

# Lives Sacrificed to a Beautiful Building: The Early Years of Sage College, Housing Coeducation and a Reversal of Spatial Autonomy

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**This paper takes Sage Hall during the period from 1872 to 1884 as its architectural subject. The former date marks its construction on the campus of Cornell University, significant for being the first accommodation made by an American east coast university for the sake of co-education. The latter date marks an incident in which the University's Board of Trustees decreed that all women students who chose not to live in Sage Hall would be effectively expelled. Architecturally, Sage Hall was a key player in each of these episodes. As a dormitory, it programmatically mitigated what was perceived to be women's lesser physiological capacity for academics, and trained women for their social role as men's helpers. Sage Hall was also a clear manifestation of the difference in pedagogical obligations conferred to the male students, and was ultimately a crucial point of leverage by which the Board wrested autonomy and self-governance from the women students. In other words, Sage Hall was both a result and means of enforcing separate rules depending on students' sex.**

## INTRODUCTION: THE STORY OF JENNIE SPENCER

Early arguments for coeducation were a manifestation within the scholastic context of larger national conversations about women's political, professional, and personal capabilities. Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, had an important place in this national debate, for while not the first nationally, it was the first east coast university to offer coeducation. This aligned both chronologically and geographically with larger national movements, for although women would not earn the vote until 1920, the Seneca Falls Convention was held just forty miles from Ithaca, in 1848, and the National Women's Rights Convention just two years later.

While Cornell's motto to "found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study" was ostensibly meant to apply from the outset to women as well as men, it was not until five years after its founding that the university first accepted a woman student. Jennie Spencer of Cortland, New York, was admitted in 1870, but withdrew within her first month, citing the difficulty of the commute from town to campus. This was no light claim, as making the 400-foot ascent multiple times a day was a significant difficulty before public transportation. The cinched waists, long skirts, and cumbersome petticoats that typified women's clothing at the time would have made the trek even more untenable. Spencer's withdrawal from the university became a rallying point in pushing for the construction of coeducational facilities. Two

years after her withdrawal, local businessman Henry W. Sage offered the funds necessary to build a college for women on Cornell's campus.

In this case, material conditions that were presumed to merely signal sexual difference actually produced and guaranteed their initial presumption. The standard of American dress in the late 19th century dictated elaborate textile embellishment for women's fashion. The added restriction of such dress ultimately so taxed Jennie Spencer that it made the fulfillment of her scholastic duties prohibitively burdensome. Succumbing to this manufactured helplessness then provided opportunity for a well intentioned man in an attitude of paternalism—that benevolent face of masculine hegemony—to 'rescue' her. The story of Jennie Spencer, in other words, demonstrates in miniature a dynamic that would later play out at larger scale with Sage College.

## LETTERS OF ORGANIZATION

There are three administrative documents important to the development and management of Sage College, referred to here, for the sake of brevity, as the Report on Organization, the Sage Proposal, and the Dear Friend Circular. Cornell's first president, A.D. White, was central to the production of these documents, and to the University's wider architectural and pedagogical development. Written soon after Cornell's founding, and two years before its opening, White's 1866 "Report of the Committee on Organization" demonstrated his sensitivity to the ways in which spatial relations influenced social relationships. It stated without equivocation that "[t]he committee are decidedly opposed to any large adoption of a dormitory system,"<sup>1</sup> and presented only two circumstances under which dormitories might be considered to be of some benefit. The first was to give Cornell a point of financial leverage by which to regulate the local housing market, the second was to meet a need for temporarily housing large numbers of students engaged in various research and work on University land. Both concerns were dismissed on the assumption that the growing town would soon alleviate the need for both.

A more significant objection was that the dormitory system "tends to put the professorial corps in the attitude of policemen. And the situation is made all the worse by the fact that the professor is armed with no authority under the law of the land, and so comes to be regarded not even as a policeman, but as a spy... Nothing could be more fatal to hearty, kindly relations between teachers and taught" (White 1866, 45). White

