

Collection details botanical education of women

By Arthur O. Tucker
Delaware State University

Garden Tales

In 2003, The Claude E. Phillips Herbarium at Delaware State University in Dover was donated a bound collection of plants collected by somebody named Anna Garrett and dated May 1829.

This looked like the sort of herbarium that was prepared in a girls' school of the early 19th century, although the calligraphy is that of an adult. However, we knew little about education of women in this era, and initial attempts to find information about Anna Garrett produced nothing.

The ideology of actually teaching women was a new concept in our post-Revolutionary War years. The "Republican mother" was supposed to be educated to educate the children of the New Republic.

From the 1790s, this novel idea was pursued by both male and female writers in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. Later, in the 1820s, the concept of "teaching daughters" arose to promote the education of women as teachers. This was pursued with vigor in private girls' schools until the middle of the 19th century, when public education gradually took over these duties, especially with the formation of state normal schools in the late 19th century.

Particularly prominent in these educational efforts were the Quakers. Around 1780, an academy for girls was established in Philadelphia, but most of the schools for young ladies were simply finishing schools until the early 19th century.

Soon, schools with serious aims were established. First termed an "academy," later a

"seminary," these academic institutions were the primary agencies of female education for the first 75 years of the 19th century, reaching a peak in 1830-1860, but declining after the Civil War, when public high schools and women's colleges increased in importance.

As a result of these efforts, literacy in rural Pennsylvania jumped from about 40 percent of white females in 1775 to almost 100 percent by 1840. With the emphasis on education of all females by the Quakers, by 1850 about 59 percent of black women in New Castle County, could read and write (this percentage fell after the Civil War with migrations from the South).

The study of botany by women had a much more practical consideration, however. A woman of the 19th century acted as the nurse-in-residence for the household and farm or plantation. Because most of the medicines of the time were plant-based, knowledge of plant identification and herbs was a valuable commodity in the choice of a wife. To facilitate these identifications, young girls were also encouraged to prepare a herbarium.

Examining a table of subjects offered by 107 schools between 1830 and 1871, we find that botany was taught in 82 percent of them. Most notably, and somewhat paradoxically for young girls, plant identification was taught using the Linnaeus' Sexual System. Simply by counting the number of stamens and further examining the parts of the flower, plant identifications were facilitated for the

masses, not just the scientist.

However, the study of flowers was still considered proper for young girls by the writings of William Paley. In his "Natural Theology" (1802), he claimed that discoveries in natural history were proof of the wisdom and power of a divine creator. For the next half century, Mr. Paley's work served as the religious reason for the popularization of natural history; in writings from women of this era, they frequently mention Mr. Paley as a paradigm for their discourse.

Originally, at what is now 10th and Market streets in Wilmington, Quaker brothers Eli and Samuel Hilles started The Wilmington Boarding School for Girls in 1812. This large double house, in a section of town then described as "retired" and "elevated," had an extensive garden with a view of the Delaware, Christiana, and Brandywine rivers.

The northern half was used as a school, while the side facing 10th Street was occupied by the Hilles family. This house was home to descendants of the Hilles until 1914, when it was torn down and the municipal building and county court house was built on the site.

The catalogue from The Wilmington Boarding School for Girls says that "botany is taught chiefly by the examination of living plants, of which the vicinity of Wilmington furnishes a great variety." We know from surviving records that Master Samuel taught botany in the extensive garden of The Wilmington Boarding School for Girls. He and his brother, Master Eli, also conducted picnics along the Brandywine River, further allowing the girls to botanize.



Submitted photo/
Delaware State University
In 2003, Delaware State University's Claude E. Phillips Herbarium was donated a bound collection of plants collected by Anna Garrett and dated May 1829.

Samuel Hilles was not only the co-owner and teacher of The Wilmington Boarding School for Girls, but also a recognized botanist. He and his brother Eli later helped found The Botanical Society of Wilmington in 1843 (the society's specimens are now at the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium and include a sheet from Samuel's son, John, dated 1843).

But who was Anna Garrett? Early records of The Wilmington Boarding School for Girls have not survived, but a catalogue of previous students still exists, so we know that a girl named Anna Garrett from Wilmington was enrolled sometime prior to 1845.

Typically, girls entered these schools between the ages of 12 and 16, but earlier admittance was also allowed under special

circumstances. Then, I delved into genealogical records for Delaware and nearby Pennsylvania, and I found a record of an Anna Garrett, born Feb. 2, 1822 in Wilmington. She was the daughter of Thomas Garrett and Mary Sharpless, which set off bells and whistles in my brain.

Thomas Garrett was an iron merchant who lived at 4th and Shipley streets in Wilmington. However, Delawareans know Mr. Garrett as a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Working with Harriet Tubman, Mr. Garrett helped free up more than 2000 slaves, and today Tubman-Garrett Riverfront Park is part of the revitalization of Wilmington.

Mr. Garrett was repeatedly threatened by slave owners with violence, and because of his illegal actions, a U.S. circuit court fined him so heavily that he lost all of his property in 1848. After the Civil War, Mr. Garrett was honored by the blacks of Wilmington with a parade, wherein he was called "Our Moses." Mr. Garrett married Mary Sharpless in 1813, but she died after the birth of their fifth child in 1828.

We have no evidence connecting the Anna Garrett of our herbarium in 1829 with the Anna

Garrett born in 1822 as the daughter of Thomas and Mary Garrett with the Anna Garrett enrolled in The Wilmington Boarding School for Girls, but the time and place fit. I can imagine Thomas, upon the death of his wife in 1828, now sole parent to his children, trying to conduct his business in iron, and, since 1820, helping to free slaves as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Anyone in similar circumstances would be overwhelmed, and it would be no surprise to find a man in similar circumstances boarding his children. Mr. Garrett did eventually remarry in 1830 to Rachel Mendenhall, but, if my assumptions are correct, Anna continued enrollment at The Wilmington Boarding School for Girls until possibly as late as 1840 at age of 18, eventually dying in 1853 at the age of 31.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call (302) 857-6408 (Dr. Tucker) for more information about this article.