THE PALIMPSEST

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A College Is Born

As Lewis Baldwin Parsons, a successful merchant from New York State, rode over the rolling prairies of Iowa, the almost limitless expanse of rich land made an indelible impression on his mind. Parsons had been visiting his son in Keokuk when he suddenly determined to make a horseback trip through Iowa. Impressed with the possibilities for the growth and development of the newborn state, he invested heavily in land in Cerro Gordo, Hancock, Jasper, Polk, and Worth counties at $1.50 per acre.

Lewis Baldwin Parsons was born of Puritan ancestry at Williamstown, Massachusetts, on April 30, 1793. While yet a young man he had worked as a clerk for several business firms and eventually established his own concern, moving in 1829 to Gouverneur and later to Buffalo. While working at Homer, New York, he met Miss Lucina Hoar to whom he was married in 1814. Four sons and four daughters were born to them.

Always interested in education, Parsons fore-

saw the need of a "Christian College" in Iowa. Just before his death in 1855, he made a will providing for the establishment of such a school, or for endowing one already in existence. He directed that the school should be under the control of "Trustees, Presbytery or Synod" connected with the New School Branch of the Presbyterian Church until a reunion of the two sections — Old and New School — could be accomplished. Three sons — Lewis B., Jr., Charles (who lived in Keokuk), and George — were named as executors of his estate. The panic of 1857 and the financial uncertainties arising out of the Civil War prevented a disposal of this property except at a great loss, but finally enough land was sold to create a $4,000 fund.

Not long after the death of Lewis Baldwin Parsons, the Presbyterians in Iowa began to survey their educational facilities. Two Presbyterian Synods existed at this time. The North Synod sponsored Lenox College at Hopkinton, but the South Synod had no similar institution.

In 1869 the Parsons executors visited Iowa to select a site for the proposed school. They chose as their advisory committee three ministers — S. G. Spees of Dubuque, John Armstrong of Muscatine, and Willis G. Craig of Keokuk. When this became known, the South Synod promptly sought the aid of the Parsons Trust. An institution organized as Parsons Seminary was actually

incorporated at Cedar Rapids in hopes of securing the fund. While Cedar Rapids, Marshalltown, and Des Moines were considered as possible locations for the college, none of these towns was able to meet the conditions set forth by the executors, and no action was taken for two years.

At a meeting of the South Synod of Iowa, held at Council Bluffs in 1871, the problem of establishing a college was again raised by the appointment of a committee to confer with the Parsons' executors. Several proposals were considered by the Synod committee and the Parsons family, but no decision was reached that year. In 1872 the North Synod proposed to establish a college at Cedar Rapids by joint action with the South Synod, but this suggestion did not materialize either. At last, in 1874, definite action was taken when the South Synod, meeting in Des Moines, agreed to establish an institution of learning and appointed a committee to select a site and procure any available endowment. In addition, the Synod recommended that the Reverend John Armstrong of Muscatine, already a member of the Parsons executors advisory committee, be named as chairman. Later Willis G. Craig and Carson Reed, both Presbyterian ministers, were named to serve with Armstrong.

Fairfield was not considered as a site for the proposed school until November, 1874. James F. Wilson, the Reverend Carson Reed, and Judge

Charles Negus aroused interest within that town for the procuring of the college by holding public meetings. Subsequently the location committee of the Synod was invited to come to Fairfield to consider that town's claim. The meeting, presided over by William Elliott, was opened with prayer, a fact which made a deep impression upon Lewis B. Parsons, Jr., as it was the only place where the committee's deliberations were opened in that manner.

The location committee, on December 11, 1874, proposed to locate the school at Fairfield if $27,000 in bona fide subscriptions could be raised locally. Since Fairfield at that time had a population of only 2,343, and no major industries, the task of raising such a large sum appeared almost insurmountable. Encouragement was received when it became known that William Elliott and Robert McElhinny had each contributed $1,000. Other gifts soon followed and the stipulated sum was raised in the specified time. The senior executor, Lewis B. Parsons, Jr., then issued a call for thirty men to meet in Fairfield on February 24, 1875, to become trustees of "Parsons College." Twenty-five of the thirty invited appeared to sign and adopt the articles of association. After the oath of office had been administered to all the trustees, the following permanent officers of the board were elected: Lewis B. Parsons, Jr., president; the Reverend Carson Reed, secretary; and Wil-

liam Elliott, treasurer. When Parsons later resigned, the Reverend Willis G. Craig was elected president of the board, a post which he held continuously for thirty-three years.

