



# Thought Knows No Sex: Women's Rights at Alfred University

*Susan Rumsey Strong*

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*Grounded in student experiences at nineteenth-century Alfred University, this social history explores the origins of women's higher education and the rural roots of reform.*

"The essential powers of the spirit are neither masculine nor feminine, but human, sexless. Thought knows no sex." — Jonathan Allen, President, Alfred University (1867–1892)

One of the nation's first coeducational colleges and an early leader in women's higher education, Alfred University offered a remarkably egalitarian environment for women in an era when their voices were silenced elsewhere. Founded in 1836 as a select school in rural western New York State, it embraced women's public speaking, women's rights, and even suffrage. Susan Rumsey Strong shares the history of nineteenth-century Alfred, explaining its uniquely liberal environment by focusing on the individuals who created it and the sociocultural factors that contributed to it. Shared labor, a dense kinship system, a separatist denomination, independence from that denomination, liberal theology, and a secular mission all supported an explicit ideology of equality. Grounded in student experiences of the period, this social history explores the origins of women's higher education and the rural roots of reform. Along the way, Strong allows individual voices from diaries, letters, and recollections to recount their own stories, revealing the excitement, hopes, and fears felt by some of the first women to aspire to higher education.

At Alfred University, Susan Rumsey Strong is Reference Librarian, Herrick Memorial Library, and has also served as Vice-President and Associate Provost.

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