An American educator, who lectured and counseled on public and female education. She was born Emma Hart in Berlin, Connecticut, and was largely self-educated. She entered the teaching profession in 1803 and was principal of the Female Academy, Middlebury, Vermont, from 1807 to 1809.

Emma established a boarding school for girls in Middlebury, Connecticut in 1814. Rejecting contemporary theory on education for women, she included in her curriculum a number of subjects, such as mathematics and history, previously offered only in schools for men. Her Plan for Improving Female Education (1818), which proposed additional innovations, won the approval of the governor of New York, DeWitt Clinton, and in 1819 she opened a girls' seminary in Waterford, New York, the first school in the United States to offer a college-level education for women. In 1821 she founded the Troy Female Seminary (now the Emma Willard School) in Troy, New York; she managed the school until 1838.

In later years, Emma traveled extensively, lecturing and counseling on public and female education. Besides a number of textbooks, she wrote The Fulfillment of a Promise (1831), a volume of verse remembered chiefly for the poem “Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep.”