

THE PALIMPSEST

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Many Foundations

Before the elementary school system had been well established, the early inhabitants of Iowa began to formulate plans for higher education. Seminaries and academies were projected in many localities and the inspirational foundations of future colleges were laid. Born of the inherent desire for the refinements of civilization, this frontier development, which seems premature, owed much of its progress to the missionary zeal of young clergymen who saw in Iowa a fertile field for church and school.

As early as 1838 a theological student at Yale wrote that he had become deeply interested in the country west of the Mississippi and wished to go there, both to preach the gospel and to exert his influence toward opening a "school at the outset" which could "soon be elevated to the rank of a college."

Sometime in 1841 or 1842 a group of men invited

Rev. Aristides J. Heustis to come to Mount Pleasant for the purpose of establishing an institution of higher education under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Having obtained his services, an association was formed on March 11, 1843, to erect the Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute. Any person could become a member of the association by subscribing five dollars in money, labor, property, or building materials. Within less than two years a brick building was erected and instruction begun. Although invited in 1844 to take it over as a conference institution, the Methodist Episcopal Church did not consider the matter seriously until 1849 at which time a committee was named to arrange for the transfer. The name of the institution was retained, however, until 1854 when by conference action it was changed to Iowa Wesleyan University.

By an act of the General Assembly in 1855, Iowa Wesleyan University was authorized to give instruction in medicine, law, and theology. Furthermore, the institution was to be "forever open on equal terms, to all who may wish to avail themselves of its advantages, irrespective of their religious opinions." To be sure, the statute made no requirements as to when the professional departments should be opened, if at any time, but the power to confer such degrees was granted.

During the history of the institution from its inception to the close of the first decade a number of different men acted as the principal teacher, but in

the fall of 1853 James Harlan was put in charge. It is well known that he became president of the Institute only on the express stipulation that it should be advanced as rapidly as possible to college rank, an achievement which was accomplished before his career was diverted in 1855 from the field of education to the arena of national politics.

Of all the schools in Iowa the institution which may claim priority in continuance of organization and classes of college grade is Grinnell College. Indeed, its history may be identified with the slogan of a group of young missionaries, "a college for the territory and a church for every town". In May, 1838, seven young men at Yale proposed to "have a meeting for consultation of those interested in our Iowa college plan." Though money was hard to raise, times were getting better, the banks were "beginning to pay specie," and things were "looking up." By July, two of this company were already in Iowa.

It was at least five years after the Yale men had visioned a college in Iowa that a member of another group at Andover said: "If each one of us can only plant one good permanent church, and altogether build a college, what a work that would be!" And this purpose separately formed was subsequently to become the common aim of the Yale and Andover men, representing both the Presbyterian and Congregational churches, when they met in the Territory of Iowa.

March 12, 1844, is a date to be remembered, for it marks the beginning of the execution of the long-cherished design of these two groups. At a second meeting in April, when representatives of both Congregational and New School Presbyterian members in the Territory assembled, a report from a committee which had been sent out to seek a location was heard and the "Iowa College Association" was organized. All plans and reports were approved by this organization and Rev. Asa Turner was at once commissioned as agent to go East for funds to carry out the proposed scheme.

The committee on location recommended the plan of entering a claim for a large tract of land in some favorable section of the Territory, and thereafter the collection or borrowing of funds to pay for it. Their choice fell upon a site in Buchanan County, where the present city of Independence is built and included the water power furnished by the Wapsipinicon River at that point.

The journey of Asa Turner to the East in order to secure capital to purchase the claim was not successful, although through no fault of his or of his associates who from their thin purses contributed his expenses. It is said that several potential contributors objected to the speculative feature of buying a large tract of land with a view to subsequent sale at a profit.

After about two years spent in this preliminary survey of college possibilities, the committee rec-

commended Davenport as the most desirable place, a city which even then was considered as having no rival "for ease of access and beauty of situation". Plans for a college building to cost not to exceed \$2000 were adopted. Upon the completion of the building in 1848 instruction was begun in November under Rev. Erastus Ripley, professor of languages and principal of the preparatory department.

Unlike some other institutions, the charter of Iowa College as it was originally named, required neither the trustees nor the faculty to be connected with any particular church; and during its early history the New School Presbyterians were joined with Congregationalists in the Iowa College Association. This relation was maintained, it seems, until about 1852 when some differences led later to the withdrawal of the Presbyterians from any official connection.

Within the five years from 1850 to 1855 not less than nine institutions of considerable permanence, some of which have since reached a high rank among the first colleges of the country, were established. Each has an individuality which may best be shown in the events surrounding its infancy. For example, in 1851, Rev. George B. Bowman who had sought to establish the Iowa City College some years before, exhibited his faith in a bold undertaking to begin another not far away. Being a determined and persevering character, he did not hesitate to locate a college site on the open Iowa prairie and then, prac-

tically single-handed, to set about the collection of means to occupy it. The widely scattered settlements of that time required long journeys on the part of the circuit rider, and it was through these travels that an intimate acquaintance with the uplands, the lowlands, the woodlands, and the streams was acquired. That the masterful environment of certain localities should appeal to far-sighted men is not, therefore, to be wondered at, and the early selection of claims along the wooded streams with prairie adjacent, as well as the planting of villages at strategic points where cities arose, is evidence of the results. And so it seems, the outlook from the hill at Mount Vernon compelled the minister to halt in his journey and to declare that this should become the site of a college maintained by his denomination. This decision was made in 1852 and thus for nearly a decade he had cherished the plan which had proved unsuccessful in his Iowa City enterprise.

