

## CHAPTER I

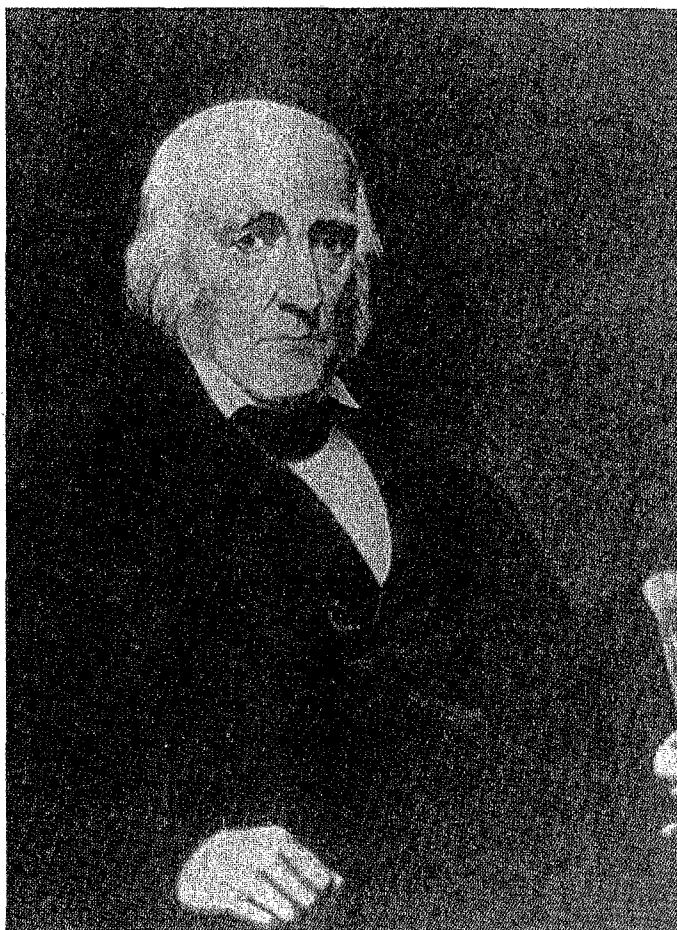
### Beginnings

#### 1844 to 1848

**O**n December 18, 1844, twenty-nine students from around the State of New York, two instructors, and a group of educational and civic dignitaries gathered in an abandoned railroad depot on the north side of State Street between Lodge and Eagle streets in Albany. With workers hammering in the background making last-minute changes in the building, dignitaries, faculty and students officially opened the newly authorized New York State Normal School.

The speaker for the occasion was Col. Samuel Young, Superintendent of Common Schools, and one of the people principally responsible for the creation of the school. His remarks, replete with the oratorical flourishes characteristic of the age, extolled the high calling of teaching, described the new curriculum, advised the students to develop good health habits, and urged them to "diffuse throughout the state a . . . fund of moral and intellectual wealth." A half century later, William Phelps, one of those original students, characterized himself

(Opposite) David Perkins Page, the Normal School's visionary founding Principal.



Gideon Hawley, lawyer, businessman, and educator, had been New York's first superintendent of public instruction. In 1844, as a member of New York's Board of Regents, he was instrumental in the founding of the Normal School, and became a member of its first Executive Committee.

and his cohorts as "young people who had left their rural homes in distant parts of the State and journeyed to the capital to gather, if possible, some inspiration of the new gospel of education . . . They were teachers actuated by a high and noble ambition."

Immediately after the ceremonies, Principal David Page and faculty member George Perkins divided the twenty-nine students into two sections and conducted the first drills in reading and arithmetic. The new Normal School was officially launched.

The New York State Normal School was New York's response to the universal American enthusiasm for common school education in the 1830s and 1840s. Public expectations matched the public enthusiasm. Community leaders never tired of emphasizing the importance of an educated electorate in a democracy. "The schools are the pillars of the republic," asserted one author. Such schools were expected to eradicate almost every vice in American society: crime, vagrancy, unemploy-

ment, alcoholism, prostitution, and political radicalism, to name a few. Ultimately, said one observer, the schools were "the grand lever, which is to raise up the mighty mass of this community . . ."

In New York the Legislature in 1795 began offering matching funds to communities willing to tax themselves to maintain common schools. Between 1812 and 1814, lawmakers created a complex system for sharing the costs of supporting these schools. School districts provided buildings, towns hired and paid the teachers, and the state distributed funds from a "permanent school fund." The principal result: attendance burgeoned, and by 1844 nearly two-thirds of New York's children under age nineteen were enrolled in schools for at least part of the year.

