

AN IOWA-BORN HISTORIAN AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION:

Carl Becker and "The Spirit of '76"

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and
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One hundred years after the Boston Tea Party, a boy was born on an Iowa farm who in the course of his life would change the way Americans thought about their Revolution. His parents named him Lotus Carl Becker. During his boyhood years it appeared that Lotus would become anything but a distinguished scholar. However, a Waterloo school administrator spotted the youngster during his high school years and prophetically told Becker's father: "your son is by far the best student in school and we'll hear from him someday."

After a midwestern education, Becker taught and wrote for the remainder of his life at various universities, none of them in Iowa. During the early decades of this century Americans began to "hear from him" in a stream of books, articles, and reviews, many of them dealing with the era of the American Revolution. As of 1976 the best book on the Declaration of Independence is still Becker's volume on that subject published in 1922. Nine of Becker's 16 books are currently in

print; many of his 75 scholarly articles are available in modern anthologies. Many of his 180 book reviews are models of expression in that genre.

Consider, for example, a section of Becker's 1928 review of a book about French culture in America:

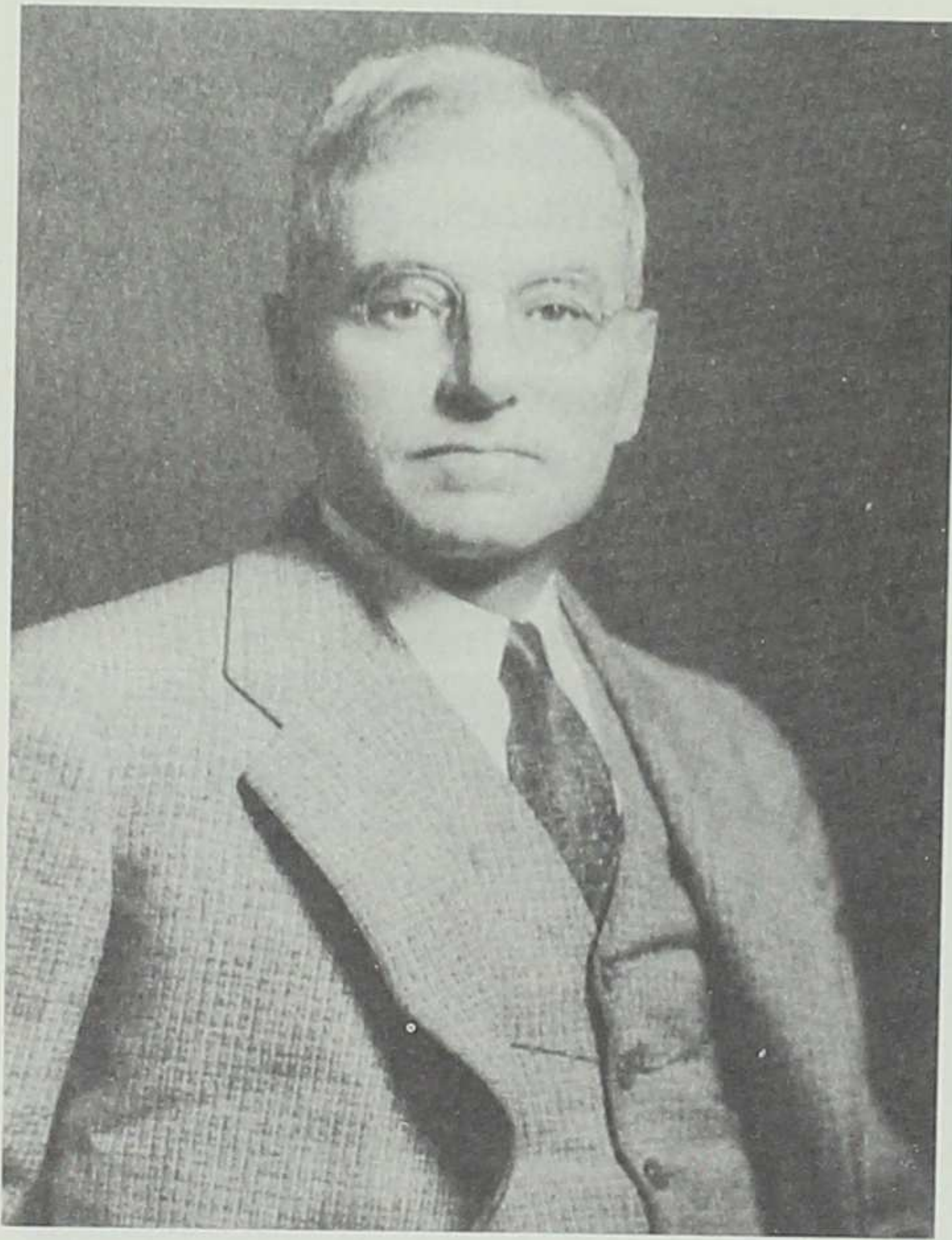
When one billiard ball strikes another, the struck ball *always* moves in a precisely determinable direction. But when a French idea strikes an American mind, the mind so struck may move forward or backward, to right or to left, up or down, slowly or rapidly — or it may not move at all.

The situation is complicated by the fact that the American mind may move most rapidly when struck by an idea which is only supposed (quite mistakenly) to be French. When quite a young lad I heard the Reverend Van Ness (his prestige was immense in Waterloo, Iowa) preach an eloquent sermon passionately denouncing "French atheism" in general and Voltaire in particular. I have reason to know that the contacts of the Reverend Van Ness with things French were of the slightest; and I am convinced that he denounced Voltaire, not because he knew anything about him, but because he want-

ed the boys of Waterloo, Iowa, to be good boys and join the Methodist church. The effect of this sermon . . . was undoubtedly to confirm many Americans in their settled conviction that the French, having the misfortune to be born abroad, are naturally immoral and light-minded. My point is that such powerful and pervasive "influences" as these have operated effectively, not in proportion to the contacts of Americans with things French, but precisely in proportion to the absence of such contacts. "I hate that man," said Charles Lamb on one occasion; "I hope I never meet him; because if I met him I would be sure to like him; and I hate him."

Not that the influence of the sermon was necessarily of the sort intended. I myself had the perversity to be influenced in a quite other way. It is true the sermon made a profound impression on me, chiefly because the words "atheist" and "Voltaire," unlike such words as Solomon and sanctification, were altogether novel; so that the passionate eloquence of the preacher invested them with horrific and engaging connotations. The incident accordingly gave me an interest in atheism and in Voltaire which I have never wholly lost. As soon as ever I could I read books about Voltaire and books written by him. It was a disappointment surely to learn that Voltaire was after all not an atheist, but something less; and yet consoling to learn that he appeared to have cut more of a figure in the wide world than there was any reason to suppose the Reverend Van Ness had done . . .