Citizens of Fairfield and Jefferson County delivered to the trustees the sum of $27,516.25, consisting of 604 notes amounting to $26,947, a number of pledges totaling $475, and $94.25 in cash. From other sources, 166 acres of land with an estimated value of $1,725 were donated, in addition to stone in the quarry worth $275. The Parsons Estate turned over $4,016.65 in money and securities and approximately 3,560 acres of land.

The Board of Trustees purchased a twenty-acre tract just north of the city for $13,300. This land, known as the "Jordan Property," had once been owned by Bernhart Henn, who had built a brick residence there in 1857 at a cost of approximately $30,000. This building, which housed the first classes, is today known as Ewing Hall.

At its first official meeting in February of 1875 the Board took the necessary action to prepare Parsons College for its official opening in the fall. After expressing its gratification to the Parsons family and the citizens of the Fairfield community for their aid in establishing the school, the Board appointed a "Committee on Curriculum" to prepare "an academical or preparatory course of study. . . ." The committee for the selection of faculty members was charged with nominating to

the Board at least two instructors, and a third one if necessary, with individual salaries not to exceed $1,500 per year.

The executive committee of the Board was authorized to construct a chapel and to improve the "present building and grounds" at a cost not in excess of $6,000. The Board, announcing its aversion to debt, stated that "no obligation shall be incurred or expenditure made beyond funds within control or clearly in view." At this same session, John Armstrong accepted the position of financial agent of Parsons College on the condition that he be furnished a "suitable" residence and that all of his expenses incurred on college business be defrayed by the institution.

Committee reports presented at the next meeting of the Board on June 15 indicated that progress was being made in readying the college for its opening ceremonies. A contract had been made for the construction of a chapel to cost $6,500, and building activity had already begun. Many Board members believed that it was significant that the first building should be a chapel, since it indicated that "God was to occupy the place of pre-eminence."

At this June meeting the faculty committee nominated the Reverend Alexander G. Wilson for the position of "Rector of the Academical Department" and professor of languages. In addition to his salary of $1,500, Wilson was given the "use of

such rooms as may be vacant in the old building, together with a garden and dooryard." The Reverend John Armstrong, who was serving already as financial agent of the school, was nominated for professor of history, literature, and moral science, while the Reverend Albert McCalla was recommended for professor of mathematics at a salary of $1,000. The course of study to be adopted was referred to the executive committee, the instructors, and W. W. Jamieson, with the direction that it be published by July 1, 1875.

Several significant facts appear in the nominations made by the committee on faculty. First, while the institution was to be known as a college, its head was to be the "Rector of the Academy." Second, clergymen composed the entire faculty, which was perhaps a natural thing since Parsons was to be a church-related school. Third, Parsons was to serve as a liberal arts school, but no mention was made of science and no instructor provided. Fourth, the department of history, literature, and moral science was to be headed by the business agent of the school, either task normally being considered full-time duty.

The executive committee of the Board was instructed at the June, 1875, meeting to make any necessary repairs to the "Mansion" and to complete and furnish the new building by providing seats for 250 people in the chapel and to improve the appearance of the front of the structure at a

cost not to exceed $10,000. With the selection of the third Wednesday in June as the commencement date, the official action on the part of the Board of Trustees for the opening of Parsons College was completed.

The college at last had become a reality. The Reverend Willis E. Parsons, grandson of the founder and president of the school, was later to write: "Parsons College entered upon its career, not as a creature of impulse, but after mature deliberation and careful investigation. Its modest endowment was not the surplus from great wealth, but the life-long savings of a consecrated Christian man and woman who desired to honor their Maker and benefit their race. There seems to have been no thought of posthumous fame coming to the Founder in the way of exalting his name, but a sincere desire to serve. In this lies the choicest heritage of this institution."