



Amy Morris Bradley – Establishing Schools In Wilmington: From Diary And Letters, 1867-1871

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Abstract

Amy Morris Bradley (1823-1904) served as a nurse during the Civil War. After the war, she was asked to serve as a missionary worker for the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Soldiers' Memorial Society, founded by the AUA to honor Unitarian soldiers who had died fighting for the Union cause. Her assignment was to open and manage a mission in Wilmington, NC. Since other missionary organizations had already established schools for former slaves and schools for white children had been destroyed or deserted, she determined that the greatest need was for a school for poor white children. For the next thirty-eight years she developed and ran several schools, including a teacher-training institute. Her diary entries and letters reveal the hard work and dedication required to sustain this effort as well as her commitment to raising a generation of white children who would respect people of all races.

Pollitt, P. (Book Chapter) in Emerson, D.M., Edwards, J., & Knox, H. (2000). *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform: 1776-1936*. Skinner House Books. NC Docks permission to re-print book chapter granted by author.

Establishing Schools in Wilmington

From Diary and Letters, 1867-1871

AMY MORRIS BRADLEY (1823-1904) served as a nurse during the Civil War. After the war, she was asked to serve as a missionary worker for the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Soldiers' Memorial Society, founded by the AUA to honor Unitarian soldiers who had died fighting for the Union cause. Her assignment was to open and manage a mission in Wilmington, North Carolina. Since other missionary organizations had already established schools for former slaves and schools for white children had been destroyed or deserted, she determined that the greatest need was for a school for poor white children. For the next thirty-eight years she developed and ran several schools, including a teacher-training institute. Her diary entries and letters reveal the hard work and dedication required to sustain this effort as well as her commitment to raising a generation of white children who would respect people of all races.

See the Biographical Sketch on pages 379-381.

Diary, 4-14-1867

Now if I can only create an energetic spirit—a spirit that desires to lift itself out of this miserable state in which slavery has kept the poor white so long—in the children of these people, I shall feel that my mission is not in vain. If I can teach them how to become good citizens and good Christians—followers of the Savior—then I shall know that the angels of our Father have guarded and guided me aright! . . . Two years ago I was . . . in Virginia laboring among Soldiers who were fighting for our glorious Union. Now I am in Wilmington, NC, teaching the orphans of Rebel soldiers to become thorough Union men and women, so that Peace and Harmony may be restored when the rising generation may come into the field of action. God grant that war and its fearful influences may never again be known in our beloved land! Mine is a mission, a great power. If I work aright! Father, give me light!

♦ ♦ ♦

Fundraising Appeal, 5-18-69

The undersigned, Committee of the Free Schools established in the City of Wilmington by Miss Amy M. Bradley, take pleasure in reporting the progress made and work done through her instrumentality, aided by benevolent Societies and individuals—for the information of such as have interested themselves in her work and with the hope as a continuance of favor, until such time as the State and City may be able to maintain a system of public schools adequate to the wants of the public. Miss Bradley arrived in this city on the 30th of December, 1866, commissioned by the Soldiers Memorial Society and the American Unitarian Association of Boston to establish free schools for white children. . . . We know the good done by them cannot be measured by numbers or stated by words. These children are nearly all of them in such circumstances as deprive them entirely of school privileges, being unable to attend pay schools and we had no other. They are poor white children, whose parents in many cases are ignorant, with little appreciation of the benefits of education. Many of the children were poorly clad and poorly fed. Their wants in this respect are supplied, and today the improved mental and physical condition of these pupils attests more eloquently than words to the good work done. Miss Bradley has established Sabbath Schools, obtained a Library, instructed the elder girls to sew and has given much valuable instruction to the young men whose occupations prevent their attendance at the daily school. We feel certain that of the pupils attending Miss Bradley's Schools, but a very small number of these could have attended any other; they would have been thrown upon the streets uncared for, growing up in idleness and crime—instead of this sad calamity we fearlessly assert that the schools are orderly, well disciplined, well instructed and give promise of a most gratifying future. Our State free schools are not yet established; it will require time, perhaps years, to place them upon a sure basis. The end of the present term of Miss Bradley's schools is near at hand. We feel it is an imperative necessity that her schools be maintained through the session of 1869 and 1870. In view of the importance of the work we have urged Miss Bradley to go out and call upon the charitable everywhere to come to our aid. We appeal to the good and liberal with confidence that an object so deserving will be sustained.

