

**“A SOCIETY OF OUR OWN”:
METHODISTS, COEDUCATION AND THE FOUNDING OF P.E.O.**

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In early 1869, on a college campus in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, a new secret society was born. While the group made themselves known in their community, the meetings remained veiled in mystery. Members would set out from their home well ahead of meeting time and walk in the opposite direction from where they wanted to go, trying to evade anyone who might be watching. Sometimes they made several stops along their route, or took back roads which were unnecessary under normal circumstances.¹ All of this was done in an effort to maintain the secrecy of their society’s meetings. Perhaps this seems unremarkable in the context of history—even if intriguing—as men participated in secret societies long before the 1860s. However, this society was of a new breed. It was formed exclusively by women and was one of the first of its kind.

P.E.O.², as the society called itself, was founded on January 21, 1869, by seven women at Iowa Wesleyan University. It is the second oldest women’s society which has remained in continuous existence in America.³ Today the society boasts a quarter million members in the United States and Canada.⁴ However, P.E.O. remains almost entirely out of scholarly conversation, with the exception being in the form of brief mention in sweeping studies of secret societies and fraternalism in the United States.⁵ There is no doubt this has something to do with the secrecy surrounding the group. Still, in recent decades P.E.O. International has made an effort to make itself more transparent and visible in the world while maintaining the private nature of their

¹ Stella Clapp, *Out of the Heart: A Century of P.E.O. 1869-1969* (Des Moines, IA: The P.E.O. Sisterhood, 1968), 31.

² The meaning of the letters in P.E.O. are known only by members. It should also be noted that the society does not prefer to use the designation “secret society”; however, for purposes of scholarly literature this description remains accurate due to the private nature of their business and records.

³ The first known secret society for women was the Adelpian Society, founded at Wesleyan Female College in 1851. Wesleyan was chartered as Georgia Female College on December 23, 1836, and is the world’s oldest women’s college, opening its doors to students on January 7, 1839. See <http://www.wesleyancollege.edu/aoubt/history.cfm>. Site accessed 22 July 2013.

⁴ I am a member of P.E.O. having been initiated into a local chapter in 2010. Current membership information may be found at, P.E.O. International, “The Official Website of the P.E.O. Sisterhood,” accessed October 17, 2012, <http://www.peointernational.org/>.

⁵ For example, Alvin J. Schmidt, “P.E.O. Sisterhood,” in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions: Fraternal Organizations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 258-259. This article, however, contains some inaccurate information.

meetings and organization. Today, the phrase “Philanthropic Educational Organization” is used as a descriptive way to refer to the sisterhood, reflecting the group’s mission. Their public website describes the group, saying, “P.E.O. is a philanthropic organization where women celebrate the advancement of women; educate women through scholarships, grants, awards, loans, and stewardship of Cottey College;⁶ and motivate women to achieve their highest aspirations.”⁷

With that in mind, the primary goal of this essay is to bring P.E.O. into the scholarly discussion of American women’s history. The emphasis placed on women’s studies in recent years has brought topics such as women’s fraternities, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and women’s journals into prominent historical discussion. Given its early formation and its continued cultural impact, P.E.O. is appropriately added to this discussion. Secondly, this essay will record the strong ties between Methodism—throughout meaning the Methodist Episcopal Church—and the founding of P.E.O. I will argue that Methodist advances in education, specifically coeducation, in the late 1800s created the environment for the formation of P.E.O., demonstrating a significant link between Methodist history and the evolving role of women in American society.

Methodists, Education and Iowa Wesleyan University

Before discussing the specific setting of Iowa Wesleyan University—where P.E.O. was founded—it is necessary to set the stage for Methodist interaction with higher education in the 1800s. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Methodists engaged actively in the Sunday School and common school movement. American Methodism’s heretofore limited involvement in establishing institutions of higher learning was dramatically altered by the General Conference of 1820, which adopted the following resolution: “That it be, and is hereby recommended to all annual conferences, to establish, as soon as practicable, literary institutions, under their own control, in such way and manner as they may think proper.”⁸ For the rest of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries, higher education was a significant missional focus for American Methodists. As early as 1828, a national-level committee on Education gave structure to such concerns.⁹ Further evidence for this trend is provided by denominational publications. Sylvanus Duvall notes that after 1830, there is a significant increase in the number of arti-

⁶ Cottey College of Nevada, Missouri, was founded in 1884 by Virginia Alice Cottey Stockard. After herself becoming a member of the P.E.O. Sisterhood, she recognized that the goals of the College and of the Sisterhood were strikingly similar. She made a gift of the College to the P.E.O. in 1927, making Cottey College the only nonsectarian college both owned and supported by women. See <http://www.peointernational.org/cottey-college>. Site accessed July 22, 2013.