On July 4, 1852, in the presence of a great company of pioneers, gathered from the four points of the compass and from widely scattered settlements, who had just listened to an address on "Education" by James Harlan, ground was broken for the first building which was subsequently to constitute a part of the equipment of Cornell College. No action by any corporate body nor, as it appears, by any concerted authority had been taken; not even a title to the land had been obtained when this event occurred. It is quite clear, therefore, that the project had been

carried thus far by the superlative purpose of one man who believed that his judgment would be sustained. Not until September following did the Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, assembled at Burlington, accept, without consideration, the property — fifteen acres of land adjoining the town plat of Mount Vernon and the projected building — and elect nine trustees, five laymen and four ministers, to manage the new institution. But this was not a college; nor was any name applied until 1853 when the trustees formally authorized the title of the "Iowa Conference Male and Female Seminary", and elected a faculty of three members — Rev. Samuel N. Fellows, principal and professor of mental and moral sciences and belles lettres; Rev. David H. Wheeler, professor of languages; Miss Catherine Fortner, preceptress; and some assistants or special teachers.

Students began to arrive in September, 1853, before the building was ready and when only one member of the faculty, the preceptress, was there. She assumed the responsibility of the entire management of classes assembled in the village church. In November, the single building, "large and commodious" as all first college buildings have been, was occupied and there, in unfinished rooms crowded with classes, the work was carried on until the close of the scholastic year in 1854. On that occasion a public examination was attended, it is said, by "an enthusiastic crowd from far and near". During the

year 161 students, 104 men and 57 women, were in attendance and this seems to have inspired the trustees with a purpose to proceed at once to reincorporate under a college title and to secure a college building.

It was in 1851, also, that the preliminary steps were taken which led, thirty years later, to the founding of Coe College. Although wholly a private venture it is illustrative of the elementary manner in which a number of institutions have begun. A few young men in the community — sixteen it is said — were desirous of preparing for college and were instructed by a local minister in a room of his own unfinished dwelling. From that beginning an academy class was formed in the fall of 1852 by a teacher drawn from Knox College. This instruction was conducted in a local church and the name of "Cedar Rapids Collegiate Institute" was soon adopted. Meanwhile, the former instructor of the young men, Rev. Williston Jones, was endeavoring to obtain aid from the East, and it was his fortune to meet Daniel Coe who, being kindly disposed toward educational improvements, donated funds (\$1500) on the condition that eighty acres of land adjoining the city as well as some additional real estate within the town plat be purchased. With this prospect a stock company was formed whereby each holder of a share valued at twenty-five dollars became a member of the corporation.

Among the provisions of the articles of incorpor-

ation was one securing to the "Iowa City Presbytery in consideration of five scholarships for the first five years, and ten scholarships thereafter" the right to "nominate all teachers of the Institute, subject, however, to confirmation by the Board of Directors". This provision was not consummated, but stipulations forbidding any distinction between the sexes in the privileges allowed has been in effect from the beginning. Moreover, a fund was set apart by Mr. Coe "to be appropriated to the best advantage for the benefit of such students as may need to assist themselves by manual labor."

Before the close of 1853 the real estate had been secured, but when means were sought to erect a building there were some discouraging experiences. The outlook was such that the elementary school which had been continued in the building, used also for a church, could not be maintained, especially in competition with the public schools then developing. Last of all, the general support which the church was supposed to render in establishing such institutions was not forthcoming, so that by 1855 the promoters had little hope of realizing their object.

As early as 1846, it is said, the Baptists had thought of an institution for the education of their youth and proposals were made to locate a school at Agency City. But the matter was not again considered until 1851 when definite action was taken. Thereupon five persons were appointed to make a survey of possible locations and to solicit informa-

tion relative to the advantages which communities had to offer in establishing a denominational university for the State. This committee was authorized to summon a convention of the people concerned whenever it was considered advisable. This was done in 1852 when the action resulted in the opening of Burlington Collegiate Institute — an institution which struggled on with varying fortunes for a half century without reaching college dimensions.

Late in 1852 delegates assembled at Oskaloosa but, owing to the limited number present, they decided to postpone definite action. At a new convention, called in 1853, Pella was selected as the future site of the institution since known as Central University of Iowa. The object, as set forth in the beginning, was the maintenance and development of a literary and theological school under the control of a board of thirty trustees, the first president of which was Rev. H. P. Scholte, who had led the Hollanders in their settlement at Pella in 1847.