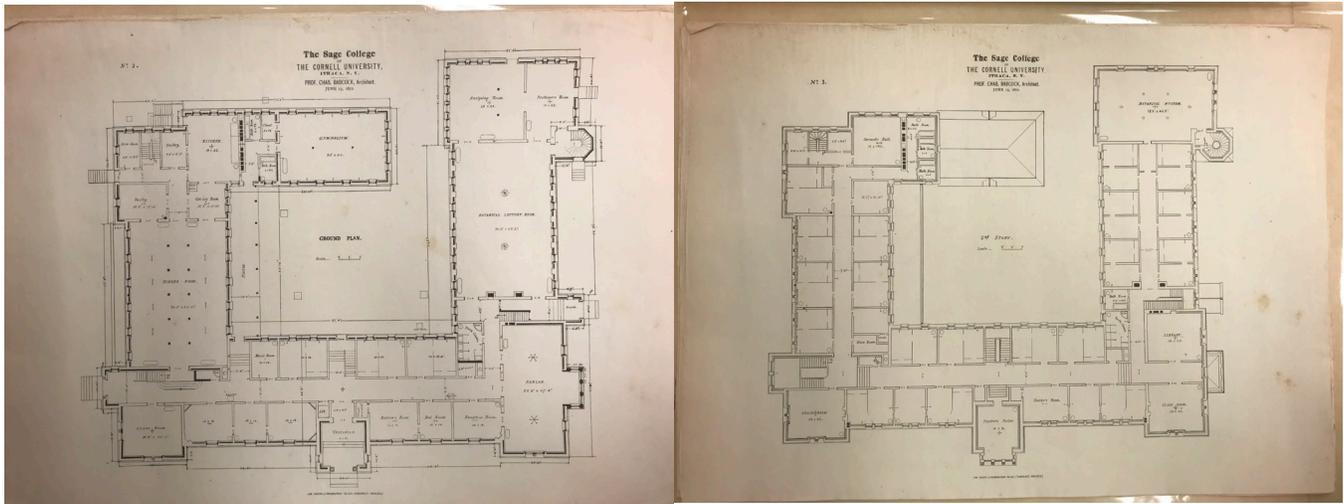


Figure 1: Sage College Floor Plans, Ground and Second Floor, ca. 1874, Kroch Archives.

believed that supervision and surveillance to be outside the pedagogical jurisdiction of the university, but that one of a student's chief responsibilities was the management of their own liberty, an exercise fundamentally limited by supervision. For White, autonomy regarding living arrangements was a mark of citizenship, and a student should be "left to make arrangement for his lodging as any other person coming for a time to town would do... Care of him as a citizen is left to the town authorities; care of him as a member of a family, to the household with which he is lodged—the University, of course, reserving the right to inflict penalties for offences against the University common law and statutes. The committee believe [this] system [to be] the more sound in theory and the more satisfactory in practice" (White 1866, 44).

Even once increased student population eventually made dormitories a necessity, an expectation of individual student liberty and responsibility persisted. White wrote that "good order in every student hall [shall] be entrusted to the self-governing powers of the students residing in it," though he retained the University's right of final arbitration in disciplinary matters.

### THE SAGE PROPOSAL AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SAGE COLLEGE

White's ambivalent acceptance of the dormitory system changed with an offer of \$250,000 from Henry Sage, given on condition that "instruction shall be afforded to young women, by the Cornell University, as broad and as thorough as that now afforded to young men."<sup>2</sup> White officially presented Sage's offer to the Board of Trustees in 1872 in the self-explanatorily titled "Report Submitted to the Trustees of Cornell University in [sic] Behalf of a Majority of the Committee on Mr. Sage's Proposal to Endow a College for Women."

There were a variety of arguments against coeducation that the Sage Proposal was meant to address, many of them

variations on fears that to do so would result in the feminization of men and masculinization of women, resulting in the collapse of both social and biological orders. White responded to these objections primarily with testimonials from other schools, presenting the opinion and experience of administrators of various institutions where coeducation had already been implemented. First hand accounts from himself and these administrators countered what White considered mere "theories on one side and the other." Beyond just arguing the validity of coeducation, these "theories" were a means by which to construct or reinforce the social place of women, in particular, by assigning her "mental and moral capacity, her sphere of activity, her equality with man or subordination to him" along a variety of axes, "physiological, psychological, political, aesthetical and biblical." In contrast to these arguments, the testimonials presented by White overwhelmingly showed not only that students were not harmed by the inclusion of women, but that the social and scholastic behavior of the men students improved.