⁷ P.E.O. International, “The Official Website of the P.E.O. Sisterhood,” accessed October 17, 2012, <http://www.peointernational.org/>.

⁸ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume 1, 1796-1836* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), 208.

⁹ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 309.

cles on the topic of education in the *Methodist Magazine*.¹⁰ Nathan Hatch has noted that the *Methodist Magazine* was converted into the *Methodist Quarterly Review* by Nathan Bangs in 1830, with the goal to offer a more serious and literary journal.¹¹ While this journal’s focus on education might reflect the shift in its purpose, it is nonetheless significant to note that after 1830, articles on education appear more frequently. Higher education was becoming a focal point for Methodists.

A number of well-known nineteenth-century Methodists took up the cause of higher education. A prime example is Matthew Simpson, who, prior to his election to the episcopacy, was one of the first advocates of higher education for ministers.¹² In 1839, Simpson became President of Indiana Asbury University, where he remained almost ten years. In his presidential inaugural address, Simpson describes the importance of education and its value for the nation, encouraging frontier education in particular.¹³ Matthew Simpson is particularly relevant to this story because of his intersection with at least two future Presidents of Iowa Wesleyan. The first, James Harlan, graduated in 1845, from Indiana Asbury while Simpson was still President. Harlan would later change the curriculum model of Iowa Wesleyan to reflect that of his *alma mater*. The second, the Rev. Dr. Charles Elliott, was added to the faculty of Iowa Wesleyan in 1856 and served as President there twice, from 1858 to 1861 and from 1863 to 1866. Prior to his time in Iowa, Elliott had worked as the editor of the *Western Christian Advocate* both before and after Simpson’s own tenure for the periodical. From these examples, it is clear that during the nineteenth century, prominent Methodists often successfully championed efforts to create opportunities for higher education.

Compared with other denominations, Methodism came late to higher education. Still, as Douglas Montagna points out, once they resolved to participate, Methodists played a large role.¹⁴ By 1844, the number of Methodist-related colleges was second only to those affiliated with Presbyterian bodies.¹⁵ Between 1832 and the Civil War, thirty-four colleges were established by the Methodists¹⁶ and by 1880 that number had risen to forty-four.¹⁷ The growth was rapid and mostly successful, in large part because Methodists

¹⁰ Sylvanus Milne Duvall, *The Methodist Episcopal Church and Education Up to 1869* (New York: Columbia UP, 1928), 62.

¹¹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), 204.

¹² H. B. Ridgaway, “Bishop Simpson,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* 67 (January, 1885).

¹³ Matthew Simpson, “Inaugural Address: Indiana Asbury” in *The Life of Bishop Matthew Simpson of the Methodist Episcopal Church* by George R. Crooks (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 476-506.

¹⁴ Douglas Montagna, “Education and the Refinement of Nineteenth-Century Methodism in the Midwest,” *Methodist History* 44.2 (January, 2006): 97.

¹⁵ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 220.

¹⁶ Montagna, “Education and the Refinement of Nineteenth-Century Methodism in the Midwest,” 97.

¹⁷ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 304.

did not understand education as competing with, but rather supportive of religious endeavors.¹⁸ By the late 1800s, it is arguable that Methodists were equally committed to literacy and to salvation.¹⁹

This newly found emphasis on higher education was especially prominent in the Midwest which was still a frontier region. Joanna Gillespie notes, “Midwestern Methodists prided themselves on being less awed by social rank and tradition than Easterners, and on being in the vanguard of education for the people.”²⁰ The small town of Mount Pleasant, Iowa, then, provides a window into higher education in Midwest Methodism during the mid and late 1800s as the home, not only for Iowa Wesleyan University, but also for the formation of P.E.O.