Most teachers in the common schools were temporary, ill-paid, and ill-prepared by any standard. In rural upstate New York, common-school education was a seasonal activity. Older students attended during the winter months when there was little farm work to do, and men did much of the teaching in these "winter schools." Younger children

often attended during the summer and were frequently taught by women, since the male teachers, like their students, often farmed in the summer. Many teachers, often barely older than their students, had little more than a few years of common school education, often gained in the very school in which they taught. Male teachers generally viewed ill-paid teaching positions as a form of temporary employment until "something better" came along. Women, with fewer career alternatives, stayed longer but after marriage often left teaching for "another line of work." The rapid turnover of teachers had become a serious problem by the 1840s.

Those who saw the common schools as the salvation of the nation concluded that something must be done to better prepare teachers for their important task. Some turned to existing private secondary academies. These were basically college preparatory schools, but the Regents in 1828 saw them as "fit seminaries . . . for the training of teachers." From 1834 to the end of the century, some academies received state funds for teacher education, but many supporters of the common schools believed that teacher training was only an afterthought for the academies and turned instead to the idea of a normal school devoted solely to that purpose. Not until the 1840s, however, did they achieve success.

The principal champion of a state-supported normal school was Colonel Young, an experienced politician who became state superintendent in 1842, won support from two successive governors, William Seward and William C. Bouck, and found a powerful ally in Calvin T. Hulburd, the chair of the Assembly Committee on Colleges, Academies and Common Schools.

Soon after taking office, Young began his campaign at a meeting of common schools officials in Utica. There he assembled a collection of educational notables from within the state as well as such national figures as Horace Mann of Massachusetts. Mann argued passionately that professional preparation was necessary for successful teaching and that New York should follow Massachusetts' example by establishing one or more normal schools. The gathering followed Mann's lead and approved a resolution in favor of such a move.

In 1844 the effort moved into the Legislature. There, Hulburd's committee issued a seventy-seven-page report on New York's common

(Top) Alonzo Potter, a member of the Executive Committee and a professor at nearby Union College, shared the vision for common school education and teacher training espoused by Horace Mann, lawyer and Massachusetts educational reformer (bottom). Mann encouraged the organization of the Albany State Normal School and recommended David Page as its first Principal, a recommendation endorsed by Potter. (Potter photo courtesy of the College Archives, Schaffer Library, Union College.)



schools and introduced a bill to establish a state normal school at Albany. After some political maneuvering, a substitute bill was passed on May 7, 1844, and promptly signed by Governor Bouck. The final measure provided for the establishment and support of a normal school in Albany "for the instruction and practice of teachers of common schools in the science of education and in the art of teaching." To support the new school the bill provided \$9,600 to be followed by five annual appropriations of \$10,000. Supervision was the joint responsibility of the Regents and the Superintendent of Common Schools, but immediate oversight of the new school fell to a five-person local Executive Committee which included the superintendent.

Why Albany? Curiously, there seems to have been little competition for the school. Many of the most important advocates for the Normal School were from Albany or the immediate vicinity. But the most compelling argument for the Albany location was political. The Normal School was, in a sense, an experiment. Locating it within easy view of the Legislature could generate political support for its continuation. In addition, Normal School supporters pointed to the educational advantages of training common school teachers where they could observe the operations of the American republic in the halls of state government.

In any event, Albany in 1844 seemed to be a suitable site. Its rapidly-growing population was approaching 50,000. Westward-moving Yankees with their traditional respect for education still dominated the city, but there were also varying numbers of the older Dutch, newly arrived Irish and Germans, Jews, and African-Americans. Ninety percent of the population lived within a half mile of the city center at State and Pearl streets.

