

# Early Diplomas Awarded in New England Academies

By HARRIET WEBSTER MARR

**A**T Bristol Academy, Taunton, Massachusetts, in 1797 the Trustees requested the Preceptor, Simeon Doggett, "to prepare a form for a diploma for the young misses, and a certificate for the young masters." The wording is significant, for even in coeducational institutions like Bristol Academy diplomas were given to girls far earlier than to boys. Presumably the boys would go on to college and there receive a diploma conferring a degree while for the girls the academy was the end of their education.

Before 1828 the statements given to students at the academies were usually personal certificates of character and attainment, such as might be used in seeking a position to teach or admission to college. One of the earliest is from New Ipswich (now New Ipswich Appleton) Academy, New Hampshire, dated 1789:

To all to whom it may concern: This is to certify that Samuel Appleton has in time past been under my instruction; that he is well acquainted with English Grammar, and well capable of keeping an English school. He is hereby recommended to the attention of any who shall see fit to employ him.

John Hubbard, Preceptor.

A 1790 certificate from Phillips Exeter Academy might well be a recommendation for college entrance:

The bearer of this, Theodore Mansfield, has been a student at Phillips Exeter Academy. He has read those Classic Authors a knowledge of whom is considered necessary for an introduction into any of the Universities. He has likewise read a part of Horace's Odes, and paid some attention to Geography, Mathematics,

and English Grammar. His conduct has been uniformly pleasing to his instructors, and he is now regularly dismissed from that Institution by

Benjamin Abbott, Instr. of said Academy.

In 1799 the Trustees of Phillips Exeter Academy voted: "With a view to encourage Industry, Science, and Morality . . . that certificates may be granted to students in certain cases." The words "certain cases" seem to indicate a ruling for individual certification rather than general graduation. A certificate granted that year lists in such a manner the studies pursued that it appears to be a personal document. That certification has become famous because it was granted to Lewis Cass:

Be it therefore known that Lewis Cass has been a member of said Academy seven years, and appears on examination to have acquired the principles of English Grammar, French, Latin, and Greek languages, Geography, Arithmetic, and Practical Geometry; and that he has made valuable progress in the study of Rhetoric, Natural and Moral Philosophy, Logic, Astronomy, and Natural Law; and that he has sustained a good moral character during said term.

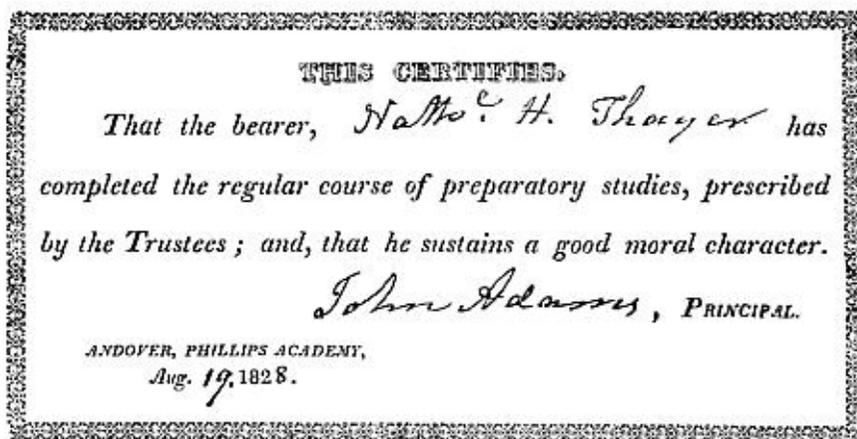
In testimony whereof we hereunto set our hands and affix the seal of said Academy, this second day of October, one thousand seven hundred and ninety nine.

John Gilman  
Jacob Abbott.