Iowa Wesleyan University opened in 1842 under the name Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute (sometimes called simply the Institute). At the time of its opening it was not affiliated with any particular religious tradition. During the 1830s, a Methodist circuit rider—identified as the Rev. John Ruble—had begun preaching in the area of Mount Pleasant and by 1837, a forty-member congregation existed in the town.²¹ This group was interested in education and committed to furthering its progress in their area.²² By 1849, when the college was seven years old, the local Methodist Conference had accepted the college’s requests for recognition and support under the Methodist name, a mutually beneficial relationship that brought conference financial support to the Institute.²³ The name of the college was not officially changed to reflect this alliance until 1855, under the guidance of President James Harlan.²⁴ (Recall that Harlan—later a United States Senator—also changed the curriculum of the school, making it follow the model of the newly established Indiana Asbury University.) At that time the Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute became Iowa Wesleyan University, clearly Methodist-affiliated. The college required attendance at religious exercises, and Methodism became a part of the cultural climate. Yet, the story remains incomplete, because we have not yet explored the role of women in Methodist educational efforts, or more specifically at Iowa Wesleyan University. It is to these points that we now turn.

¹⁸ Montagna, “Education and the Refinement of Nineteenth-Century Methodism in the Midwest,” 75.

¹⁹ Joanna Bowen Gillespie, “The Emerging Voice of the Methodist Woman: *The Ladies’ Repository*, 1841-1861,” in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. by Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1993), 252.

²⁰ Gillespie, “The Emerging Voice of the Methodist Woman: *The Ladies’ Repository*, 1841-61,” 251.

²¹ Louis A. Haselmayer, *A Sesquicentennial History of Iowa Wesleyan College, 1842-1992* (Mount Pleasant, IA: Iowa Wesleyan College, 1992), 7.

²² Haselmayer, *A Sesquicentennial History of Iowa Wesleyan College*, 7.

²³ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 33. (Cross reference could also be made to the Iowa Conference Quarterly Minutes.)

²⁴ Haselmayer, *A Sesquicentennial History of Iowa Wesleyan College*.

Methodists and Coeducation

Methodists were integrally involved in the promotion of women’s higher education during the 1800s. In the denomination’s view, the cause of women’s education was intertwined with Methodism’s evangelistic and social emphases. Culturally, in the early 1800s women’s participation in public roles was extremely rare. However, through broadening educational opportunities women’s roles began to expand to include the social sphere. Methodists were involved in two ways: first, through the formation of women’s colleges. In fact, the oldest women’s college in the world is Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia.²⁵ Opening in 1836, it became Methodist affiliated in 1839. Second, Methodists promoted women’s education through support of coeducation. Coeducational institutions were particularly prominent in the Midwest, and Iowa Wesleyan is a prime example. The frontier nature of the Midwest at the time allowed for pioneering attitudes that other parts of the country with strong traditions were slower to encourage.

Coeducation fostered the formation of a new kind of woman and created a new social group in American society: that of the well-educated, typically Protestant, woman.²⁶ Kristin Bloomberg writes, “By establishing coeducational colleges . . . Methodists created a transitional social space in nineteenth-century American culture that allowed for the identification of women as a political class, opening up the gender-biased dichotomies of public and private, secular and religious.”²⁷ Bloomberg argues that coeducation was one way that Methodism influenced society by creating women who would go on to use what they learned to “become actors in the world.”²⁸ As will be shown, this was true of the women who founded P.E.O. at Iowa Wesleyan. Still, the changing role of women must be kept in perspective in order to understand the pioneering nature of the seven involved in founding the P.E.O. sisterhood. In 1869, when the federal Office of Education began keeping records, there were 63,000 people attending higher education institutions in America.²⁹ This represents about one percent of the population between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four years of age at that time.³⁰ The number of females in higher education, then, would have been less than 1% of the given population.

Iowa Wesleyan University was a coeducational university. There had been women faculty on the staff beginning as early as 1843 (Mount Pleasant

²⁵ See above, n. 4.

²⁶ Kristin Mapel Bloomberg, “Nineteenth-Century Methodists and Coeducation: The Case of Hamline University,” *Methodist History* 47.1 (October, 2008): 49.

²⁷ Bloomberg, “Nineteenth-Century Methodists and Coeducation,” 49.

²⁸ Bloomberg, “Nineteenth-Century Methodists and Coeducation,” 62.

²⁹ Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *National Center for Education Statistics, 120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Report* (United States Department of Education, January, 1993), 64.

³⁰ Snyder, ed., *National Center for Education Statistics, 120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Report*, 64 and 76.