At times, this engaging man wrote for the general public, at others for students (even young ones), and still at other times for scholars. Professional historians continue to ponder the philosophy of history he expressed in 1931 as President of the American Historical Association. At this stage in his career Becker regarded history as the sum of



Carl Lotus Becker (courtesy of MIT Press)

everything that has taken place — all the thoughts, actions, words, and deeds of all people who ever lived. But human beings cannot replay the past as a movie projectionist reruns a roll of film. Historical facts do not exist until someone creates them from incomplete written records, fallible memories, and other imperfect sources. When humans handle these facts, telltale traces of their locations and times, even of their personalities, values, and circumstances rub off on the facts themselves. Thus, for Becker, history was not an exact science, but an incomplete, subjective, and temporary appraisal more closely related to art.

During this Bicentennial year it is appropriate that Iowans remember a native son who wrote brilliantly in the field of eighteenth century European and American history and who also thought

deeply about the nature of history. This article raises a question: what telltale traces of Iowa rubbed off on Becker and his historical writings, particularly his writings about the American Revolution? In the following pages biographical data and details of Iowa history lead into and merge with a discussion of a portion of a great historian's works. One objective is to determine whether, in his writings on the Revolution, Becker achieved his own ideal of communicating the spirit of an historical age without leaving a single clue as to the historian's time, place, personality, or circumstance. If he did, then he refuted the very philosophy of history he expressed as President of the American Historical Association.

Charles DeWitt Becker (1841-1919), the historian's father, educated himself and worked hard before achieving modest comforts in Iowa. Born of German and Dutch ancestry in New York, he heard his grandmother relate incidents she had witnessed during the Revolutionary War. Charles may have had some connection with Charles DeWitt (1728-1778), a delegate to the Continental Congress from New York. His grandfather spoke only German; Charles only English. (Lotus completed the circle by stumbling over German in graduate school.) Thoroughly American, Charles Becker participated in two great themes in nineteenth century American history — he fought in President Lincoln's army and, three years later, he heeded Horace Greeley's advice and went West.

Shortly before leaving his native state in 1868, Charles married Almeda Sarvay (1845-1915), a sensitive woman of good

disposition from a New York family of some means. The young couple tried Illinois briefly, but before the year was out they settled in Black Hawk County southwest of Waterloo, Iowa. Almeda's brother, Lotus Sarvay, settled nearby. The land lies flat and fertile in Lincoln Township where Charles acquired "as good farm land as there is any where to be found." Here he and Lotus Sarvay broke prairie sod with a walking plow. They used their muscles and minds to bring to reality Thomas Jefferson's dream for the American West — rectangular fields, neat farmsteads, roads following the section lines, and a school house at the cross roads. To this day the description holds true for the locality except that the children have abandoned the rural school in favor of a consolidated school in town. Two features in Lincoln Township defy eighteenth century order — the creeks draining into the Cedar River and the diagonal road to Waterloo.

Lotus was born on the family farm September 7, 1873, the second of four children. Assuming that the parents wanted their boy to emulate his namesake, "Uncle Lote," Lotus Becker should have become a progressive farmer, a leader in community betterment causes, and a devout Methodist. Almeda, according to her niece, passed on to Lotus her "looks and disposition;" he in turn, "became the silver lining in his mother's life." Jessie, the youngest of the three Becker girls, asserted that her mother endowed her brother "with her good disposition which made him beloved by the family and friends." Although Jessie considered her mother "above average in intelligence," she unhesitatingly asserted that her brother "inherited his

brilliant mind from his father.”

A pillar of strength in the community, Charles Becker functioned best among Union army veterans, Republicans, Masons, and Methodists. He had taught school as a young man in New York and served on the school board in Lincoln Township. While visiting in the vicinity of the farm in 1974, the authors located one octogenarian, George Glasener, who remembered the venerable pioneer donning his Civil War uniform on special occasions such as Decoration Day, “. . . parading through Lincoln Cemetery with other veterans, putting flowers on the graves of Civil War veterans.” Glasener recalled that Charles Becker was a large, impressive man and a Methodist. Ironically, a century after Lotus Carl’s birth, neither Glasener, nor anyone else in the vicinity of the Becker farmstead had any knowledge of the historian or his writings.

Few details survive of Lotus’ life as a farm boy. We know that Lotus began his formal education at Lincoln school, diagonally across the section from his family home. In later life he found merit in rural schools, at least as promulgators of American democracy. Regarding the farm work he wrote in 1909, “. . . I can remember when my father cut his wheat with the old fashioned ‘reaper’ which raked the single unbound ‘bundle’ on to the ground.” Significantly, he did not mention the work of tying the bundles, pulling them together, and shocking them in neat clusters. The explanation is that the family did not remain on the farm long enough for Lotus to help his father much with the heaviest farm work. When Lotus was 11 years old, his

father rented out the farm, loaded up the family possessions, and traveled the diagonal road to a new home in Waterloo.

After the 1884 move to the bustling county seat of over 5,000 inhabitants, Charles Becker became increasingly active in partisan politics. That fall he was elected County Recorder in a Republican landslide that swept every contest



Charles DeWitt Becker (courtesy of Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York)

in the county. He held this office for many years and also served long terms on the County Board of Supervisors and the Waterloo School Board. A prominent figure throughout the county, he was often called upon to make the main speech on the Fourth of July or at the laying of a cornerstone. The Waterloo Eastern Star chapter still carries his name as a tribute to his public service.

"It is something of an ordeal for a new boy — a country boy, for example, entering a city school — to be subjected to the severe scrutiny and the rough-and-ready test which he cannot escape," Becker wrote in *The United States: An Experiment in Democracy*. "Let him grin and stand up to it; let him return . . . taunt for taunt, and it is soon over; he is accepted at once as a brother, and has henceforth an equal chance with every member of the community." Usually studious Lotus, his cousin Leonard Sarvay, and another boy once went into school late, "with playing cards pinned on their back," for which they were expelled. Lotus came home and said to his mother, "no more school for me." His joy was short lived for after lunch he was sent back with a note to the Superintendent which caused him to be reinstated at once.

In later life the historian revealed that living in Waterloo did not preclude summers in the country. "During the summers of 1888-91," he wrote, "I enjoyed the great pleasure of following a McCormick selfbinder about a forty acre oat field for ten hours a day, in the humble capacity of a 'shocker.'" Circumstances surrounding the episode suggest that he was not entirely facetious about the pleasures of agrarian toil. Lotus delighted in spending his

summers on Uncle Lote's farm, away from the scrutiny of an exacting father, and with his cousin and closest friend, Leonard Sarvay, as a constant companion. Lotus Carl's economic well-being was not seriously at stake. Such circumstances are conducive to an enthusiasm for farming.

