

"THE COMING WOMAN" Ward Seminary, 1865-1913

BY MARY ELLEN PETHEL

"Within its walls... young ladies may find an excellent impetus to a full and well-rounded life."—*The Iris*, 1898

Ward Seminary motto: *Ubi mel, ibi apes*—From bees there is honey.

Nashville resident Eliza Hudson Ward saw an opportunity in the spring of 1865. The Civil War officially had ended, and many people were looking to begin a process of renewal. She believed education would be critical to this process, and was particularly interested in female education. At that moment, however, Nashville was lacking: the Nashville Female Academy, which had operated since 1820, would not reopen after four years of Union occupation. It was the moment for which she had waited. She wrote to her husband, Dr. William E. Ward in New York about starting another girls' school in Nashville, and he agreed that it was a good idea.¹ For the next twenty two years, the Wards

molded and managed what became known as Ward Seminary.²

As the seminary developed the Wards dealt with shifting social expectations, particularly as regards women's roles within the public and economic spheres of the New South. In a speech entitled the "The Coming Woman," William Ward revealed his anxiety over the growing autonomy and independence of women. "The coming woman ought not to be, but I fear she is, aiming to make herself, independent of man," he argued.

Just as far as she does this she contravenes the law of the Almighty, who made her for a help-meet for man... Woman is dependent on man; she is weaker; she ought never to be educated out of that idea. Independence perforce destroys sympathy, and sympathy is the subtle, all-pervading, and omnipotent energy that binds all mankind together. If the coming woman is to come to that, let her never come.³



In 1911, students from Ward Seminary posed for the camera. Their school opened in 1865, and dealt with shifting social expectations of women's roles. (The Harpeth Hall School Archives)

Ward's comments reflect antebellum notions of women's roles that were eroding in the late 1800s: women should seek education solely to prepare themselves for roles as wives, mothers, and advocates of social benevolence. In the speech he presented his postbellum vision for an "improved" Southern Belle who still knew her place in the home and in society. He also acknowledged, however, that the "coming woman" would be more autonomous, and use her education for her own improvement.

Ward's comments speak to the reality that educational institutions were expanding in the New South, and in the process

were changing gender roles. Increasing numbers of women entered higher education, and this generation modified images of the Southern Belle. Certainly they participated more actively in the public sphere than did antebellum generations. They did not enter the workforce in large numbers before 1920. Even so, female graduates of southern college preparatory schools, seminaries, and women's "colleges" became Progressive Era nurses, teachers, missionaries, professional musicians or actors, social workers, and community organizers. Many of these positions were unpaid or "non-traditional" employment, but female graduates of schools like Ward