Institute, recall, was founded in 1842).³¹ Furthermore, the first woman to be awarded a degree was Lucy Kilpatrick in 1859.³² Women had a place at the table in this institution of higher education. As the Civil War drew to a close, enrollment of both men and women increased at the college. Alice Bird (one of the founders of P.E.O.) is recorded as saying, "In 1866 the Iowa Wesleyan University received an influx of life. The war was over; affairs assumed a stability one might rely upon, and from all around students came to our college; from the farm, from the town and from camp still wearing the fatigue coat of the soldier."³³ It was in this Methodist coeducational environment that the seven founders of P.E.O. began their college days.

The Founders

Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the denominational affiliation of the school, each of the seven founding women has specific ties to Methodism. Since part of the purpose of this paper is to bring P.E.O. into historical discussion, a brief sketch of each woman is necessary.³⁴ This will also allow for description of each of their specific relations to the Methodist movement. All seven of the women were active Methodists at the time of their college careers.

Mary J. Allen (Stafford) was a senior in 1869, the time of the society's founding. She was born and raised in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. She married Charles L. Stafford in 1871; he was a Methodist minister and later became president of Iowa Wesleyan. Her husband was also the leading minister of the Iowa Wesleyan Conference and was sent as a delegate to General Conference on four occasions. Mary was active in religious work at the college. She was remembered as using Christianity practically by applying it to all areas and problems of life.³⁵

Alice Bird (Babb) was also a senior when the society was founded. She, too, was born in Mount Pleasant. Alice Bird became a teacher and at one time was the chair of Latin at Iowa Wesleyan. She married Washington I. Babb in 1873. She was well respected for her literary abilities, and people considered her a scholarly woman, as a reader and author.³⁶ Alice Bird was remembered as creating a Christian and Methodist home life for her family.³⁷

³¹ Evidenced by alumni records. Charles J. Kennedy and Lillian Kendig Rogers, *History and Alumni Record of Iowa Wesleyan College, 1842-1942* (Mount Pleasant, IA: Iowa Wesleyan College, 1942).

³² Kennedy and Rogers, *History and Alumni Record of Iowa Wesleyan College*, 121-122.

³³ Haselmayer, *A Sesquicentennial History of Iowa Wesleyan College*, 18. There is no citation for the origin of this quote.

³⁴ Biographical information compiled from three sources: Kennedy and Rogers, *History and Alumni Record of Iowa Wesleyan College*. Clapp, *Out of the Heart* and Winona Evans Reeves, *The Story of P.E.O.*, 2d ed. (Des Moines, IA: Supreme Chapter of P.E.O., 1923). These two internal histories will be cited directly when biographical notes are made that are likely to be matters of interpretation.

³⁵ Reeves, *The Story of P.E.O.*, 11-12.

³⁶ Reeves, *The Story of P.E.O.*, 12-13.

³⁷ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 11-14.

Hattie B. Briggs (Bosquet) was another senior. Hattie’s father was a Methodist minister. She worked as a leader in the church and on campus. In 1873, she married H. L. Bosquet. Little is recorded of her life, however, because Hattie died in 1877 (just shy of thirty years old).

Alice Virginia Coffin³⁸ was part of the class of 1869, as well. She entered the college late in the Civil War years when her father was called to war, as he chose to enroll all four of his children at Iowa Wesleyan at that time. Her story is the most varied, religiously speaking. She had strong family ties to the Quakers. Yet, she too grew up in a Methodist home, following in the footsteps of her mother’s faith. She is the only one of the P.E.O. founders recorded to have changed denominational affiliation, later in life becoming Episcopalian. It is said this was because Alice Coffin enjoyed their rituals, not to mention she liked dancing, which Methodists at the time discouraged.³⁹ Alice Coffin is also the only founder not to marry. She was a teacher.

Franc Rhodes (Elliott) is the last of the seven founders to graduate in the class of 1869. She married the son of Dr. Charles Elliott (a former college President, author of Methodist history books and one time editor of the *Western Christian Advocate*), Simon Charles Elliott, in 1872. Franc did graduate work at the University of Nebraska and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. She was also a teacher. Of all the women involved in P.E.O.’s founding she is considered the most prominent in her continued advocacy for the advancement of women. Franc was acquainted with Susan B. Anthony, Frances Willard and others of the feminist movement. In 1884 she was appointed to represent Nebraska at the New Orleans Exposition, which is notable because it was the first time women were named to a world exposition. Franc also worked for many years to have women elected to the Methodist Episcopal Church’s General Conference. This effort was successful following her years of advocacy.

Suela Rose Pearson⁴⁰ (Penfield) was a part of the class of 1871. Following her graduation she moved with her family to Washington D.C. and later went to New York and then on to Cleveland where she married W. A. Penfield in 1876. Suela did not keep up her work with P.E.O. after her college years.

