

The Round Hill School for Boys, 1823-1833

By HARRIET WEBSTER MARR

THE dignified houses built by the Shepard brothers on Round Hill, Northampton, Massachusetts, have had an eventful history as homes, schools, and health resorts and are now in process of being torn down. From 1823 to 1833 they housed the Round Hill School for boys.

That school was founded by two men, George Bancroft and Joseph Green Cogswell, who had much in common. Both were graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy and from Harvard College, although not in the same year; both had traveled and studied abroad where they came into close association with each other; both were interested in natural science and physical education, and both were admirers of the thorough methods of education they had observed in Germany. When they returned to America they saw still more of each other for both of them taught at Harvard for a year, and both were troubled over the state of education in New England, in preparatory schools and colleges. This discontent led them to plan a type of school new in America, based largely on the schools they had seen in Germany and England.

The first problem that faced them was the choice of a location. Both of them

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loved natural scenery and believed in the noble influence of nature. After hunting the length of Massachusetts they decided on Round Hill because of the inspiring view of mountain and river. They were able to rent the houses and in 1824 bought them for \$12,000. This was made possible by a loan of \$8,000 from the Harvard Corporation.

In 1823, the year the school opened, Bancroft began an essay "On the Liberal Education of Boys," which was never completed. The first chapter, in the Manuscript Room at the New York Public Library, deals with problems of education in America. "Our busy habits spare but few years for liberal pursuits. The scene of action commences almost at the limits of boyhood, and the years, which in older countries are spent in furnishing the mind with learning, find our young men already in places of responsibility. It is therefore our only hope to improve the season of early life, when there will be leisure to form good taste, and obtain an acquaintance with literature." Apparently with this idea in mind the two men planned to admit only young boys, preferably in their tenth year. "A boy of nine is old enough to commence regular studies, and to delay this longer would be to waste precious time, and . . . the period when good habits are most easily formed."¹ They said they would never admit a boy over fourteen, and a boy of twelve only under unusual cir-

¹ George Bancroft, *On the Liberal Education of Boys*, Mss., New York Public Library.

cumstances. "It is idle to think of educating unless the beginning is made before twelve. Intellectual pleasure [in teaching] is less with small boys, but the moral is so much greater as to be more than a compensation."²

Both men had been impressed by visits to the Fallenberg school at Hofwyl and the devotion there to the doctrine of the perfectability of man. To attain this end they planned to begin with a small number of pupils. There were at first only twenty-five pupils, picked out of numerous applicants from cultured and wealthy families. The rate for a year was \$300, \$100 more than at Harvard. Notices of the school appeared in some southern papers, but the *Hampshire Gazette* carried no advertisement although nearby academies at Deerfield, New Salem, and Hadley were advertised.

The educational ideals of Bancroft and Cogswell were high. They desired the education of the whole man, and at the same time recognized that individuals must differ from each other. Education must not be an iron bed of Procrustes. Men must be educated for the world as it is. And all this could be accomplished only by hard work on the part of the pupil. "The great object with us," said Bancroft, "is to teach the whole application of the mind, and I think it is no object to make a play or an amusement of what should be hard work. Nor is it essential to make it more attractive than play; it is a lesson which one cannot learn too soon that they are born to work, and not to while away life in pastime."³

Individual examinations of the boys when entered confirmed the masters in

² Anna Ticknor, *Life of Joseph Green Cogswell* (Riverside Press, 1874), p. 179.

