

INAUGURAL  
Washington  
January 29, 1862



# *Dear Daughters*

A HISTORY OF MOUNT VERNON SEMINARY AND COLLEGE





# *Dear Daughters*

A HISTORY OF MOUNT VERNON SEMINARY AND COLLEGE

NINA MIKHALEVSKY, *Director, The Elizabeth Somers Center and  
Women's Leadership Programs*

Mount Vernon Seminary and College Alumnae Association  
Washington, D.C.



### *1100 M Street 1880-1917*

*"This home is my tribute to young womanhood . . ."*

Elizabeth Somers

In the summer of 1880, the Seminary moved from F Street to 1100 M Street, then the "fashionable west end." Mrs. Somers had purchased a frame house on the site of Forster's Drug Store and converted it into a school building. She also purchased another large house next to it from Crosby Noyes, then editor of the *Evening Star*. The double mansions had porches running down the 11th Street side with windows facing both 11th and M streets. Somers added to the M Street houses by building new classrooms, a conservatory, music room, and a chapel. An article in *The Washington Post* that year announced:

*Mrs. Somers' educational institution, The Mount Vernon Seminary, is to have new quarters at the southwest corner of Eleventh and M streets northwest. The present building will be*



*Horse-drawn trolley on M Street, circa 1900*

*so remodelled and added to that all trace of the old structure will be lost in the magnificent mansion for which Architect R.L. Fleming has made the plans. The new pile (four stories and basement) will front one hundred feet on both M and Eleventh street . . . Slated mansard roofs will be ornamented by copper cornices and finials. . . . Provision has been made for commodious study-rooms, music hall and gymnasium containing bowling alley and other athletic appliances. Additional sleeping apartments and twelve bathrooms are conveniently located for the use of students. The building will be heated by steam and will have an elevator, pneumatic tubes and signal bells and will be wired for electric lighting . . .*

Within two years, Somers purchased three additional houses next to the Noyes' mansion. The courtyard on 11th Street was enclosed by a high-board fence and served as a recess ground, tennis court, and basketball court. Mrs. Somers supervised every aspect of the building and renovations of the physically expanding school, while continuing to teach classes and manage the institution. When one of the faculty asked her why she insisted on attending to details of carpentry and paint that could be handled by the workers, Mrs. Somers answered, "This home is my tribute to young womanhood, and I would offer it, as Christ would have His church, having no spot and without blemish."

*Garden and courtyard, M Street*





Senior House

Between 1890 and 1917, Mount Vernon Seminary grew to more than 100 boarding pupils and nearly 50 day students. Its reputation had long since extended across the country and now attracted students from abroad. The expanding alumnae body also returned to the school for reunions and special events, and as they married and started families, alumnae daughters and nieces became an important tradition of the school. Mrs. Somers always wrote to each alumna upon the birth of a girl, offering congratulations and a future place at Mount Vernon Seminary.

In 1885, the Mount Vernon Alumnae Association formed and has remained in continuous existence. The year it began, the alumnae association was limited to the 56 students who had graduated from the Seminary or collegiate course. However, within a few years, the decision was made to include any student who had attended the school for at least a year. The alumnae also voted Mrs. Somers, Mrs. Hemley, and several long-time members of the faculty honorary members of the alumnae association. The first alumnae reunion was held during commencement week in 1886, and the tradition of formally welcoming new graduates to the association began at that time. The Mount Vernon Alumnae Association also began publishing an *Alumnae Record* as well as a regular magazine with news about the school called *Roll Call*.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Mrs. Somers continued

M Street, circa 1900



View of Mount Vernon Seminary  
from M Street, circa 1900



Main Room



Reception Room

to attract outstanding faculty and the course of study reflected their interests and expertise. Theodate Smith, one of the new faculty, offered a course in psychology that included the works of Fitchener, Darwin, Galton, and James, "supplemented by some classroom experimentation and accounts of the experimental work of the larger laboratories." The class, "undertook some practical work in child study, using Sully's recent book on that subject, and some of the questionnaires issued by President Hall of Clark University." A course in sociology, taught by Jean Dean Cole, covered topics on the "origin, growth, and structure of society, labor movements and trade unions, crime, sweatshops, child labor, and social-reform movements." For that class, Cole's students read original monographs, government documents, and a variety of books including Jane Addams' *A Function of the Social Settlements*. A course in physics, taught by Harriet Belle Walker, worked from Gage's *Introduction to Physics* and covered "electricity from Appleton . . . machines from Steele." She took