The last founder to mention is Ella Stewart. Her father, the Rev. I. Stewart, was a Methodist minister. In fact, she lived at the Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute in Pioneer Hall where her father served until 1855. She is the only woman who did not graduate from Iowa Wesleyan, as she left the school after three years to help at home, so Ella is not represented in the alumni records. Ella was also active in church and service activities, and taught piano.

The seven founders—Mary, Alice Bird, Hattie, Alice Coffin, Franc, Suela

³⁸ A small text deals specifically with Alice Virginia Coffin. See Stella Skiff Jannotta, *Alice Virginia Coffin: A Biographical Sketch*, 3rd ed. (Privately Printed, 1940).

³⁹ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 19.

⁴⁰ In the alumni records of Iowa Wesleyan College Suela’s last name appears as “Pierson.”

and Ella—had more than just the Methodist name. They were formed by the Methodist church through their college careers and their leadership activities. Two had fathers who were clergy, and they grew up in the Methodist itinerating system, and one married a Methodist clergyman. Furthermore, at least one of the women had strong ties to others who were known for their advocacy of women's rights. This was the cultural milieu in which the founders of P.E.O. existed. Methodism was simply part of life for each of the women. Stella Clapp writes of the founders that "Theirs was a pioneer and religious background with highly significant emphasis on education."⁴¹ As such, they found themselves at Iowa Wesleyan University, a coeducational institution of the Methodist Church where their lives had ever expanding possibilities. They took advantage of these opportunities through the formation of P.E.O.

"A Society of Our Own"

P.E.O was founded on January 21, 1869, by seven women who gathered in the music room of Main Hall at Iowa Wesleyan intent to form a 'society of their own' as Hattie Briggs is famous for saying.⁴² Previously, all the women had also been members of the campus literary society for women, the Ruthean Society (they continued to be active in the literary society). Now, they wanted to form a different kind of group; one that emphasized friendship. Alice Bird, during the second society meeting just a few days later, said that she wanted the society to be something substantial and lasting, more than just a college fraternity.⁴³ She later wrote,

If there is any virtue in the founding of P.E.O. it is not on account of the founders, for we were all ordinary girls, but on account of the time of founding. It was the age of vision, reconstruction not only among national lines, but reconstruction of thought, minds, souls. Women's Clubs were demanded, they came just at the right time. It was strange soil for them to grow in, our lives were rigid, our paths were straight. Economy was the order of the day, but like Alpine flowers blooming in the snow, they bloom all the more luxuriantly because of the rigidity of the atmosphere. P.E.O. thrived, we were not bound by criticism or cynicism.⁴⁴

The campus made room for the group, and in time it spread to the local

⁴¹ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 8.

⁴² The first fifteen months of the Original Chapter A minutes (the founding group) are missing according to Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 31. Other early Original Chapter A minutes exist and have been preserved, but due to P.E.O. policy cannot be examined without being present in Iowa, at which time the researcher would need to be a member of the Sisterhood. Policy states that no chapter minutes can be photocopied or distributed. In lieu of these early records, reconstructions given by the founding members and a few P.E.O. history collections which were commissioned by the organization prove most helpful and become the primary sources available. Internal state histories are available for several states as well. And Reeves notes that she knew almost all of the founders personally, making her book a valuable source of information on the early years of P.E.O.

⁴³ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 32.

⁴⁴ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 2. I believe this is quoted from the *P.E.O. Record* of November, 1919.

female seminary, off the college campus, and eventually across the United States. Methodists in general were making room for women’s societies. For example, later in 1869 the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed; Methodists supported and led in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union beginning in 1874; the Methodist deaconess movement began in the mid-1880s. Carolyn Gifford says that the impression is often given that these groups came out of the blue.⁴⁵ However, that is simply not the case. The changing culture of Methodism was participating in and supporting these opportunities for women.

More specifically, Methodist advances in higher education and coeducation had a direct impact on the formation of secret societies for women (which pre-date and even influence the more often discussed groups like the WCTU and WFMS). As noted above, the first known secret society for women was the Adelpian Society,⁴⁶ which ceased to exist during the Civil War, but reemerged in 1905; Clapp writes that it is “doubtful that the seven founders [of P.E.O.] ever mentioned or even heard of” the Adelpians.⁴⁷ However, the founders were aware of I. C. Sorosis (the Latin name, which today goes by Pi Beta Phi). I. C. Sorosis is the oldest continually existing secret society for women. The group began in Monmouth, Illinois in 1867, not far from Iowa Wesleyan. In fact, it was the expansion of a chapter of I. C. Sorosis onto the campus of Iowa Wesleyan that spurred the formation of P.E.O. Only a few of the founding seven women were invited to join the newly forming chapter, created on December 12, 1868. So rather than join I. C. Sorosis, the seven girls created their own society just one month later.