Jessie recorded that late in the summer preceding her brother's junior year in high school, Lotus wrote home that he intended to remain on the farm that fall and did not plan to return to school. Upon receipt of the letter, his father, still a member of the Waterloo School Board, immediately drove the 15 miles into the country and when he returned "the young gentleman was with him." Such episodes ceased after a change in school administration, no doubt effected in part by the elder Becker. Annie S. Newman, a teacher and principal at West Side High School, "realized my brother was an exceptional student," wrote Jessie, "and I think helped him on the way up as much as any one person."

A Becker biographer, Burleigh T. Wilkins, phrased a blunt question about his subject's early intellectual development. "What then is the historian to make of the son of an Iowa dirt farmer who wrote . . . with 'the urbanity of a Lord Chesterfield and the pithiness of a Benjamin Franklin?'" With little or no evidence, Wilkins assumed that Becker began his education at an "inferior" rural school. Becker did not consider it entirely such as indicated by his comments in *The United States: An Experiment in Democracy*. Wilkins implied that during the Waterloo years Becker was seldom challenged and that only a select few saw the glimmer of genius in him — Annie S. Newman and Superin-

tendent George A. Bateman. The Becker family library of some 100 books provided some stimulation, as did the librarian who responded so aptly when the Becker boy took one of Tolstoy's novels from a shelf at the Waterloo Public Library and asked if it was a "good book." Becker later explained her response:

The lady glanced at the title, then looked at me, over her spectacles, searchingly, sizing me up, no doubt wondering whether, for a boy of perhaps thirteen, *Anna Karenina* was after all quite the thing. At last she said: 'It's a very powerful book.' Nothing else — a wise lady I've always thought.

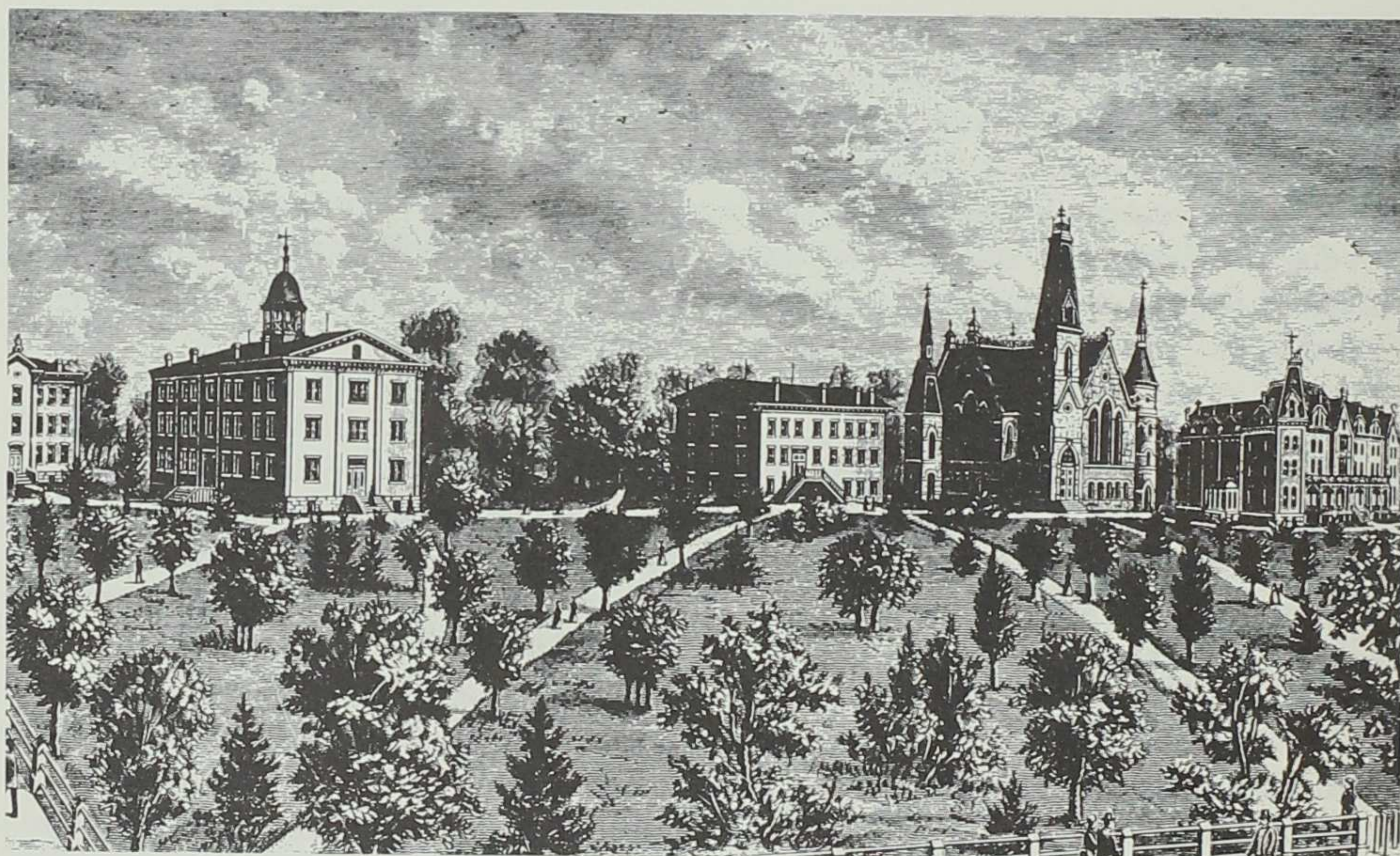
The custodians of culture in Iowa were not total failures during Becker's youth.

To respond to Wilkins, there is no known way to anticipate where people of extraordinary ability will seek mental nourishment. There is no more reason for surprise that the son of a Boston candle-maker made an impact upon the eighteenth century than that the son of Charles Becker wrote about Franklin with a touch of the same genius that "snatched scepters from kings and lightning from the sky."

Like Franklin, Becker threw off the religious inheritance that came to him from his parents. Wilkins describes the Becker home in Waterloo as "a place for moderation and security, but not for romance or revolution, whose proper place was in books, which is where Carl Becker eventually found them." The house was located at 926 Randolph Street, not far from the First Methodist Church where the family regularly attended the sermons of Reverend J. G. Van Ness from 1884 to 1887. One Sunday

the Tempter worked through the sermon of this eloquent preacher who passionately denounced Voltaire. Ironically, the very clergyman who admitted Lotus to church membership (September 13, 1885) aroused his young parishioner's curiosity to the point where Lotus began reading about the eighteenth century skeptic on his own. Playing cards, ball games, and billiards tempted the affable Methodist boy, but beyond this momentary backsliding, there is no evidence that Becker yet admired Voltaire as "the champion of reason and tolerance."

