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The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South

Christie Anne Farnham

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The American South before the Civil War was the site of an unprecedented social experiment in women's education. The South offered women an education explicitly designed to be equivalent to that of men, while maintaining and nurturing the gender conventions epitomized by the ideal of the Southern belle. This groundbreaking work provides us with an intimate picture of the entire social experience of antebellum women's colleges and seminaries in the South, analyzing the impact of these colleges upon the cultural construction of femininity among white Southern women, and their legacy for higher education. Christie Farnham investigates the contradiction involved in using a male-defined curricula to educate females, and explores how educators denied these incongruities. She also examines the impact of slavery on faculty and students. The emotional life of students is revealed through correspondence, journals, and scrapbooks, highlighting the role of sororities and romantic friendships among female pupils. Farnham ends with an analysis of how the end of the Civil War resulted in a failure to keep up with the advances that had been achieved in women's education. The most comprehensive history of this brief and unique period of reform to date, The Education of the Southern Belle is must reading for anyone interested in women's studies, Southern history, the history of American education, and female friendship.

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