Frances Willard: Local Women and Social Reform in the 19th Century

Willard on her bicycle (Undated Photo, Willard Archives)
Introduction

Over the course of her career as a writer and activist Frances Willard served as the driving force behind the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Through her leadership role in the organization, Willard expanded the WCTU’s vision for reform and sought to align the group with suffragists, labor activists, populists, and veterans in an effort to transform American politics and society. A presentation on the life and work of Frances Willard provides an opportunity to focus on the progressive issues that were central to an evolving America in the late nineteenth century.

Willard was an important local figure, but she also played a key role in the larger struggle for women’s rights. Her excellence in education, as a student and later as a teacher, not only provided Willard with the skills she would need in her career, but also placed her among the growing ranks of college educated women in the late 1800’s. Her involvement in the WCTU allowed Willard the opportunity to campaign for expanded voting rights for women. Over the years, Frances Willard embodied a positive model of local citizenship, working with the poor, the homeless, and those suffering from alcoholism. She extended her efforts on a global scale, touring and delivering speeches overseas and across the country.

The purpose of this resource guide is to provide students, and others, with an assortment of primary source materials on the life of Frances Willard, her involvement within the local community, and the evolution of women’s roles within the context of a changing America in the late nineteenth century. Through this “virtual” archive, students can engage in independent exploration, and form their own interpretation of Willard and the issues she championed.
Early Life

Frances Elizabeth Willard was born in September 1839, in the small town of Churchville, New York. In 1841 Willard and her family moved to Oberlin, Ohio where both her parents attended the college there. Her mother, Mary, pursued a standard degree while her father, Josiah, concentrated on ministry studies. Five years later the Willard family moved again, this time in order to accommodate Josiah, who was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His doctor suggested the family move out of the “city” and into a more rural setting. Therefore the Willards settled in Janesville, Wisconsin where they owned a farm. The final move for the family occurred in 1858 when they relocated to Evanston, Illinois.
Evanston

*A Classic Town: the Story of Evanston*, by: Frances E. Willard

Preface:-

“The only satisfaction that I have in contemplating this desultory piece of work is that, as a loyal Evanstonian, and a pioneer pilgrim to this human oasis, I have helped preserve some dates, facts, and personalities for the use of that staid and dignified individual who will in due season materialize, i.e., ‘The Future Historian.’”

*Chicago: Its History and its Builders*

*A Century of Marvelous Growth*, by: J. Seymour Currey (1912)

-Page 357:

“It is safe to say that no name among the residents of Evanston looms larger on the pages of the country’s history than that of Frances Elizabeth Willard.”

After attending the North Western Female College, Frances Willard undertook a teaching position at the Evanston school in 1862. Willard understood the impact the school would have on many young women’s lives, much as it had on herself. In her book, *A Classic Town: the Story of Evanston*, she comments, “…Northwestern Female College quietly took its place as one among a trio of schools, founded in the name of Christian education, and having the whole northwest as their territory of supply! Evanston has thus been, from its first hour, a paradise for women.”

In 1866 Willard was elected corresponding secretary of the American Methodist Ladies Centenary Association in Evanston. While in this position Willard helped raise $25,000 to 30,000 which was put towards the construction of Heck Hall. This new building was to house the Garrett Biblical Institute, and was named after Barbara Heck, an eighteenth century Methodist laywoman. Unfortunately, Heck Hall no longer exists due to a fire in 1914. Northwestern University’s Deering Library now resides in its place.
After teaching at various other schools and studying abroad for two and a half years, Willard returned to Evanston in 1870, and was elected President of the newly formed Evanston College for Ladies. Here she was able to implement new rules and was allowed to plan the curriculum as she saw fit. Three years later, in 1873, the Evanston College for Ladies merged with Northwestern University and became known as the Woman’s College of Northwestern University. Willard became the Dean of the Woman’s College, as well as a professor of rhetoric and aesthetics (a branch of philosophy). In 1874, Frances Willard decided to resign from her position at the college due to her strong and differing opinions with the administrators and faculty.

Women’s Roles and Education

As president of the Evanston College for Ladies, and later as dean of women students at Northwestern University, Frances Willard served as a living representation of how far women’s education had come in the nineteenth century. In the years after the American Revolution, and into the 1800’s, women’s primary roles in society were as wives and mothers. Women were ideally seen as the moral guardians of the family, preserving the home as a sanctuary within which to cultivate learning and to promote religious values. Most middle and upper class women received a basic education, either at home, or at special academies designed to prepare them for their futures as mothers and home makers.

