'I have been talking today a great deal with Mrs. Robinson, Mr. Bunce and others about another teacher to be employed in the high school here – And they all seem to think you would be just the thing for them’, Henry Stevens informed his sister, Sophia in 1848. ‘It will be a glorious place for you here if you can fill it’. Stevens confidently suggested that his sister would find the newly opened Hartford Public High School a better teaching assignment than her post in Vermont, and he used his personal connections with Hartford families to secure her the job. As other young teachers like Sophia Stevens were drawn from around New England to staff the fledgling school, they imported fresh ideas and attitudes about the meaning of education. As a group, they believed they represented a new kind of educational community that was charged with realising the lofty goals of educational promoters. Hartford Public High School provides an opportunity to explore the reciprocal relationships between school, city and teachers, and, in the process, to assess the nature of the community that emerged.1

Most examinations of public high schools like the one in Hartford have relied heavily on published sources, especially annual reports submitted by school visitors to an institution’s board of education. While school reports are extremely valuable, they were written from the board’s perspective and they suggest that women teachers, who dominated the teaching corps, played only a superficial role in the school’s operation. As a result, histories of public high schools based on these sources have placed women in the classroom, but have assigned them little or no creative role in the process of institution building. In contrast, women’s historians have utilised

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private correspondence and journals to investigate the myriad ways in which individual public-school teachers used education for intellectual development, and to fashion new identities as learned women. They have not, however, fully considered the impact of women teachers on public institutions themselves. Bridging these two approaches, this article seeks to redress the near erasure of women from the formal history of the early years of Hartford Public High School, and to forge a more complex and gender-inclusive concept of institutional growth and development. The school served as the site for women teachers not merely to enhance their intellectual capacity, but also to develop an identity linked to running the high school itself. By analysing school formation from the perspective of the women who taught there, it is possible to examine the social interaction among teachers, their relationship with school board members and their connections with influential segments of Hartford society. Examination of manuscript sources for six of the ten women teachers who worked at Hartford Public High School between 1847 and 1851 reveals not only the gendered allocation of power in nineteenth-century high schools, but also the active role of committed women teachers in contesting that power.2

‘So genteel a business’

On 8 March 1847, members of the First School Society of Hartford approved a measure for the creation of a co-educational public high school in their city. Supporters of the school sought to create an institution that would be consistent with the social and cultural characteristics of the Hartford community. Unlike many antebellum northeastern cities, Hartford retained a remarkable degree of homogeneity, and the city’s core elite retained its grip, even in the face of significant social and demographic change. As the city’s economic base diversified from its colonial roots in the West Indies trade, Hartford developed a small manufacturing sector, and became a centre for insurance and publishing. The population of Hartford grew substantially, from 6,900 in 1820 to 29,150 in 1860, but the city nevertheless remained small in the nineteenth century. Antebellum Hartford retained elements of its religious, political and social homogeneity well into the nineteenth century, in contrast to large urban centres like Boston, which were marked by a higher degree of diversity and social fragmentation.3

The connections between the school’s founders and Hartford’s religious and social establishment are clear. David Robinson, for example, who was instrumental in the founding and early governance of Hartford Public High School (HPHS), was a wealthy publisher, member of the Second Congregational church and president of the Hartford Savings Bank. Horace
Bushnell, who helped found HPHS, was the well-known theologian and minister of Hartford’s North Congregational church. One of Bushnell’s deacons and the two-term mayor of Hartford, Amos Collins, also lent his political weight to the project. These wealthy and influential men sought to create an educational institution that would improve the tight-knit community that they were influential in directing.4

Because they would not run the school on a daily basis, the supporters of the school understood that the teachers they hired were crucial to the implementation of their plans. After opening its doors in December 1847, Hartford Public High School attracted teachers from all over New England to staff its ranks. Of the ten women teachers and five male administrators who worked for Hartford Public High School between its opening and 1851, none were native to Hartford, and only three had direct ties to the city. Additionally, the faculty of the HPHS turned over with a high frequency. Of the first ten women teachers, only three worked at the school for more than one year, and the school had four different principals in its first four years. In light of this rapid turnover, the school’s wealthy supporters worked hard to integrate these newcomers into the city’s social fabric and to socialise them to community norms of behaviour.5

To acculturate newcomers, promoters of the high school drew on their personal connections to select teachers. James Bunce, for example, who contributed $1,000 to establish the high school and then served on the committee to oversee its operation, encouraged his niece to teach in Hartford. The applicant pool, in fact, was initially limited to relatives of prominent residents or to the recommendations of trusted friends. Once hired, new teachers were offered accommodation with some of the city’s best families and given access to a social world of polite teas and parties. As one newcomer noted, ‘All the teachers board in some of the first families & consequently [are] in the first circles of society’. To limit the disruption that the high school might cause the city, the new teachers were immediately ‘adopted’ by the city’s elite in an attempt to socialise them to the community’s norms. Members of the first group of teachers were all under the age of 24, and were carefully selected and then integrated into the highest circles of Hartford’s social life. For some, the fit was natural. While she taught at the high school, Olivia Day, the daughter of Yale’s president, lived with her uncle. Those without family connections boarded not in rooming houses, but with elite families. John Olmsted, a retired dry goods merchant and one of the wealthiest men in Hartford, opened his home to Mary Brognard and Sophia Stevens.6

For Stevens, the transition from Vermont to Hartford entailed more than a geographical change. Stevens’s father, a farmer, postmaster, book collector and founder of the Vermont Historical Society, provided a solid education for all his children, but needed their paid labour to supplement
his meagre income. Sophia Stevens’s abilities as a teacher gave her access to a social world wholly unlike the one she experienced at home. ‘I like the society here very much’, she assured her parents. ‘I am in the very best circle too’. Demonstrating the impact of Olmsted’s wealth and refinement on a young woman from rural Vermont, Stevens took special care in her letters home to list the elegant furnishings in his rooms, including marble tabletops, imported carpets, an extensive library and frescoes on the walls. While living in the Olmsted household, Stevens was treated like a member of the family. She described cold winter evenings when she would sit in a rocking chair and read and talk with John Olmsted or his son. Access to the extensive Olmsted library allowed Stevens to read books like John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* that would help cultivate her aesthetic interests and contribute to her social refinement. In fact, Stevens read Ruskin aloud with Frederick Law Olmsted and it formed the context of their socialising. After a particularly trying week at school, Sophia Stevens and Olivia Day took an evening ride on the frozen Connecticut River with Olmsted that provided the context for their application of Ruskin’s ideas. As Olivia Day wrote to a friend, ‘[E]verything reminded us of that book, and illustrated its principles’.