At Bacon Academy, Colchester, Connecticut, it was voted in 1805 that "every scholar continuing a member of the Academy during two or more terms, who has duly respected the laws, and diligently attended to his studies during the same, after having passed acceptably the

public examinations according to law, shall, previous to his leaving the Academy, be entitled to an honorary testimonial, signed by the preceptor, certifying the

chusetts, a document is preserved, again evidently a personal certificate or recommendation, listing the recipient's attainments, especially one that few modern



CERTIFICATE OF GRADUATION, 1828, PHILLIPS ACADEMY, ANDOVER  
Courtesy of the Oliver Wendell Holmes Library, Phillips Academy, Andover.

regular deportment of such scholar and his proficiency in his studies." In 1808 the following certificate was granted by Bacon Academy to Stephen Austin:

This certifies that the bearer, Stephen F. Austin, has been a member of this institution and a Boarder in my family, most of the time for three years past. As a scholar he has been obedient and studious; as a boarder, unexceptionable. Having passed acceptable [*sic*] the public examination and having, during the whole period, sustained a good MORAL character, he is judged worthy of this honorary testimony.

By order of the Trustees in such cases, provided—

Attest—John Adams, Preceptor  
Colchester, Bacon Academy  
January 7th, 1808.<sup>1</sup>

At Milton Academy in Milton, Massa-

<sup>1</sup> Aram Damarjian, "Bacon Academy History," *Bacon Academy Beacon* (1953), pp. 40-41.

college graduates could boast—"He writes an elegant hand."

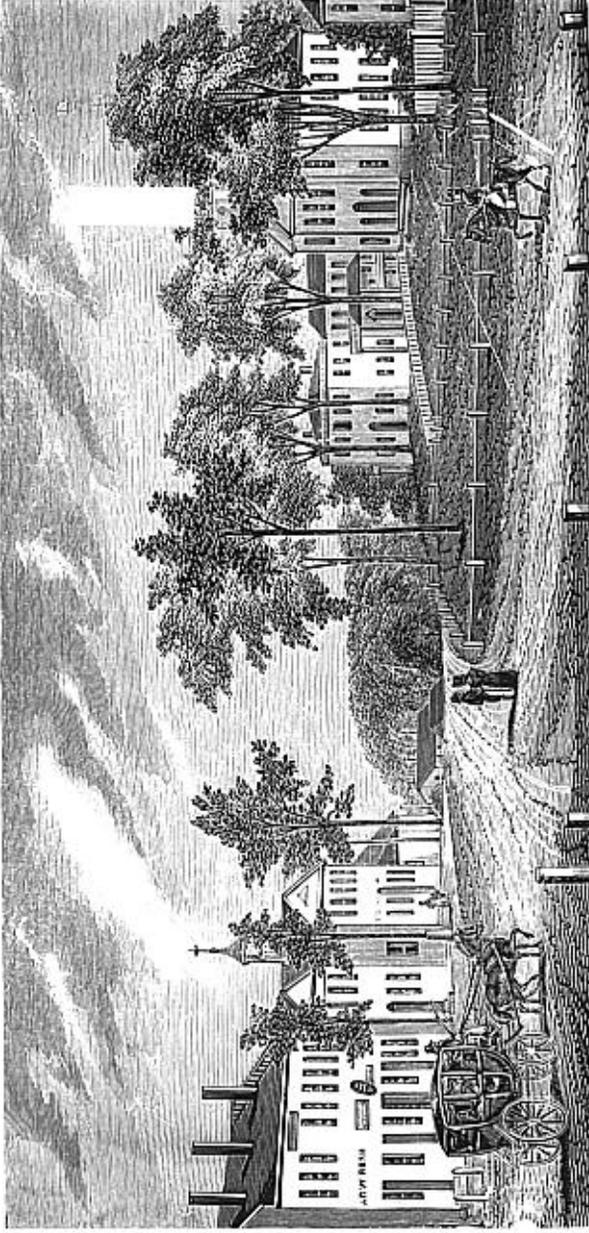
Milton Academy, Sep. 13, 1815

To whom it may concern:

This may certify that the bearer Hannaniah Temple has been a member of Milton Academy for two years past. He is a young gentleman of promising talents, and sustains a good moral character. By his industry and close application he has made very laudable attainments in literature. He writes an elegant hand, has a good knowledge of English Grammar and Arithmetic, and is well versed the Latin and Greek [*sic*] Grammars, the Greek Testament, Virgil, Cicero's Orations, and Sallust.

