

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## A Seedling

1853-1863

Near the time of Cornell's founding the wise and humorous Doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote a poem about the Deacon's Masterpiece — the wonderful one-hoss shay,

That was built in such a logical way  
It ran a hundred years to the day.

Then all at once it went to pieces, and the Doctor, in commenting upon that catastrophe, wrote:

In fact, there's nothing that keeps its youth,  
So far as I know, but a tree and truth.

He might well have added—and a college. For is not youth the very lifeblood of every college?

But there is a special reason why Cornell College still keeps its youth on its hundredth anniversary. It was *not* built in a logical way. It was planted like a tree in the fruitful soil of Iowa and like a tree it has grown, bringing forth fruit in its season.



Cornell College was planted by a Methodist circuit rider, aided by the pioneers of Mount Vernon, a village which had been derisively known as Pinhook. The circuit rider, George B. Bowman, a native of North Carolina, who had been for four years presiding elder of the Dubuque District, chose in 1850 to become pastor of the Linn Grove Circuit. Legend says that, riding one day on this lonely circuit, he paused on the hilltop near Mount Vernon, and, looking across the rolling prairie, was seized with the conviction that here was the spot on which to build a Methodist college. Dismounting, he knelt among the hazel bushes and in prayer dedicated himself to the challenging task of building the college. The tall, lean, bronzed circuit rider was not, himself, a college graduate, but the records show that he had a passion for education. Ten years earlier he had led in the building of a church at Iowa City. Now he quietly set about building a plain brick church in Mount Vernon and reviving the religious interest of the settlers roundabout.

Among the villagers were several who shared Elder Bowman's enthusiasm for schooling. Allison I. Willits saw the importance of church and school to a growing frontier town and began to talk about a seminary. One day Elijah D. Waln, a storekeeper of Mount Vernon, and his friend Jesse Holman started a subscription list with their own names at the head for ten dollars each. At the



end of the day they had a hundred dollars promised. Elder Bowman called a church meeting, and then and there they laid plans for the "Iowa Conference Seminary." Bowman persuaded Isaac H. Julian, who owned the acres of hilltop land, to sell it at half its value.

On July 4, 1852, ground was broken for the first building. Word had spread across the prairies about the great doings at Mount Vernon. People came by stagecoach, horseback, and in wagons from far and near to listen to an address by James Harlan, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and to inspiring words from Elder Bowman. It was not until a month later that Bowman obtained the title deed to the land in his own name, ready to present it to the Methodist Iowa Conference which met at Burlington in late September.

No, the college was not built in "a logical way." It was built by faith and hope and hard work. Faith in the future of Iowa, which in that year of 1852 was still two-thirds unbroken prairie, with half of its ninety-nine counties as yet unsettled. Hope for good roads and closer links with the settled regions east of the Mississippi, for in 1852 railroads were being constructed from Chicago to its eastern banks. Yet these men and women of the Iowa frontier dared to dream of a college where their children could have the kind of education they might have had in New England, New York, Pennsylvania, or Ohio — a college that would



grow and bear fruit like the orchards and the schools they had left behind.

But they knew that dreams are not enough. They also worked. Two men of the village served as mason and carpenter. Others donated labor in their spare time. Teen age boys hauled sand and carried hods. Elder Bowman himself superintended the building along with pastoral duties and gathering more funds for the great project. He and several other men dug deep into their pockets to supply immediate cash. Those who could not give money gave pigs, cows, poultry, potatoes, and other produce to be sold. Elijah Sells, a potter in Muscatine, donated a lot of "newly-burnt crocks, jugs, and jars." These the Elder loaded on a steamboat headed up the river to Galena. In that growing city he disposed of the crockery for several hundred dollars.

In September the Conference at Burlington gratefully accepted the property offered by Elder Bowman, "to-wit: fifteen acres of land in the county of Linn and adjoining the town plat of Mount Vernon in this state, upon which there is now in progress of erection a large and substantial edifice adapted to and designed for educational and collegiate purposes." A board of nine trustees was appointed. At their meeting on July 2, 1853, they elected the first faculty: the Rev. Samuel M. Fellows, A.M., principal and professor of mental and moral science and belles lettres, the Rev. David H.



Wheeler, professor of languages, and Miss Catherine A. Fortner, preceptress.