The other primary argument against coeducation had more explicit architectural repercussions. White singled out Dr. Edward H. Clarke as something of a national spokesman on this topic after giving a speech to the New-England Women's Club in Boston, in 1872, which he later expanded into the influential book, *Sex in Education, or, A Fair Chance for the Girls*. In Clarke's opinion, biological energy had a fixed limit that could be turned either to the effective development of mental faculties—such as those expended by study—or of biological faculties—primarily those required to develop and maintain the reproductive system. He argued that "undue and disproportionate brain activity exerts a sterilizing influence upon both sexes is alike a doctrine of physiology, and an induction from experience." Given what Clarke described as the "larger size, more complicated relations, and more important functions, of the female reproductive apparatus," the sterilizing influence of excessive brain activity was

more pronounced in female than male students, such that the “delicate and complex mechanism is likely to be aborted or deranged by the withdrawal of force that is needed for its construction and maintenance.” Permanent impairment of mental and reproductive faculties were not the worst of it, as Clarke offered examples of women who had read so tirelessly that it eventually led to premature death.

While Clark ultimately argued that women students should spend fewer hours studying, White offered compromise in the form of additional amenities (botany, gymnasium, baths) which would act as restoratives to the women students. Implicitly ceding the inadequacy of women’s physiology, White wrote that “[a]ny college building erected for women should be planned with special reference to the health of its inmates.” Adhering to the prescriptions of contemporary medicine, he offered that “[s]un-light should be admitted to every room and copiously; the most effective system of ventilation should be adopted; there should be a well equipped gymnasium, and provision should be made for work in the botanical and general gardens, and for amusements” (White 1872, 23). Instead of refusing or limiting their studies, he provided architectural amenities to supplement the women’s health, mitigating their physiological shortcomings through the deployment of proper facilities.

The physiological concern was not the only sexed presumption to find form in Sage College. White took the “ordinarily developed” position that “woman is the help-meet of man, that she gives him aid in difficulty, counsel in perplexity, solace in sorrow” (White 1872, 34). White argued from this position that women were receiving an insufficiently robust education to prepare them to serve as adequate help-meets, the result being that “strong men, in adversity or perplexity, have often found that the ‘partners of their joys and sorrows’ give no more real strength than would Nuremburg dolls. Under this theory, as thus worked out, the aid and counsel and solace fail just when they are most needed” (White 1872, 34). Women’s education needed improvement in order to maintain a position of useful subservience that matched the education of their male counterparts.

White found in Charles Babcock an architect capable of meeting these programmatic criteria and joining them to an appropriate aesthetic. Trained in the American Gothic style under a long personal and professional relationship with Richard Upjohn, Babcock designed Sage College as a stately building of brick and stone arranged around a central courtyard, all rooms served by a central corridor, prioritizing their access to natural light. Babcock’s building bore the indelible influence of John Ruskin in its use of alternating brick, central loaded pointed arches, and quatrefoil ornamentation. The column capitals framing Sage’s entrances not only evoke Ruskin in their foliation, but in their method of production. Hand carved by local masons, they were true to Ruskin’s belief that

workmen should be allowed to fashion architectural ornaments in their own way. Ruskin’s notions of architectural self-actualization parallel the ideals of self-actualization in coeducation advanced by White. The practice of one’s individual liberty is a theme bringing the functional and aesthetic concerns of Sage College into alignment. The degree to which individual liberty and self-actualization were extended to women students themselves, though, would become far less certain. Such references were not lost on the student body, as a student publication wrote of the columns that “Mr. Ruskin would surely be pleased with them.”<sup>74</sup>

White intentionally finished Sage’s public rooms lavishly with objects “purchased at Berlin, Paris, and London, with the intention of surrounding the lady students with objects of real beauty.”<sup>75</sup> Display of such wealth was meant to train the students in proper aesthetic appreciation, as both a pedagogical and moral undertaking, a prescription against the social ill that fewer American women visited art museums than crowded the “temples of haberdashery.” The hope for White was to familiarize the students with objects of quality, thereby infusing them with an oblique aesthetic education as a means by which to discipline them against falling prey to a “burdensome perversion of [their] love for the beautiful,” to instill “an aesthetic sense which would lift our best women into a sphere of beauty where Parisian grotesque could not be tolerated,” thereby priming “the strength of character which would cause woman to cultivate her own taste for simple beauty in form and color, and to rely on that, rather than on the latest whim” (White 1872, 35). The decoration of Sage College was not a secondary concern, but a deliberate extension of Cornell’s pedagogical mission, that through exposure to beautiful things the students might build an immunity to compulsive frivolity.