³ Russell Nye, *George Bancroft, Brahmin Rebel* (Knopf, 1944), p. 69 (quoted by permission of the publisher).

their belief that American education was deficient. Cogswell wrote to a friend, "I am more convinced than ever of the necessity of reform in our system of instruction, for there is not a single boy of our number, collected as they are from the several extremes of our country, who bears the marks of even tolerable teaching and discipline."⁴

Recitations were individual. Each boy was given books adapted to his needs and capacity, told to study until he had something ready to recite and then come to the teacher. But at the same time he was warned that the slightest failure would send him back to his seat to study longer with no chance to recite again until all the boys in the room had had their turn. To fail in one point was to fail in all.⁵

This plan of individual recitations must have been adopted partly to meet the problem that so troubled the educators of the 1820's and 1830's, "emulation," the desire for relative superiority. For this, Round Hill substituted a desire for absolute excellence. Apparently there were no marks in the usual sense of the word. That fact, and the individual recitations, would help to prevent students vying with each other for the highest honors, and lead them to seek instead to improve on their own last performance. Letters were apparently sent to the parents similar to the "Progress Reports" of many schools today. A short quotation from a long letter dated March 22, 1829, to Samuel Ward, a New York banker, about his son indicates Bancroft's keen judgment of his pupils' ability and character.

It is very seldom we are able to say so much good and so little ill of anyone as I can truthfully say of Sam. His course . . . has been manly

⁴ Ticknor, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁵ Nye, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

and correct, . . . pleasant and industrious. His progress in his seven studies has been satisfactory. Yet I am not sure I should say to Sam himself so much. Praise injures him. . . . It makes him first confident, and then careless. . . . I should advise holding him earnestly to a course of severe industry in matter of science and exact knowledge. . . . He learns too lightly and thus superficial habits might be formed. . . . Greek and mathematics are the true studies for him. Let him learn as much French and Spanish, and read as many good books in English as he will, but let all this go as pastime.⁶

Both Bancroft and Cogswell were interested in science and so were involved in the rising problem of classics versus science. They distinguished interestingly and on an unusual basis between the two subjects. Quoting again from "Some Account": "We must be careful to select for the young those works in which the principles of patriotism and virtue are inculcated, and the elements of moral truth embodied in eloquent language. Acquaintance with a particular science may prepare for a particular station, but the principles of virtue and prudence are of universal value. . . . Here is the reason why the ancient orators, poets, and philosophers are still to be read. Moral truths are eternal."⁷

In the Prospectus of 1823, quoted in the appendix to Anna Ticknor's *Life of Cogswell*, is the statement that "nothing can supply the want of a thorough knowledge of our own tongue." To write and speak correctly, to be acquainted with English literature and the great masters of prose and verse, were the most necessary objects of instruction. Next came the study of Greek and Latin classics; "they form the basis of learning and taste." "The Greek literature surpasses the Latin in variety, interest, originality, and actual merit."

⁶ Ward Papers, Manuscript Room, New York Public Library.

⁷ Bancroft, *op. cit.*

Their attitude toward mathematics shows again their idea of education of the individual: "We shall not compell all to apply themselves to a study for which there would seem in many minds a natural inaptitude." But that higher mathematics was taught at Round Hill is evident from a statement about an eight-hour examination in mathematics covering differential calculus, and other branches of mathematics which exceeded anything offered at Harvard in the first two years of their course.

Modern European languages were probably better taught than in most schools of the day for native teachers were brought from Europe, and conversation at different tables in the dining room in the five languages taught was required.