Warren Peirce, Preceptor.

At Windsor, Vermont, a ruling of the Trustees in 1817 included both sexes: "Collegiate degrees will not be expected, but such honorable testimonials of improvement as Students whether Male or



CENTRAL PART OF GREENFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

Printed from the original wood-block engraved for John W. Barber's Massachusetts *Historical Collections* (1839).

"The above is a northern view of part of the public buildings. The Court-House, with a small spire, is seen on the left; the first building northward is the Greenfield Bank; the Congregational Church is seen on the right; the Greenfield High School is a few rods south...." (Original caption)

Female may from time to time be found to merit will be cheerfully granted." This again is purely personal, not a form for a class graduation.

Phillips Andover Academy issued for the first time in 1828 a diploma engraved and uniform for a class, with blanks for the name of pupil and the signature of the Principal (see illustration). That same year, 1828, Washington County Grammar School at Montpelier, Vermont, published a statement of requirements for a diploma which may be classified as follows:

English: Orthography, Reading, Writing, Grammar, Composition.

History and Geography: Geography, History of Vermont, History of the United States.

Mathematics: Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Surveying, Mensuration.

Religion: Evidences of Christianity

Science: Natural Philosophy

Drawing

Languages, which played so important a part in the seaboard academies, were not required.

But the personal certificate still continued. The following is from the Friends' Yearly Meeting Boarding School, now the Moses Brown School in Providence, dated 1835:

This certifies that Moses Bailey has been a student six months in this institution, during which time his industry and application together with his improvement in the branches of education to which he has attended have been fully satisfactory.

His deportment so far as it has come within our observation has been invariably exemplary, no entry for misconduct having been made against him in the register.

As circumstances are now about to separate us I can only say that he leaves the school with our kind feelings, and our best wishes for his future welfare and happiness.

Pliny Earl, Jane Slocum Joint Principals.

The Teachers' Seminary at Andover

Academy gave an engraved diploma, but the Classical Department did not. One copy dated 1839 is in the archives at Andover:

The English Department and Teachers' Seminary, Andover, Massachusetts: To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting. This certifies that *Jesse F. Eaton* has been a member of this Seminary for three years. He has steadily attended to the exercises prescribed by the laws of the Institution; has sustained a good moral character, and thoroughly completed the prescribed course of study.

Given at Andover this 3rd day of July, A. D. 1839

Lyman Coleman.

At Exeter the form for a diploma in 1844 reads,

Agreeably to a standing order of the Board of Trustees. Presents witness that ——— has completed the course of English Education established in this Academy, and that he is entitled to this testimonial of Approbation for general (or entire) correctness of moral conduct, while a member of the Academy, and for highly (satisfactory or respectable) improvement in his various studies.

We notice that this was a diploma for the English course. Apparently the Classical Department did not yet give diplomas.

In 1836 Wilbraham (Massachusetts) Academy gave a recommendation for college entrance which appears to have been personal, and not a class diploma.

The bearer, Henry Martin Nichols of Huntington, Connecticut, has been for two years a student at the Wil. Acad'y. During that time his moral conduct has been good and his diligence in his studies commendable. He has studied in a thorough manner the Latin of Sallust, Virgil & Cicero & the Greek Reader so as to be considered qualified to enter any of our colleges. He is cheerfully recommended to the Faculty of any Institution where he may offer himself for admission as a Young Man of Studious habits, correct morals & uniform integrity, or in short who will merit their appreciation and esteem.