Those elite families who had worked hard to create the high school attempted to ensure its success by offering to potential teachers like Sophia Stevens an attractive package that included not just employment at the school, but also access to Hartford’s social amenities. In addition to putting some of their own money behind the school, David and Anne Robinson encouraged their daughter to write to prospective teachers and act as an ambassador for the city and the school. In one letter that sounded like promotional literature from the chamber of commerce, Sarah Robinson wrote glowingly of the fine scenery, houses and people that made up Hartford. ‘In our enlightened land’, Robinson proclaimed, ‘teachers are loved & respected … as much as any members of society’. She offered assurances that the new high school was ‘one of the most desirable’ and that the ‘youth of Connecticut’ were ‘docile, and … ready to receive instruction’. Believing that the social world was at least as much an incentive as the school, Robinson assured Sophia Stevens that if she accepted the post in Hartford she would be introduced to the city’s ‘best young ladies, the admired of all admirers’.

As Robinson predicted, Hartford’s high-school teachers were indeed offered the opportunity to form friendships with the daughters of prominent families. Sophia Stevens, for example, proudly informed her mother that she saw ‘a good deal’ of Eliza Trumbull, the governor’s daughter. Stevens’s inclusion in a selective group of young women appealed to her. In addition to Trumbull, her new circle of friends included Emily Perkins, Sarah Robinson and Elizabeth Hamersley, all of whom were from socially
and economically powerful families. These women gathered together on Wednesday evenings for their ‘Now and Then’ meetings, which Stevens called a ‘small sewing society of select girls’. In addition to the sewing society, women teachers were also asked to join their new friends once a week for Bible study. Both activities were common outlets for women in Hartford, and suggest that women teachers were encouraged to replicate conventional gender patterns.9

In addition to providing respectable homes, the supporters of educational reform integrated the new teachers into the city’s social fabric. When newcomers arrived in Hartford, for example, they were announced in the newspapers as new teachers, and a wealthy philanthropist made all the teachers of the high school life members of the local tract society.10 Although they conceded an enormous amount of autonomy to women teachers during school hours, community leaders worked hard to recreate patterns of female sociability that centred around benevolence, the church and the family. While Hartford had a long tradition of women educators (most notably Catharine Beecher and the teachers she trained and recruited at the Hartford Female Seminary), male educational reformers sought to shape the experiences of these independent women teachers and to channel their activities in directions that the community accepted. The boarding of HPHS teachers in elite homes and their inclusion in benevolent associations presented them with spaces to live and to socialise that were similar to the experiences of young Hartford women who did not teach.

The process of incorporating newcomers into accepted social patterns occurred in formal and informal settings. Letters indicate that teachers attended social gatherings regularly, sometimes three or four times a week, and became enmeshed in the active social life that young men and women conducted in Hartford. One fancy dress party, where all the guests dressed up as historical figures or characters from popular books, captivated attention. ‘The fame of it has spread abroad & every body is anxious to have the party at their house’, one guest noted proudly, but added, ‘It will not be made very public’. While these gatherings might be commonplace for the daughters of wealthy families, the exclusivity of the social relationships was heady stuff for some of the teachers. At social events they had the opportunity to meet influential people, including members of the Connecticut legislature and, on one occasion, the Secretary of State. The importance of these cultural exchanges was not lost on the teachers themselves, and one noted that she was ‘gratified to find teaching so genteel a business as it is in Hartford’. Part of the attraction of the teaching position, therefore, was that it offered refinement and status.11

Yet living ‘respectably’ in Hartford society cost money, more money than some teachers had available to them. To attend these gala affairs,
fashionable dresses needed to be made or old ones ornamented. Sophia Stevens, for instance, did not want to appear at parties in shabby clothes and hoped that her parents would pay the cost of a new black silk dress for spring. Although she assured her parents that she would not adopt ‘city notions and extravagances’, Stevens had to balance the expectations of her new friends with those of her parents in Vermont. Her father, for example, hoped that she would refuse most invitations to parties, and that if she did attend, she would not dance. While Sophia acceded to her father’s wish that she avoid dancing, she did not agree to refuse all invitations, adding ‘I have no desire to make myself conspicuous by my oddities’.12

Despite links between the daughters of respectable families and women teachers, the two groups, in fact, did not always share the same expectations for their role as women. Although Sarah Robinson acknowledged that ‘It is an excellent thing for a young lady to teach’, she never sought that path herself. Ultimately, the desire of some women to teach – or the economic necessity that propelled their vocational choice – distanced them from the more comfortable and conventional world of women like Sarah Robinson. At one point, Robinson even voiced irritation that Stevens’s schoolwork interfered with her willingness to attend parties. This palpable cultural distance necessarily influenced how women teachers were perceived by Hartford society. Even though Olivia Day confidently stated that Sophia Stevens was ‘very much beloved by those who are at all intimate with her’, she acknowledged that some found her ‘odd on slight acquaintance’. While Day never spelled out exactly why some found Stevens unusual, others shared her assessment. Emily Perkins lamented to her cousin, ‘I am sure you cannot tell [Sophia’s] full value on ordinary acquaintance. She is different from other girls in general – so generally unappreciated’. There are many possible reasons for their perception of Stevens’s difference. First, the Stevens family was not independently wealthy and consequently Sophia was dependent on the income from her work and could not spend as much money on clothes or other forms of personal adornment. Second, all of Stevens’s letters indicate that her devotion to learning and to teaching distinguished her from many of the young women with whom she socialised in Hartford. Despite the parties they attended, women teachers like Stevens formed their primary identity based upon the work that they did at school, and their interaction with their colleagues and students.13

‘Generally surrounded by a group of scholars’

While the whirl of Hartford’s social life initially proved exciting to the teachers at the high school, and offered a welcome distraction from the periodic drudgery of their work, it did not domesticate them. Soon the
novelty of parties wore off, and they instead represented an intrusion into an already busy schedule. Because they took their identity as learned women and the success of the school seriously, they spent time developing the necessary professional skills that would make them effective teachers. To negotiate the inevitable period of adjustment to the new school and community, teachers formed their strongest relationships not with the sons and daughters of the elite but with other teachers. While they happily interacted with Hartford society, the teachers at the high school developed their own community that sustained them during their professional struggles.

