

Hunter's First Year Or, How It All Began

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is drawn primarily from the first three chapters of *Hunter College: Eighty-Five Years of Service* by Samuel White Patterson, Professor Emeritus, published in 1955.

The name of Thomas Hunter first appeared in print in New York City in the mid-1850s, in a listing of teachers in *Valentine's Manual*. The drawing teacher, who had been born in Ireland of Scottish parents, came to New York in 1850 when he was 19 years old. By the mid-1860s, Hunter had become principal of School No. 35 on 13th Street, where in 1866 he established the first evening high school in the city.

In 1868, A. Oakey Hall was elected mayor of New York. Known as "Elegant Oakey" because of his sartorial splendor, he was a crony of Boss Tweed, who ran the Democratic Party and, thus, the city. (Hall's 1868 election would soon be cited in *The American Commonwealth* by the historian James Bryce as the most scandalous in the city's history.)

Perhaps to take the public's attention away from the flagrant wrongdoing of his cohorts, Elegant Oakey wanted only the most upstanding and well-educated citizens on the board of the city's Department of Public Instruction. Among those appointed to the board were William Wood, a retired banker, Isaac Bell, a business executive, and Richard Ludlow Larremore, a lawyer and the board's president. All three would play crucial roles in the events of special concern to us.

When Elegant Oakey's education board convened in 1869, there was no regular teacher training institution in the city. The state legislature had voted in 1827 and again in 1834 to support training teachers for the common or grade

schools, as elementary schools were then known. Young women who had completed the 8th grade of common school were considered competent to teach in lower grades. From 1842 there was occasionally a Saturday Normal School in the city, where primary grade teachers could get some training for their work.

The year 1847 was an educational landmark in New York: The Free Academy was founded to provide post-grade school education for boys. Despite calls for a similar school for girls over the next few years, none was established. In 1866 the boys' Academy became the College of the City of New York.

One of the board's first resolutions was to establish a normal and high school for women. Training women to become teachers was seen as a way to improve elementary public education in the city. It was also a politically opportune move: There were 100,000 schoolchildren in the city, many of whose fathers were potential voters. On October 23, 1869, Commissioner Bell invited some of the education board members to dinner at his home to discuss informally the possibility of establishing a normal school. He drafted the resolutions establishing a Daily Normal School for Females that would provide "a constant supply of trained and competent teachers" for the city's schools. A month later, on November 17, 1869, the education board approved unanimously and authorized preliminary funding.

Commissioner Wood then sought out Thomas Hunter, whose reputation as an educational innovator was rapidly spreading, to turn plans for a normal school into reality. Hunter was the father of three daughters, as well as one son, which presumably suited him particularly well for the task at hand.

Wood envisioned a grand institution, one more "worthy of the American metropolis than had yet been dreamed of." At a time when elementary education in the city was still segregated, Hunter insisted that the new school admit students of all racial backgrounds on equal terms. Fearing that teacher education might become too narrowly focused, Wood insisted that the traditional liberal arts, including Bible studies and the Classics, be included. Hunter, excited by the intellectual developments of his era, stressed the need for education in the sciences. Wood and Hunter agreed to combine traditional, academic, and education courses in the new school's curriculum.

On December 1 the board changed the name of the future institution to Female Normal and High School, and voted for administrators to start the school. Hunter did not get a majority of votes for school president on the first ballot. But a professional vote of confidence by contender David B. Scott, principal of School No. 40, who refused to allow Hunter to withdraw, convinced most of the commissioners that Hunter deserved their vote. Thus the one-time drawing teacher became head of a not-yet-existing school on the second ballot. For vice president the board elected Arthur Henry Dundon, a New Jersey educator and a friend and colleague of Hunter's at the New York Evening High School.

Scott went on to become a professor of English at the College of the

City of New York; one of his students was George S. Davis, who became the second president of Hunter College.

