WOMEN ENTER MEDICINE IN THE WESTERN RESERVE:
THE GRADUATION OF THE FIRST SIX WOMEN DOCTORS
FROM WESTERN RESERVE COLLEGE, 1852-1856

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On March 4, 1852, the Daily True Democrat of Cleveland, Ohio reported that the annual commencement exercises of the Cleveland Medical College (CMC), the medical department of Western Reserve College, had taken place the day before in the lower lecture room of the college. The 1852 graduating class of the CMC was unremarkable except for a single significant exception. One of the 53 graduates was Mrs. Nancy Talbot Clark of Sharon, Massachusetts, the first woman at Western Reserve and the second woman ever to receive a medical degree in a coeducational setting from a recognized regular medical school. The local newspaper report of the event took special care to point out that, during the two required sessions of study, Mrs. Clark had "won a good reputation among our citizens as a lady of talent and character as she has with her class and professors for great industry as a student. She has demonstrated the fact that a woman may get a medical education in any of the colleges without compromising in any particular those delicate feelings which constitute the beauty of the sex." Nonetheless, the report continued, "We are sorry that the professors of this college have deemed it advisable to exclude ladies from their classes in future." 2

In this paper, I will present an overview of the events surrounding the graduation of Nancy Elizabeth Talbot Clark and five other women who found the means to enter and to graduate from the Cleveland Medical College of Western Reserve in the 1850s. By fact and by circumstance, these unusual women demonstrated that the entry of Elizbeth Blackwell into regular medicine in 1849 had been more than a notable exception or a fluke. Without compromise of delicate feelings or of their determination to gain full status as practitioners, this pioneering group of women studied medicine on an equal basis with male students, and established a precedent by obtaining fully-accredited medical degrees. Though several medical schools exclusively for women had been opened by 1850, this small cohort of what Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi would later call the "advance guard" pursued legitimacy within the mainstream of the profession. 3

The medical department affiliated with Western Reserve College of Cleveland had been established nine years earlier, in 1843, by act of the legislature of the State of Ohio. The urgent need for physicians among the pioneer population in the West, particularly in those areas engulfed by malaria and cholera, had resulted in the formation of many similar small local medical schools beyond the Alleghenies. Following a faculty dispute at the fledgling Willoughby Medical College east of Cleveland, four of that faculty, led by John Delamater, M.D., had resigned their positions to accept an invitation to form the new faculty of the CMC. That department prospered even during its early years, accounting for nearly 200 students annually in a student body of just over 300 at Western Reserve College. 4

Women had been shut out formally from all regular medical schools in America, including the CMC. They had been the primary care givers in communities of the colonial past, but were being excluded even from midwifery by mid-nineteenth century. Reformers of the era were pleading for the return of women healers to improve the conditions through which women obtained relief from the travails of childbirth and other physical suffering, while maintaining the modes of Victorian modesty. Many women had entered the practice of medicine as lay healers or with degrees obtained from irregular or professionally unrecognized schools. Through personal
experience Elizabeth Blackwell had recognized the need, also, for women to be able to extend their career choices beyond that of elementary school teaching in their youth, followed inevitably by marriage and maternity. She saw the practice of medicine as the most likely and logical direction for women to expand their sphere of productive activity, in addition to the benefit of providing health care for their own sex.

Quietly overcoming her own aversion to the sights of blood and disease, Blackwell graduated in 1849 from the Geneva Medical Institute in New York State and then obtained two years of clinical experience in Europe. She had broken through the barrier opposing women's entry into regular medicine and provided the model for other women, more inclined and disposed to the work, to follow. She believed strongly that for women to attain what she termed "legal" status and a voice within the profession, they would have to obtain respected medical degrees and then pursue optimal clinical experiences. They would have to excel to compete successfully on an equal basis with men or forever be frustrated or shut out from full participation in the improvement of the profession.5 Following Dr. Blackwell's lead and, in two cases, through her direct influence, the early women graduates of the fully-accredited CMC further reinforced this effort initiated by Blackwell.

