

Mary Lyon

Founder of Mount Holyoke College

Mary Mason Lyon opened the first women's college, which produced graduates that continued the advancement of women in education by becoming teachers and opening schools of their own. Her commitment to affordable education for women is what makes her one of the most influential women in advancement of women's education.



Mary Lyon was born in Buckland, Massachusetts in 1797 and began her education at a district school. She was very fortunate that the Buckland school allowed her to attend class all year because most schools at the time only allowed girls to attend school in the summer. Because her mother was a widow and the family needed her income, she began teaching at 17 in country schools in Massachusetts. After 1817, she alternately taught and studied, financing her own education. She attended Saunderson Academy in Ashfield, Massachusetts, Amherst Academy in Amherst, Massachusetts and the Byfield Female Seminary in Byfield, Massachusetts, spending all of her time either in the classroom teaching, at lectures, or traveling between the two. Lyon struggled to earn enough money to pay for her education and boarding and often traded blankets she had woven for room and board.

In 1824, she opened a girls' school in Buckland, Massachusetts. Beginning with twenty-five students, it quickly grew to four times that size because of Lyon's commitment to affordable tuition. In the summer, she joined her friend Polly (Polly) Grant at Adams Academy in New Hampshire, where the two of them set an important precedent by issuing diplomas to young women.

Lyon went outside of New England for the first time in the summer of 1833, going as far as Detroit to survey various schools. The most important of these visits was to Emma Willard's school in Troy, New York, which had set the model for female education since its 1819 founding. Determined to follow Willard's work at an even more advanced level, Lyon searched for interested donors. She raised funds for three years, obtaining sums that varied from six cents to hundreds of dollars. Lyon literally walked door-to-door and farm-to-farm, canvassing sixty Massachusetts towns to secure her goal of a \$30,000 endowment. Criticized for this behavior, she wrote to Grant, "I am doing a great work; I cannot come down." An innate public-relations genius, Lyon added, "the plan should not seem to originate with us, but rather with benevolent gentlemen."

Male town officials in South Hadley donated \$8,000 and thereby became the site of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Chartered by the state in 1836, Mount Holyoke opened in 1837 with approximately 80 students – and some 400 applicants were turned

away in 1838 for lack of space. Lyon's ideas set Mount Holyoke apart from the other seminaries of the time. She designed the school so that middle-class girls would be able to afford it because she knew that would have a greater influence on changing standards for female education. She required her students to participate in domestic work to keep the cost of tuition low. Students had to be at least 17 years of age and pass entrance exams. Lyon's wise business decisions made Mount Holyoke a successful and permanent fixture in women's education. Even though the nation's first serious depression hit in 1837, the year that it opened, and even though tuition-based schools remain a risky business today, hers was an unquestioned financial success from the beginning.

It also demonstrated that women wanted a serious education, similar to that of men's colleges. Although Mount Holyoke was not officially labeled a "college" until 1893, the school met all the academic standards of a college. Her emphasis on math and science was particularly unusual for a women's school. Students at Mount Holyoke were required to take 7 courses in math and science, which was unheard of at the time. Lyon's students also went on learning field trips and attended lectures of famous scientists. She personally taught chemistry and inspired her students to become researchers and science teachers. Another unusual activity was exercise: Lyon strongly believed in exercise and required her students to walk and participate in calisthenics on a daily basis.

Many students went on to become missionaries – or more exactly, wives of missionaries, usually from nearby Yale or Andover. By teaching around the world, these women spread American influence and values. Indeed, Lyon titled her only book, published in 1843, *A Missionary Offering*. Other graduates went on to open schools of their own, and they hugely influenced national ideals by teaching in the one-room schoolhouses of the western frontier.

Mary Lyon served as principal at Mount Holyoke for 12 years, expanding the curriculum and the space, but she suffered from increasingly severe headaches, especially after the suicide of a nephew. Worn out from her hard work in building the school, she died in her apartment at Mount Holyoke at just 52. Her grave site remains a feature of the campus grounds, while the college continues today as the first of New England's prestigious "Seven Sisters." Unlike many deserving women, Mary Lyon was honored soon after her 1849 death, with the first of several books of remembrance being published by Edward Hitchcock in 1851. It was titled *The Power of Christian Benevolence: The Life of Mary Lyon*.