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5-20-1870

My dear Mrs. Leowe,
Your letter came this morning as a benediction from the Father comes sometimes in hours of trial. Verily, He will reward you for the kind words of sympathy which it contains. Next Sunday night Misters Kidder, Martin, Chadbourn and Heat meet at my room for a final decision. I have told them, first, a proper home must be provided for myself and teachers as it would be useless to attempt keeping up without it! I will tell you candidly, my good friend, that the pressure is almost unendurable. The County Commissioners have not decided to give me the position of County Examiner, as the gentlemen told you would be done, and the five ministers are hard at work sometimes preaching, and oftener visiting my parishioners giving them information that Miss Bradley does not believe in Christ. Mr. Ashley, I have been told, says Miss B. shall not have the position of Co. Ex. [County Examiner]. So you will perceive, Mrs. Leowe, that evidently I am scared on all sides. Don't you begin to think that Amy is a powerful woman? Sectarians—Politicians, Rebels and Carpetbaggers would drive her from their midst. The first because she is a Unitarian, the second because she minds her own business and they cannot make a fool of her. The Rebels because they fear her power every way as her influence extends in the City, and the Carpetbaggers because she is so popular. . . . God reigns yet and if I but trust Him—He will protect me and give me success.

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Diary, 6-16-1870

My first Sunday School—sixty present. Since the close of last term, during vacation, the numbers of different churches have been working to induce the children to leave my Sunday School and the Episcopalians have started two free schools, one near the Hemenway, the other near the Union school, and taken quite a large number from the Union day school. Sectarianism and opposition to the free school system are the obstacles in our way this year. I cannot tell the end—I shall try to work faithfully as a disciple of the Savior should work, remembering He said Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake. May I endeavor to obey His teachings ever—He will triumph in the end. And though I may not live to see the day when a Unitarian Church will be established, I firmly believe the foundation has been laid.

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10-22-1870

My dear Mrs. Hemenway,

I have been so hard at work since my return that I have found little leisure for correspondence, except of a business character or that relating to my office as Examiner (County school examiner). And now I am only going to say my schools have opened finally, with my new corps of teachers—new organ in the Hemenway School—new song books and many new scholars. During my absence the Episcopalians started two new free schools (sectarian) and the Lutherans also started a sectarian school—of course they have drawn away all who were of their persuasion. Still we have in the Union School 137 and in the Hemenway 115—the Roman Catholic Bishop calls my schools “Godless Schools” and warns his people about allowing their children to attend them—Still they come. Our Sunday School opened with 60—the second Sunday over 100—so the prospect is cheering all.

* * *

1-10-1871

To the Reverend Charles Leowe,

Although I have not written to you during the last three months I have not been idle—the schools opened 10-10-70 and the first quarter closed Dec. 22, 1870. I have sold the Hemenway school house to the county for \$3000.00. My schools have been adopted by the Committee of Wilmington Township and were opened Jan. 2, 1871 as State Schools; the State will pay \$1000 and the Peabody Fund \$1000. . . . “Proud”? No—not a bit—but so happy to think that her [Amy’s] efforts have been so wonderfully blest. . . . She feels truly that Our Father has given His angels charge over her—Our Sunday School is still a bright spot in the Mission, and numbers 76. The persecution on the part of the Churches is greater this year than any before. I cannot hinder it . . . but when I remember that my Savior said “Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.” God will care for all found to be faithful and Right must triumph! Our Father reigns.

* * *

1-13-1871

My dear Mrs. Hemenway,

Your [letter] of the 23rd came to me Sunday morning Dec. 25th. A Christmas offering like those of the wise men of the East some eighteen

hundred years ago—to the blessed Savior! I cannot describe my feelings on reading that portion of your letter—“And dear Amy’s dream of the upper room will be realized” [an addition to the school]. It was as if Our Father had accepted the efforts which had been made to elevate this people—as from those who had heard the sayings of His Son and tried to obey them—and the reward? One of His messengers proclaimed in the letter, Christmas morning!