Educational opportunities for women had increased by the mid 1800’s, with female colleges and universities having been established in several states. One of the more famous examples was Oberlin College in Ohio, where Willard’s parents went to school. Oberlin College was also one of the first American universities to provide equal educational access to African American women.

In the nineteenth century, increased educational opportunities for women were an important first step on the road to greater equality within American society. These female colleges and universities produced a generation of talented, articulate young women who, like Frances Willard, used their education to help them argue their positions regarding suffrage, workplace reform, and other critical social issues.
Willard’s Journal

Throughout her early life, Frances Willard kept an extensive journal. Many of her journal entries give a small clue regarding Willard’s beliefs and future ideas, especially regarding women and their role in educated society.

Journal Entry from February 14, 1859

“My mind to me a kingdom is.” I have pleasure in solitude – in Thinking, Reading, and Writing, than in anything else. I feel that I am “coming up higher,” every time that I acquire a new idea. I am thirsty for knowledge. Am I to be chained to the world? To do as the world thinks best, and wisest? Have I not more pleasure in my quiet room – learning, ever, something new – than these girls – girls that I might name, who “care for none of these things” and care only for those other, - but I forbear. Do I care what people think so long as I know I am honest and pure and true? Shall I cater to the wishes of those who have no interest in me, and who could follow me to the grave tomorrow without a single sigh? Shall I not rather vindicate myself? Be true to my own soul? And follow those pursuits that I find most congenial? Ah! I would; - I wish I might “the Spirit” is all resolute and willing. But it is well to beat thus against the prison-bars. Shall I not lacerate my own heart by so doing? Am I a suitable judge? Do I know what is best for me?

- What is Willard talking about in this passage?
- What is Willard’s path in being true to her own soul?
- How would Willard rather spend her time?
- What was Willard’s personal priority?
Below is a picture of the Evanston College for Ladies, founded in 1871. Once the College merged with Northwestern University, Willard became the Dean of Women’s College, where she applied many of the rules and regulations she first developed at ECL.

This building housed the dormitories and classrooms for all the students in attendance.
Here are several primary documents that all relate to Willard’s view on education, and how she felt women should be treated in society. When looking at each source keep in mind that these documents were put together by Willard for the purpose of maintaining discipline within the student body. All of these documents can be found at the Frances Willard Memorial Archives in Evanston, IL.

This is a handout, given to the parents of students, regarding the rules and regulations at the Evanston College for Ladies.

**MORAL AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.**

The highest aim of the ladies who founded, and who have in charge this school, is that it may be pre-eminent for Christian influence. The advantages of Evanston, as a centre of religious thought and power, are recognized by all who are acquainted with its history. Young ladies will attend whatever church their parents may prefer. Those who are not pursuing the Sunday School Normal Course are required to belong to some Sunday School; and where no choice is expressed they are assigned to Dr. Jewell’s Bible class, a favorite and celebrated auxiliary of one of our Sabbath-schools. Mrs. Bishop Hamline’s “Girls’ Class Meeting,” on Tuesday afternoon, is open to all pupils of the College. There is also a “Conversation Meeting” on Sabbath evening, intended for familiar religious instruction. A prayer meeting on Sabbath morning is conducted by the pupils — no teacher being present. Between the first and second evening study hours, there will be a prayer meeting of fifteen minutes duration, and once, daily, every young lady spends twenty minutes alone in her room.

Many of these means of grace have been instituted from observations on the methods so signally successful at Mt. Holyoke and elsewhere, and all are perfectly voluntary save attendance at Church and Bible class once every Sabbath.

**PHYSICAL EDUCATION.**

The young ladies walk over a mile a day in going to and returning from their various recitations. A Gymnasium is to be connected with the new college building. Lectures on the care of the health are given by Dr. Mary J. Safford, the well-known lady physician of Chicago.

*Common sense applied to dress,* is one of the problems in the solution of which those having the school in charge earnestly solicit the co-operation of its patrons.

Evanston has excellent physicians, but, judging from its proverbial healthfulness, their skill is exercised in prevention rather than in cure.

**MANNERS.**

“The Good Behavior Club” has proved a favorite feature of the school. Into its “Question Box” are dropped anonymous queries of all sorts, relating to the proprieties of life, the care of the person, and the etiquette of
Willard’s rules seem tight and well controlled, without much room for disobedience.