*On assigning the Senior Essay topic, "Women's Suffrage" one year, Mrs. Somers said, "While I have not wanted the suffrage myself, the world is changing and needs its women to share the political burden and I wish my girls prepared."*



*Allie "Ethel" Edwards was Mrs. Somers' niece. She came to the Seminary as a young girl in 1883 and graduated in 1893. One of the first editors of The Record, Edwards was also a painter and talented singer. After leaving the Seminary, she studied both art and music in New York, Philadelphia, and Paris, then returned to teach singing and dramatic arts at Mount Vernon Seminary from 1903 until 1930. Edwards was an early member of Washington's Friday Morning Music Club and the Washington Arts Club.*

her class to several local laboratories, including the laboratory at the Columbian College, and they went to lectures including, "An evening with Mr. Carr doing experiments in Rontgen Rays, Radium, and Sound" and "A lecture by Prof. Bliss Illustrated on Wireless Telegraphy."

During this period, Mrs. Somers and Mrs. Hensley formalized the practice of "Senior Essays" for graduating Seminary students. These essays were assigned on a current political or social topic, required primary research, and were read by the students at Commencement exercises. Prizes were given for the most outstanding essays. In 1909, for example, the topic was "The Child, a Sociological Study" and papers addressed "the nature of modern society" and review of "various ideal commonwealths", "the fundamental weaknesses of the social structure", "effects of poverty on the child", and "child-labor questions." The authors and works discussed included Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Marx's *Capital*, and works by Eugene Debs and Herbert Croly. In other years, Senior Essay topics included "Women's Suffrage", "Prohibition", and "The Monroe Doctrine." As the senior class grew bigger, the practice of reading the essays was moved to School Day exercises but senior essays continued to be a Seminary requirement through the 1940s.

The strong emphasis on academic achievement also led to the formation of several clubs or student organizations focused on reading literature, writing plays and poetry, and debating ideas. These informal student groups evolved into selective honorary and even secret societies. I.T.S., B.T.S., and V.V. each had their own mottoes, pins, and secret initiations, club rooms, and activities. The clubs engaged in dramatic competitions, essay contests, and social activities.

These clubs flourished for nearly 20 years until the level of exclusivity and competition became so intense that Mrs. Somers and Mrs. Hensley grew concerned that they were undermining the core values of the school. In 1911, Mrs. Somers made the extraordinarily unpopular decision to eliminate all secret societies and, in a letter to the students returning to the school for the fall in 1911, she explained why.

"After 20 years of the existence of secret societies, this new year marks their discontinuance in Mount Vernon Seminary. To those who have been familiar with their motives, aims,



*Choir members of XX.*

and influence, there can be no question that they have been instrumental in the fixing of high standards in the work and character of the students . . . [but] from the necessity of choosing some and excluding others two unfortunate results have ensued." Mrs. Somers pointed out that one of the greatest advantages of attending the Seminary was the diversity of students who came, "not only from all portions of our own country, but from Hawaii, Japan, Syria, and other lands beyond the sea." The propensity of students in these societies to choose students "of close social relations" to the existing members thus "robbed them of an opportunity to develop relationships with students from very different backgrounds and cultures." The second negative effect was that the social life and activities surrounding these groups also excluded non-members. Somers wrote, "In this was a grave injustice, because every pupil who comes to us is entitled to all that





*Cate Warner (left), her roommate  
Grace Bissac (right), and their room  
in 1887 (below). Bissac graduated  
in 1887 and remained at the Seminary  
as a member of the staff,  
becoming first bookkeeper, then busi-  
ness manager, and eventually vice  
president and treasurer. Bissac's sis-  
ter and niece also graduated  
from M.F.S. Cate Warner graduated  
in 1888.*





*Photographs taken from a student scrapbook, 1902-1904.*



happiness and contentment which the general conditions of the school are so thoroughly fitted to create." The only club permitted to remain was Optima, an honors society founded by Mrs. Hensley. Optima was, "an open club... whose membership is composed of those who have won this honor through a high grade of scholarship or outstanding achievement in music or art." Optima remained the premier academic honors club for the next 50 years.