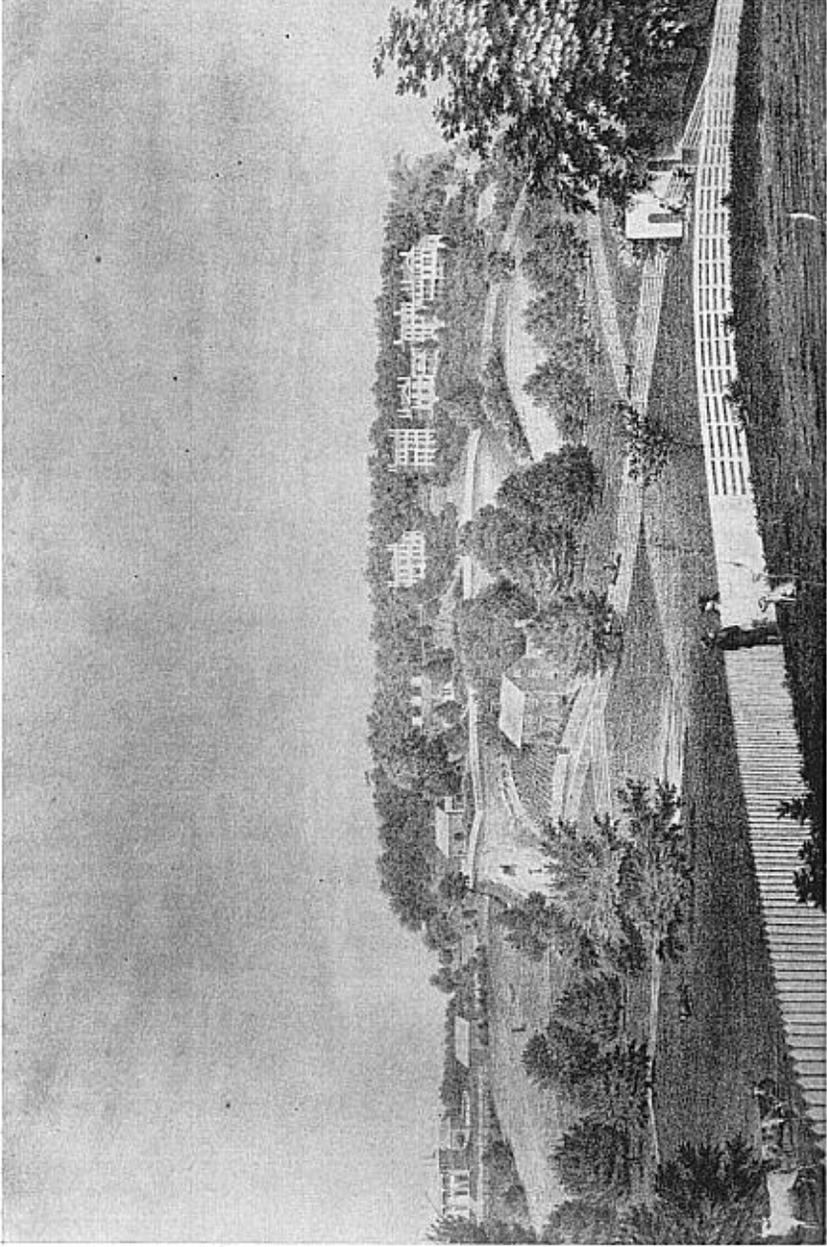
"We favor literary pursuits because they exercise intimate and direct influence on morals, but education would be incomplete without [science]. Natural science . . . [is] to be pursued as a relaxation, and to quicken the powers of observation."⁸ Science was one object of the long walks on which Cogswell and Bancroft both insisted.

Sometimes the teachers grew discouraged. Cogswell wrote, "Our boys were so young, so badly instructed, and for the most part so dull that we have no great account of their progress."⁹ But at almost the same date he wrote of a boy not yet eleven years old who had read two-thirds of Nepos, Murray's English Grammar, and would soon finish Watts's *On the Mind*. How many ten-year-olds could match that today?

To the boys from wealthy homes the day at Round Hill must have been a surprise. Nine-year-old Francis Ward,

⁸ Mark A. DeWolfe Howe, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (Scribners, 1908), p. 128.

⁹ Ticknor, *op. cit.*, p. 148.