In the fall of 1892, Lotus and his inseparable cousin Leonard, entered a Methodist-supported school, Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, Iowa. Both young men enrolled in the "Scientific Course," which calls into question Becker's later statement concerning his early resolution upon a writing career. The *Cornell College Catalog for 1892-93* spelled out the school rules: students must attend daily chapel on campus and Sunday worship at a local church; the faculty prohibited "profanity, obscenity, gambling, the use of intoxicating liquors, the playing of cards or billiards, attendance upon balls, dancing parties, or other objectionable entertainments." Wilkins' characterization of Cornell as "largely an act of piety" should not obscure the fact that some able people strode the campus during the 1892-93 term. Among the student body, Charles Reuben Keyes, a junior, was destined to become the father of Iowa archaeology. Several faculty members held advanced degrees from good institutions. Charles Atherton Cumming, Director of the Art School and a significant Midwestern artist, was one of the more creative Cornell faculty



Cornell College in the early 1890s. (from the Cornell College Catalog, 1892-93)

members of the period. A faculty improvement program supported the school's history professor on leave during the winter and spring terms of Becker's freshman year. Curiously, Becker took no history courses at Cornell during his three terms of study there.

Cornell College provided an environment that seemed proper for the Becker and Sarvay boys of Waterloo. "With the Republican Club on third floor singing *Marching Through Georgia*, and the young ladies on second floor singing *Marching to Zion*," reported the *Cornell Breeze* of October 15, 1892, "something partaking of the nature of confusion weighed about the main college building Wednesday evening." If indeed they knew about it, Becker's parents could tolerate such confusion. Two disappointments of the fall term, mild in comparison with what was to follow, did not escape their notice. *The Cornellian* of

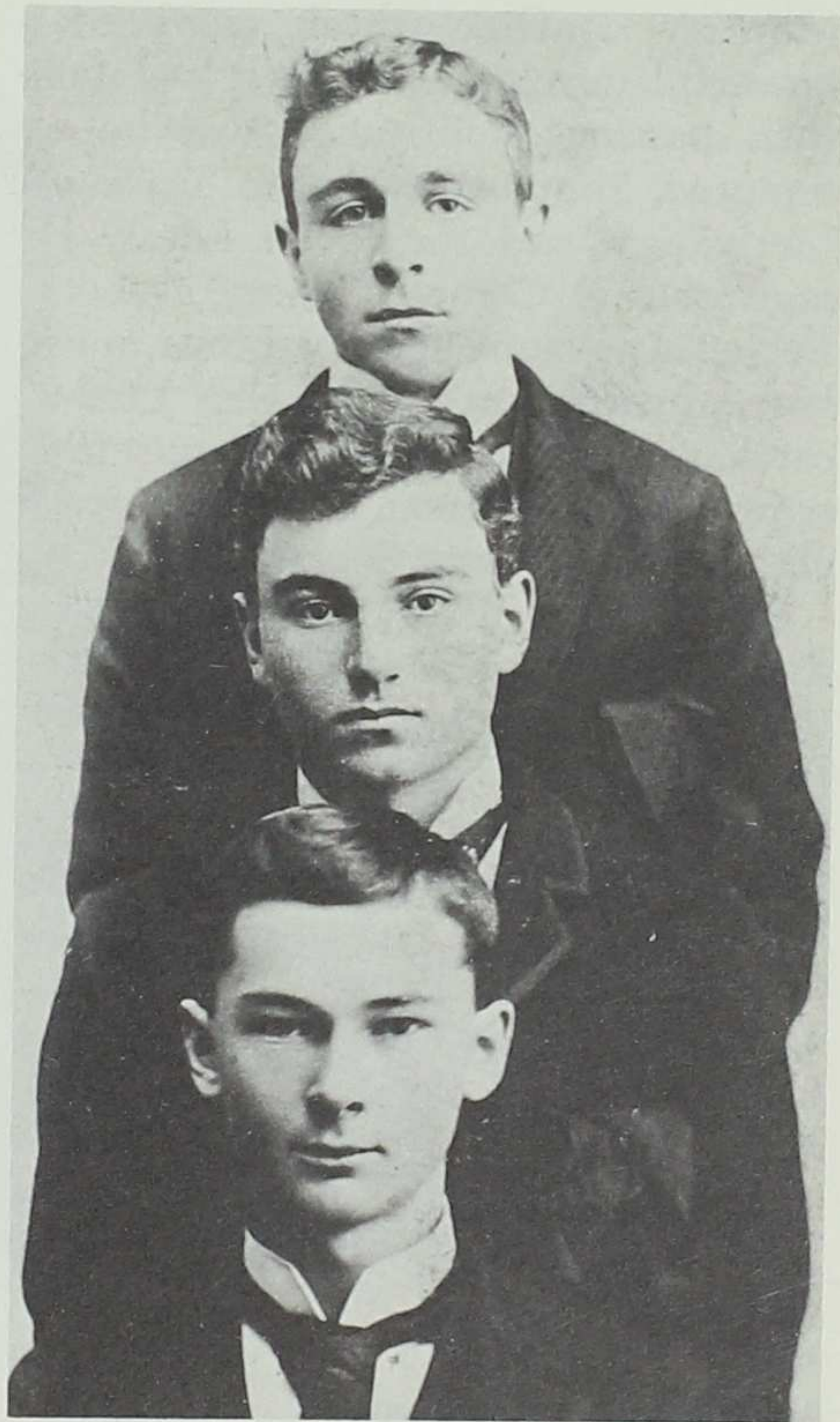
November 21, 1892 reported: "Mrs. Becker of Waterloo came down last night to care for her son Lotus who is laid up at Mrs. Wright's with a very bad knee." Under such attention the patient convalesced. The same could not be said for Lotus' grade in "Fr.[eshman] Essay." At the end of the term the registrar recorded a grade of 43 for this course and mediocre, but passing grades for his remaining classes. Leonard Sarvay on the other hand went home at Christmas as a newly-chosen officer of the Amphictyon Literary Society.

All thinking people must at some time face the problem of reconciling ancestral faith with personal experience and contemporary thought. After the Christmas recess, such a test came for Lotus. He skittishly added and dropped classes during the winter term; among those dropped was "Sophomore Evidences." The college catalog elaborated: "In this

course recitations from Fisher's Manual of Christian Evidences and lectures, connected with biblical and theological science, are had upon alternate days." Soon after turning his back on "Christian Evidences," tragedy struck. Leonard Sarvay became so sick at the outset of the spring term that he could not continue his studies. He went home, struggled for life during the month of April, then died May 10, reportedly of typhoid fever. *The Cornellian* of May 13 reported: "Mr. Becker went to Waterloo Thursday to attend the funeral of his cousin Leonard Sarvay."