During the 1850s, while the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania struggled bravely for regular status against harrassment and ostracism by the prestigious Philadelphia County Medical Society, the faculty of the Cleveland Medical College of Western Reserve fluctuated between movement toward reform and withdrawal into further exclusion of women from the profession. Their vacillation would continue for six years resulting in the graduation of six women. The debate at the CMC began in February, 1850, probably instigated by Blackwell's graduation from Geneva one year earlier. Jared Potter Kirtland, Professor of Physical Diagnoses and the Theory and Practice of Physic, a man esteemed nationally for his leadership in Natural Sciences as well as in Medicine, moved that "respectable ladies who were fitting for the practice of medicine be admitted to attend all the lectures of the School on the same footing as gentlemen." When the motion was tabled by Dr. John Cassells, Professor of Materia Medica, Pharmacy and Botany, Dr. Horace Ackley, Professor of Surgery, moved that "respectable negroes be admitted to the same privileges," effectively silencing the discussion and tabling both motions.6 Nonetheless, later that year, the young widow, Mrs. Clark, began her first session of study at the school, under the preceptorship of Dr. Delamater, Dean and Professor of Midwifery.

There is no record of what kind of influence Mrs. Clark was able to exert to break this barrier and obtain entry to Western Reserve. Like Elizabeth Blackwell, she had had a persuasive female friend who urged her to enter medicine in order to be able to bring feminine medical care, without trauma or embarrassment, to other women. However, rather than attending either the women's medical schools of Boston near her home or in Philadelphia, she traveled west. The door for entry of women into regular medicine had opened just a crack in Cleveland. It has been speculated that she may have come to the notice of the dean because of the social ranking of the Talbot family in the Boston area and possible local or family ties there with the family of Mrs. Delamater.7 Nonetheless, it is apparent in the extant records and correspondence of Drs. Delamater and Kirtland that each of them strongly advocated abolition and women's rights and had no quarrel with the entry of "worthy" women into regular medicine.

Mrs. Clark completed a graduation thesis on the mutual dependence of the vital organs within the harmonious perfection of the human system. Her essay displayed anatomical and physiological expertise, focusing on the body's natural functions rather than therapeutic intervention.8 It is interesting to repeat here that the stated reason for the entrance of women into medicine was to provide empathic medical care for members of their own sex. However, the theses
of this advance guard of medical women, including Dr. Blackwell’s, displayed a broad range of medical interests and expertise. It is obvious that these women not only showed willingness to participate fully in medical education, but displayed a thoughtful and wide-ranging understanding of the material.

On her return to Boston in 1852, Dr. Clark began practice immediately. Having fulfilled all of the conditions for attaining full status within her profession, she applied for membership in the Massachusetts Medical Society, where she was abruptly refused only because she was a woman. Thus barred from access to the Boston hospitals, she followed the lead of Elizabeth Blackwell and traveled to Europe to obtain clinical experience. She studied in Paris for a year and then returned to a successful practice in Boston. A romance with Amos Binney, whom she had met on board the ship to Europe, led to marriage in 1856 and her retirement from medicine until all six of their children were grown. It is, perhaps, Dr. Clark’s willing acquiescence to the contemporary social norms and expectations—the setting aside of a hard-won and bold professional career for the benefits of marriage—that has led to the relative obscurity of her accomplishment in the history of women in medicine.

Following Dr. Clark’s graduation, no further mention of the admission of women to the School is recorded in the faculty minutes until October, 1853. At that time, Dr. Kirtland moved that Dean Delamater be empowered "to act at his discretion in the admission of female students ...--insisting upon proper qualifications--moral character--purpose to complete their education."9 Displaying an apparent uneasiness with the growing public support for the training of female practitioners, the full faculty unanimously deferred the "woman question" to their dean. By this time he had received correspondence from Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell requesting permission from the CMC for the admission of her younger sister Emily—a continuing expression of Dr. Blackwell’s insistence that medical women would not be accepted legally or intellectually without a medical education equal to that received by men.

Having successfully completed the 1852/53 session at Rush Medical College in Chicago, Emily had been informed that she could attend the next session at Rush but would not be allowed to graduate. She returned to New York in the summer of 1853, her dream of practicing medicine in association with her sister undaunted. Emily obtained permission to attend clinics and rounds at Bellevue Hospital, and by so doing, she acquired exceptional practical experience for a woman during that time. As a result of the petition of Dr. Elizabeth to Dean Delamater, armed with his newly-empowered use of discretion, Emily was admitted to the CMC in November, 1853 to attend her second session. Drawing on case examples from her unique experience at Bellevue, Emily composed a strong thesis that anticipated modern scientific medicine. She was outraged by the harsh, system-specific therapeutics of the past and called for a means for classification of all individual remedies. When physicians could administer medicine in dosages with confidence of the result, Emily argued, "then, and not until then, all certainty will cease and medicine will take its true position, that of an exact science."10