To mitigate the isolation of a new job and a new city, many teachers hoped that friends from home would be hired to fill vacant positions. Pleased that both she and her friend were offered jobs in Hartford, Marion Goodrich remarked, ‘It has always been a dream of Mary’s and mine to teach together but it is seldom that such an opportunity offers’. Debating whether to accept a post in Hartford, Nancy Johnson assured her friend, ‘It would be no small part of the temptation that you would be my “fellow laborer” and companion’. But teachers formed new friendships as readily as they continued friendships from home: Olivia Day and Sophia Stevens, for example, quickly became friends, and Stevens would often spend the school vacations in New Haven with Day’s family. Stevens’s early letters to her parents testify to the depth of her admiration for her ‘sister Teacher’. Referring to Olivia Day as a ‘rare girl’ whom she loved ‘exceedingly’, Sophia Stevens described her as a genius who was ‘most deeply taught in both heart & intellect … Her wit is exceedingly sharp – but delicious. She has deep toned piety’. While Stevens had a good opinion of many of her acquaintances, no one else received such effusive or extensive praise. Their shared experiences in Hartford as women teachers in a new school created a powerful bond between the two women. Historian Carroll Smith Rosenberg has argued that schooling forged bonds of affection and mutual support that sustained women in their domestic lives. The Hartford educational experience suggests that they operated in a comparable fashion in public activities as well.

Not only were relationships created among those who worked at the high school, but a reciprocal concern for the institution itself existed among members of this educational community. As part of the first generation of teachers at HPHS, Day and Stevens were aware that they were crucial components in the success of an educational experiment, and they avidly followed the school’s progress. ‘The High School is knit to my heart’, remarked Olivia Day, ‘and sometimes I have to feel the pain of it’. The youth of the institution allowed its early teachers to shape its identity, and the principal, Thomas K. Beecher, inspired the teachers to commit themselves to the creation of an exemplary school. As a result of his efforts, the teachers expressed excitement about their work and optimism.
about its significance. Even after they left the high school, many teachers continued to be concerned with its welfare. By specifically referring to the HPHS as ‘our beloved institution’, Mary Torrey consciously identified herself as part of the group anxious about the school. The work of creating a viable school, in fact, encouraged their identification as a distinct community, and they keenly felt the departure of anyone in that group. ‘I cannot bear to think of what Hartford and the High School must seem without Mr. Beecher, Minnie or Miss Brognard’, lamented Mary Torrey after the three had left Hartford. ‘Its charm would be nearly lost to me I am sure’. The school was inseparable in their minds from the community of men and women who worked there.16

The shared experience of teaching, in fact, served as the basis for solidarity among teachers in the face of adversity, and sustained them as they coped with difficult tasks in the classroom. As a group, they confronted their vocational difficulties and supported new teachers who expressed serious doubts about their abilities. Many inexperienced teachers had trouble adjusting to their students, but Olivia Day actually experienced ‘cold chills’ whenever she thought about teaching in Hartford, and wondered if she should continue. Midway through her first year, Day described her appearance as ‘forlorn, bedraggled, chalky and school-worn’, and she often felt real weariness at week’s end. After one class had been ‘torturing’ Day with their ‘cold, almost insulting manner’, she sought freedom from the trials of her classroom and expressed deeply ambivalent feelings about teaching that highlight both the pain and the satisfaction she associated with her job. ‘If ever at the close of a recitation I can feel as if I had been teaching, in the lowest sense of the word’, Day wrote a friend, ‘I am sufficiently happy’. She admitted however, that ‘There are days when I never have this pleasure, when everything drags – mortifies – perplexes – when my whole connection with the school seems an absurd farce – and even my assumed part is hard to play’. Although the work was often frustrating, the educational community of teachers and students that existed at Hartford Public High School remained an appealing package that Day would not easily relinquish or replace.17

Even for those women who did leave, the school remained an important part of their lives. While still working at HPHS, Marion Goodrich could not imagine wanting to even hear the school’s name once she departed. Yet after returning to Burlington, Vermont, she remembered her students, especially her ‘pet class’ in geometry, when it was time for their recitations. ‘I wish I could see that Geometry class of mine’, wrote Goodrich, ‘for I shall always claim it’. It was common for teachers to voice mixed emotions about their work. After the death of her mother necessitated her return to New Haven, Olivia Day thought of the ‘trials and delights’ of her former history class and felt ‘a deep sense of loss, that I knew not well how
to bear it’. Yet moments later, Day likened the school to a prison. ‘Today I remembered you, at two o’clock’, Day wrote Stevens, ‘for never did school come so near to seeming a bondage & a drudgery, as when that great unshaded building stared down on me, as I returned to it in the afternoon’. The cessation of teaching represented for Day an end to the fears that plagued her, but also the loss of a public identity that gave purpose and direction to her life.\(^{18}\)

While teaching caused some women to experience periodic doubts about their vocation, others became progressively more self-confident and assertive. As principal, Beecher encouraged all teachers to become ‘independent & individually strong’, but the one who emerged from the group to become Beecher’s deputy or confidential friend was Sophia Stevens. In Stevens, Beecher recognised a will as strong as his own and ‘an energy that has often sustained’ his. Like the New England women schoolteachers examined by historian Jo Anne Preston, Sophia Stevens exhibited a belief in her own worth and a willingness to assert herself. While she accepted the school’s offer of $300 per year to start, Stevens expected a $100 raise each year and confidently asserted, ‘If I am worth anything I am worth this salary as I believe I shall have proved to them this year’. Stevens quickly emerged as a leader within the community of teachers who faithfully advanced Beecher’s vision for the school.\(^{19}\)