Considering this practical encounter with "Christian Evidences" and deep uncertainties about his own destiny, a torrent of thoughts must have rushed through Lotus' mind. "When a young man who gave every promise of a useful life is thus stricken down in the very beginning of his manhood, the ways of providence seem hard to understand," asserted an article in the *Breeze*, May 13, 1893. No available record reveals how Becker reacted to the statement that Leonard died "in furtherance of his [God's] eternal purpose, and though we mourn we can but say God is good and wise; his will be done." Academically, Becker did not buckle under the strain and, in fact, finished the spring term with no grade lower than 88 (and a 95 in "Fr. Essay"). He apparently resolved to abandon his scientific ambitions in favor of a classical course of studies.

During 1893, Becker passed through an acute phase of a wrenching psychological experience. Had he found comfort in the prevailing philosophy of Cornell he would have returned there the next fall as his parents wanted him to



The debate team of Waterloo High School circa 1892. At the top is Becker's cousin, Leonard Sarvay; in the middle is Becker; and at bottom, Randolph Wright. (courtesy of Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York)

do. But this time his father could not stem the tide. Leonard's death "was one reason my brother refused to go back," explained Jessie in 1955; "the other reason was he wanted to go to a university." The word "refused" suggests intensity as does the historian's remark to his own son that the only thing Cornell College did for him "was to teach him that that institution was not for him."

Previous writers about Becker have failed to recognize the symptoms of an

identity conflict which troubled a powerful, developing mind. It is of more than passing significance that he attempted, simultaneously, to shake off Methodism and the name Lotus. He registered at Cornell College as Lotus Becker. His name appeared thus in college records except in the 1892-93 catalog prepared during his unsettled period at Mt. Vernon. In this source it appeared as C. Lotus Becker.

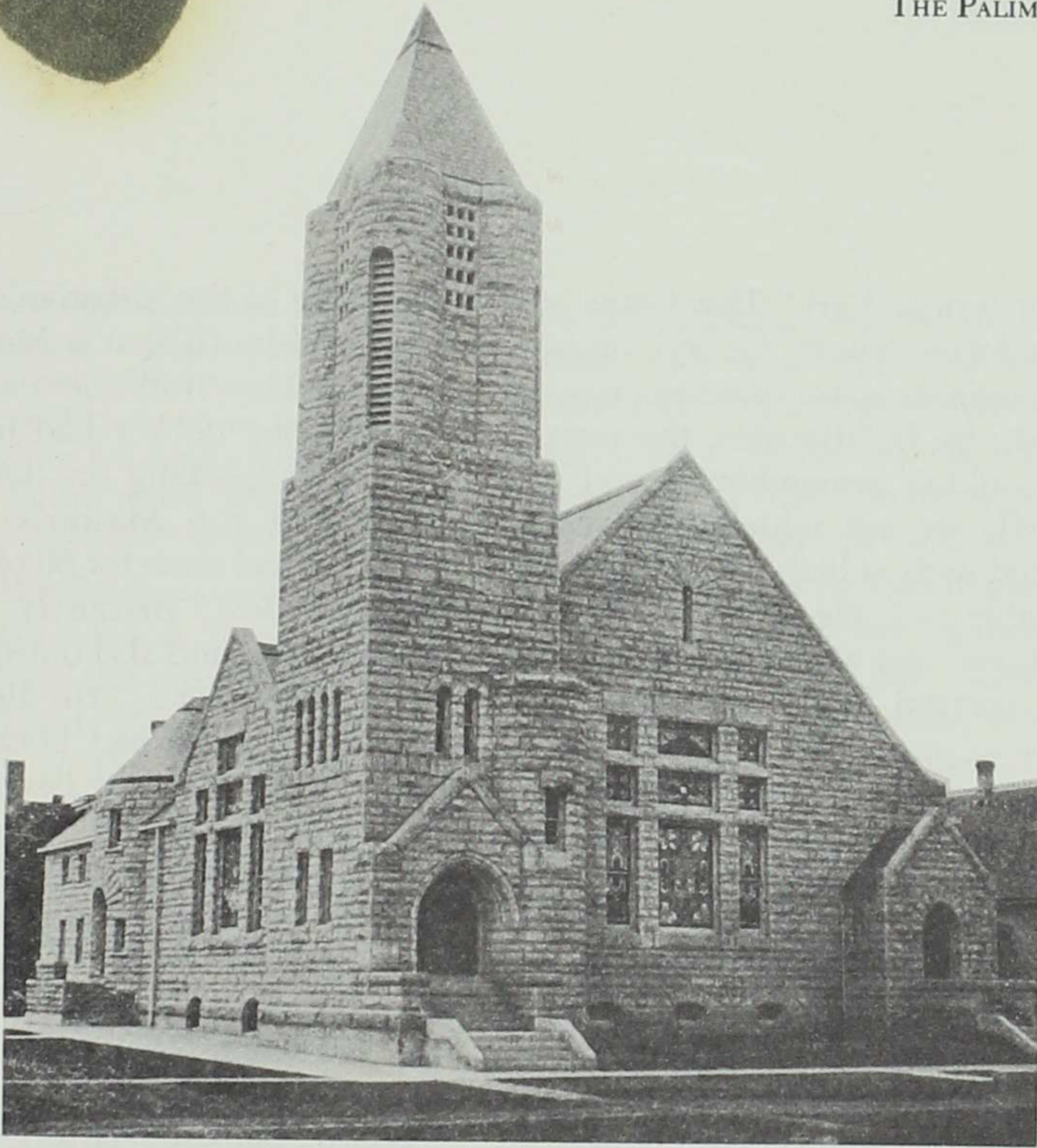
In the fall of 1893, Becker enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, also under the name C. Lotus Becker. "On the faculty of that University," wrote Becker in later years, "was a man whom a young lawyer in my town had belauded and bragged about, and familiarly referred to as 'Old Freddie Turner.'" The statement and context imply that Frederick Jackson Turner, the most provocative American historian of the day, was one of the attractions of the University of Wisconsin in young Becker's mind. The facts do not bear this out. Diligent search has failed to turn up a lawyer answering to the above description. Furthermore, in writing about the impression Turner made upon him as "a youth of eighteen" (a page later it appears "boy of eighteen"), Becker blundered. He did not see Turner prior to his twentieth birthday and did not take a class from him for several months thereafter. Coupled with additional evidence, this chronological mistake suggests that the adult Becker suppressed the memory of a trying period of his life. During his years as an undergraduate at Madison, Becker kept a "Wild Thoughts Notebook," where, among the entries, he doodled and experimented with his name. Charlotte Watkins Smith who has carefully charted

Becker's experiments with his name, from the "Wild Thoughts Notebook," October 1894. (courtesy of Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York)

a course through this interesting document contends that as an undergraduate Becker "abandoned fundamentalist Christianity, in his mind at least," and that he arrived at a "semi-deistic position."