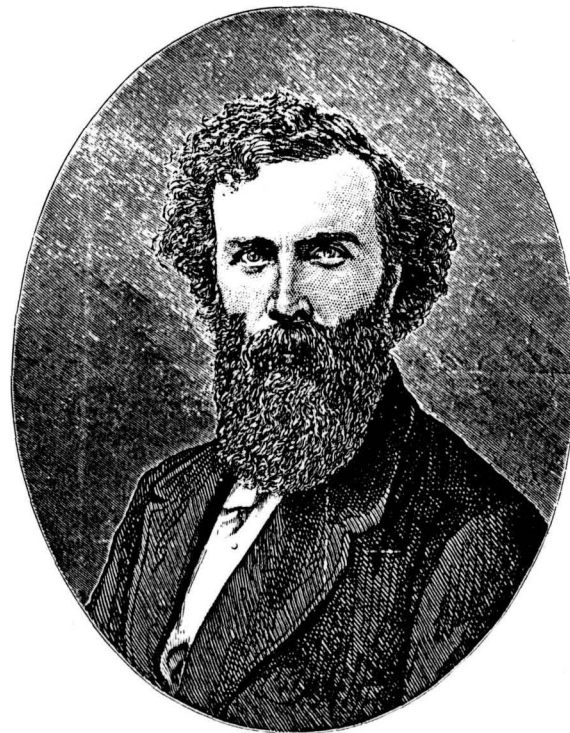
The commissioners wanted the new school to open for the spring 1870 semester, only two months off. As preparation, they authorized Hunter and Dundon to study the best normal schools from Maryland to New England. One idea Hunter brought back from this field trip was to establish a training department, or model division, as soon as feasible, to provide teaching practice for his Normal School students. This division would open the following September as the Model Primary School.

Lack of office space at No. 35's Evening High School required that Hunter and Dundon plan the new educational venture within the senior department for girls at nearby School No. 47, on East 12th Street. Headed by Miss Lydia Fowler Wadleigh, this department's three-year course was then the best pro-

gram available to young women preparing to teach.

Meanwhile Commissioner Wood was searching for a site for the school. One, on West 61st Street, was considered to be too far uptown for the potential students. Finally, Wood rented an upper floor and a half of a business building at 694 Broadway, at the corner of Fourth Street, for \$5,000 a year, with an option to renew for \$6,000 after 18 months. The education board voted another \$5,000 to renovate the space and create eight classrooms, with sliding doors and curtains so they could be further subdivided into eight more.

The new school was in a transitional neighborhood, northeast of still placid Greenwich Village and just south of what was becoming the chic new retailing center, later known as Ladies' Mile. East of Broadway was a residential area, while to the west commercial enterprises flourished. The Cooper Institute with its Great Hall was at



Thomas Hunter, President of the Normal College, at the age of 43, as shown in Harper's Weekly, July 1874.

prises flourished. The Cooper Institute with its Great Hall was at Astor Place a few blocks south. Within a few minutes' walk was the distinguished architecture of the fashionable Grace and St. Mark's churches.

Prospective students were solicited and tested. One thousand young women, 300 of them from Miss Wadleigh's school alone, passed the qualifying examination with a score of 75 percent or better. The test was a bit controversial: Some people believed that competitive tests were too taxing for young women. President Hunter, confident of young women's abilities, offered to retest anyone who failed because of nervousness. He later said that "the first tests did everybody credit—teachers and students alike."

President Hunter assembled a multi-talented staff. He himself would be professor of intellectual philosophy and the theory and practice of teaching. Vice President Dundon was also professor of English and Latin. It was he who devised the school's motto: *Mihi cura futuri*. The two other professors were Joseph Anthony Gillet, for mathematics and physics, and Charles Albert Schlegel, for German and French. Two tutors, one of them female, presided over a music curriculum geared to vocalization. Miss Wadleigh resigned from School No. 47 to become the new school's "lady superintendent"; she seems to have been an authoritative if charming disciplinarian. There were also about six assistants, all of them female.

Hunter planned a three-year program of two semesters each. The first year was known as "Ducks," for introductory; it was followed by sophomore and senior. During ducks and sophomore years traditional academic subjects were taught, but in the senior year there was five months of pedagogic the-

ory to be followed by five months of practice teaching.