Being part of the first generation of teachers at Hartford Public High School created in Stevens a desire for personal excellence linked to the success of the institution. She launched projects, like the creation of a girls’ gymnasium, that would both improve the school and help her carve out a leadership role as well. To be an effective educational leader, however, Stevens believed that she needed to continue her own learning. Historian Mary Kelley has demonstrated that many women of Stevens’s generation used books as ‘the site for experiments in personal transformation’, and as mechanisms to fashion their own distinctive personal identity despite the limits created by gender convention. For Stevens, reading clearly held a central place in this personal maturation process, and increasingly served her practical desire for institutional power. During her first year at the high school, for example, she read John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* and Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, books that helped her operate within the educated social world of Hartford. At this stage in her life, with her ambition still unformed, the reading groups and the parties she attended often appeared interchangeable – as young men and women used books as part of their courtship rituals. Yet in her second year, she became committed to excellence in her chosen vocation, and her reading supported this ambition. Instead of detailing Hartford’s social life, her letters home increasingly emphasised her directed programme of reading, and an intense interest in augmenting her influence at the school.\(^{20}\)
As she realised that she had the opportunity to achieve a considerable amount at Hartford Public High School, her reading became directed to a specific programme of study. Proclaiming a ‘mania for study’, Stevens energetically attacked Blackstone and Hume as well as works of English constitutional history and Richard Hildreth’s *History of the United States*. Insisting that her ambition did not interfere with her school duties, she asserted, ‘I find the more I study – the better I can teach’. Ultimately, however, her ambition extended beyond excellence in the classroom: she wanted to run a school. For Stevens, the first step toward achieving this goal was to develop her intellectual capacities to the fullest.21

Her energy in the classroom, commitment to intellectual development, and ambition to become an educational leader had a powerful impact on the students in her charge. During her three years at the high school, Sophia Stevens became a compelling model for young female students, who sometimes called themselves her ‘adopted daughter’. Charlotte Braddock, whose decision to teach at the high school was doubtless influenced by Stevens, offered this testimonial: ‘I do believe I never knew a teacher, that I loved more. I hope you will always remember me’. Stevens achieved a level of popularity with the students that attests to her personal charisma and professional commitment. As one student noted, Stevens was ‘generally surrounded by a group of scholars’ who competed for her attention and approval. This devotion from students, like the support she had among the teaching corps, gave Stevens a level of power within the high school. Her ability to build support among city residents, students and teachers both encouraged and enabled her to wield influence at an institution that reserved formal leadership positions for men.22

While Sophia Stevens received glowing testimonials from many of her female students, she had more trouble with the boys. One of her students, J. Pierpont Morgan, particularly resented her authority in the classroom. When Stevens had occasion to send him out of class for disruptive behaviour, her action was met with disdain from the future financier. Playing the part of the persecuted pupil, Morgan demanded to know how she could treat him in such an ‘inhumane manner’ for ‘laughing a little too loud’, an action he assured his teacher he was ‘perfectly unable to control and which no punishment will cure me of’. In an attempt to reverse the hierarchy of teacher and pupil, Morgan threatened to leave Stevens’s classes in history and grammar and move to other sections if she would not treat him better. Some of Morgan’s indignation no doubt stemmed from the fact that Sophia Stevens stood before him as a confident, powerful woman. The negative comments by Morgan stand alongside the almost worshipful attention she received from many of her female students as indications of Stevens’s growing power at the high school.23
While Beecher was the acknowledged leader at the school, Sophia Stevens had emerged as his unofficial second in command, and the centre of a dynamic group of teachers who shared similar aspirations for the future of the institution and who effectively worked and socialised together. A series of events that began in 1849 and culminated in Beecher’s departure in the spring of 1850, however, demonstrated both the fragility of this educational community and its power to encourage individual teachers to challenge conventional gender patterns. This change in personnel created deep rifts among the school board, teachers, students and city residents as two short-lived replacements failed to exercise effective leadership. By the time the school found a principal who satisfied all parties, every teacher who had served under Beecher had left. In the years before their departure, however, they struggled to prevent the school’s destruction and to preserve the community of teachers who would make HPHS ‘a bright & shining light’.

‘If I only wore a coat and pants’

In the decade following its founding, Hartford Public High School faced repeated struggles for control of its curriculum and its methods of discipline that pitted teachers, principals and board members against one another. These conflicts were severe and protracted and therefore presented a serious challenge to the viability of the institution. The nature of the conflict, however, has been very difficult to determine precisely because the official history of the school masked the conflict behind bland rhetoric. Manuscript sources, in contrast, add depth to the conflict and expose the power relations between the community, male administrators and women teachers. Most studies of public high schools in the nineteenth century highlight the role of an all-male cast of board members and principals who divided the governance of the school. While scholars have amply documented the role of women in the classroom, they have rarely placed women within the decision-making structure of public institutions. Women’s authority over disciplinary matters, the hiring of teachers, or curricular decisions is usually associated only with the female seminary.

In their book on co-education, David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot focused on the role of male school officials in devising school policy. Although Tyack and Hansot acknowledged that women teachers in urban schools did not always agree with these directives, their reliance on official sources conveys the impression that women were not in a position to influence decisions of the governing structure. The especially rich collection of private correspondence that centres on Sophia Stevens and Hartford Public High School suggests that women teachers were not content to
allow male principals or school boards to make policy decisions without them. Instead, the Hartford example fits in with the recent work of historians like Kathleen Weiler and Victoria-Maria MacDonald, who have found that increased institutional control over schools did not necessarily mean the absence of autonomy or agency for women teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the process, they have presented a more nuanced understanding of the lives of women teachers. As historians are uncovering in both rural and urban institutional contexts, women teachers in Hartford contested the gendered allocation of power and authority. In a period when the urban public high school had not been fully centralised or bureaucratised, the actions of Sophia Stevens and her band of fellow teachers illuminate the ways in which women used their support from the community and the students to claim institutional power. Although formal power was in fact reserved for men at co-educational institutions, women teachers, like their counterparts in female seminaries, did play a vital role in setting the agenda.