As befitting an orderly person, Becker made a clean break with Methodism by writing to his pastor in Waterloo and explaining why he wished to terminate his membership. The letter cannot be found, but Becker likely sent it during the early months of 1896. He recalled receiving from the pastor a scathing reply which troubled him greatly at the time. A few months later, according to Smith, "he abruptly and permanently ceased to worry," when he learned that the pastor "who had castigated him so roundly had himself just eloped with the wife of a parishioner."

Somewhere between Becker and Smith, the story became twisted. In fact during the summer of 1896 the minister in question, 45-year old Reverend George E. Scott (married and a father), ran off with 16-year old Daisy Dorlan, daughter of a prominent Waterloo businessman who lived near the parsonage and a block away from the Beckers. During the day of yellow journalism the incident made sensational copy for



The First Methodist Church in Waterloo, where Becker attended services as a child. (from History of Black Hawk County, 1904)

newspapers wherein it was reported that Scott had once preached against the practice of young women of Waterloo riding bicycles on the public streets while clad in bloomers. In due course Daisy and Scott were apprehended in Indiana, whereupon Charles Becker and other authorities tried to determine whether the wayward clergyman had been influenced by drugs. After ample ecclesiastical and civil proceedings, Scott was judged insane and sent to the asylum at Independence.

This bizarre incident shook First Methodist Church to its foundations. It was the talk of Waterloo, and certainly of the Becker household, when the bud-

ding historian was home during the summer of 1896. Even in the privacy of his "Wild Thoughts Notebook" the amiable son of Almeda Becker showed restraint: "It is just as vulgar to be parading one's skepticism . . . as to be parading one's fanaticism."

He demonstrated similar restraint in tampering with his given name, receiving a B.A. from the University of Wisconsin in 1896 as Carl Lotus Becker and a Ph.D. from the same school eleven years later as Carl Becker. Justifiably confused about the variations in name, one colleague asked the adult historian for an explanation. Becker replied: "You are quite right about the name. It was

originally 'Lotus Carl.' The Lotus was given me for my uncle. An odd, unusual name, connotating somnolence too appropriately by far! Besides, the men in college couldn't remember it, and so I left it off, an act which my mother deprecated with as little mildness as she was capable of." He did not add that "Uncle Lote" was also a symbol of what he later termed "the Methodist menace."

As a young man Carl struggled to establish his own identity and in so doing rejected several things his parents, particularly his father, held dear. He categorically rejected Methodism and modified the name his parents gave him. But he also chose history rather than the practical profession of the law which his father hoped he would take up. Charles Becker paraded in his Civil War uniform; Carl abhorred militarism and showed no interest in the history of warfare. Although Carl in his own words helped "save the country" by casting his first presidential vote for McKinley and sound money in 1896, he departed far afield from his father's consistent Republicanism to cast votes for Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas. Rather than a "gracious and talented Waterloo girl" (whose identity cannot now be determined), Carl married Maude Hepworth Ranney, a New York widow with a seven-year old daughter, in the year 1901. When their own son was born they named him Frederick, likely after Carl's intellectual mentor, Frederick Jackson Turner.

The life of the historian's father came to an end in 1919 at a Methodist Conference. The Waterloo paper reported that Charles Becker had just taken his seat after speaking on the pleasure of serving in the Master's kingdom — which he had done for 60 of his 78 years. His muscles "instantly relaxed, he crumpled up and slid out of the folding chair to the floor . . . He died in the harness. His prayer had been answered." Undoubtedly the old issues came back with full force when Carl read the obituary, attended the funeral, and visited his father's friend and his own namesake, Lotus Sarvay. Carl wrote that his father left his affairs in good order. "On the whole, therefore, it was a good end, and there is nothing to regret."

When Becker visited Waterloo in 1928, Methodism was the main theme of a letter to a close friend back in Ithaca, New York:

This is the very heart of the Methodist menace, but you will be relieved to learn that it is apparently gasping for breath. Two (2) big churches each capable of seating 2500 people, and every Sunday about 2 people per pew . . . Most of my relatives (except those who are over 80), although all brought up in the faith, never enter the Church except for weddings or funerals. Another generation and the thing will be virtually dead. The auto, the movie, the fundamentalism are destroying the menace. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad! For if Methodism is slowly dying in Iowa there is hope for the world. It may yet continue to go to the Devil in peace. . . . I have been here four days saturating myself in an atmosphere of the

respectable and platitudinous. It nearly suffocates me, but it is good for the intellect. A good lady of 80 years told me today that she would rather bury her granddaughter than see her smoke a cigaret: & that if Al Smith were elected she wouldn't wish to live any longer.

Clippings in the Becker papers and surviving correspondence between Carl and Jessie clinch the point that "Uncle Lote" symbolized "the respectable and platitudinous" in the historian's mind. Becker usually tempered his views on religion in his formal writings, but discriminating readers will detect that he did not entirely subdue them. In fact, his text book, *Modern History*, was unacceptable to some Iowa school boards for this reason.

On the rebound from Iowa Methodism, Becker found solace in the Age of Reason. "Whatever he wrote about or wherever he was, the transplanted Iowa farm boy did not venture far from his spiritual home," wrote his student, Leo Gershoy. That home was with Voltaire and Jefferson in the eighteenth century, far distant from that of his parents or devout Lotus Sarvay who lived to see his 96th year in Waterloo, Iowa in 1943. After rejecting Christianity and even more emphatically its institutional apparatus, Becker grasped all the more firmly the rural and agricultural portions of his Iowa experience.

In many ways Becker's writings on the American Revolution show telltale traces of turn-of-the-century Iowa influences as well as hints of the historian's

own personality, values, and circumstances. His first book, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1750-1776* had as its setting the location of his own forebears. (Whether Charles Becker passed on to his children the oral traditions he had learned about the Revolution at his grandmother's knee is unrecorded, but likely.) Published in 1909 while Carl was teaching at the University of Kansas, this book contains the intriguing idea that prior to 1776 not one, but two revolutions were underway: "the contest of home rule and independence, and the democratization of American politics and society." It was not difficult for the son of a practicing politician and upholder of Republican orthodoxy during the years of the Populists and Bryanites to recognize struggle and cleavage as motivating forces in American political life. A resident of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Kansas during the Progressive period of buoyant faith in American democracy, Becker found the democratization process fundamental to the revolution in New York: "it began before the contest of home rule, and was not completed until after the achievement of independence." Becker reasoned that the two revolutions related to each other because those who made policy for the British empire determined who would hold the reins of power *within* each of the colonies. Was a colonial "aristocracy" able to maintain control because it had the blessing and backing of the British government? Yes, answered the "unfranchised" colonists

and their democratic historian, and thus the struggle against Britain converged with the struggle against a privileged class in the colonies.