The dining facilities were open both to faculty and other students, so that between dining and dances, it was clear that while ostensibly a space for women, the highly social program of most of the building indicated an expectation that the women frequently play host. The women’s space was fundamentally a shared space, in which they were trained in the skills of sociality that would be required of them as mothers, wives, and hostesses.

From the outset, the floor plans of Sage Hall designated a room beside the front door as a room for a Matron, but the students for a long time resisted the installment of such a person. Anna Botsford Comstock wrote that, while she was a student, “President White and Mr. Sage thought we should have a chaperone in charge of Sage College, but we would not have it. We had come to Cornell for education, had been reared to care for ourselves, and we considered chaperoning insulting to our integrity.”<sup>76</sup> White frequently attempted to hire a Matron, particularly after a minimal incident of student hijinks early in Sage’s occupation. To account for their



Figure 2: Sage College West Facade, n.d., Kroch Archives..

own management, the students of Sage instead formed the Women's Self-Government Association, so were able to retain a degree of autonomy from the University.

#### THE DEAR FRIEND CIRCULAR

For the first nine years of occupation, Sage College housed roughly half the women of Cornell. Partly due to the added cost of services such as dining and laundry, many of the women chose to live in town or with families. This was the state of affairs until the summer of 1884, when every Cornell student and alumna received a letter christened by its recipients—due to its initial greeting of “My Dear Friend”—the Dear Friend Circular.

The Dear Friend Circular informed the women of Cornell that the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees had on July 3rd, 1884 adopted a new resolution. “Resolved,” it read, “That all lady students be required to room and board at Sage College, unless specially excused, for due cause shown, by the Committee on Sage College.”<sup>7</sup> The justification for enforcing the occupation of Sage College circled around a few main points. First, White refuted prior argument by many of the

women that living at Sage cost too much, insisting that, “so far as the room rent is concerned, no attempt has been made to secure anything more than that merest nominal income upon the cost of either of the rooms or of the furniture.” While he spoke here to the position of those charging rent, he did not indicate sensitivity to those paying rent. “As to board,” he continued, “that has been supplied at never more than actual cost and sometimes at less; and all the other accommodations of the building of every sort have been thrown open to its inmates without fee or reward, or charges for ‘extras’ of any sort. It is not known that in any other establishment in the country that such liberality has been shown” (White 1884, 1). Also chastising them for lack of commitment to their larger social obligations, White wrote that “the Trustees do no feel that it is of any advantage either to the country, or to the lady students, or to the reputation of the University, to allow young ladies for the sake of saving at the most fifty or sixty cents per week, to deprive themselves of well ventilated rooms, good food, opportunities for exercise, bathing, and social improvement. To do this is to practice a wretchedly false economy. Better by far that a young lady go without a university education than thus undermine her constitution...” (White 1884, 4). The exercise of their personal liberties, once so central to