While Mrs. Somers emphasized physical exercise and healthy outdoor activities from the earliest days of the school, by 1890 competitive athletics and sports were a regular part of Seminary life. Students were given weekly instruction in tennis and basketball, and on weekends they went on long bike trips and hiked to Great Falls. A Thanksgiving Day basketball game between the junior and senior classes became a tradition. Students even learned a relatively new sport, baseball. One student wrote home to a friend, "It was not with a tennis racket and a rubber ball that we girls played Base Ball . . . but with a hard, wooden bat and a ball that made our hands sting when we were so fortunate as to catch it . . ."

*(continued on page 45)*



*Students in the courtyard of  
M Street, roller skating on M  
Street, and taking their annual  
trip on the C&O Canal,  
late 1890s and early 1900s.*





*(Opposite page):*

*Lou Mosier Torinus and her sister, Grace Frederika Torinus, both attended Mount Vernon Seminary.*

*"Grace" graduated in 1885 and died four years later. Lou, later Mrs. G.W. Tolon, graduated in 1904 and was an active member of the Alumnae Association as well as a leader in the Girl Scouts in Minnesota. Her granddaughter attended Mount Vernon Seminary.*

*The senior banquet at the Willard Hotel, 1910.  
Mrs. Somers in front.*

than 150 pupils each year and its reputation was so distinguished that it was impossible to accommodate all the requests for admission, even for alumnae daughters and nieces. Somers and Hensley began to plan for a larger student body and a campus with up-to-date facilities and housing on the new site.

Washington during this period was still a relatively small city with a slow "southern" pace. Municipal and federally guided building and planning projects had finally developed Washington into a beautiful capital city. Residents were accustomed to large public displays during Inauguration or national holidays, as well as more casual access to their



Mrs. Somers, or Mrs. Hanley, each school day 10.00 to 11.00 A. M., and 12.30 to 1.30 P. M.

Cable Address—"Seminary, Washington."

Telephone number: North 139. There will be no service on Sunday or after 7.30 P. M.

Daily Schedule.

Rising Bell	7.00 A. M.
Breakfast	7.30 A. M.
School Hours	9 A. M. to 1.30 P. M.
Luncheon	1.30 P. M.
Afternoon Walk	2.30 P. M.
Study Period	2.45 to 3.45 P. M.
Dinner	6.00 P. M.
Prayer	7.30 P. M.
Evening Study Period	7.45 to 9.00 P. M.
"Abend Brot"	9.00 P. M.
Lights out	10.00 P. M.



CLASS OF 1904

PRESIDENT—ALICE MARJORIE RAY  
 VICE-PRESIDENT—BERTHA VERNELL BUSH  
 SECRETARY—BLANCH MILDRED ARNOLD  
 TREASURER—LOIS MOWER TORINUS

Blanche Mildred Arnold  
 Anna J. Boyd  
 Bertha Vernell Bush  
 Mary Grosvenor Day  
 Elsie Elmore  
 Grace Jackson Hill  
 Caroline M. Lacy

Marguerite Bourn Macomber  
 Marie Louise Peters  
 Charlotte Emily Piamondin  
 Alice Marjorie Ray  
 Estelle Rodgers  
 Fannie Porrester Rowan  
 Olive Stines  
 Alice Frances Stone  
 Lois Mower Torinus

Prettiest Girl  
 Best Looking  
 Slowest  
 Quickest  
 Noisiest  
 Quietest  
 Best Student  
 Old Maid  
 First Married  
 Fattest  
 Thinnest  
 Athlete  
 Neekest  
 Most Domestic  
 Best Disposition  
 Best Dressed  
 Most Practical  
 Most Popular

Ms. Lois M. Torinus, 10 September 1904  
 Mrs. Helen M. Torinus, 908 N. Third

Book	French	Jan. Lit.	Sept. Comp
83-90	87-90	89-	1903-4
85-90	90-90	90-90	Torinus, Lois M.
86-90	91-90	91-	Mrs. Helen M.
87-90	92-90	92-	
88-90	93-90	93-90	
89-90	94-90	94-90	
90-90	95-90	95-90	
91-90	96-90	96-90	
92-90	97-90	97-90	
93-90	98-90	98-90	
94-90	99-90	99-90	