Women teachers at Hartford Public High School were uniquely suited to influence school governance for a number of reasons. First, all teachers at the high school from its founding through 1851 were women. Though the faculty was evenly divided between men and women for the remainder of the 1850s, in the early phase of the high school a disproportionate number of responsibilities fell on women teachers. While no evidence from the school committee exists to suggest that hiring only women was a conscious policy, it could easily have emerged from the structure of Hartford education itself. As historian John L. Rury has noted, changes in the antebellum labour market had led to the feminisation of teaching as men increasingly selected more lucrative professional alternatives. During the 1840s, numerous women worked in Hartford’s primary schools, but they were most visible in the various female academies, especially the Hartford Female Seminary. Founded by Catharine Beecher in the 1820s, the Hartford Female Seminary had remained an important educational institution in the city that used a rigorous curriculum and graduated scores of talented, accomplished and influential women. Many of the vocal male supporters of the high school, including Horace Bushnell, David Robinson, and Amos Collins, were also trustees of the Hartford Female Seminary and consequently had experience dealing with effective women teachers. Having witnessed Catharine Beecher’s success in institution building, as well as the accomplishments of graduates like Frances Strong, who went on to run the seminary, trustees like Robinson were prepared to take the ideas of women teachers seriously. After becoming chair of the HPHS governance committee in January 1850, David Robinson repeatedly sought Sophia Stevens’s advice on matters of hiring teachers and the standards for student admissions.
Such advice was invaluable during the early years of the school’s existence. When Hartford Public High School was founded, an enormous number of issues needed to be addressed: teachers needed to be hired and retained, standards needed to be set for the admission of students and methods of teaching needed to be adopted. Naturally, disagreements often occurred. The annual reports of the high school indicate that in addition to divisions among committee members, serious chasms emerged between the committee and the principal over how these tasks should be implemented. Perhaps because they understood that public opinion might swing against the high school, members of the Board of Visitors were especially sensitive to criticisms of the school that circulated informally and within the press. The community’s willingness to accept tax increases for the school was, of course, in part based upon the perceived success of the school in fulfilling its mission. Rumours that radical teaching methods reigned at the school, for instance, would prove especially embarrassing to the board that had to justify the school’s existence.

The 1849 report of the School Visitors revealed that the principal, Thomas K. Beecher, was at the centre of a debate over the running of the school. The report stated that ‘the theory of discipline, and of instruction’ at the high school was ‘peculiar … broad and radical’. Negotiating the precise allocation of power within the governance of the school, the committee chose to move away from its earlier commitment to grant considerable freedom to the principal in the general conduct of the school. Demonstrating that Beecher had some support on the board, however, they opted to give their young principal another year to prove the worth of his pedagogy. Yet by spring 1850, Thomas Beecher’s tenure at Hartford Public High School had ended and his departure set in motion an expansion of conflict and not its resolution. While the 1849 report revealed that some disagreement existed among board members, it minimised both its nature and severity.

The circumstances surrounding Thomas Beecher’s appointment in Hartford are unclear, but a recent biographer has suggested that a family friendship with Horace Bushnell, a Hartford minister who actively supported the creation of the high school, may have played an instrumental role in his selection. Based upon their general hiring practices, it is probable that the school board relied heavily on personal recommendations from influential residents, whether from Bushnell or others, to fill the vacancy created when the first principal stepped down for health reasons after only one term. Prior to becoming principal of Hartford Public High School, Beecher had been the head of the Northeast Boys Grammar School in Philadelphia. In both assignments, he displayed an independence of mind that led him to become embroiled in educational politics. Beecher chafed, for example, at the demand that he teach his students...
primarily for the high-school entrance exam. He refused, stating ‘I cannot do injustice to my scholars & education by stuffing them for a technical examination – training them to esteem words more important than ideas’. Believing confidently in the superiority of his own educational ideas, Beecher did not shy away from confrontation with those who did not accept them.30

When Beecher arrived at HPHS, he implemented a theory of teaching that was at odds with the conventional practice in Hartford, which emphasised rote learning and rigid discipline. Exploring his goals for the school in a letter to one prospective teacher, Beecher remarked that he wanted to offer students the ‘highest range of abstract analysis’, which would force them to truly understand subjects like English grammar, rather than to memorise rules. These theories were not out of step with antebellum trends in education, but they did stand out in Hartford. While Beecher’s methods were greeted with scepticism by the Hartford school board, they found favour with many of the teachers. Within weeks of her arrival in Hartford, one teacher was sending excited letters back to her family about Beecher’s methods. Exulting that ‘Thinking is the thing to be taught’, Sophia Stevens revealed that the corps of teachers rejected the authority of traditional texts in favour of the ‘deepest closest analysis’.31 Beecher and his converts wanted to encourage principles and ideas to emerge in the mind of the learner rather than be transplanted there by a book or a teacher. This theory of teaching, combined with Beecher’s opposition to corporal punishment, appeared too lax for some in the community and caused the board to constrain Beecher’s power as principal.

The controversy came to a head in December 1849 and Beecher left the school soon after, believing that his time in Hartford represented his ‘crucifixion as a teacher’. Rumours circulated in the press about the ‘fearful anarchy and insubordination’ that reigned at the school, and one teacher heard a story in New York that Beecher ‘left the school because it was in a state of open rebellion’! Student assessments, however, did not substantiate this view. One student remarked that the school was ‘melancholy’ after Beecher’s departure and that ‘it has not seemed at all like the High School of 1848 and 1849’.32 In fact, the school had trouble finding an adequate replacement, with two men serving as the school’s principal for only one term each. All published histories of the high school merely list the men who acted as principal, and suggest that their short tenure in office created some instability at the school. Broadening the sources beyond published annual reports allows a fuller and more nuanced portrait of the school to emerge.33

At the core of the conflict were arguments about pedagogy and authority, but the dispute itself exposed the gendered dynamics of power at the school. Beecher had many converts among the teachers and students, and
when he was forced to leave in 1850, a group of women teachers led by Sophia Stevens attempted to continue his methods and campaigned for his reinstatement. Using her popularity among the students and her connections with Hartford’s social elite, Stevens was also instrumental in the dismissal of the two principals who succeeded Beecher. Her role in the firing of these two men, which appears nowhere in the official histories of the school, reveals both the multifaceted nature of power in nineteenth-century educational institutions and the extent to which the influence of women has been obscured. A glance through the annual reports of the school suggests that only men, either as principals or as the Board of Visitors, had the authority to govern the school. Yet the annual reports fail to capture the ways that women teachers exercised power informally. Sophia Stevens understood that converting people to her ideas would allow her to negotiate power and successfully ‘de-throne’ male principals who did not adhere to her philosophy of teaching.