The favorable climate for women at the local medical school did not fail to draw the attention of the citizens of Cleveland, among whom the reform issues of women’s rights and abolition were being hotly debated. A steady influx of East Coast speakers on the lecture circuit was drawing large, enthusiastic audiences. Many Cleveland area women had already attended the Women’s Rights Conference of 1850 in Salem, Ohio. Many more were at the Akron Convention in 1851 to hear Sojourner Truth speak. At the 1852 Massillon Conference, Caroline Severance and Martha J. Tilden of Cleveland were elected officers.11 Later that year Mrs. Severance and Mrs. Tilden joined with eight other wives of prominent Cleveland business leaders and politicians to form the Ohio Female Medical Education Society, an association organized for the encouragement of medical education for women.
The business of this society, as stated in its Articles of Constitution, was to provide loans to women deemed worthy, for the expenses incurred by the study of medicine. As stated in Article IV, a worthy applicant was one who could "furnish testimonials of a past upright life, a good rudimental education, and a sufficiently robust constitution and freedom from actual disease, to endure the course of study, and furnish reasonable ground of hope that the aid given will ever be profitably employed." To my knowledge, this was the first such medical student aid fund established for women. The terms of the agreement were very liberal. The recipient was obliged to pledge that repayment of the loan would be made when she became sufficiently established in her practice or otherwise financially comfortable enough to repay the sum loaned, at no interest. Assisted by Harriet Kezia Hunt, the Society formed eight chapters throughout Ohio within the next three years.

Meanwhile, Dr. Emily Blackwell returned to New York after her graduation in 1854 and soon set off on a trip to Europe. There she obtained invaluable clinical experience in Edinburgh with Sir James Simpson, as well as in clinics in London, Paris, Berlin, and in Dresden with Dr. Franz von Winckel. When she returned to New York in 1856 to assist Dr. Elizabeth in establishing the New York Infirmary for Women, she was the most highly trained woman physician in America.

While Dr. Emily studied in Europe, Dr. Elizabeth was grooming Marie Zakrzewska, a young emigrée midwife from Prussia, to join the physician sisters in their work at the Infirmary. Under the mentorship of Dr. Joseph Harmann Schmidt, Professor of Midwifery at the Berlin University, Marie had been an outstanding student who rose quickly to the position of Chief of the School for Midwives. She was frustrated, though, by the exclusion of women from full participation in the profession. Hearing about the establishment of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, Marie assumed attitudes were much different in America. She immigrated soon after, hoping to be able to earn a proper M.D. degree and establish her own hospital for women. However, upon reaching New York, she realized the full impact of her inability to speak English and the less than enthusiastic support in America for "female doctresses." She could find no one who had heard of a medical school for women in Philadelphia, and those few whom she could ask thought the idea was odd and not to their liking. Marie did, however, find the Blackwells and the New York Infirmary.

Dr. Elizabeth recognized Marie's great talents and acquired skills and set about assuming a role as her preceptor. She taught Marie rudimentary English, meanwhile petitioning Dr. Delamater once again for permission for enrollment of a female student at the Cleveland Medical College of Western Reserve. As well, Dr. Elizabeth had become aware of the Ohio Female Medical Education Society through her involvement with reform groups. When Dean Delamater indicated that Marie could be sent to Cleveland for enrollment in the fall session of 1854/55, arrangements were made with Caroline Severance for the care of Miss Zakrzewska during her stay in the city. After her arrival, Marie lived with the Severance family and was enlivened by the opportunities to meet the famous American reformists and lecturers who gathered there. Later, she worked as a nursemaid for a minister's family and eventually moved to a neighborhood boarding house which reluctantly accepted the female medical students.

The Female Medical Education Society loaned Marie Zakrzewska a total of $200 to complete her medical education. Under the terms of the loan, she was not required to pay back the sum until she could afford it. When that hard-won day finally arrived, Dr. Zak, as she came to be known, was in Boston and had accomplished her dream in coming to America. She had helped establish the New England Hospital for Women and Children and was on the faculty of the New England Female Medical College. The Ohio Society had long been dissolved by then and there was no fund to which to return the money. Feeling considerable obligation to the spirit of those
who had helped her accomplish her quest in America, she loaned the money herself to needy women medical students, under the same terms that she had obtained it. When any was paid back, she loaned it again, continuing throughout her life to assist other women to enter the profession of medicine.