Did you notice the focus on the “Self-governed List” about half-way down?

Once the young women were on this list, what happened to them?

How did one get onto this list? Do you think it would be a good thing or a bad thing to be “Self-Governed”?
Women in attendance at the Evanston College for Ladies were required to fill out a weekly Self-Report regarding their behavior at the school. This tradition carried over to the Women’s College of Northwestern University.

Here is a later version of the Rules for those attending the Women's College at Northwestern University. Note the strict time-table, and the need to obtain permission for many different activities.
How is this Checklist for the Women’s College of Northwestern related to the Self-Governed List described in the earlier document from the Evanston College of Ladies? Keep in mind that even though the name of the school changed, its location did not, neither did Willard’s tenure as its leader.

- How or why was the Self-Report Checklist used?
- How is it related to the Rules of the Women’s College of Northwestern University?
- Given all the rules and regulations that the female students had to live under, how or why would one want to get onto the Self-governed list?
- Why did all these rules and regulations exist at this time?
- If Frances Willard was such a proponent of Women’s rights and freedoms, why would she send out these pamphlets with their rules and regulations?
Frances Willard’s Letter of Resignation

In 1874 Frances Willard resigned from her position as Dean of the Women’s College at Northwestern University and became involved with the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Before she left the college she wrote a letter in which she reflected on her experiences there. Next to each page of the original letter is a transcript of the text.

To the Faculty,

Authorized by a Resolution of some weeks since I will indicate briefly the principle points developed the past Term in the working of the "Rules for the Women's College."

1. The demand of a certain class of patrons and students for equality between the young men and women in their relations to the government seems to have been met in a way generally satisfactory by making no special requirements of young women boarding outside of the college building; thus placing them in all regards on the same basis as young men.
Those parents who desire to entrust their daughters with the responsibilities and prerogatives of self-government can certainly make no complaints that this is not practicable in the Northwestern University.

2. On the other hand allow me to call your attention to the fact that a large and estimable class of patrons do not find their wants met by the system of regulations at present prevailing in the College building. From the first, I have been impressed with this but particularly so within the last fortnight on being questioned by those who contemplated entrusting their daughters in the care of this Faculty, and who were entirely disabused of old time prejudices.
against "mixed schools." One of the first inquiries of such parents is: "To what extent will the acquaintances formed by my daughter, and the social attentions she receives be regulated by those under whose care I placed her?"

A gentleman from Kansas applying on behalf of his motherless daughter of fifteen asked me this question with much anxiety. In view of the fact that young ladies in the College building receive calls from whom and when their judgment dictates (out of study hours) that they can be attended by gentlemen to nearly all the public exercises of the institution and to all the regular religious meetings without any special permission in view, also, of the fact that they leave
the grounds at all times freely out of study hours, (and thus on Saturday and Sabbath can be absent for hours at a time without a teacher's cognizance;) in view of these facts I have found it impracticable to answer truthfully such questions as I have referred to and at the same time to secure the patronage of the inquirer.

3. The principle having been recognized that within the College building the social relations of young ladies are in the main left to be determined by the girls themselves, I have found it extremely difficult indeed, impossible, to impress them with the dignity and importance of such exceptions to the general rule, as the Faculty has seen fit to make.
When, by the authority of this Faculty, young lady can receive a call daily, if she chooses from Mr. A (even if the teacher in charge deems his acquaintance an undesirable one for her;) when if she chooses when she can attend Monday evening prayer meeting, Tuesday evening class and Wednesday prayer meeting, and on Friday evening can accompany him to literary society, is it to be sundered at, if she regards it as unimportant that she obtain permission before going with him on Thursday evening to hear the Hampton Singers?

Once admit that a lady student is competent to decide upon four fifths of the "social privileges" of a given week and she will soon learn to speak as flippantly as she thinks lightly of the
restriction placed upon the remaining fraction of her liberty.

4. As an influence from what has been started already, let me record the opinion that one and the same system of self-government for a lady student (within the building as well as without) is more logical and will prove more successful, than the present partial measures, which suit neither the radicals nor the conservatives and are, as experience and their own testimony combine to prove, unsuited to the girls themselves. Indeed I think girls boarding out have, under the present system the advantage over those in the building: for being few in number in any one family they are not likely to go to such extremes as when left so
largely to their own immature judgment.