During her years in Hartford, Sophia Stevens had developed into an experienced teacher who won praise from students, parents and board members. With her success in the classroom came added responsibility at the school. Stevens, for instance, was asked by the school committee to write letters to other women teachers she knew to see if they would be willing to fill posts in Hartford. The committee’s willingness to hire new teachers on her recommendation made Stevens proud that she had earned such a respected position at the school and in the community. By playing a vital role in hiring new teachers, Sophia Stevens was in a position to select those women who shared her ideas about teaching. Moreover, the new teachers would be loyal to her, since she was instrumental in getting them their posts. Both elements increased her influence at the school and heightened her self-confidence so that she could act in ways usually reserved for men.34

When the board hired McLauren Cook to replace Beecher, Stevens initially hoped he would prove an adequate substitute for her mentor. Yet within a month, stories of his incompetence were circulating among Stevens and her friends. A former teacher at the high school was heartily amused by Sophia’s description of Cook, which she laughingly called ‘High Treason’, and sympathised with Sophia’s desire that Thomas Beecher would return to the school. Calling Cook a ‘ninny’, ‘rather stupid’ and ‘altogether too small potatoes’, Stevens hoped the school would be rid of him by Thanksgiving, and she was not alone in her criticism of the principal. Another teacher suggested that despite solid recommendations, he was an ‘unskillful person’ and ‘not the one’. Stevens and her fellow teachers ridiculed Cook’s shortcomings, almost willing him to fail so that he would be replaced quickly. On other occasions, they ignored Cook’s presence, assumed control over school governance, and performed his
duties for him. In November 1850, Stevens and her supporters were so effective in overseeing the examination of candidates for admission to the school that Cook was publicly relegated to an auxiliary position. ‘Mr. C acted merely as an assistant & poor at that’, Stevens wrote without concealing her contempt, noting with evident satisfaction that at least Cook was obedient. Stevens’s ability to establish an effective system of discipline for the school and to manage the end of term examinations increased her frustration with McLauren Cook’s incompetence. At the end of the semester, the school committee did in fact dismiss ‘him in a very mysterious quiet manner’.35

The ineffectiveness of Cook and the uncertainty caused by another leadership change after only one semester combined to create new problems for the school, and made its prospects look bleak. Two teachers, in fact, opted to leave the school and seek employment elsewhere. After returning home to Vermont, Marion Goodrich expressed relief to be out of the strife and even announced, ‘I’d rather be sick here than to go back to the High School’. For her part, Stevens had no confidence in the new principal, Cephas Leach. Labelling him a ‘no go’ and a ‘conceited drone’, Stevens pledged to stir up Leach or ‘else try to get him out of the way’.36 To carry out her plan, she asked friends for information about him. Catharine McKeen, a teacher in Massachusetts, warned that even though some spoke highly of Leach’s manner and his abilities, she thought ‘his head may have more solidity than his heart, beware’! Her immediate and visceral dislike of Leach caused Sophia’s parents to reproach her hasty judgement. Rather than feeling chastened, however, Sophia was proud that she had judged Leach’s character in less than six days, and believed that ‘every day since has been a practical demonstration of his inability to come within sight of our ideal of method’. Another teacher supported Stevens’s assessment and suggested that even the school committee was quickly disappointed in Leach, ‘one of that useful class of reptiles’. Acting on the firm conviction that the school would never prosper under Leach’s guidance, Stevens felt compelled to expose his shortcomings and ‘to keep the wreck above bottom’ without an overt expression of power.37

For almost a year, Sophia Stevens had been amassing informal power – students were fiercely loyal to her (Sophia claimed they were pledged to her like Freemasons), most of the teachers were personal friends and many in the community were convinced of her effectiveness. These factors gave her confidence to manoeuvre against Leach, but the strategy was not without risks. The new principal was deeply jealous both of her influence in the school and of her popularity with the students, and he was seeking to replace her. This barely-suppressed animosity between Stevens and Leach made school uncomfortable – she acknowledged that Leach was ‘most uncongenial to me,’ and any misstep could put her own job
in jeopardy. Pledging to pull ‘the strings to make the puppet go’, Stevens encouraged students to petition the committee for Leach’s removal, and to voice their support for Beecher’s return. One student reacted to this atmosphere of open criticism by composing and then circulating doggerel that lampooned both Cook and Leach as incompetent fools. Despite a growing consensus that the current principal was woefully inadequate, however, there was little community support for Beecher’s reinstatement. Even eight years after he had left the high school, stories were still circulating that Beecher had been a failure as principal. 38

The controversy soon extended beyond the walls of the school, and the institution’s future was debated at the annual public meeting in February 1851. The conflict surrounding the current principal and the general instability in the school’s administration created infighting among supporters of the school and provided a golden opportunity for its opponents to mobilise. Hoping to encourage community participation in the school meeting and forestall the rearguard action, the Hartford Courant announced that ‘an attempt is made to close the High School by refusing the necessary appropriation for its support’. One concerned observer noted with resignation, ‘I do not think the public care very much who heads the school – it is no such matter of life and death as it seems to us’. Believing that another leadership change would further erode community support for the school, the board opted to retain the current principal while closely monitoring his governance of the institution. 39

