

Michigan Female College founded in Lansing by two Rogers Sisters in 1855

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During the period from 1850 to 1870 opportunities for acquiring a college education were few and far between, as compared to our day. This applied to the education of young women especially as at that time practically no college admitted women on the same basis as men. In fact, it was generally believed that young girls should receive an entirely different line of instruction than the boys.

Women had not yet entered the professions or the business field, consequently the ordinary college curriculum did not apply to them at all, even had they been allowed to enter. In order to supply adequate facilities for higher education of young women during this period, a large number of seminaries, academies and 'female' colleges were organized. Many of these were incorporated and the records of that time show that almost every town in southern Michigan was the home of an institution of this character.

One of them was organized in Lansing and named by its founders "The Michigan Female College."

Organize School

In the early part of the year 1855 there arrived in Lansing two women, both of whom were destined to pass the remainder of their lives here and leave a lasting impression of the minds and characters of more than 1000 girls and young women who at various times came under their instruction and influence. These two women were the Misses Abigail and Delia Rogers. They were born in Genesee county New York, and were well qualified in every way for the work in hand. Both of their parents were teachers and had long been

identified with educational matters in their native state, so it was natural for the daughters to follow in the same vocation.

Very soon after arriving in town they organized their school and as their means were slender they could not build a building of their own, but were obliged to start in a rented location. About the only place that could be found was a two-story frame structure that stood on the south side of Washtenaw st. directly opposite the present building of the Lansing Capital News. This building was one of the first hotels erected in Lansing and was named the 'Ohio House,' but not proving profitable had been abandoned as a hotel and thus became available.

Land Donated

In this building the first modest start was made and in it the "College" was conducted for about three years. During this time they seem to have been successful and to have impressed their character and ability on some of the leading men of Lansing and also Detroit, because in 1858 they secured financial aid and backing enough to erect a suitable building for their work. A tract of land of about 20 acres was donated by James Turner, H.H. Smith and J.W. Collins, so it was only necessary for them to raise funds enough for the erection of a building. This land was located at the head of what was then Franklin st., now Grand River av., and is at present occupied by the Michigan School for the Blind.

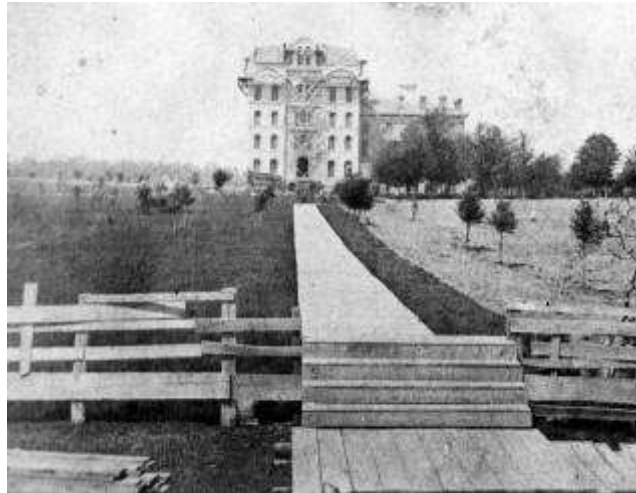
The two sisters had some funds of their own, which with other money subscribed by Lansing citizens, and very substantial aid from the Hon. Zachariah Chandler and Capt. Eber Ward of Detroit, enabled them to erect a 4-story brick building on the site.

The building was ready for occupancy in the autumn of 1858 and the "college" organized on a larger and more comprehensive basis. They could now take "boarding" as well as "day" students so the number of pupils increased very materially, many prominent families from all parts of the state sending their daughters for instruction. Capt. Ward, a wealthy ship owner and merchant of Detroit, seems to have taken a great interest in the

institution, and not only made substantial gifts, but also entered several of his daughters and granddaughters as students.

Elopes with Gypsy

One of these, Clara Ward, was the daughter of his eldest son John. She was a pupil for some years and after graduation attained a certain amount of fame or rather notoriety, by reason of her matrimonial adventures. She became a beautiful and brilliant woman, and going to Europe married a Belgian nobleman, the Prince DeChimay. This alliance did not long endure, and one day her relatives and friends were shocked to learn that she had left the Prince and eloped with a Gypsy musician named Rigo. On account of her social prominence and aristocratic connections this elopement created a tremendous sensation at the time.



For some years the school was conducted with considerable success, but in the days of our Civil War the financial burden evidently became somewhat onerous, as an effort was made to have the state take over the college and conduct it as a state institution. The proposition was urged at several sessions of the legislature, but received scant encouragement, probably on account of the exigencies arising by reason of the war.

After their request was finally rejected by the legislature, the two sisters continued as best they could and conducted the school until 1869. In that year the eldest, Miss Abigail, died, leaving the entire burden on the shoulders of her sister Delia. This proved too much for her to carry, so in the same year the college was closed and the business discontinued.

Sold to State

For a year or so the property remained idle, but in 1871 was sold to the Michigan Grand Lodge of Odd Fellows, who intended to use it for a charitable and benevolent institution in connection with their order. They made some improvements and enlarged the building but for some reason the project was dropped and the property rented to the state. It was finally purchased in 1874 and developed by the state of Michigan into the institution we now know as the School for the Blind.

After the college was discontinued, the surviving sister, Miss Delia, remained and honored and loved citizen of Lansing for many years, finally passing away on 1886 at the home of her niece, Mrs. S.L. Smith.

I am greatly indebted to Mr. James Seager and Mrs. Schuyler S. Olds, nephew and niece of the information from which this the Misses Rogers, for much of the article is written.