It was Elder Bowman, of course, who had discovered these first faculty members. Having heard of Fellows as a successful teacher in Rock River Seminary at Mount Morris, Illinois, he had ridden there on horseback in the early spring of 1853, and persuaded Fellows and another teacher, Wheeler, to come and investigate the new seminary in Iowa. The two arrived in June, were impressed by the spirit of the community and the opportunity offered, and agreed to come in the fall when the new building was ready.

Samuel Fellows, largely self-educated, had earned a Master's degree from Asbury University (now De Pauw) and had been teaching for ten years. He was married and the father of two little girls. David Wheeler was a younger teacher of promising ability. Miss Fortner, educated in a New York normal school, had been teaching a select school at Tipton, Iowa.

At the opening time for the fall term the "substantial edifice" was not completed, Professor Fellows could not leave his position at the Rock River Seminary until October, and Professor Wheeler was ill. But such difficulties did not defeat Elder Bowman. He arranged for the use of the church building, and there Miss Fortner opened the school in September. Principal Fellows arrived in time for the closing weeks of the fall term.



On November 14, 1853, teachers and students (57 girls and 104 boys) after morning services in the church, formed a procession and marched through the village and up the hill "with banners flying" to take formal possession of the new seminary building. That building, still in use and now known as Old Sem, measuring forty by seventy-two feet, three stories high including the basement, was still unfinished. There was only one coat of plaster on the partitions, none on the outer brick walls, and no painting at all. Nevertheless, its rooms served as classrooms, chapel, and dormitory, and the work was finished while school went sturdily on.

It was not a logical way to found a college; but the higher logic of eagerness to learn, youthful enthusiasm, hope, and vision worked a miracle. Each day began with chapel services at 5:30 in a big room lighted by candles with tin reflectors. Breakfast was at six. Each class lasted an hour, and the day ended with chapel again at five and supper at six. Girls as well as boys built their own fires in the small stoves which warmed their rooms. At the end of the school year, on June 24, 1854, public examinations were held, during which anyone might question the students. The examinations were followed by exercises, including "essays by the ladies and declamations by the gentlemen," and a stirring address by Principal Fellows.

The tuition for a term of eleven weeks was four



dollars, and the cost of board for each student was a dollar and a half a week. Although six of the trustees had each given five hundred dollars at the beginning of the year, at the close there was a deficit. So from their meager salaries those first teachers each refunded about a fourth of their annual salary.

In spite of a financial depression that swept the country in the late fifties, this college seedling grew. In 1854 the faculty was enlarged by the addition of Stephen N. Fellows, brother of the principal, as professor of mathematics and natural science. In July, 1855, the trustees voted to amend the articles of incorporation, changing the name of the school to Cornell College in honor of W. W. Cornell, one of its benefactors in those early years. Samuel M. Fellows was urged to accept the presidency of the college, but declined because of poor health. For years he had suffered with asthma. The Rev. Richard W. Keeler, eloquent as a preacher but with no experience in teaching and little aptitude for it, was elected president in 1857 and resigned after two years. Principal Fellows then consented to take the office and held it until his death in June, 1863. The records show that the character of the growing college was largely determined by the spirit of this truly great man. Colonel H. H. Rood declared of Fellows in 1904, when reminiscing on those early years:

He was a man of high personal character, modest, firm,



just, and far-seeing. Overwhelmed at all times with the details of the great work he had undertaken, he still found time to read and study, and ever brought into the classroom, the lecture room, and the college chapel fresh thought clothed in simple but beautiful language. Fortunate, indeed, is it that the spirit he planted has never changed, and he who would understand what Cornell of today is, must carefully study what the Cornell of that day was.

On July Fourth, 1856, the cornerstone of a second building was laid — a building still in use, known as College Hall or Main. At the ceremony President Fellows spoke "with an earnestness and eloquence I have never heard surpassed," said Matthew Cavanagh, another student of those earliest years. Music was supplied by fife and a drum made of a large sheet of stovepipe iron with undressed calf-hide ends. When the building was finished the following year, John O. Foster, a student, secured the job of putting up the cupola. Sixty years later he wrote: "I was guilty of one foolhardy trick. When the wooden spire was safely nailed and the wheel on top had been bored for the iron rod to contain the weathervane, I got up on the eight-inch round top, stood up straight, swung my hat, and shouted, 'Hurrah for Cornell College.' "

The chapel room, now moved to this new building, was lighted by lard-burning lamps secured from a church which had bought a newer kind of lamp. Some of the stoves for heating the class-



rooms had been broken when a wagon hauling them from Muscatine overturned and dumped them on the frozen ground. But they were repaired and they warmed (or partly warmed) the rooms for half a century. Such stoves always bore fancy names, and one student of about 1910 recalls that the stove in the sociology classroom was named Patient Griselda!

