varying locations on an intermittent basis. It was at some of these institutes that a call for a normal school at Indiana, Pennsylvania, was made.

What were normal schools? Contrary to what you might expect from the term, normal schools were considered to be exceptional places, permanent institutions that specialized in teacher preparation with a mix of instruction in content and pedagogy and actual practice in teacher methods generally in an affiliated model school. Many believed them to be the best means of preparing students for the teaching profession – much better than short-term teachers’ institutes, or even ordinary colleges.

The inspiration for American normal schools came from France. There ecole normales were created to train high school graduates to be teachers, establishing norms or standards for teaching. The idea spread to the United States and by the middle of the 19th century, they had expanded in popularity and were being created across the nation to train teachers for the common schools. Their focus on teacher preparation made them different from colleges as their students bodies tended to include many female students.
In 1857, the Pennsylvania legislature encouraged the development of normal schools with the enactment of a Normal School Law which divided the state into normal school districts and provided some funding for one school in each district. Indiana, Westmoreland, Cambria, and Armstrong counties made up the State’s Ninth District. By 1869, it was still lacking a normal school.

At these teachers institutes, the suggestion was made that the normal school for the Ninth district of Pennsylvania should be located at Indiana, Pennsylvania. It had a favorable location accessible by railroad from the rest of the district. Leading citizens including bank president, real estate broker and merchant John Sutton and state senator Harry White set about raising funds from private subscriptions and state appropriations to build the school. Leading voices in the community called for building the school for a variety of educational, civic, and economic reasons.

Eager for an institution of higher education, they recognized that state support for a normal school would help make it a successful venture. Many argued that the school would have a positive economic impact on the community. Senator White wrote and introduced a bill in the state legislature that was passed in 1871 which provided funding for the establishment of the school. Stock certificates were sold to private investors and sufficient funding was raised for the project to become a reality.

Though founded as a normal school for teacher preparation, the founders of the school had broader visions. At a time when high schools were uncommon and colleges and universities expensive and far away, the normal school offered an affordable, accessible alternative for those seeking preparation for other academic and professional work. Their vision is clear in the first catalog, which claimed that “We feel confident that there are no better opportunities to obtain a general business, and scientific, and liberal education, or to pursue studies preparatory to those that are strictly professional, than will be afforded at this institution.”

http://www.archive.org/details/catalogueofoffic1875indi

Senator and Civil War general Harry White sought and secured financial support from the State to help fund the development of the normal school.