After the board extended his trial period, Leach sought to consolidate his power in the school and remove those elements that stood in his way. Sophia Stevens, because of her popularity and her refusal to accept his leadership, was a main target in his strategy. During the spring of 1851, therefore, a power struggle occurred between Leach and Stevens, as each plotted to remove the other and to cultivate the support of the board. Leach, for example, blamed his lack of early success on resistant teachers like Stevens, hoping they would resign. Responding with a strategy of circumspection, Stevens limited her attacks on his authority to covert actions, and instead fell back on her formidable reputation as a classroom teacher. She understood that openly engaging Leach would confirm his complaints about her, but publicly distancing herself from the conflict would make him look petty and unable to work with a popular and effective teacher. In May 1851, the board rejected Leach’s ultimatum that Stevens be removed and instead voted to dismiss him from Hartford Public High School. 40

Continuing her own efforts to exercise power at the school, Stevens soon initiated a petition drive to reinstate Beecher. Displaying her customary playfulness, she admitted that the committee ‘would kill me if they knew I was at the bottom of it. I have my confidential agents who
execute my orders. It will not perhaps bring Mr. B back – but it will stir up
the community a little – & I hate nothing so much as apathy’.41 These events
indicate that deep rifts had emerged over the governance of the school.
After four principals in its first four years, Hartford Public High School
struggled to fashion an identity that would attract community support.

The conflict at HPHS also had a profound impact on Sophia Stevens’s
awareness of her own power, intellect and ambitions. Her involvement in
the controversies surrounding the principals, for instance, taught her ‘the
way to deal with men’. Through creative means, Stevens found ways not
only to voice opinions, but also to influence substantive policy decisions.
Studying the ‘spirit of the community’ as carefully as she studied books,
she noted that social gatherings provided an excellent opportunity for a
woman to make her views known. ‘A gentleman over a plate of hot oysters
or a cup of coffee will most readily promise his name … to a project pro-
posed by a spirited young lady who entertains him with wit & pleasantry’s,
she informed her parents.42 School reformers had hoped that replicating
family life and conventional social activities would incorporate new
teachers into Hartford society, but the proximity between teachers and
the Hartford elite had unintended consequences. Women teachers at the
high school created new roles for themselves that blended the social world
of parties with a growing commitment to the success of the educational
endeavour. In fact, the bonds between teachers and elite families created
a ready-made network. Two years of working with – and, more import-
antly, socialising with – the elite in Hartford had taught Stevens how to
negotiate the corridors of power without a formal title.

Yet the lack of stability in the office of the principal induced Stevens
to move beyond merely influencing men at parties to consider her ideas
about running the high school. Some of the changes in her role at the school
occurred for purely practical reasons. In the interim between principals,
for example, Stevens, as a senior teacher, took on the added duties of
training the new staff. Her ease in carrying out her new assignments and
the enjoyment she derived from them, however, made formal power look
much more attractive. ‘I have produced results by my power to command’
rather than by moral influence, she noted with pride after managing the
school for a day. Reflecting the social opprobrium that would be heaped
on a woman who left her assigned sphere, Sophia’s brother cautioned that
‘educated ladies are too apt to be masculine in their manner – they forget
their tender nature’. Despite the admonition, Stevens believed she was
capable of effectively running the school, and wished for the chance to prove
it. Exuding self-confidence, she informed her parents, ‘Your daughter will
show herself a man & do right valiantly. The school shall be better taught
& better managed than it has been for a year. Some of my theories will
be tested thoroughly’. The language she used in this instance is especially

revealing. By telling her parents that she would ‘show herself a man’, Sophia Stevens underscored the gulf that stood between her ambition to serve the school and social expectations of the proper role for women.43

Although she believed that she had all the energy, ideas and connections necessary to be the school’s principal, Stevens understood that she would never be given that title in Hartford. She felt keenly the limitations of her position. As her involvement in running the school increased, so too did her ambition. ‘I feel a power within me’, asserted Stevens, ‘to be a better principal than any we have had yet’. Aware that her stated desire to run a school might sound presumptuous, she assured her parents that ‘I do not overrate the power that is in me’. In fact, Sophia was developing solutions to some of the basic problems that plagued the school. She wanted to re-organise the elementary schools so that all students who entered the high school would meet a minimum standard, an issue that was regularly addressed in the school’s annual reports. However certain of the value of her ideas, Sophia understood that she could not be principal. ‘If I only wore a coat & pants’, she told her parents, ‘I would seize the office at once’. Her growing self-confidence that she possessed the skills necessary to be an effective leader ran headlong into the realisation that her gender made her ambition unattainable.44

Sophia Stevens decided to leave Hartford in the summer of 1851, after three years of arduous service to the school. She married Stephen Hitchcock, a Vermont educator, and together they started a female academy in their home state. Although Stephen Hitchcock’s death soon after the school opened in 1852 prevented the realisation of her plan for a more equitable distribution of power, Sophia Stevens had come to believe that only at a female seminary could she see her ‘experiments in female education tried’. Before she left Hartford, however, Sophia mobilised her fellow teachers one last time to demand that the school board pay them for the extra work they had performed while the school was without a principal. She hoped to force the board to recognise that since the teachers did the work of the principal, they should be compensated accordingly. As she expected, the board ignored the petition.45 Nonetheless, this final skirmish demonstrates how the experience of working at the school had raised her consciousness of the inequitable distribution of power in public education. For three months, the women teachers faithfully performed the duties of the absent principal, yet they received no monetary compensation for their service, and all official documents of the school effectively erased their contribution from the historical record.

These events surrounding the departure of Beecher and the two principals who succeeded him provide a much-needed window into the dynamics that operated at public high schools in the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to the creation of a centralised bureaucracy that controlled
school governance, urban high schools like HPHS represented contested terrain. Members of educational communities, which often included residents, board members, the principal and teachers, jockeyed for position so they could mould high schools to fit their own understanding of what these new institutions should be. Women teachers are not usually considered a powerful constituency in this negotiation, but the actions of Sophia Stevens and her compatriots afford a unique opportunity to re-evaluate the meaning of educational politics from a gendered perspective. The responsibilities assigned to Sophia Stevens and the other women teachers were in part a consequence of ineffective leadership by two male principals. Had Beecher remained at the school or had the committee found a replacement who could retain his position and implement his vision for the school, Stevens would have had fewer opportunities to exercise power. The experience of working for men whom she believed were incompetent, however, led her to question the gendered hierarchy of school governance and to become conscious of the subordinate position of women. Despite real constraints, women teachers created informal mechanisms to exercise authority over the educational process. Their friendships with city residents, their solidarity as teachers, their commitment to the educational experiment and their drive to excel together created the foundation for women to move beyond the classroom, challenge male administrative prerogative and play a role in building a viable institution.