One year later, in June, 1854, the board determined to open an academy in the succeeding fall. Accordingly, a principal and two assistants having been employed, announcement was made that students would be admitted in September. When the principal arrived, however, nothing was ready; not even a room being available in which to collect a class, to say nothing of furniture which was yet growing in the Des Moines timber. Nevertheless, within three weeks the logs were cut, made into

desks and seats, and erected in the temporary school room. Although commencing nearly a month after the date announced, there were thirty-seven students present on the opening day — a number coming from a distance.

During this term there were 73 pupils and by the end of the year 122 were enrolled. It is known that there were only nine American families in the town of Pella, but the families of the Hollanders patronized the new school, and it happened that a number came the first year from the twenty or more families of immigrants that had wintered in the neighborhood. These students were probably taking advantage of the only school privileges offered and, although the greater number were young men and women, it is clear that elementary work was offered by some or possibly all of the three instructors. As in many other organizations which set out to become colleges, the first important work involved the creation of a local institution where no public effort had been made to provide for schooling.

This situation was not unlike the opening of the seminary or academy at Fayette which later became Upper Iowa University. At about the same time (1855) it attracted as many as a hundred students, most of whom were probably from the community. The origin of Upper Iowa was due to two liberal-minded citizens of the vicinity who had promoted its establishment prior to its being taken over by the Upper Iowa Conference. Designed in the beginning

to carry instruction into the college grade, the school first had to prepare its students through subordinate courses, and therefore provided for the academy.

Although it was not until 1857 that students were admitted to the Tabor Literary Institute, this school had been founded in the southwestern part of the State in 1854, and soon attained college standing. Being established by a colony of settlers who were interested in planting another educational institution, the development of the school and town were closely identified.

Early in 1853 an undenominational movement was projected by a group of men who designed the "establishment of a colony of christian families" on a plan that would secure an endowment fund for an "institution of learning of a reformatory character." The scheme involved the idea of obtaining and subsequently disposing of large tracts of land at an advanced price. Those desiring to become interested shareholders were to invest one hundred dollars a share and when \$7000 had been subscribed a committee should be selected to explore the unoccupied territory of either Iowa or Missouri in order to locate the colony the most advantageously. First of all a town would be platted in a most favorable place on the land while the remainder would be surveyed into tracts of ten, twenty, and forty acres. These larger divisions, appraised at five dollars an acre, would thereafter be assigned to the shareholders to the full value of their holdings; and to each

share likewise there would be assigned a scholarship good for gratuitous instruction during a period of five years in the proposed institution of learning. From the sale of town lots and other lands, an educational fund would be derived for buildings and endowment.

Such was the plan for a school which for many years was known as Amity College located at College Springs. The ideals set forth by the promoters announced that the "institutions of learning and religion" at Oberlin, Ohio, and Galesburg, Illinois, would be "worthy of imitation" while they would inspire the company with the hope of success. This school, it should be said, was established as a manual labor institution, and for both sexes.

Early in 1855 the capital of the company was increased to \$30,000 and the organization adopted the title of "The Western Industrial and Scientific Association". Not long after this decision, parts of Kansas, Missouri, and southern Iowa were explored and before the close of 1855 the site for the town and college had been selected in Page County and there the articles of incorporation were recorded and the name Amity College was adopted. When the lands had been surveyed and all was ready for occupancy or sale, instructions were given the trustees by vote of the stockholders to insert in every deed for land or lots a provision prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcoholic drinks — for this was not purely a business undertaking.

As early as 1852 the German Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which subsequently provided instruction of collegiate grade, was founded at Dubuque by Rev. Adrian Van Vliet, the pastor of a small church in that city. He sought to find young men whom he assured the Presbytery would license in due time, if they would prepare for the ministry. With this purpose in view he began with but two students using a part of the parsonage as the school room. The attendance soon grew to eighteen and from these limited accommodations the school was moved to two small frame buildings located on a single small lot, and an assistant teacher was employed. Thus the University of Dubuque began.

One of the most peculiar institutions founded in Iowa during the fifties was Western College fostered by the United Brethren. A site was selected in Putnam Township, Linn County, on the open prairie. This was to have the advantage of providing a quiet and undisturbed environment away from centers of population, and the people attracted to the town which would grow up around and with the college would be in sympathy with the institution. Moreover, the sale of lots would provide endowment for the school. Within two months from the time the town was laid out, seven buildings had been erected and more than fifty lots sold. By August, 1856, at least a hundred persons called the town their home. A provision in every deed declared it void if the owner should ever deal in spirituous

liquors or even allow any gambling or dancing on his premises. Thirty students enrolled at the opening term in 1857. The manual labor department enabled students to earn part of their expenses and pursue a course in scientific farming at the same time.

Lenox, Griswold, and Oskaloosa colleges also had their origin just before the Civil War. Some of these schools that originated in the fifties flourished for a while and were then discontinued or absorbed by another institution. A few have recently been transformed into junior colleges. But most of the early ventures into higher education have justified the faith of the founders by their survival for three quarters of a century.

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