Miss Sarah Pierce's Academy at Litchfield, Connecticut, was probably the first school for girls to give a diploma. A sample, not filled in with the name of the recipient or the date, is among the prized possessions of the Litchfield Historical Society. It is engraved, probably by Tisdale, on twilled silk, and reads,

Litchfield Female Academy

Miss ——— has Completed with honor the prescribed course of study Grammar, Geography, History, Arithmetic, Rhetoric, Natural and Moral Philosophy, Chemistry, & Logic.<sup>2</sup>

Of special interest in this document is the "prescribed course of study," for many of the academies allowed pupils to choose courses for themselves. A later Litchfield diploma, also in the Historical Society, is engraved on white satin and bound with blue ribbon. It lists the same subjects as the earlier diploma with the addition of "Principles of Taste."<sup>3</sup> This diploma is undated, but was issued to Miss Harriet Grant whose name appears for the last time in the list of pupils in 1831.

The New Haven Female Seminary in 1825 issued diplomas of first and second degree at the close of the summer term. The course of study as outlined in the *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven), April 26, 1825, stated, "At the close of the summer term, those members who shall have completed their first course, with acceptance, shall receive a diploma of the first degree, with the signature of the authority and the examiners, and with the seal of the Seminary. In like manner for the second course, a diploma of the second degree." "Premiums" were also granted, but not defined. A copy of the Seminary diploma granted in 1828 is in

<sup>2</sup> Emily Vanderpoel, *Chronicles of a Pioneer School* (Cambridge, 1903), plate facing p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

the Old Colony Historical Society at New Haven:

This certifies that Miss Leona Mansfield passed through the regular branches of Academical studies required in this Institution to complete the first and second course of Female Education, and sustained her examination with honor, and that for her amiable deportment and good scholarship she receives a diploma of the first and second degree. Given under my hand and seal at the Seminary Hall this 17th day of October in the year of our Lord 1828.

This diploma was issued during the principalship of John Metcalf Garfield.

At least one paper criticized the granting of diplomas to girls. The *Springfield Republican* in its issue of April 30, 1828, printed a most sarcastic paragraph, probably directed at the New Haven Seminary, judging by the reference to premiums and titles and to a preceptor instead of a preceptress:

At a Female Seminary in Connecticut, diplomas, premiums and titles have recently been conferred upon several young ladies for excellence in literary attainments. We presume the title of Mrs. would have been more acceptable, and if the preceptor of that institution would engage to offer this title he would not be wanting for scholars.<sup>4</sup>

Zilpah Grant at her first school, Adams Academy at Derry, New Hampshire, and again at Ipswich, Massachusetts, gave diplomas that are especially interesting because the form is so close to that used later by her assistant and friend, Mary Lyon, in the Female Seminary at South Hadley:

Derry, 1824 ——— has completed the prescribed course of study, and by her proficiency and correct deportment merits this testimonial of approbation.

At Bradford (Massachusetts) Academy in 1821 there was no grading, no planned course, and no graduation or

<sup>4</sup> Vera Butler, *Education as revealed in New England Newspapers* (1935), p. 189.

diplomas, but in 1842 they gave a diploma:

This certifies that ——— has been a member of this Academy, and has completed the course of studies prescribed by the Board of Trustees; that she has regularly attended the exercises for instruction; and has sustained a good character, and is honorably entitled to this testimonial.<sup>5</sup>

In 1846 the New Hampton (New Hampshire) Academical and Theological Institution voted to give diplomas to girls. In 1852 and 1853 Hopkinton (New Hampshire) Academy and Hampden (Maine) Academy both voted that "Females completing the full course prescribed for the Department, on graduating shall receive a diploma," (wording of the vote is from Hampden). These

<sup>5</sup> Jean Pond, *History of Bradford Academy* (Bradford, 1950), plate preceding p. 145.

three schools were coeducational, and our first impression would be that diplomas had already been given to the young gentlemen, and that now the young ladies were to be included. But a study of a graduation program at Kimball Union Academy, Meriden, New Hampshire, in 1850 suggests a different interpretation. That program gives the subjects of essays and orations by each boy in the class. The girls took no part in the program, but at the very end "diplomas were conferred on the young ladies." Evidently the theory held that boys would receive a diploma later in college. Possibly the same was true at New Hampton and at Hampden. In 1861 the trustees at Kimball Union voted to give diplomas to the boys.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Most of the diplomas quoted in this article can be found in the archives of the academies or in the archives at Dartmouth College.