In succinct and memorable prose Becker concluded that the American Revolution was about "home rule" and "who should rule at home." As recently as a decade ago Professor Wesley Frank Craven of Princeton University termed this "the single most influential statement ever made by this very talented historian."

In 1915, Becker published his second book bearing upon the Revolution, *Beginnings of the American People*. Here he narrated American history from the age of discovery until the day George Washington resigned his military commission. In a section mirroring his own religious development he told how Franklin became a Deist by being exposed to arguments against Deism and how Franklin in his old age "stood with Voltaire in Paris to be proclaimed the incomparable benefactor of mankind!" The last chapter of the book, "The Winning of Independence," hardly touched the military aspects of the war with the Mother Country. The struggle of ideas preceding physical combat interested Becker much more.

At this point in his career, the editor of *Who's Who in America* asked Becker for his biography. On the matter of nativity the historian replied, in manner characteristic of a rural Iowan, that he was born in Lincoln Township, Black Hawk County, Iowa, September 7, 1873. He could

have replied more conventionally, that he was born near Waterloo, but this would have been imprecise and a partial betrayal of his rural heritage. The county and township designation survived every revision of his entry in *Who's Who* for the remainder of his life. This was not editorial prescription nor was it accidental. A keen sense of place took root naturally in the mind of an Iowa boy. The very paucity of striking landmarks in Lincoln Township had sharpened his eye for variation in environment. Becker thought of place with an intensity still observable in the generation of Iowans who followed the reaper, shocked grain, and otherwise farmed with their feet on the ground.

A major point is that Becker's sensitivity to place carried over to his historical writing. Just as crops respond to soil and season, people relate to place and time. While writing *The Eve of the Revolution: A Chronicle of the Breach with England* (1918) Becker experimented with techniques to convey to his readers how people on British soil contrasted with Americans in what they "thought and felt about what they did." The device of telling "the story by means of a rather free paraphrase of what some imagined spectator or participant thought or said about the matter at hand" enabled him to lay aside the constraints of the historian and address his readers through the minds of his eighteenth century "observers." As history, Becker considered this work "an enterprise of questionable orthodoxy." *The*

Eve of the Revolution appeared in print the year after Becker became a professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, a place he called home for the rest of his life.

Despite the fact that he was now distant in miles and time from rural Iowa, Becker could not escape the evidences of his origin — nor did he want to. Charlotte Watkins Smith examined a photograph of Professor Becker taken during the early 1920s and saw: "... a smooth-shaven, stocky, youthful-looking man — rather square jawed and weathered. Aside from his spectacles he had little of the look of the scholar and nothing of the esthete." Despite 30 years of university life as student and teacher, Becker "could still have passed for an up-and-coming farmer with his feet entirely on the ground."

If Becker's appearance betrayed his origins, so did his mannerisms. Carl Gustavson, Becker's last doctoral candidate and a native of Vinton, Iowa, was "thoroughly scared" when he first went to see the great professor at his office at Cornell University in October 1938: "Once inside the office, I discovered an Iowa farmer sitting at a desk. He started talking to me in Iowa vernacular, and I abruptly stopped worrying. Mr. Becker might be one of the world's great historians and a master in English language usage, but *this* was familiar, this was a breath of home." In a half serious, half whimsical letter Becker once explained to a friend, "The people I don't especially take to, I expect I treat rather casually.

That's partly my country upbringing — I haven't any conventional manners." Like Meredith Willson's stereotype Iowans of turn-of-the-century vintage, Carl Becker neither wore his heart on his sleeve nor palavered with people he did not know. A protective epidermis covered a sunny disposition, strength, common sense, and substantial good will.

After World War I a publisher asked Becker to write a book about the Declaration of Independence. He found his bearings, then wrote a friend, "my chief task is to show where the Natural Rights philosophy came from and where it went to and why." Farther along in the project he wrote the same man, Professor William E. Dodd of Yale, "Southern writers make a good deal of Jefferson having got his ideas from the 'atheistical French school.' Of course I don't think he did. My whole contention is that the revolution, both in theory and practice drew its inspiration from the parliamentary struggles of the 17th century."

In the final draft Becker concluded that the Americans did not borrow the natural rights philosophy, "they inherited it." The "self evident" truths with which Jefferson proclaimed American independence were really the same compact theory of government, the same natural laws and natural rights John Locke developed a century earlier to justify the Glorious Revolution in the mother country. In short, the year was 1776, the circumstances were American,



Becker at age 43, while teaching at the University of Kansas. (courtesy of the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York)

the “felicity of expression” was Jefferson’s, but the ideas were Locke’s. Iowa enters incidentally into the last chapter of the book where Becker traced the “living faith” of the Declaration through the constitutions of the various states. To this day Iowans have recourse to a modified right of revolution through their state constitution.

The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas (1922) is, in places, a difficult book. Nevertheless, it is so vivid and exciting that the Actors’ Repertory Company of New York arranged for “dramatic rights”

to the volume, and Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards used it as a source while writing the currently-popular musical, “1776.”

In his first book Becker explored the political process which brought some, but not all New Yorkers to revolution. In *Beginnings of the American People* and *The Eve of the Revolution* he backed up, broadened his approach, and explained the breach of 1776 from both the American and British points of view. In *The Declaration of Independence* Becker concentrated on the revolution in people’s minds which, he insisted, had to come before they were ready for war. With unorthodox techniques of grasping and communicating the spirit of an age under control, the mature historian summarized his own scholarship about the Revolution in a brilliant essay, “The Spirit of ’76,” which he published in 1927.

The main character in this spritely piece is Jeremiah Wynkoop, a New York merchant (and ardent reader of John Locke) who embodies the spirit of the educated people of his generation and class in America. Wynkoop lives on a large estate, “part of the generous dowry of his wife, the daughter of old Nicholas Van Schoickendinck, a great landowner in the province.” During the sugar and Stamp Act crises of the mid-1760s, Nicholas fails to understand why some colonists who resent paying the new taxes resort to window breaking and violence — even to the extent of burning the governor’s chariot. Wynkoop explains, “if Ministers will play with oppression the people will play with violence.” The elder man chides, “It is not windows they aim at but class privilege, the privileges of my class and

yours, the class that always has, and I trust always will govern this province."

As events of the 1760s unfold, Wynkoop is gradually but inevitably pulled into the revolutionary swirl. Following passage of the Townshend Duties, for example, he helps organize a boycott of British goods. Discussion between Wynkoop and Van Schoickendinck frequently becomes heated. When Wynkoop feels that he must serve in the Congress in Philadelphia to prevent the New York delegation from going radical, his father-in-law warns of treason. Despite the family tie, the two men part in the summer of 1776. Wynkoop becomes a reluctant revolutionary; Van Schoickendinck an inactive Tory.

