“Learning’s Altar” - The Rise of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning in Concord and Beyond

Sunday - Thursday    July 10 - 14, 2022

The hills are rear’d, the seas are scooped in vain,
If learning’s altar vanish from the plain.

~[William] Ellery Channing

(quote painted by May Alcott onto the mantelpiece in Orchard House’s Study)

For decades, educator and Transcendental philosopher A. Bronson Alcott cherished a dream that was finally realized in 1879 with the opening of The Concord School of Philosophy and Literature, one of the very first summer schools for adults in the United States. Among the notables who presented during Mr. Alcott’s lifetime were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Peabody, Ednah Dow Cheney, Julia Ward Howe, and William Torrey Harris, the last of whom, along with Alcott, Emerson, and Concord educator Franklin B. Sanborn, was also a founder of The School.

The 1879 sessions were held in Mr. Alcott’s Study in Orchard House, with distinguished academics, writers, scholars, artists, and reformers among the participants. Many were also women, whose access to higher education had been severely limited during their lifetimes; some even traveled alone each year from the Midwest and beyond to attend the series. By the next year, “Hillside Chapel” was built on the grounds of Orchard House and served as The School’s venue for the next seven years.

Noted for Platonic-based conversational interaction between presenters and attendees, the sessions offered a unique style of learning for participants. Unlike single-night Lyceum lectures or the popular religion-based Chautauquas held around the country, The School of Philosophy conducted upward of seven weeks of daily educational sessions. Attendees flocked to Concord, often staying for the entire length of series. Among the topics discussed were art, religion, politics, science, Shakespeare, philosophy, history, and mysticism.

The School closed after the Summer of 1888 in honor of Mr. Alcott’s death, but re-opened to the public in 1976 with a revived summer lecture program. By 1999, the Series was further enhanced by incorporating Mr. Alcott’s conversational style of learning into a week-long interactive educational program which thrives to this day.

This year’s Summer Conversational Series will offer participants an in-depth examination of the history of adult education around the world, and how programs like The Concord School of Philosophy and Literature revolutionized attitudes toward lifelong learning and intellectual growth. To be considered as a Presenter, please submit a one-paragraph presentation summary along with a short biography to Director of Education Lis Adams and Executive Director Jan Turnquist (ladams@louisamayalcott.org and jturnquist@louisamayalcott.org) by April 1, 2022.

Please note that the 2022 Summer Conversational Series will be an all-virtual event; an in-person component may be added after an evaluation of public health developments in June. Please consult www.louisamayalcott.org for updates.