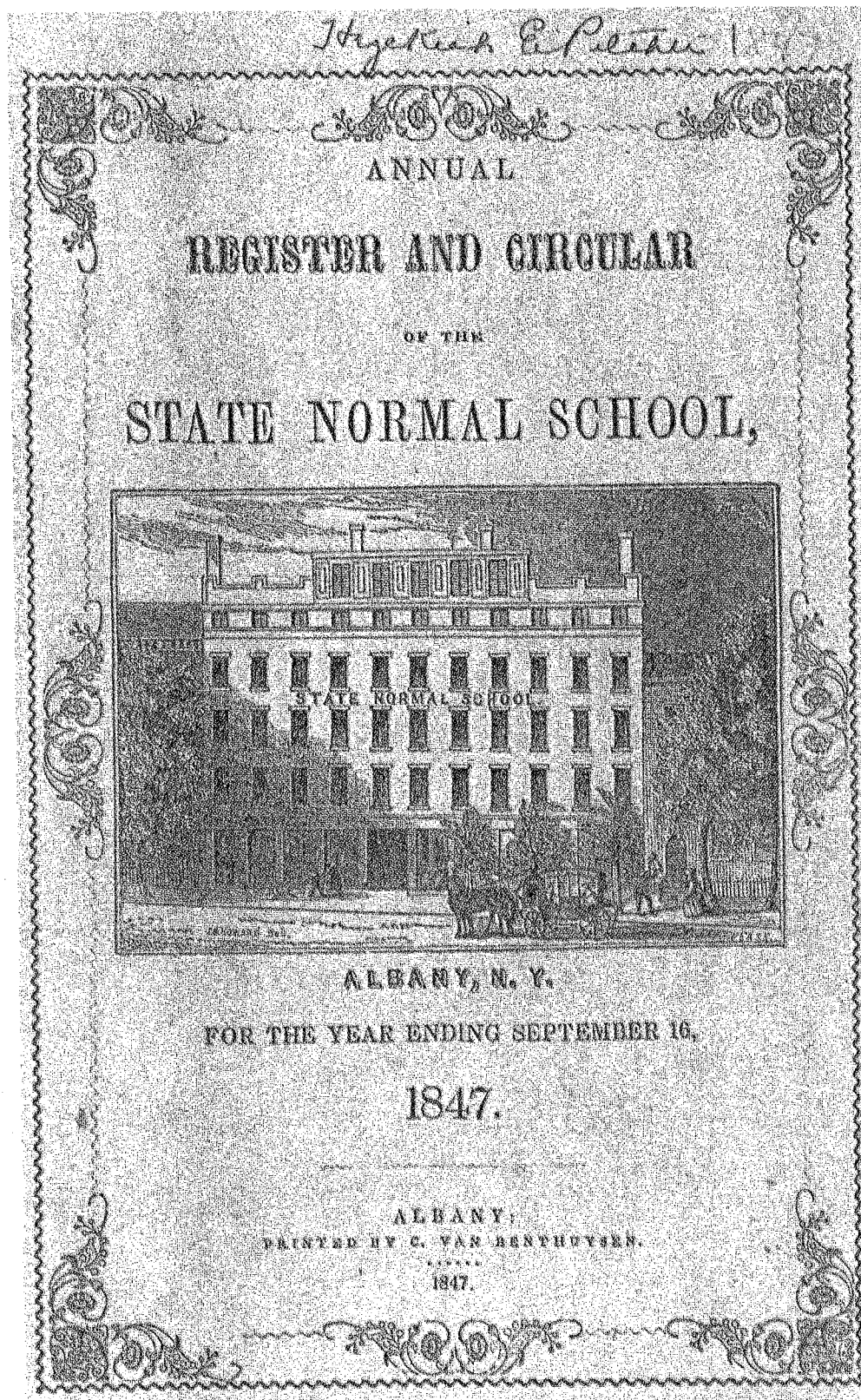
Of course, the students who arrived in the 1840s could hardly have been impressed with the urban amenities: there was no sewage system, streets were ill-paved, and the inhabitants had to depend on inadequate, privately owned water systems. Hogs running loose in the city streets often outnumbered the people!

Yet Albany was an extraordinarily prosperous city by the 1840s. It was a major transportation hub. The Hudson River and the Erie Canal gave Albany superb access to the expanding west as well as New York



Friend Humphrey was mayor of Albany from 1843 to 1845; the city provided use of the first building occupied by the Normal School. (Photo reproduced from Cuyler Reynolds, *Albany Chronicles*: Albany, 1906.)

(Opposite) The final legislation establishing the Normal School as New York's first public institution of higher learning. It was approved by the New York State Legislature on May 7, 1844, and promptly signed by Governor Bouck. (Photo by Gary Gold, '70, of original document in the New York State Archives.)



The cover of the 1847 *Annual Register and Circular* showing the School's building, a former train depot at 115-121 State Street.