ROUND HILL SCHOOL, NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS
Pendleton lithograph, ca. 1830-1835.

brother of Sam, in a letter to his father outlines the day in one long sentence. "We play eight hours, and study six hours, the way is we get up at half past five and study till half past seven and are not in school until nine, from nine we study till ten when we play ten minutes, and so on till twelve when all the boys go out and do not come in till two when we study till five o'clock, afterwards we do not study at all that evening."¹⁰ Other writers outlined the day differently, but always there was an alternation of study and "play," or physical exercises, and the exercises were so varied that it is not strange the boy referred to them as play. There were no bells, yet Cogswell boasted that the boys had learned to be punctual. Of course the rooms were heated by fireplaces and the boys were required to saw the wood and make their own fires. There were little garden plots for each boy, and there was also Crony Village, apparently a plan of Cogswell's who furnished the materials to build the cabins and allowed the boys to live there with their chums, cook their meals, and roast potatoes and the small game which they shot with bows and arrows. For some reason Crony Village was given up, and Mr. Cogswell required the boys to tear down the cabins themselves. Dear as the village was to them, yet, says Thomas Appleton, a pupil at that time, "so great was their love and reverence for Mr. Cogswell that even this calamity was accepted as a thing not only inevitable but just."¹¹

The varied physical exercises referred to included calisthenics, a mile run through the woods, archery, tumbling, balancing, and games. Later Mr. Cogs-

¹⁰ Ward Papers.

¹¹ Thomas G. Appleton, "Round Hill School," *New and Old Magazine*, July, 1872.

well had a half-mile running track built, and required the pupils to make the run in not more than three and a half minutes. A rare statement for that day said, "Due weight was given to the mental effects of coöperative play."¹²

It was Joseph Cogswell who introduced walking trips of several days to places of natural or historical interest. Sometimes on these trips the old system of "ride and tie" was used, one group of boys riding a certain length of time, then tying their horses and walking, while a second group walked from the starting point until they found the horses, and then rode on, passing the first group and in time tying their horses for the first group to find.

The school grew so rapidly for five years that individual instruction had to be given up, but there were never more than six pupils in a class. In 1827 there were 135 pupils, and in 1829 the masters decided to incorporate the school. Shares were sold and it is interesting to note that Daniel Webster bought one.

But Bancroft had never wanted to go into teaching as a life work. Writing to Edward Everett from Germany in 1819 he said, "The labor of a school is nothing alluring, but it must be confessed that this would be a way of doing the most good. . . . I would not wish, however, to give many years of my life to an immediate connection with it. . . . I could perhaps for five years do naught better than attempt to establish a learned school."¹³ As time went on Bancroft liked the work less and less, although he was a wonderful teacher for the ablest boys. He never won the affection of the boys as Cogs-

¹² John Spencer Bassett, "Round Hill School," *Papers and Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, April, 1917.

¹³ Howe, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

well did and they made fun of his infirmities and took advantage of him in many ways. He would come to class with one shoe and one slipper on, or without his glasses. In the middle of class he might go to sleep whereupon the boys would read aloud from some novel—not one on their reading list! More than one writer says that Bancroft was more interested in learning for himself than in helping the boys to learn. Finally in 1830 he sold his share in the school to Cogswell.

Mr. Cogswell was deeply loved by all the boys. When he visited the Fallenburg school in Switzerland he wrote, "How delightful it must be to govern where love is the principle of obedience." Teaching might at times grow tiresome, but one who approached it in that mood could not fail to find continuing delight in his task.

Mr. Cogswell was an idealist. Possibly his money sense was not too well developed; for instance, when shares were being sold for the school his friends fairly forced him to accept their money. Thomas G. Appleton who was one of his pupils at Round Hill said that all the money Mr. Cogswell made he put back into the school. From other sources we find references to the half-mile racing track, to riding horses, gymnasium equipment, and materials for Crony Village, all references so worded that it seems probable that Mr. Cogswell paid for these things.

Like the Master at Hofwyl he entered into the boys' sports and varied interests, amusements as well as studies, and "made it perfectly obvious that what he desired was to awaken and stimulate all that was best in their minds and character."¹⁴ He united the qualities of a man of books and a man of action. His head, filled as it was

with the learning of America and of Europe, could not overbalance his generous largeheartedness. "Not distance nor time could ever break the bond which bound them [master and students] to each other, and the clasp which held them all was their reverence and affection for Mr. Cogswell."¹⁵ With his boys he was a boy of larger growth and maturer experience, but nevertheless one of the party. Sam Ward in a letter to his father told of being called in by Mr. Cogswell for a talk, "just like one boy talking to another."¹⁶

Financially the school was not a success. The work was so thorough that students from Round Hill were able to enter second or third year at Harvard and other colleges, but most colleges required a student entering an advanced class to pay the full tuition for the earlier years, and since the fathers had paid \$300 a year at Round Hill they were not willing to pay it all over again. Probably many boys left early and entered as freshmen at college.