This rival society is an interesting story in itself, but for purposes of this essay, the point remains that the oldest secret societies for women either began at, or quickly spread to, a Methodist institution of coeducation. Equally of interest is that Iowa Wesleyan had only a minority of trustees by 1873 who opposed these societies, and so the groups became “an important factor” in campus life.⁴⁸ P.E.O. was able to thrive, in part because of the climate in which it was formed and lived.

Further Religious Influences

To claim that such strong connections existed between the founding of P.E.O. and Methodism in the late 1800s suggests that comments are in order about the role religion played in the Sisterhood itself. Fran Becque writes that the founders “depended on their religious teachings to frame their sisterhood because it was an integral part of their daily lives.”⁴⁹ The society

⁴⁵ Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, “Sisterhoods of Service and Reform: Organized Methodist Women in the Late Nineteenth Century: An Essay on the State of the Research,” *Methodist History* 24.1 (October, 1985): 20.

⁴⁶ See above, n. 4.

⁴⁷ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 34.

⁴⁸ Kennedy and Rogers, *History and Alumni Record of Iowa Wesleyan College*, 37 and 40.

⁴⁹ Fran Becque, “The Role of Religion in P.E.O.,” *The P.E.O. Record* (May/June 2009): <http://www.peointernational.org/peo-record-16>.

meetings included prayer which was offered by a chaplain,⁵⁰ and even today meetings begin with Christian prayers and Bible reading.⁵¹ As Alice Bird retold the events of the first ceremony and the founding of the Sisterhood, she recalls the use of the Bible which the girls stood circled around waiting to make their vow to one another. Alice writes, “There they stood with the old college Bible on the table, old-fashioned girls, old-fashioned Bible, ready, anxious to subscribe to the old-fashioned principles which dignify our order.”⁵² Making vows around a Bible is not out of the ordinary—consider courts of law—still, the action reflects the cultural milieu in which the women operated. The women even chose to announce their existence to the rest of the college campus by marching into chapel in matching attire, with their newly chosen star emblem and the letters P.E.O. attached to their aprons.

Later, in 1881, the society adopted core values which were associated with Scriptural principles. These included “growth in charity,” and “in the qualities of Faith, Love, Purity, Justice, and Truth.”⁵³ By 1893, the constitution of the society included the specification that a member must acknowledge belief in God.⁵⁴ P.E.O. is not a religious society. However, it is apparent that Christianity has influenced it from its earliest days. Methodism in particular provided the culture for the Sisterhood’s formation, and in turn the values and ideals which were a part of Methodism naturally became those of the seven founders. The society always emphasized general improvement (or education), and by 1907, it founded the Educational Loan Fund (ELF) to support women in their education endeavors. Today, the group continues “promoting educational opportunities for women,”⁵⁵ true to its founding principles and its roots in nineteenth century Methodism.

Conclusion

While P.E.O. remains a society whose business is private, its origins and development are important to the stories of both women and Methodism in American history. As the second oldest women’s society in continuous existence—with direct ties to later advancements for women—the group deserves further scholarly consideration. Furthermore, the connection between Methodist history and P.E.O.’s history should not be overlooked. It was in the context of Methodist advances in education that P.E.O. was formed and thrived, finding its own emphasis on education which continues to this day. This further supports scholarship which demonstrates significant links between Methodist history and the evolving role of women in American society by citing such groups as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society and *The Ladies’ Repository*. P.E.O. can now become a part of the conversation.

⁵⁰ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 98 and 103.

⁵¹ Becque, “The Role of Religion in P.E.O.” <http://www.peointernational.org/peo-record-16>.

⁵² Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 6. Quoted from a letter by Alice Bird in 1913.

⁵³ Clapp, *Out of the Heart*, 100-101.

⁵⁴ Becque, “The Role of Religion in P.E.O.”

⁵⁵ P.E.O. International, “The Official Website of the P.E.O. Sisterhood,” accessed October 17, 2012, <http://www.peointernational.org/>.