

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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CAROLINE PHIPPS ACHILLES 1812-1881

It was one hundred eighty-five years ago that Caroline Phipps, daughter of Joseph and Mary Phipps was born on March 12, 1812. She was the ninth child in a family of eleven children born at Rome, N.Y. In 1825 the family moved to Albion and located on a tract of land south of Eagle Harbor. A brother who was nine years older had built a log house prior to the family's arrival.

Caroline's early education was superintended by her father with great care at home. Her ambition at a very young age was to become a teacher. This desire was soon satisfied when at the tender age of only fourteen she was permitted to teach at a log school house 14x16 feet in size at Gaines Basin. Her compensation was one dollar per week and 'board around' as was the custom of that day. She taught several terms at Gaines Basin. In 1831 she entered the Gaines Academy for a year of academic work. This was followed by a year's study at a ladies' finishing school in Whitesboro, N.Y.

Returning to Albion and determined to teach permanently, she accepted a position in the classical school which had been opened by two ladies in Albion. Within a short time the premises was transferred to Miss Phipps in April 1833. The building which was located on the Court House Square had formally been the Eagle Tavern.

Acting on the premises that it was better to teach boys and girls in separate schools, she divided her scholars accordingly. After a time however, she declined to take boys as pupils. Her girls school became an immediate success so that by 1836 it was necessary to erect a more commodious building. The former structure was moved off the grounds and through the aid of prominent citizens, a large brick edifice measuring 40 x 60 feet with three floors was erected for \$17,000. It opened in January 1837 and quickly took rank as one of the best schools of its kind in Western N.Y. In 1840 this school was duly incorporated as the Phipps Union Female Seminary.

We must remember that at this point in our history, all secondary education (grades 9-12) was through private institutions, usually known as academies and primarily directed at boys.

In 1839 Miss Phipps married Colonel Henry L. Achilles and thereafter had his assistance in the direction of her enterprise. In 1856 due to increased demands, a wing was added to the building to accommodate boarders. At this time, there were 100 boarders, 100 day students and ten teachers.

On two occasions the property passed from her hands by sale, but both times it came back to her.



After marrying, she and her husband moved to Boston for a time leaving the seminary in the care of others. In 1849, to protect their interests, it was necessary to return to Albion and again take charge. The school immediately became prosperous. In 1866 she transferred it to others but was compelled to take charge again within three years.

In 1874 and 1875 two different fires caused damage to the building and furnishings. This coupled with the infirmities of old age, forced Caroline Phipps Achilles to terminate her career as an educator. She died in January 1881 in her living quarters at the seminary.

Later in 1881, the vacant and damaged seminary building and property was sold to Orleans County. The building was razed, the lot graded, and the site was then used for the County Clerk's Office which was built in 1882-83.

With very limited preparation, next to today's standards, Caroline Phipps Achilles, with great perseverance, accomplished what she undertook to do. She believed that education and culture went hand in hand. She displayed qualities of wisdom and courage at a time when often advanced female education was held in disfavor. She utilized her gifts and talents with which she was endowed, to make the world a better place to live for many young women.

The quality of her life was one of superlative usefulness, not unlike so many commonplace women whose names are long forgotten.