

Seminary gained confidence and a certain sense of self-reliance. They set the stage for the "Coming Woman," whether William Ward approved or not. Even if unintentionally, the Wards (and the founders of other women's schools in the New South) prepared women to challenge prevailing notions of gender roles.

Moreover, Ward Seminary was a critical part of a process of post-Civil War urbanization in Nashville.<sup>4</sup> Historians have noted that the city rapidly developed after 1865 because it, like other interior cities in the South with railroads, could more easily conduct commerce with the North and the West than its port city counterparts.<sup>5</sup> By the 1870s, Nashville was one of the region's most attractive cities, with burgeoning industrial and population growth and expanding municipal departments and services. A byproduct was that the city saw an explosion of hospitals and publishing houses, and an ascendant cultural arts scene that sculpted a new cityscape.

Nashville became known as the "Athens of the South" in the 1850s, and the idea was bolstered by the Centennial Exposition of 1897, which displayed a full-scale replica of the Athenian Parthenon.<sup>6</sup> Educational opportunities blossomed in this atmosphere. The local elite promoted the city to northern philanthropists such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and George Peabody as a city ripe with potential.<sup>7</sup> It worked. From the Civil War to 1900 a number of predominantly private schools

were founded: Roger Williams University (1864), Ward Seminary (1865), Fisk University (1865), Vanderbilt University (1873), Peabody College (1875), Meharry Medical College (1876), Belmont College for Young Women (1890), and Nashville Bible College/David Lipscomb College (1891).<sup>8</sup>

The advancement of education created an advantageous association between the city and its schools. Educational institution-building became integral to business boosterism and urban growth. This symbiotic relationship carried with it unintended consequences for gender relations. As William Ward learned, it galvanized and empowered the young women of Ward Seminary, along with other females attending local schools and colleges. Whether in community clubs or as part of the emerging professional class, Nashville's young women shaped and were shaped by a community that emphasized higher education and used its academic reputation to boost the local economy.<sup>9</sup>

Opportunities for higher education, whether single gender or co-educational, was a relatively new option for women. Prior to the Civil War, few women maintained more than an eighth grade education. After 1865, however, educated women modified meanings of motherhood and spousal duty to include "work" outside the home, in areas such as social work, education, community clubs, and reform movements. Higher education became a

springboard by which to propel women into otherwise restricted public spheres.<sup>10</sup> It helped mold new definitions of acceptable behavior in New South cities, such as Nashville, by the 1920s. Ultimately, then, Ward Seminary served several purposes: it was a gateway to top-tier traditional universities, a site of social awareness and communal activism, a training ground for teachers and others involved in fine arts, and a finishing school.

The experiences at Ward Seminary support modern historiographical interpretations of women's education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the New South, women played a contested but progressively influential role in higher education, in the process re-writing gender roles.<sup>11</sup> Young Southern women between 1865 and 1913 experienced a tension between their desire for intellectual development and social pressures to conform to older ideals of womanhood. Historian Barbara Solomon argues that educated women in the late nineteenth century were enigmatic, as they "were caught between the attraction of using their education in professional ways and keeping in mind that a woman's usefulness was not equated with [male] professionalism."<sup>12</sup> In the end, however, Solomon concludes that an "increasingly industrialized society not only created new demands for the university training of professional men but generated needs in service fields that trained women could fill."<sup>13</sup>

As with other Southern schools, Ward Seminary reinforced certain societal expectations that reserved real political and economic power for men. Even so, "within its framework [it] extended woman's sphere beyond familial roles."<sup>14</sup> That extension would become powerful. Historian Rebecca S. Montgomery, for example, asserts, "The South's single-sex institutions facilitated organization by producing close bonds among female students that served as a basis for collective action in movements that challenged the status quo."<sup>15</sup> Young women who attended Ward Seminary between 1865 and 1913 used their education to achieve a range of personal and professional goals. They were perhaps less threatening to southern society because of the school's all-female student body. Perhaps students and graduates remained less threatening because the majority did fulfill roles as wives and mothers. Whatever was the case, the lives and experiences of Ward Seminary students were at the core of subtle yet certain re-thinking of gender roles in Southern culture.



Founder William E. Ward was a remarkable man. He grew up under the watchful eye of his father, owner of a large cotton plantation near Huntsville, Alabama. At sixteen he enrolled in Green Academy in Huntsville, where he excelled in history, geography, and English. In