

— hidden — HISTORY

"HEALTHFUL EXERCISE AT ALL TIMES"

By Amy Ensley

Wilson may have been in its infancy in the 1870s, but the College was ahead of its time when it came to encouraging its female students to take part in physical education.

The first Wilson College catalog, printed in 1870, proclaimed, "The conviction is justly held, that first of all things to be secured and cared for in the training of the young, is sound physical health." The catalog goes on to stress the importance of "Physical Culture" in addition to the traditional college curriculum: "Accordingly, wise and liberal provision is made to preserve and promote it by liberal exercise in the open air. Ample accommodations are also provided for exercise indoors."

Just seven years after its opening and despite serious financial problems, Wilson constructed a gymnasium as one of its first priorities and touted the gym as an educational advantage. The 1876-77 catalog states, "A gymnasium has been completed during the Summer of 1877. The building is 40 x 60 feet, and is furnished with Rings, Dumb-bells, and other needful appliances. Few buildings can be found in the country better fitted for gymnastic purposes. We call attention of parents, who value the higher physical education of their daughters, to the superior advantages which are afforded here for healthful exercise at all times, regardless of stormy or inclement weather."

Wilson's dedication to physical fitness flew in the face of late 19th-century belief that both education and exercise were bad for young women. The concern for the physical health of those attending the new women's colleges was due to a general anxiety, spread by leading physicians and physiologists of the day, that the new fad to educate girls would come at the expense of the healthy development of their reproductive systems.

In 1873, just three years after Wilson opened, Harvard physician Edward H. Clarke wrote a lengthy treatise on the topic and warned what the future for college women would likely be: "Girls of bloodless skins and intellectual faces may be seen among the scholars, skins that cover curving spines. Later on, when marriage



Wilson's original gymnasium was completed in 1877.

and maternity overtake these girls, they bend and break beneath the labor, like loaded grain before a storm and bear little fruit."

What responsible parent would dare send a daughter off to college after these dire warnings? Clarke insisted, "The number of these graduates who have been permanently disabled or fatally injured by these causes is such as to excite the gravest alarm."

Clarke's argument would eventually be roundly debunked by administrators and faculty of women's colleges and by women physicians of the time—and also disproved by the rapidly rising number of female college graduates who showed no ill effects from their education and exercise.

The new exhibit, "Empowered Women: Athletics at Wilson," is now open at the Hankey Center and is free to the public. For an appointment, call 717-264-4141, ext. 3279, or send an email to amy.ensley@wilson.edu.