While Dr. Zak claims in her autobiography that she did not acquire adequate skills in English until her second session at the CMC, she did manage to barely complete her studies, failing only in one subject. However, Dr. Kirtland of the faculty had been in correspondence with her mentors in Berlin and she came so highly recommended that her difficulties were considered a result of her faulty English. She received such assistance from Dr. Delamater that she listed him as her preceptor during her second term. She would go to his home twice a week to recite her lessons and she claimed, in addition, that as the Professor of Midwifery and Diseases of Women and Children, he gave her "much practical advantage." This suggests that Marie was allowed to assist, or to at least observe, obstetric cases during her formal education, a unique advantage for female students since any males lacking an M.D. degree, including male medical students, were not allowed, by law, to observe a birth during this era. Male students were taught obstetrics only through lectures, graphics, and practice on mannequins.

For her graduation in 1856, Marie completed a thesis on the physiology of the uterus at parturition. The essay was highly received by the censors and faculty and any question of her abilities was dismissed.

One month after Marie Zakrzewska had arrived in Cleveland, Sarah Ann Chadwick was enrolled at the CMC for the fall session of 1854/55. Though she is referred to frequently as Mrs. Chadwick, she was born Sarah Ann Chadwick in Windsor, Maine, and had lived most of her life with her family on the edge of the frontier in Lee Center, Illinois. Sarah Chadwick also gained financial assistance to study medicine from the Female Medical Education Society of Cleveland. She became Marie Zakrzewska's roommate in the Superior Road boarding house, but Marie, who wanted to touch and learn about all facets of the community, found her roommate prudish.

Although she received an M.D. in 1856 after completing a thesis on the Malthusian inevitability of contagion, Dr. Sarah Chadwick apparently did not maintain contact with her female colleagues. There is speculation that she returned to take up practice in western Illinois, but records of that activity have not yet been uncovered. The Congressional Record reveals, however, that Dr. Sarah Ann Chadwick volunteered to serve as a Surgeon with the Seventh Illinois Volunteer Cavalry when the western states were called upon to hold Cairo, Illinois, for the North at the outbreak of the Civil War. Her services were so commended by the troops of the Illinois Seventh that she was hired to continue, but because she was a woman, she could not be given the title of Surgeon. Nonetheless, she was subsequently paid by the Congress for service as an Assistant Surgeon to the cavalry, one of the few medically trained women in the War who was not forced to assume the veneer of nurse. A marriage subsequent to the War may have resulted in her retirement from medicine. Of the six graduates, she and Dr. Clark were the only two to marry.

At the opening of their second session at the CMC in November, 1855, Marie Zakrzewska and Sarah Chadwick were joined by two female classmates: Cordelia Agnes Greene and Elizabeth Griselle. Both of these women had completed a first session at the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania. Though they were seen as oddities in many corners of the community and met some resistance from their fellow male students, the group provided each other support and
companionship. They studied and read together, and, according to Dr. Zakrzewska, "There being four women among a couple of hundred young men, we had a box seat to ourselves, unmolested by the tobacco-chewing and spitting Aesculapians in embryo."  

Lizzie Griselle from Salem, Ohio, was the only member of the group of six who remained in Ohio to practice after graduation. Lizzie had grown up in an atmosphere of reform and social action. Her Quaker family had been actively involved in the abolitionist movement near Salem when Lizzie was a child. Her mother's name appears in reports of the Women's Rights Convention held in Salem in 1850. Also active at each of the Ohio conventions held in the early 1850s was Dr. Kelsey Thomas, an instructor at the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania whom Lizzie Griselle named as her preceptor when she enrolled for a second session at the CMC. Dr. Thomas of Massillon, Ohio strongly advocated the entry of women into medicine and provided his services as a preceptor to many women who wished to be prepared as lecturers or medical students. Having received favorable indications from the CMC faculty, Dr. Thomas advised Lizzie Griselle that it would be advantageous to complete her degree in Cleveland, since she expressed intentions of entering into general practice in Ohio. Her sophisticated 1856 thesis on the biochemistry of ingestion and excretion displays her widespread familiarity with the literature and her broad understanding of the physiology of the human system. Except for a brief practice in Cleveland following her graduation in 1856 and a sojourn in San Francisco at the height of the immigration westward, Dr. Griselle enjoyed a long, steady medical practice in her hometown of Salem.