On February 14, 1870, opening exercises for the Female Normal and High School were held. Education board president Larrimore presided and school president Hunter briefly addressed the select audience of prominent New Yorkers, parents and friends of students, teachers and the students themselves. These "teacher-pupils" wore ankle-length skirts and high-buttoned shoes, in the fashion of the day. Most, but not all, were American-born and middle class.

With the testing controversy only a few weeks in the past, two new problems surfaced immediately. First, there were 200 more students than classroom seats. Diplomatically, President Hunter remarked that he hoped the seating shortage would spur the education commissioners' search for larger and permanent quarters. Meanwhile, some students would have to attend part time. Next, Broadway was a major thoroughfare for

business as well as private traffic, creating several unpleasant distractions for young students. Iron horseshoes and iron carriage wheels clattered resonantly over the large cobblestones. A variety of odors emanated from a nearby restaurant. Even President Hunter was distracted. "On the floor above was an armory," he wrote; "on the floor below was a store for the sale of carriages."

Hunter's educational innovativeness had its limits: He disapproved of extracurricular activities. His own personal life did not make time for sports events or other recreation, and he did not see why students should depend on the school for such activities, which properly belonged at home. He did, however, approve the founding of two literary societies in the 1870s, on the grounds that the girls' minds would be improved by the discussions that were to take place there.

Hunter also disapproved of the assignment of additional readings. Years later a student recalled that "it was not right to say there were



NORMAL COLLEGE OF NEW YORK.

The Normal College of the City of New York, East Fourth Street, corner of Broadway, as shown in the Manual of the City of New York in 1870.

no books outside of texts" in her day, because there were books, "kept in those glass cases." Riposted another, "Yes, *kept* there."

In April 1870 the state legislature authorized a permanent site for the school, which was renamed the Normal College of the City of New York. President Hunter thought the name premature at best, certainly "a misnomer, since the school granted no degrees." He saw one advantage to the error: It would "impel everyone to work hard to deserve it."

"Normal College" was still a three-year course of study for young women in their teens. Indeed, it was what we now call a high school; it was, in fact, *our* high school.

In May 1870 the city provided a site for a permanent school building from a tract of city-owned land far uptown, on 68th Street at Lexington Avenue, and a sum was voted for the best building design—but that is another story.

On July 12, 1870, the first commencement was held in the Academy of Music on Irving Place at 14th Street. Rebuilt only a few years earlier, it was the city's most popular auditorium. Ninety-seven young women had completed five months of professional training and were qualified to teach in the city's public elementary schools. Five superior graduates were appointed to the staff of the Model Primary School, due to open two months later.

The entire student body marched down the aisle. The new president of the education commission spoke of that body's gratification that the school had made so much progress in so short a time; the credit went to the teachers and students. The Salutatorian spoke in English, instead of the Latin that characterized stuffer institutions in those days. Other students spoke, read

essays, and sang. The Mayor spoke, followed by additional student recitals and the valedictory address. Commissioner Wood talked of the school's growth, and presented certificates to the graduates. There were a silver and bronze medal for the best essays on methods of teaching. The event was covered by the leading newspapers of the city, which all reported that the exercises closed with a rendition of "Doxology" at "a late hour."

Thus ended the first semester of what would later become the Hunter College Campus Schools

and Hunter College. Inseparable in their origins, they have been linked throughout their history.

Themes that continue to characterize the schools to their graduates were apparent at the very start: Commitment to academic excellence, coping with less-than-ideal conditions, challenges of growth and change, occasionally reactionary decisions on the part of administrators, and conflicts over entrance examinations, school locations and buildings. Even odors and an armory. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* ♦

TEACHER, NEW YORK CITY

*I stand, in flat shoes and a master's degree
in Handling of the Child at Puberty
and wonder what I am supposed to do
when one strained voice cries tenderly, "Screw you!"
and if the nouns and verbs and de la Mare
I prate about will lay some beauty bare,
and whether I—we all—have come too late,
and what if I should lose my dental plate;
if forty minutes five times every week
for forty weeks is time enough to speak
of matters more intense than procreation,
and what the heck's the use of education
while all around us fall, in shapeless clods,
our mores, and our ethics, and our gods.*

*Rena Trachtenberg Garter Kunis
January '39*