

Reprinted from the November 2006 issue of *Wellesprings*, the newsletter of the Welles Family Association.

The Rev. Lyman⁷ Beecher and
His daughters Catherine⁸ Beecher and Harriet⁸ (Beecher) Stowe

By Barbara J. Mathews, CG

Sometimes it is best to think — in Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegone terms — that “all the children are above average.” For one family of Welles descendants, however, that might well be an accurate assessment. This column will look the Rev. Lyman⁷ Beecher and his famous literary children.

Lyman’s mother, Esther⁶ Lyman, appears as a child in our upcoming Welles genealogy; she is a sixth-generation descendant of Anne² (Welles) (Thompson) Hawley. Esther was born on 17 February 1746/47 in Durham, Connecticut (Barbour citing VR 2:119), the daughter of John and Esther (Hawley) Lyman; and died 14 Oct 1775 in New Haven, a mere two days after giving birth to her only child. She married in March 1775, as his third wife, a blacksmith named David Beecher, son of Nathaniel and Sarah (Sperry) Beecher, born 25 April 1738 in New Haven, Connecticut; and died 12 June 1805 in New Haven. David had married, first, 18 October 1764, Mary Morris; and, second, 15 May 1771, Lydia Morris. After Catherine’s death, David married, fourth, Elizabeth Hoadley; and, fifth, Mary Lewis.¹



Picture of the Beecher family c.1850. Taken by Mathew Brady, New York.
Standing from the left : Thomas, William, Edward, Charles, Henry.
Seated from the left: Isabella, Catherine, Lyman, Mary, Harriet.²

Esther’s son Lyman was born 12 October 1775, in New Haven, Connecticut.³ According to his autobiography, he was two months premature. The midwife had no hope for his survival

¹ Donald Lines Jacobus, *Families of Ancient New Haven* (Rome, New York: Clarence D. Smith, 1923), vol. 1, p. 174.

² Courtesy of The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut.

³ Jacobus, *Families of Ancient New Haven*, vol. 1, p. 175.

and concentrated on trying to save his mother, whose tuberculosis made her recovery difficult. Following his mother's death, his aunt, Catherine⁶ (Lyman) Benton, the wife of Lot Benton of Guilford, took the small and scrawny child. Lot and Catherine were childless. For his part, Lot soon understood that Lyman wasn't the right nephew to inherit his farm. However, Lot was able to educate Lyman, who entered Yale College to prepare for the ministry. Lyman graduated from Yale in 1797.

Following one further year of theological studies, Lyman took the pastorate of the church in East Hampton, Long Island. It was there that his older children were born. From Long Island, Lyman moved to a church in Litchfield, Connecticut.

Lyman had thirteen children in all by his three marriages prior to his death on 10 January 1863 in Brooklyn, New York.⁴ He married, first, on 29 September 1799 Roxanna Foote; second, in November 1817 Harriet Porter; and third in 1836 Lydia (Beal) Jackson, the widow of Joseph Jackson.

In all, Lyman had six surviving sons, all of whom became ministers. Of his four surviving daughters all married and three became recognized names for literary and suffragist pursuits. The one daughter who herself didn't become famous was in her turn the mother of another famous suffragist. Key to the success of the children was, of course, their education. Lyman, while a minister in Litchfield, made an arrangement with a woman who had a school for girls. The arrangement was that his daughters would receive an education in return to his seeing to the spiritual needs of the students. Thus Catherine and Harriet attended Miss Sarah Pierce's School for Young Ladies.⁵

In his first daughter, Catherine Beecher, Lyman had the best student in the school. Catherine was courted by another brilliant mind, Professor Alexander Metcalf Fisher of Yale College. He was a prodigy who entered Yale at the age of 14 and graduated in 1813. Following Andover Theological Seminary, Fisher returned to Yale as a professor of mathematics and physics in 1818. When, on a visit to Litchfield, Fisher discovered that the thoughtful correspondent to *The Christian Spectator* known as C.D.D. was Miss Catherine Beecher, a courtship began. Catherine, only 19, was teaching at a girls' school in New London, Connecticut.

Finally, the couple became engaged in 1822. Fisher decided to travel to Europe for a year, with plans to marry on his return. Just before taking ship, he sent a letter to a Yale colleague containing plans for his estate should anything happen. Indeed, the ship *Albion* wrecked on the shores of Ireland, losing all but one person. Fisher's letter came to light. In it, he bequeathed \$2,000 to Catherine Beecher. She was never again to find her intellectual match.⁶

With a fortune by the measurements of the time, Catherine Beecher moved to Hartford and opened a school for girls called the Hartford Female Seminary. When existing textbooks proved inadequate, Catherine wrote new ones. In 1832, when the Rev. Lyman Beecher moved to Cincinnati to start the Lane Theological Seminary, Catherine followed him and established a school for girls.

After helping her by teaching in Hartford from 1815, Catherine's sister Harriet followed the family to Ohio, where she became an abolitionist. Later she married the Rev. Calvin Ellis Stowe and became a minister's wife, first in Maine and later in Hartford. Harriet's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a mainstay of the abolitionist movement.

⁴ Jacobus, *Families of Ancient New Haven*, vol. 1, p. 175.

⁵ Stowe, Lyman Beecher, *Saints, Sinners, and Beechers* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1936), p. 76.

⁶ Stowe, *Saints, Sinners, and Beechers*, pp. 80-86.