Cordelia Greene, the sixth and last woman to graduate from the CMC during the 1850s, had served many years as assistant to her father, Dr. Jabez Greene, a prominent hydropathist in western New York State. When she desired to obtain legal status as a practicing doctor, she was able to obtain entry into the Philadelphia school for women and earned money for her expenses by nursing. Then, through the efforts of a family friend, Dr. Henry Foster of Clifton Springs Water Cure, she was hired to work at the Cleveland Water Cure for Dr. T. T. Seelye while, at the same time completing her studies toward an M.D. at the CMC. That the faculty of the CMC did not object to Cordelia's sectarian ties implies that Dr. Seelye's institution had emerged as a significant force within the local community. Dr. Seelye and Dr. Jabez Greene--both avowed hydropathists but both holding regular medical degrees--are listed as her preceptors in the class records. Not wincing at all from her beliefs in therapeutics that differed from the mainstream approaches of her censors, Cordelia wrote an authoritative thesis, outlining the social causes of disease and the preventive approaches she believed would eventually eliminate these miseries, bowing only to suggest that general principles of medicine might be improved by the "conjoint influence of preventive measures."

With her M.D. degree in hand, Cordelia became a member of the staff and management of the Dr. Foster's Clifton Springs spa. Upon the death of her father in 1862, she returned to Castile, New York, bought her father's spa and maintained a brilliant practice there until her retirement. Her grateful patients, who included Susan B. Anthony and Frances Willard, frequently referred to her as "Saint Cordelia." The personalized, homely treatment and cure obtained by patients at Castile--prayers, hugs and cold water baths in the absence of heroic therapeutics--bordered on a semi-religious experience for many. After Dr. Greene's death, directorship of the Castile Sanitarium was assumed by her niece, Dr. Mary Greene, an 1890 graduate of the University of Michigan School of Medicine.

Following the graduation of the four women from the Cleveland Medical College in 1856, the doors were once again closed to their sex until well after the Civil War. Dr. Delamater and Dr. Kirtland, the women's strongest advocates, were growing old and nearing retirement. A new
regime with different attitudes was about to assume leadership. Dr. Delamater conceded that, with the stabilization of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, women would not have to hesitate seeking a fully-accredited regular degree of medicine from that institution.29 No other women received a coeducational medical degree in the United States until Estelle Rorick graduated with an M.D. from the University of Michigan in 1869. 30

Four of the first female graduates of the CMC remained unmarried—Drs. Blackwell, Zakrzewska, Griselle and Greene—and maintained strong relationships, providing each other continuing support, friendly and financial, throughout their lives. Each of these four adopted at least one child on whom to bestow her maternal affections. Five of the graduates were members of the American Medical Association at the time of their deaths. By their tremendous success and diversity, they demonstrated, without compromise, the capacity and range of women to undertake the strenuous demands of equal education and full performance within the medical profession. Through them, the entry of women into medicine, the necessary prerequisite to acceptance, was fortified.

NOTES


2Daily True Democrat, 4 March 1852.


4See Frederick Clayton Waite, Western Reserve University Centennial History of the School of Medicine (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1946) for the most thorough overview of the early history of the institution. Since it received its charter in 1843, the medical school has had four names: Cleveland Medical College (1843-1881), Medical Department of Western Reserve University (1881-1912), School of Medicine of Western Reserve University (1912-1967), School of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University (1967- ).

5Putnam Jacobi, 150-151.

6"Faculty Minutes, Cleveland Medical College, 1844-1871, Volume I," February 12, 1850. University Archives, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

7Waite, "Clark," 1196.

8Nancy E. Clark, "The Relations of the Brain, Heart and Lungs" (M.D. Thesis, Cleveland Medical College, 1852). Archives of the Dittrick Museum for the History of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.
"Faculty Minutes, October 1, 1853."


The Anti-Slavery Bugle, 13 April 1850, 27 April 1850, 7 June 1851, 5 June 1852.

Daily True Democrat, 22 November 1852.

Harriet K. Hunt, Glances and Glimpses: or Fifty Years Social, Including Twenty Years Professional Life (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856), 344-361.


Maria Elizabeth Zakrzewska, "The Organ of Parturition" (M.D. Thesis, Cleveland Medical College, 1856). Archives of the Dittrick Museum for the History of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

Genealogical Archives, Dixon Public Library, Dixon, Illinois.

Vietor, 139.

Sarah Ann Chadwick, "An Essay on Contagion" (M.D. Thesis, Cleveland Medical College, 1856). Archives of the Dittrick Museum for the History of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.


Vietor, 125.

Elizabeth Griselle, "A Sketch of the Slavery Days," unidentified newspaper clip. Papers of Elizabeth Griselle, M.D. Archives of the Dittrick Museum for the History of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

The Anti-Slavery Bugle, 13 April 1850.

Lizzie Grisell, "A Thesis on the Relation of Chemical Forces to Vitality" (M.D. Thesis, Cleveland Medical College, 1856). Archives of the Dittrick Museum for the History of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.