Notes
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1. Henry Stevens to Sophia Stevens [hereafter cited as SS], 29 March 1848, Doc. 30, Stevens Family Papers, Vermont Historical Society [hereafter cited as VtHS].


7. SS to Henry Stevens, 2 December 1848; SS to Candace Stevens, 31 December 1848, 17 February 1849, 26 November 1849, Doc. 30, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS; Frederick Law Olmsted to John Hull Olmsted, 10 February 1849, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. [hereafter cited as FLO Papers, LC]; Olivia Day to Elizabeth Baldwin, 14 April 1849, Box 28, Folder 323, Baldwin Family Papers, Yale University Library.

8. Sarah A. Robinson to SS, 12 September 1848; 31 October 1848, Stevens Family Papers, Doc. 30, VtHS.

9. SS to Candace Stevens, 17 February 1849, 13 March 1849, Doc. 30, Stevens Family Correspondence, VtHS; Olivia Day to Elizabeth Baldwin, 14 April 1849, Box 28, Folder 323, Emily Perkins to Elizabeth Baldwin, 14 May 1849, Box 28, Folder 324, Baldwin Family Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT; Libby Hamersley to Sophia Stevens Hitchcock, 18 October 1851, William Page Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC [hereafter cited as AAA].

10. SS to Candace Stevens, 17 February 1849, 13 March 1849, Doc. 30, Stevens Family Correspondence, VtHS.

11. SS to Candace Stevens, 19 November 1848, 26 November [1848], 10 June 1849, Doc. 30; SS to Candace Stevens, 24 February 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Correspondence, VtHS; SS to Stephen Hitchcock, 20 November 1849, William Page Papers, AAA.

12. SS to Candace Stevens, 26 November 1848; SS to Henry Stevens, 10 December 1848, Doc. 30, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.

13. Olivia Day to Elizabeth Baldwin, 14 April 1849, Box 28, Folder 323; Emily Perkins to Elizabeth Baldwin, 14 May 1849, Box 28, Folder 324, Baldwin Family Papers, Yale University Library; Sarah Robinson to SS, nd Folder 3, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.

14. Marion M. Goodrich to SS, 7 January 1850; Nancy Johnson to SS, 12 January 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.


16. Olivia Day to SS, 15 March 1850; MC Torrey to SS, 21 August 1850, 8 January 1851, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.

17. Olivia Day to Thomas K. Beecher, 1 November 1848, Box 12, Folder 202, Day Family Papers; Olivia Day to Elizabeth Baldwin, 14 April 1849, Box 28, Folder 323, Baldwin Family Papers, Yale University Library.

18. Marion M. Goodrich to SS, 10 January 1851, 22 January 1851; Olivia Day to SS, 15 March 1850, 1 April 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.

20. Mary Kelley, ‘Reading Women / Women Reading,’ p. 403; SS to Candace Stevens, 3 February 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.
21. Sophia Stevens to Candace Stevens, 3 February, 10 March, 7 April, 8 September, 2 October 1850, 1 February, 9 June 1851, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Correspondence, VtHS.
22. Lottie Braddock to SS, 18 July 1851, Josie Carpenter to Olivia Day, 21 April 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS. After Stevens left the high school, several former pupils wrote her letters offering testimonials of her influence on their lives. See for example, L. Allyn to Sophia Stevens Hitchcock, 27 September 1851, M. Smith to SSH, 18 October 1851, William Page Papers, AAA.
28. See for example, Sophia Stevens to Stephen Hitchcock, 13 January 1850, AAA. For information on the trustees of Hartford Female Seminary, see Catalogue of the Hartford Female Seminary, 1850–1851 (Hartford: Case, Tiffany & Co., 1851).
31. SS to Henry Stevens, 10 December 1848; SS to Candace Stevens, 31 December 1848, Doc. 30, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS; SS to Stephen Hitchcock, 26 May 1850, William Page Papers, AAA.

34. SS to Candace Stevens, 10 January 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS; SS to Stephen Hitchcock, 2 January 1850, 13 January 1850, William Page Papers, AAA.

35. Olivia Day to SS, October 1850; SS to Candace Stevens, 18 October 1850; M. B. Brognard to SS, 22 June 1851, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS; SS to Stephen Hitchcock, 29 September 1850, 13 October 1850, 27 October 1850, 20 November 1850, 24 November 1850, William Page Papers, AAA.

36. Marion M. Goodrich to SS, 22 January 1851, 2 February 1851; SS to Candace Stevens, 15 December 1850, 25 December 1850 Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.

37. Catharine McKeen to SS, 26 December 1850; SS to Candace Stevens, 19 January 1851; Marion M. Goodrich to SS, 9 February 1851, M. B. Brognard to SS, 22 June 1851, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.


40. SS to Stephen Hitchcock, 26 February 1851, 10 March 1851, 23 March 1851, 28 April 1851, 11 May 1851, 18 May 1851, William Page Papers, AAA.

41. SS to Candace Stevens, 9 June 1851, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS; SS to Stephen Hitchcock, 28 April 1851, May 4, 1851, William Page Papers, AAA.

42. SS to Henry and Candace Stevens, 1 December 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.

43. Simon Stevens to SS, 27 February 1851; SS to Henry & Candace Stevens, 1 December 1850, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS; SS to Stephen Hitchcock, 20 January 1850, 26 February 1851, William Page Papers, AAA.

44. SS to Henry and Candace Stevens, 1 December 1850; SS to Candace Stevens, 1 February 1851, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.

45. SS to Candace Stevens, 19 June 1851; SS to ‘Comtee of the H.P. High School’, nd, Doc. 30, folder 34; SS to Candace Stevens, 29 June 1851, Doc. 346, Stevens Family Papers, VtHS.