

1870 came the University's announcement that the program of study at Mary Institute had been extended and women could now take classes in the Collegiate Department alongside the male students. An *Irving Union* editorial praised the idea: "May the young ladies do full credit to themselves and to the institution which has so liberally opened to them the golden gates of learning."

Alice Belcher, the first woman to enroll in a full undergraduate program, certainly did herself credit. In 1870-71, she surpassed all the men in her freshman class with an 84 percent average; her cousin, George, was a star, too, graduating from the University that year as class valedictorian. A second woman, Mary H. Strong, took a partial load of English, Latin, and composition, but neither returned the next fall; Alice Belcher transferred to the University of Michigan.

In 1873, two more women — Ada Calista Fisher, a public school graduate, and Mary Josephine Rychlicki, a Mary Institute alumna — were admitted as sophomores, and they stayed to graduate in 1876, third and fifth, respectively, in their eight-member class. Socially, their tenure was rocky. An 1873 *Irving Union* article teased that they had been missing early-morning chapel, probably because they were "priming," but in a letter signed "Sophomora" one replied tartly that she refused to attend services only to "be stared at by a mob of insolent boys." Further, she did not feel fully accepted by her male classmates and teachers: "No lady has made a speech or read an essay in public," she said, "[or] been honored by an election into that august circle, the Irving Union Debating Society."

Still the women kept arriving, bolstering the College's tiny enrollment. In 1882, there was one woman in a class of three; by 1886, there were three among six. Not all the men were pleased. "The gradual increase in the number of girls — if the fair creatures will allow the expression — entering our University," complained one *Irving Union* letter-writer, "has occasioned numerous discussions among the male students, or boys. Although we are certainly a gallant set of fellows, admiring girls in their proper sphere, yet I fear, had we the management of affairs, the fair maidens would soon be obliged to seek else where for a University education."



Even more tentative was the first expression of interest by a black student. In September 1870, St. Louis attorney George Kellogg asked the law school dean whether an application by a man of African descent would automatically be rejected.

Since no such case had yet arisen, replied the dean, the faculty had not considered the question. No application seems to have followed this query, but an African-American student, Hale G. Parker, did attend the law school from 1881-83. On his final exams, he scored less than one percent under the required total, so he did not receive a degree; however, he went on to a successful law career.

HARD TIMES BEGIN

The first year of Eliot's chancellorship passed smoothly. University Hall, completed at the end of 1871, was too large for the handful of College students plus the 36 students who were now taking undergraduate programs in civil engineering, mechanical engineering, chemistry, mining and metallurgy, and a short-lived new course of study — building and architecture. So another Washington University department, the St. Louis

Mary Josephine Rychlicki (?-1916).

A Mary Institute graduate, Rychlicki, A.B. '76, A.M. '79, went on to teach at her alma mater from 1877-87. She and Ada Calista Fisher, A.B. '76, A.M. '81, were the first two women to graduate from the College.

WU Archives

Alice Belcher enrolls as first female undergraduate

Alice Belcher, the first woman in the College, faced pressure to succeed. In a letter to her mother, she wrote: "When...Dr. Eliot observes, 'You are responsible that this experiment should be successful, so study,' then I realize how hard it will be to live up to this." She did so, however, earning better grades than the men in her class. Alice left after one year for the University of Michigan and a year later left Michigan to marry James F. Tweedy. Eventually, she settled in New York City, had five children, and became a part-time journalist, writing articles for popular publications.



Alice Belcher Tweedy (1850-1934).

Photo courtesy of John H. Tweedy