◆ *Biographical Sketch*

Born: September 12, 1823, East Vassalboro, Maine

Died: January 15, 1904, Wilmington, North Carolina,
age 80

Buried: Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, North
Carolina

“‘Tis the eve of my twenty-first birthday! Thus far, mine has not been a very eventful life.”⁴² So begins the first entry in the first extant diary of Amy Morris Bradley, dated September 12, 1844. Amy was one of four daughters. After her mother died when she was six, she lived with her sisters in Maine. She began a teaching career at fifteen. Amy Bradley’s life was not to stay uneventful, however. During the next twenty years, she taught in Maine, Massachusetts, and South Carolina; lived in Central America for several years; and was the matron (head nurse) of a hospital for Union soldiers in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War.

Amy Morris Bradley’s reputation as a capable administrator during the Civil War was known to several influential people associated with the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Soldiers’ Memorial Society (SMS). In November 1866, she was asked to open and manage the mission in Wilmington, North Carolina. When Amy arrived in Wilmington in December, she planned to open an integrated school. However, she found other denominational mission organizations had already opened schools for former slaves. The antebellum schools for white children had been destroyed or deserted.

Given these circumstances, Amy decided the greatest service the SMS and AUA could provide was to establish schools for the poor white children of New Hanover County, many of whom were the sons and daughters of Confederate soldiers. On January 9, 1867, she opened the Dry Pond School House with just three students present. By January

15, fifty students were attending. Soon, Amy was teaching day and evening schools. Due to her success, the SMS soon hired Claribel Garrih of Dover, New Hampshire, to join Amy in the mission work.

Most Southerners, black and white, were devastated in the wake of slavery and the Civil War. Poverty, disease, and illiteracy were common in most parts of the South. In addition to providing education, this combined effort of the AUA and SMS tended to Southerners' immediate needs for food, clothing, and household items. Another major goal was to achieve racial fairness and harmony in the former Confederate States. Toward this goal, Amy organized a Ladies Benevolent Society. A forerunner of today's Department of Social Services, this group rendered educational, financial, vocational, and medical aid to people who were poor and those in prisons. Amy also founded the first Unitarian congregation and Sunday school in the region.

Not everyone in Wilmington was happy to have these Northerners in New Hanover County. On March 9, 1867, the *Wilmington Journal* spoke for a segment of the community in an article which read:

Equally obnoxious and pernicious is it to have Yankee teachers in our midst, forming the minds and shaping the instincts of our youth—alienating them, in fact, from the principles of their fathers, and sowing the seed of their poisonous doctrine upon the unfurrowed soil. The South has heretofore been free from the puritanical schisms and isms of New England, and we regret to see the slightest indication of the establishment here of a foothold by their societies professing the doctrines of Free Loveism, Communism, Universalism, Unitarianism, and all the multiplicity of evil teachings that corrupt society and overthrow religion.⁴³

Despite some local opposition, the mission grew. In order to accommodate all the families who wanted to send their children to SMS/AUA schools, Amy opened the Hemenway School in 1868 and the Pioneer School in 1869. Given this growth, the need to train local teachers soon became apparent. Amy's last major educational gift to New Hanover County was to establish a teacher-training institute, the Tileston School, in Wilmington in 1872.

Despite her successes, Amy's work had taken its toll on her. She reflected in her diary: "My work is finished in Wilmington, for one year at least, so say the authorities and I have to yield. . . . September 12, 1873 I was fifty years old, health gone. It seems hard, but I have overworked, and the result is a worn out body and brain."⁴⁴

After a period of rest in the North and travel in Europe, Amy returned to Wilmington and resumed the principalship of Tileston in 1876. She presided over her schools until retiring in 1891 at age sixty-eight. Amy continued to live in a teacherage on the Tileston property until her death in 1904. The words "Amy Bradley, Our School Mother" are carved on her tombstone in Oakdale Cemetery in Wilmington, paying eternal honor to this woman who did so much for the cause of education.

Biographical Sketch by PHOEBE POLLITT

◆ Writings of Amy Morris Bradley

"Diaries." Bradley Papers, Perkins Library, University of North Carolina, Durham, NC.

◆ Biographical Resources

Brockett, L. P., and Mary C. Vaughan. *Woman's Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism and Patience*. Philadelphia: Zeigler, McCurdy, 1867; Reprinted as *Women at War*. Stamford, CT: Longmeadow Press, 1993.

Cashman, D. *Headstrong, the Biography of Amy Morris Bradley 1832-1904*. Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot, 1990.

Sellers, Dy. *Miss Amy Bradley*. Privately printed, 1970 (available at the New Hanover Historical Society, Wilmington, NC).

◆ Archives

The Amy Morris Bradley papers are located in the Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.