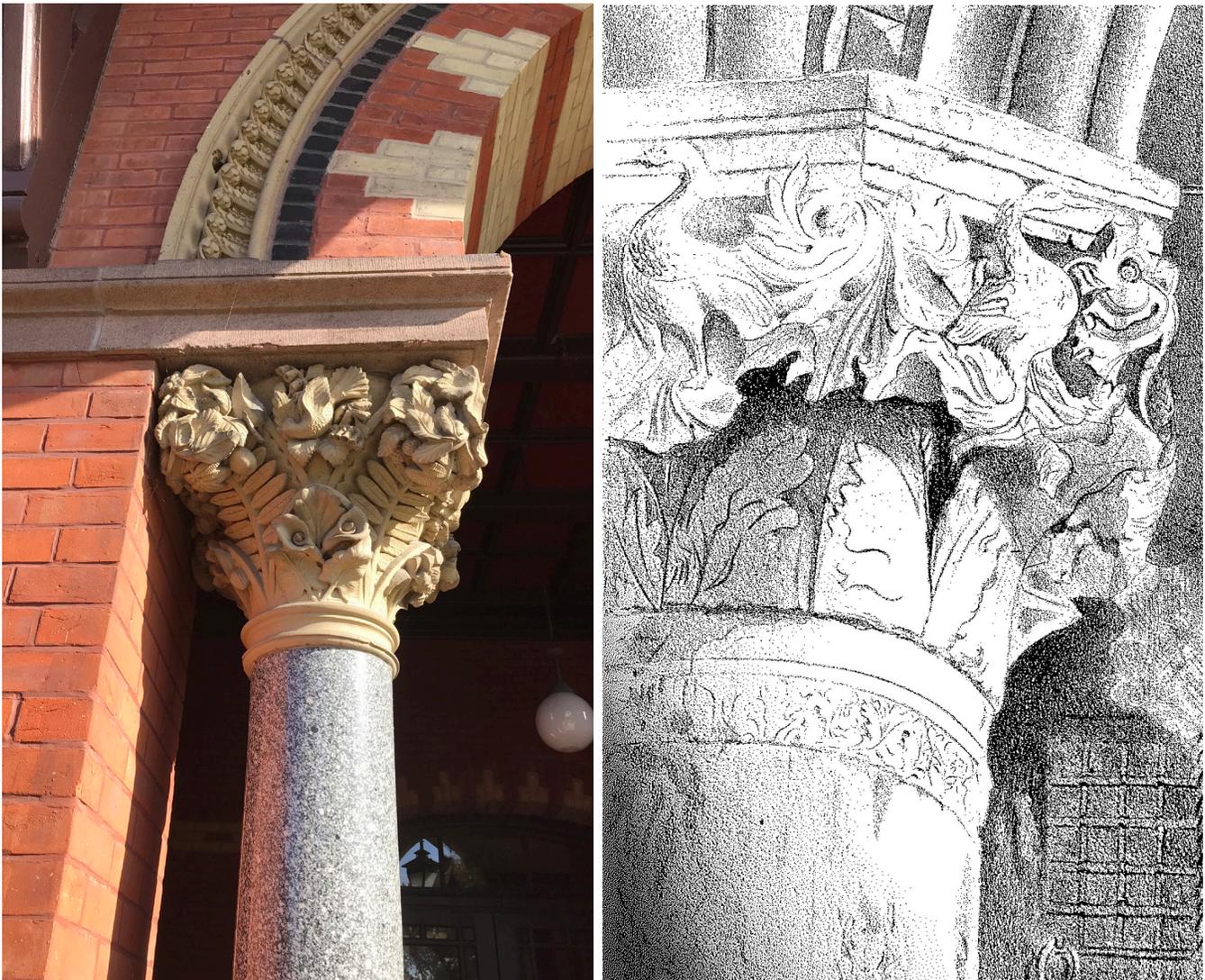


Figure 3: Comparison of Sage College column with John Ruskin, "Capital from the Lower Arcade of the Doge's Palace, Venice," Plate V, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*

White's framing of Sage Hall, had been replaced with a duty to represent the University on some imagined, national stage.

The personal disappointment of Henry Sage was another central theme in the Circular. Having identified a housing lack near the University, Henry Sage had provided Sage Hall and its surroundings, and in White's estimation "no establishment so perfect in all its appointments has ever been provided for lady students of a university, in this or any other country." (White 1884, 13). In the tone and frequency of return to this point are an implied admonishment of the students for not having the decency to arrange their budgets and living preferences to accord with Sage's generosity.

The Dear Friend Circular presents a different side of White. No longer the progressive, equality-minded pedagogue, here he is cajoling and admonishing, wielding paternalistic

disappointment and appeals to common sense beside veiled threats. Settling a years long resistance to supervision, White also took this opportunity to install a Matron who he suggested would "perfect the social life and increase the attractions of Sage College" by forming "that personal acquaintance and establish[ing] those direct and friendly relations so desirable in such an establishment" (White 1884, 14). Desirable to whom is unspecified.

Preempting accusations that such a unilateral move marked a radical difference in the equal treatment of the men and women, White stated brusquely "that no such provision has ever been made for young men." While there does not seem to be evidence that the men were similarly forced into living quarters, there were also by that time sufficient other facilities to not require the same rhetorical basis for such a forced occupation. Closing the Dear Friend Circular, White

wrote that “[I]f any person should decide not to return to the University under this regulation and the plan so adopted, she will receive upon application to the President, an honorable dismissal, with the best wishes of the Board, of the Founder of Sage College, and of the University Faculty” (White 1884, 4). An abrupt dismissal to those unwilling to tolerate the new imposition, the false choice of either living in Sage or expulsion indicates the reversal of a pedagogical current that had run through Cornell since its founding, applied unequally to the men and women students.