City and its overseas trade, and by 1842 Albany had rail connections both to Buffalo and Boston. The city bustled with activity. Goods passed through Albany headed for the west or for New York City and overseas destinations; immigrants headed into the interior to carve out farms. Wealthy merchants such as the first Erastus Corning expanded into banking and manufacturing. Workers manufactured iron stoves and rails, brewed beer, printed books, and sawed logs into lumber.

Albany was politically powerful as well. It was the capital of the most populous state in the Union, but its political influence reached into the entire nation through the Democratic party faction known as the "Albany Regency," dominated by Martin Van Buren.

Yet New York's capital was not solely concerned with the nitty gritty of economic existence or political power; it was also interested in the "higher things" of human life. The community counted some twenty-five churches of nine denominations to conduct its religious life. The Albany Institute of History and Art had begun its distinguished esthetic and historical career in the 1790s.

The pages of the *Albany Argus* showed numerous advertisements for "amusements," including theater, museums, a circus, and art exhibitions.

Albany also had a long tradition of interest in education. The Albany Academy was chartered in 1813 and by the time of the establishment of the Normal School had already seen its physics professor, Joseph Henry, conduct his path-breaking experiments in electro-magnetism. The Albany Academy was joined by its female counterpart in 1814, the Albany Medical College in 1838, and the Albany Law School in 1851. The newspapers were filled with notices of private schools, and Albany's common school system was beginning to grow.

Starting a new normal school from scratch was no easy task, but in the Summer and Fall of 1844 the Executive Committee energetically attacked the problem. The City of Albany proposed in August that the new school occupy the upper floors of a building in the heart of the city on State Street which had been used as a railroad depot by the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad from 1833 to 1841. The Executive Committee promptly agreed. The city paid the \$1,200 annual lease fee for five years, provided \$500 more to rehabilitate the building, and later paid another \$3,000 for the use of land adjoining the structure. Nearby well-to-do residents paid for painting the State Street side of the building. The first home of the Normal School contained eight rooms: two study rooms accommodating about one hundred students each, four recitation rooms, a lecture hall seating about 350, and a room for the library and storage of apparatus.

Meanwhile, Francis Dwight, the secretary of the Executive Committee, prepared a list of necessary apparatus based on an examination of the nation's first normal school in Massachusetts. A primitive library was built from two sources. School book publishers gave the Normal School sets of textbooks, and by 1846 the textbook library had over 5,000 volumes. James L. Wadsworth donated nearly 600 additional volumes; it was the School's first

## William Franklin Phelps

Like many of the early Normal School students, William Phelps, '45, had experience as a teacher when he began his studies in Albany. Phelps began teaching at age sixteen in Auburn, New York, and his exceptional reputation as a pedagogue spread across Cayuga County. It earned him a spot as one of the county's first two students at the new Albany Normal School.

Recognizing Phelps' abilities, David Page entrusted him with the task of starting the School's practice teaching program. Phelps believed that a superior teacher emerged from a blend of scholarship, methodology, and theory. In accord with this, he designed Albany's experimental program around the mastery of academic subject matter, observation of expert teachers at work, and teaching experience. Phelps' successful model school program became an integral part of the Albany Normal School curriculum.

Due to ill health, Phelps resigned as head of Albany's model school in 1852, but his career as an educator had only begun. He went on to serve as the president of three state normal schools in New Jersey and Minnesota. Recognized as an expert in the design of normal schools, his patterns were imitated by other state teachers' institutions.

In addition, writing a widely acclaimed book on teaching practice, authoring numerous articles, and serving as president of two national teachers' organizations, Phelps earned himself an international reputation as an educational theorist. His book, *The Teacher's Hand-Book*, was translated into Spanish. In 1879, he was awarded a silver medal at the Paris Exposition for his accomplishments as an educator.

Though quick-tempered and sometimes uncompromising, Phelps strove throughout his career to insure that future generations of students would not experience the teacher incompetency he had endured as a young student in western New York.



philanthropic experience. Subsequent reports of the Executive Committee suggest that while textbooks were periodically replaced, the entire collection grew very little over the years.

A school, however, needed faculty and students. The principalship fell to a thirty-four-year-old Massachusetts teacher, David Perkins Page. Page was one of five candidates for the position and came highly recommended by Horace Mann. The Executive Committee dispatched one of its members, Union College professor and Episcopal clergyman Alonzo Potter, to Newburyport to interview the young man. Potter was so impressed that he immediately reached an agreement with Page to appoint him Principal at an annual salary of \$1,500. It proved to be an admirable decision.