Through his imaginary New Yorkers, Becker captured the spirit of an age and presented the dual revolution and other ideas not in scholarly attire, but in the flowing gown of fiction — fiction so believable and fresh that the New York State American Revolution Bicentennial Commission reprinted the piece for mass distribution in 1971.

When Becker took liberties with the role of the historian in such works as *The Eve of the Revolution* and "The Spirit of '76," he came close to communicating the spirit of a previous age without reference to his own time, place, personality, or circumstance. Yet, Wynkoop and Becker shared several attributes — both were from New York families, educated, well read in history, Deists in religion, distrustful of the military, and thoroughly American. Both changed enough to keep abreast of the rising spirit of American democracy. There are also basic similarities in the older generations represented by Van Schoickendinck and Charles DeWitt Becker —

both were set in their ways. The latter, however, would have been shocked at the former's proclivity for stiff toddy and tobacco.

It would be hazardous to assert that Carl Becker refuted or sustained his 1931 philosophy of history by writing "The Spirit of '76." The piece is more

Note on Sources

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The most important source for this article is the Carl L. Becker Collection, Department of Manuscripts, University Archives, at the Cornell University Library in Ithaca, which contains some 12,600 pieces of correspondence, drafts of manuscripts, lecture notes, etc. (Special thanks go to Kathleen Jacklin and Jane Gustafson of the Cornell Archives for providing assistance in researching the Becker Collection.) The best published collection of Becker's letters is Michael Kammen's, *What Is the Good of History?: Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973). Also useful is Philip L. Snyder, ed., *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958).

Two informative biographical studies are Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *Carl Becker: A Biographical Study in American Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1961) and Charlotte Watkins Smith, *Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956). An unpublished M.S. thesis by David Freeman Hawke, "Carl L. Becker" (University of Wisconsin, 1950) contains much valuable material. For a controversial study of Becker's work on the American Revolution see Robert E. Brown, *Carl Becker on History and the American Revolution* (East Lansing: Spartan Press, 1970). Up-to-date bibliographies of writings by and about Becker are available in Kammen's book, mentioned above.

An annotated copy of this article is available in the files of the Division of the State Historical Society.

appropriately evaluated as literature. Moreover, what may be parallels between fictional and real people may better illustrate a universal human situation — the transfer of values and influence from one generation to the next. “Man in general . . . did not exist in the world of time and place, but in the conceptual world,” wrote Becker in 1932, “and he could therefore be found only by abstracting from all men in all times and all places those qualities which all men shared.”

Respecting man in relation to place and time Becker had his bearings. He was equally at home driving a 1931 Dodge through the streets of Ithaca, where he taught for a quarter of a century, or matching wits with the intellectuals in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (the title of one of his books). He had a distinct preference for straight fenders in the former context and clear reason in the latter. In the one instance when his book royalties amounted to something, he applied them toward a new car and thus indulged a quiet scholar's single excess — an enthusiasm for speed. According to a gifted student and confidant, Leo Gershoy, Becker would “sit behind the wheel talking while driving, resembling a synthesis of Socrates and Barney Oldfield.” In this setting we hear him asserting, “Whirl is king, we must start with the whirl, the mess of things presented in experience.” The Dodge safely parked, Becker had a remarkable talent for applying the brakes to

the whirl of human experience.

As a writer and teacher he could tune out the here and now to an amazing extent. The ultimate illustration of his scholarly detachment comes from the pen of one of his students at the University of Kansas, Alicia M. Seifrit:

One day one of my class mates committed suicide by throwing him[self] from the top floor of the building directly back of our class room. He fell to the concrete walk and was killed instantly. The members of the class sat with their back to the windows and saw nothing that went on. Professor Becker faced the windows and saw the body hurtling down. He witnessed the crash and the consequent confusion. Yet none of us knew anything unusual had taken place and knew nothing of the tragedy until after class was dismissed.

We must not conclude that Becker was emotionless or without personality. “He was kindly and very gentle,” wrote Seifrit, “a fund of information, a scholarly man who strove to make scholars of us.” Among his limited number of close friends were scholars, his graduate students, and such men of affairs as Justice Felix Frankfurter of the United States Supreme Court. Like Frankfurter, Becker on occasion participated in the passions of his times, at least to the extent of writing propaganda in support of western democracy during both world wars.

Becker and his last doctoral candidate, Carl Gustavson of Vinton, both suspected that their pursuit of history was not



The lush and rolling land of Lincoln Township, Black Hawk County where Becker learned his sense of place. The Becker family homestead is in the background.

fully understood or appreciated back in Iowa. Gustavson had won the state World History scholarship contest but the local newspaper “didn’t think it worth mentioning.” His classmate won a state hog championship “and the newspaper put his picture (also the hog’s) on page one . . .” During office conversations Becker named the precise place where he was born, he talked of neighborhood get-togethers, and expected his student to visualize “exactly what went on.” But Gustavson was of a different place and time and could not. His professor offered “urgently, precious remembrances in half-finished, diffident

apologetic allusions which I was supposed to be able to flesh out myself.” When Gustavson took the initiative and probed too deeply, Becker lapsed into vagaries. “For me, there was always an intensely shy, sensitive man behind that Iowa facade — one did not intentionally encroach.”

Separated in origin by a generation and a county line, the two men reacted differently to Iowa. “I had perforce done Iowa farm work,” wrote Gustavson in 1972, “but passionately loathed every hour of it.” In contrast, Becker left Iowa before disillusionment about farming permeated his mind and before Amer-

ica became predominantly urban. Proud of his rural heritage Becker wanted people to know the precise township where he was born.

Two themes stand out from Becker's Iowa experience. He rejected Methodism and, after immersing himself in historical sources, came to regard man as "little more than a chance deposit on the surface of the world, carelessly thrown up between two ice ages by the same forces that rust iron and ripen corn . . ." Secondly, the Iowa experience sensitized Becker to the subtlety of place. "In the long history of man on earth," wrote a seasoned Becker in 1941, "there comes a time when he remembers something of what has been, anticipates something that will be, knows the country he has traversed, wonders what lies beyond — the moment when he comes aware of

himself as a lonely, differentiated item in the world." Becker's hallmark as a historian was to use, perhaps to the ultimate, the perspective afforded by time and place.

Although Becker died in 1945 his works remain models of attainment in the field of history. Enough of this man and his environment rubbed off on his writings about the American Revolution to sustain the philosophy of history he expressed as President of the American Historical Association. Currently, writers of the Bicentennial State Histories are urged to "search for distinctiveness of mind, of outlook, of spirit," in the manner of Carl Becker's famous essay on "Kansas." Thus the spirit of a man born in Lincoln Township, Black Hawk County, Iowa in 1873, lives on into the third century of the nation's history. □

"Abstain and buy books"

—Carl Becker

Wild Thoughts Notebook

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