My own conviction that a more responsible “Home Government”, one more worthy of a name involving an interest so deep and a duty so high is the truer solution to the problem, need hardly be repeated here!

5. It has been my task to administer, during the past few weeks, laws to which neither rewards nor penalties had been attached. Mild as is the code, and few as are its requisitions, I have greatly felt the need as to some incentive to its observance on the part of the young ladies; and though no instance of violation of rule, which has come to my knowledge, has passed unrebuked, I have found a growing unconcern,
on the part of our well meaning girls, and a hardly concealed carelessness on that of others. Let me suggest that the hope of advancement to a higher grade, the certainty of a report sent home to parents, or some other expeditious, will greatly aid in the administration of the rules.

6. The effect, on the young ladies, of left to the guidance of their own judgment, has not, in my opinion been fortunate. Aside from the slight esteem in which they have come to hold the rules, there has been a stronger tendency toward sociability than toward study, on the part of many, and a lightness of bearing, a pertness of speech and manner, and a tendency to disorder, such as my long
experience in a school family has never witnessed hitherto.

7. I do not deem it appropriate to express in this connection, the decided opinion that, as at present conducted, the experiment of receiving young men into the building has not warranted the expectations of its friends.

The young men should, in my opinion, be more carefully chosen; should have certain restrictions or should be discontinued altogether, the latter being, as it seems to me, much the better course to be pursued. Though a few have been gentlemen, the majority have, by their rude behavior
much increased the unpleasantness of the family life, while their influence over the young ladies uniformly directed against orders and disciplines, has rendered the problem of government much more complicated than it would otherwise have been.

In conclusion, let me ask your attention to the duty of a plain understanding with the public, on the question of the government of young ladies in this institution.

The supposition is as natural as it is universal that a school, having a ladies’ department, undertakes special supervision of this class of pupils particularly in regard to their social relations. To the public mind is fully persuaded that this is the policy of
the Woman's College, not only from the nature of the case but from the newspaper controversy of last winter, at which time the supposition was correct.

Repeatedly have mothers who intended sending their daughters to this institution, asked me within the last month “If this were not a strict school?” and it has proved an ungracious task to correct this quite erroneous opinion. But take expressions like the following from the Catalogue “A Home for young women, when this is morals, health and manners can be constantly under the special care of women.” Special advantages of watch care and others, of like import, and see if there is not a discrepancy, of which you had not been aware, between them
and the system now in force.

My own relation to the Woman’s College has brought out the difficulty above referred to in a light more vivid than agreeable. With the parents on one side asking “What safe guards can you offer to my daughter in youth and in experience”, and the financial interests on the other urging the utmost possible conciliation of patronage in view of an impaired exchequer. I have newly illustrated the perils of being “between the upper and the nether mill stone”.

Clearly, there are but two courses open to the University. First, no special requirements for young women either in the building or in private families and a frank avowal of such a policy.
to patrons and inquirers, or, second (the idea of general supervision have been abandoned by the faculty) A systematic oversight of the daily life and associations of those boarding within the college walls. I do not mean the old fashioned boarding school system, which I have never advocated, but I do mean such care and oversight as will replace, so far as it can be done, the influence of Home.

All this I can say to you, gentlemen, with the more directness because of its being my lack of utterance in my present relations to you. I have long thought there was but one more sequel to my experience of the past school year, experiences of which but little has come to the surface,
in the meeting of the Faculty.

Yet, from time to time, I have hoped for an improvement in the outlook of the Women’s College. I finally determined, some weeks since, upon a careful reconsideration of the whole question of my relations to the University, and, as a result, I have wrote my resignation several days ago, which I will present to the trustees on Tuesday next.

As my last word concerning the much vexed question of government, (One, which, in my opinion involves that of the success of the education experiment to which I have in Evanston, given some of the best years) let me ask that Faculty carefully review the whole question,
not only on its merits, but in the light of this term’s experience; that you allow some weight to the womanly judgment of whoever shall succeed me; that the daily devotional exercise at the Women’s College be placed under her care; and that, upon whatever course you may determine, the policy, be carefully stated to the public, especially to parents who contemplate sending their daughters to this university.

Respectfully Submitted,
Frances E. Willard
June 13, 1874
- How did Willard’s views regarding her own education affect the way she led the Evanston College for Ladies?

- Why did Willard feel education was important? What does this say about her views regarding women’s roles in society?
Willard family home – Evanston (A Classic Town: The Story of Evanston, 1891, pg. 385)