Page had been born and raised on a prosperous New Hampshire farm, and his father for many years pressed him to remain at home to operate it. But the young man developed a strong taste for education. He attended district school and, over the objections of his father, spent about a year at Hampton Academy, teaching during the winter to help pay for his education. Page's formal education was very limited, but he developed a lifelong enthusiasm for self-education.

For about fifteen years, Page taught, first in a small district school in Newbury, Massachusetts, then in a private school and in the Newburyport High School. By age thirty-four he had become a successful classroom teacher. When he left for Albany his students in a letter to the *Newburyport Herald* observed that Page's "loss will be greatly felt in town both as a man and a christian [sic]." But it was the delivery of several lectures before the Essex County Teachers' Association that brought Page to Horace Mann's attention (and ultimately to the attention of Albany's Executive Committee). Mann was so impressed with the lectures that he printed and distributed some of them at his own expense.

Page shaped both the curriculum and educational practices of the new Normal School, and they would change little for several decades. The School began operating with winter and summer terms of twenty and twenty-two weeks with vacations in April and October when teachers' institutes were normally held. By 1850, however, summer heat

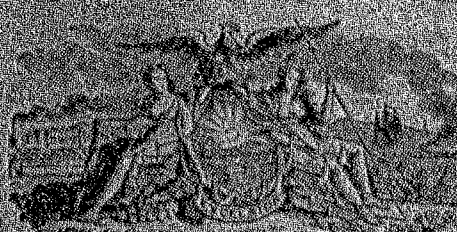
caused the School to switch to a calendar comparable to the modern semester system with two terms of twenty-one and twenty weeks beginning in late September and late February. The principal classes were

Daily class schedule for the Winter 1847-48 term. Note the division of classes into senior, middle, and junior levels and the instructors for each class.

(E.)  
**PROGRAMME,**  
 For a portion of the Term, commencing November 1, 1847.

TIME.	EXERCISES.	TEACHER.
From 9 to 9.30 minutes, A. M.	Opening exercises. Lecture Room.	
From 9.30 to 10.15 minutes,	Senior, No. 1, Natural Philosophy, ..... do 2, Geometry, ..... Middle, No. 1, Grammar, ..... do 2, Higher Arithmetic, ..... do 3, Algebra, ..... do 4, Drawing, ..... Junior, No. 1, Grammar, ..... do 2, Geography, .....	Mr. Clark. Mr. Eaton. Mr. S. T. Bowen. Mr. Webb. Prof. Perkins. Miss Ostrom. Mr. T. H. Bowen. Miss Hance.
From 10.15 to 10.20 minutes,	Change of classes.	
From 10.20 to 11.5 minutes,	Senior, No. 1, Geometry, ..... do 2, Natural Philosophy, ..... Middle, No. 1 and 2, Human Physiology, ..... do 3, Grammar, ..... do 4, Higher Arithmetic, ..... Junior, No. 1, Reading, .....	Mr. S. T. Bowen. Mr. Clark. Principal. Mr. T. H. Bowen. Mr. Webb. Miss Hance.
From 11.5 to 11.15 minutes,	Junior, No. 2, Mental Arithmetic, ..... Change of classes and singing.	Miss Ostrom.
From 11.15 to 12,	Senior, No. 1, Mental Philosophy, ..... do 2, do ..... Middle No. 1, Higher Arithmetic, ..... do 2, Reading, ..... do 3 and 4, ..... Junior, No. 1, Mental Arithmetic, ..... do 2, Elementary Arithmetic, .....	Mr. Eaton. Mr. S. T. Bowen. Prof. Perkins. Miss Hance. Principal. Miss Ostrom. Mr. Webb.
From 12 to 12.20 minutes,	Recess.	
From 12.20 to 1.5 minutes,	Senior No. 1 and 2, Lectures in Rhetoric, ..... Middle, No. 1, Reading, ..... do 2, Algebra, ..... do 3, Drawing, ..... do 4, Algebra, ..... Junior, No. 1, Elementary Arithmetic, ..... do 2, Grammar, .....	Principal. Miss Hance. Mr. Eaton. Miss Ostrom. Prof. Perkins. Mr. Webb. Mr. S. T. Bowen.
From 1.5 to 1.10 minutes,	Change of classes.	
From 1.10 to 1.55 minutes,	Senior, No. 1 and 2, Chemistry, ..... Middle, No. 1, Algebra, ..... do 2, Grammar, ..... do 3, Higher Arithmetic, .....	Mr. Clark. Mr. Eaton. S. T. Bowen. Mr. Webb.