#### SAGE MEMORIAL AND BURLESQUE OF THE DEAR FRIEND CIRCULAR

In response to the Dear Friend Circular, a group of students organized the collective crafting of a response to the Board of Trustees in the hopes of overturning the ruling. Called the Sage Memorial, the consolidated response respectfully protested the new arrangement, “believing compulsion in regard to boarding-places and the making of any arbitrary distinction between two classes of students to be unnecessary, unwise, and unjust [original emphasis].”<sup>8</sup> The Memorial specified that there had been no specific wrongdoing to which this decree was responding, nor did financial concerns seem compelling enough reason, and although it provided clear rebuttal to each of the Dear Friend Circular’s positions, it seems to have had no effect. The following semester saw all the women students living at Sage College.

There is an addendum, though, and one it seems appropriate to allow as the final word. One student, Emma Neal Basset, wrote a Burlesque of the Dear Friend Circular,<sup>9</sup> that demonstrates an understanding of the economic, power, and sexual dynamics that motivated the forced occupation of Sage College, and an irony that signals a weary familiarity with such paternalism that would remove the autonomy of the women supposedly for their sake, but against their will:

To Miss Small Income.

My dear friend:

The Trustees of Cornell University have decided that if you cannot afford a gymnasium, a bathroom, a green-house, a parlor, a reading-room, and a society-room, you had not better try to come to our University. Indeed, we are so convinced that our judgment of what is for your welfare is better than your own, that we kindly will not let you come, save on the above conditions. For, although you have have lived twenty years already without these necessaries of life, and might live forty years more without them; although thousands of people in this barbarous country of ours do spend their whole lives without them, being too poor to have them; nevertheless, we have, after long consideration, concluded that if but two

courses lie open to you, (1) to forego these indispensables and not have a University education, or (2) to forego these indispensables and not have a University education, it is wise to choose the latter.

Moreover, we have a beautiful building, the gift of a good man, which we do not know what to do with unless you come and live in it. To be sure, it costs no more to keep the building up without you than with you; for you would pay only for what you actually cost us; but we have planned that if you came you should live here, and we cannot bear to [be] thwarted in our plans. It may seem hard to you that we should sacrifice your life to a building; but the building is very beautiful, you know, and a good man gave it to us, and we must please him. Believe, too, that this is really a kindness to you and to our country. For though you have all the culture our University can afford, and have not had a bathroom and a green-house, you would be wretched and useless. So stay at home, my friend, and get on as best you can; and if ever it seems unjust that you can not share the instruction which the University lives to give, remember the beautiful building which you have been the means of enabling us to keep, and be happy.(9)

#### ENDNOTES

1. Cornell University and Andrew Dickson White, Report of the Committee on Organization, Presented to the Trustees of the Cornell University. October 21st, 1866 (Albany, C. Van Bethuysen & Sons, printers, 1867), Kroch Rare Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University, 46. French Edition and with an Introduction by Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 14.
2. Andrew D. White, “Report Submitted to the Trustees of Cornell University in [sic] Behalf of a Majority of the Committee on Mr. Sage’s Proposal to Endow a College for Women” (Albany, New York: Cornell University Press, February 13, 1872), Kroch Rare Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University, 37.
3. Edward H. Clarke, “Sex in Education, Or, A Fair Chance for the Girls” (Salem, N.H.: Ayer Co., 1992), 137.
4. “On the Sage College,” *The Cornell Era*, July 17, 1875, 251.
5. “Sage College Brochure,” n.d., Kroch Rare Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University, 2.
6. Anna Botsford Comstock, *The Comstocks of Cornell: John Henry Comstock and Anna Botsford Comstock* (New York: Comstock Publishing Associates, 1953), 80.
7. Andrew D. White, “Dear Friend Circular,” July 3, 1884, 1.
8. Sage Memorial, “Sage College Records,” Kroch Rare Manuscripts Collection, Cornell University.
9. Emma Neal Basset, “Burlesque of the Dear Friend Circular,” 1884, Kroch Rare Manuscripts Collection.