Mary B. Welch

"She was a woman of refinement, culture and grace; a pioneer leader in education, and a true homemaker."

--The Iowa Homemaker
June-July 1923

About Mary B. Welch (1841-1923)

When Mary B. Welch's second husband, Adonijah Welch, was appointed the first president of the Iowa Agricultural College in 1868, he and Mary brought their four children from Florida to Iowa and took up residence in the Farm House.1 The Welches lived in the home for two months, and shared it with two other families. Eliza Gilmore, wife of the farm manager, was the official matron of the house at the time, though it is likely Mrs. Welch helped cook for the home's thirty or more dinner guests every night. After the Welch family moved out of the Farm House, Mrs. Welch remained involved in its upkeep, including helping Maria Knapp purchase a new stove for the kitchen in 1881.1

As an experienced teacher, Mrs. Welch took over leading Adonijah’s students in the College’s preliminary session in 1868 while he finished his term as a U.S. Senator from Florida. These preliminary courses were designed to prepare students for their upcoming college career, and they were a chance for students to make sure an agricultural college education was right for them. There were seventy-five students in the initial year; nine of them were women.1

In 1875, after the Welch family had left the Farm House, a committee from the College’s Board of Trustees asked Mrs. Welch to begin giving lectures for the newly formed Department of Domestic Economy.2 Because she had no training in the area other than the insight gained from managing her own home, Mrs. Welch sought a formal education from institutions such as the New York School of Cooking, the Elmira Seminary in New York, and even the National Training School for Cookery in South Kensington, England.2 The Iowa Agricultural College’s Department of Domestic Economy was nearly unprecedented among the nation’s colleges at the time, and Mrs. Welch served as the organizer and head of the Department from 1875 to 1883.3
Department of Domestic Economy

According to a letter Mrs. Welch wrote to a friend after retiring, the early Department of Domestic Economy’s facilities consisted of two small rooms in the basement of the Main Building next to the campus dining room. The pride of the department was “half a dozen or so of copper cooking utensils,” and Mrs. Welch’s informal lectures consisted of “intimate talks on the ways and means” of housekeeping Mrs. Welch had found successful in her own home.6

Students in Mrs. Welch’s classes practiced their skills by cooking dinner for a table in the campus dining room three nights a week. A rotating schedule meant tables eagerly anticipated their turn to receive the class’s home cooked meal. The department also took orders for baked goods from faculty, and even sold food to other students.6

Mary B. Welch’s Education Philosophy

As an educator, Mrs. Welch believed in empowering women by teaching them the science of family and home management.2 She believed women were especially crucial in the improvement of society because of the “influence and power” they held over their home and children.4 Mrs. Welch regarded housekeeping as an art and sought to enlighten her students through “a series of free and familiar talks” based on both her formal education at various institutions and her personal experiences.5

A resolution adopted by the Iowa State College faculty upon her death in 1923 states that Mary B. Welch was likely the first Home Economics instructor at a Land Grant college.2 Her emphasis on both the practical and theoretical sciences of home management and her profound belief in empowering women through education were truly revolutionary.

"Let these young, active, eager, inquiring women once become convinced of their own value and power and responsibility as women, and a long step has been taken toward a higher and better civilization."

–Mary B. Welch

Woman in the Home Speech

Figure 2: Old Main, 1876. Source: lib.iastate.edu

4. Mary B. Welch, “Woman in the Home” speech, 1900, Mary B. Welch Papers, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University.
5. ---, Lecture Journal, 1876, Mary B. Welch Papers, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University.
6. ---, Letter to Miss Elizabeth Storms, Apr 2, 1920, Mary B. Welch Papers, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University.

Farm House Museum

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Additional information on the Farm House Museum and University Museums is available at the University Museums office - 290 Scheman building (2nd floor) 515-294-3342. Visit us online at [www.museums.iastate.edu](http://www.museums.iastate.edu).