EXCELSIOR.

ALBANY, N. Y., Sept. 16, 1847.

This Certifies, That *George H. Dunham* has been a member of the State Normal School *Albany, N. Y.* and that he is now judged by the Faculty of the Institution to be well qualified to engage in the duties of a Teacher.

*Wm. P. Page* Principal

*Geo. W. Whiting* Prof. Math.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

In consideration of the above Certificate, the undersigned, the Executive Committee, hereby recommend the said *George H. Dunham* as a worthy Graduate of the State Normal School.

STATE OF NEW YORK }  
Done at Albany, }  
*Sept. 16, 1847.* }

*Wm. P. Page* }  
*Geo. W. Whiting* }  
*Wm. A. Hall* }  
Executive Committee

The oldest extant Normal School diploma dating from 1847. George H. Dunham taught for eight years and also served as school commissioner of his town for six years. (Gift of Alice Hastings Murphy, MLS, '40.)

held between 9:30 am and 1:30 pm with instruction in vocal music and drawing in the late afternoon.

The curriculum was organized into a two-year program offered in four terms. Students entered the program at various places, depending

on their preparation. Many dropped out after a term or two to begin or continue teaching. The subject matter focused on "the common branches" of knowledge taught in the common schools. William Phelps, a student in the first class, recalled later that some students thought they had advanced beyond such elementary knowledge until their teachers with searching questions and criticisms persuaded them they had much to learn. Instruction in pedagogy and subject matter were closely tied; an early description of the classwork noted that students were thoroughly drilled in the subject matter taught in the common schools and were concurrently instructed in "the best modes of communicating a knowledge of these branches . . ." Students soon realized that they would learn "how" as well as "what" to teach. Classroom instruction was supplemented with lectures by leading academic and educational figures. One term in 1845 included appearances by physicist Joseph Henry and educator Henry Barnard. The educational program culminated in student teaching in a practice (or model) school, established in 1845.

Page's widely used textbook, *Theory and Practice of Teaching*, made up of lectures he gave his classes at Albany over a two-year period, tells us something of what went on in the school. Page offered a realistic but resolutely high-minded portrait of the good common school teacher. He began with motivation. Teachers, he asserted, had to be moved by lofty ideals since they could hardly expect to be paid adequately. Their ultimate reward was the knowledge that they had done an important and difficult job well.

Similarly, teachers had to be mindful of their own and their charges' character development. All needed good habits: punctuality, order, courtesy and neatness. But the teachers also had to be concerned for the bodily health, moral training and non-sectarian but forthrightly "religious training" of their charges.

Phoebe Ann Barnard, '47, was typical of many 19th-Century female graduates. She taught a total of fourteen years before the Civil War, and then during that conflict she served for nine months as a nurse in the U.S. Hospital in Frederick, Maryland. She married in 1866, had one daughter, and lived as a widow after 1882.





Still, the common school teacher was centrally concerned with "the intellectual growth" of the child. Page emphasized that children should study "subjects" rather than books and had much to say about proper methods and motivation, warning equally against stupefying lectures and "leading questions." He was skeptical of reward systems but also wrote at length about proper and improper discipline. Finally, he emphasized the importance of good relations between teachers and their communities. Years later, Jacob Chace, '46, summed up Page's approach by observing that he "sought to combine Christian teaching with intellectual development, and to impress his pupils with the same sense of responsibility in the pursuit of their chosen profession."

The Albany Normal School developed quickly in its first four years. By the Spring of 1845 nearly 200 students were on hand. Soon, enrollments reportedly outnumbered the students in the three Massachusetts normal schools combined. Indeed the pressure of numbers was so great that in 1845 the Executive Committee put a cap on enrollment at 256 students. There was obviously a strong demand for the only wholly tuition-free institution of post-primary education in the state.

Other faculty joined Page. Two full-time teachers as well as part-time instructors in vocal music and art were quickly added. The instructional staff was filled out with advanced students who drilled younger students in common branch subjects; the old "Lancastrian" system merged imperceptibly into the modern use of graduate students as instructors.

By 1848 the Albany State Normal School was a success, and surely David Page was responsible for much of it. He had developed a national reputation through his enormously popular *Theory and Practice of Teaching* and was an indefatigable missionary for common school education and improved teacher education. The Normal School was now carrying the gospel of teacher education into the whole community.

By 1848 the Albany State Normal School seemed well-placed to seek permanent funding from the State Legislature.