We have seen that Cogswell spent so much on the school that he had little or nothing to show for his years there. In 1832 he wrote, "I have made up my mind that it is my duty in every consideration to give up my struggles to sustain the Round Hill School. . . . Health suffering . . . no pecuniary benefits from the most exhausting labor . . . loss of about \$20,000."¹⁷ He tried to sell the school, and one person who considered buying it was Henry W. Longfellow who was not too happy teaching at Bowdoin. He wrote to a friend of this school, "whose renown must have reached your ears. It seemed to me a glorious opening. The terms offered by Cogswell are not unrea-

¹⁵ Ticknor, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁶ Ward Papers.

¹⁷ Ticknor, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

¹⁴ Nye, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

sonable when everything is taken into consideration. The school however is *run down*; and as such nothing could warrant such an outlay, but certainty of success, I found it would be necessary to pause and consider." He consulted various friends who told him that the school was out of favor with the public and that it would be very difficult to get it on its feet again. Mrs. Longfellow wrote, "I hope Henry has given up all hope of going to Northampton. In doing so he sacrifices very much to the wishes of his friends. The poor fellow has set his heart upon it."¹⁸ The Ticknor *Life of Cogswell* says Longfellow could not raise the money necessary.

Cogswell was deeply grieved over the closing of the school. "I am sure no attempt to provide such a place of early education will be made soon again" he wrote, "and I grieve to think of its entire annihilation."¹⁹ We wonder what would have resulted if Longfellow had taken the school.

The other great teachers in the New England academies in the 1820's and 1830's had older pupils and maintained teachers' training classes long before state normal schools arose, so that their ideals and methods lived after them. The boys at Round Hill were too young for such a class and they came largely from wealthy families where parents undoubtedly planned for them professions that paid better than teaching. An examination of the list of pupils given in Miss Ticknor's *Life of Cogswell* shows many names of professional men but none that were surely recognized as academy preceptors. There were, however, two men, loyal "Roundhillers," who manifested an

interest in education such as they had received at Round Hill. One was Dr. George Shattuck of Boston who gave his estate in Concord for St. Paul's School, and in his deed of gift used phrases reminiscent of Round Hill. The other was John Murray Forbes who had a great deal to do with the refounding of Milton Academy, Massachusetts, in the 1880's. He wrote, "I can never be grateful enough for the advantages which Mr. Cogswell conferred. May it not be possible to requite some of the obligations to the coming generation in connection with Milton Academy." He went on to say that he thought the fifteen-year-old graduate of Round Hill was generally well provided with tools to get a living, those tools being "a pretty good foundation of Latin, French, Spanish, arithmetic, and book-keeping."²⁰

So the Round Hill School came to an end. But it was not a failure except financially. Many boys had been taught by the thorough methods introduced by the two principals, and the boys long remembered the school and their teachers. Robert Lowell, elder brother of James Russell Lowell, was a pupil at Round Hill when he was nine years old. Thirty-nine years later in 1864 he dedicated a little volume of verse to the teacher he had not forgotten:

To

JOSEPH GREEN COGSWELL, L.L.D.

The first head of Round Hill School, to whom the boy brought his lessons with such reverence and love, and without fear, the man offers this book as fearlessly and with no less love and reverence.

¹⁸ Laurence Thompson, *Young Longfellow* (Macmillan, 1938), p. 196 (quoted by permission of the author).

¹⁹ Ticknor, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

²⁰ R. W. Hale, *Milton Academy 1798-1948* (Milton, 1948), p. 35.