Since cattle, grazing at large on the prairie, often invaded the campus, a fence was built along the front and later extended to surround the two buildings.

In 1858 the first degrees were conferred on Matthew Cavanagh and Mary Fellows, who three months later became man and wife. This was the first of many marriages founded on friendships begun at Cornell in spite of the famous Rule Twelve which read: "The escorting of young Ladies by young Gentlemen is not allowed."

By 1858 the faculty had been increased to eight, and the student body had grown to three hundred twenty. To be sure, only twenty-one of these were enrolled in the college department. The collegians were from Iowa City, Muscatine, Springville, Maquoketa, Mount Vernon, and Tipton in Iowa; from Dixon, Illinois, and Saratoga, Minnesota. The great majority were in preparatory classes ranging from "primary" to "seminary" and "normal." The college courses were the usual ones of that period. The catalog of 1858-1859, in addi-



tion to carrying a roll of the faculty and the name of "J. H. Long, Janitor," lists the following studies for the junior and senior years, each year being divided into three terms:

<i>Junior Year</i>	<i>Senior Year</i>
Term I	
Analytical Geometry	Moral Science
Physiology	Geology
Demosthenes de Corona	Natural Theology
	Greek Testament
Term II	
Tacitus	Mathematical Astronomy
Differential and Integral	Chemistry
Calculus	Cicero de Officiis
Natural Philosophy	Evidences of Christianity
Zoology	
Term III	
Horace, Epistles and	Mental Philosophy
Satires	Plato Contra Atheos
Electra of Sophocles and	Butler's Analogy
Prometheus of Aeschylus	Elements of Criticism
Review of Calculus	

According to the same catalog:

Exercises in Latin and Greek prose compositions are required through the entire course. During the Junior and Senior years students may pursue French, German, or Hebrew in place of certain of the prescribed studies, the selection to be made by the Faculty. Students completing the whole college course will receive the degree of A.B. Those passing a satisfactory examination in all but the Languages will be entitled to the degree of B.S. Ladies may pursue the same studies and receive the same honors as gentlemen.



These early coeds had the advantage of example as well as precept. Olive P. Fellows, the wife of President Fellows, was a cultivated woman, listed in the first catalog as teacher of French and embroidery. Skill with the needle was not insignificant in those days. It was she who led the village women and some of the students in making a flag at the outbreak of the war in 1861. Although she had two small daughters, Mrs. Fellows also found time to teach music in those early years, to help form quartettes for the Saturday afternoon "rhetoricals," to take groups of girls for their walks, and to help make white dresses for the "exhibition" at the end of the year.

In 1856 Miss Susan E. Hale was added to the faculty. A citation on Founders and Builders Day in recent years describes her as

. . . preceptress and teacher of French; educated in New England and possessed of an excellent mind and spirit of service; one who gave a gracious touch to crude and primitive attempts at social life and who brought to the ruggedness of the Middle West a gentle and refined spirit. To this gentlewoman is given the credit for the famous "Walk Around" which became a part of Cornell's social tradition; for eight years from 1857 to 1865 a gracious presence on the campus.

Among the faculty members added during these seedling years was William Fletcher King, a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University, who was called to the chair of Greek and Latin languages



in 1862 when David H. Wheeler resigned. From the age of thirty-two until his death at ninety-one his life was at the service of Cornell College. He arrived during the dark years of the Civil War, when each month more and more students were enlisting, until by 1863 only one young man remained to graduate and there were only ten other men in the college classes.

Just before Commencement in June, 1863, President Fellows became gravely ill, and asked young Professor King to take charge at the exercises. Commencement exercises then and many years thereafter were held out of doors in a shady grove on the campus. The nation was at war. After Bull Run, Shiloh, and Chancellorsville the people were tense and strained. That day in 1863 they were interrupted many times by wrangles between loyal Unionists and "Copperheads." On this occasion, a "Copperhead" badge cut from a one-cent piece brought on a melee, which involved two girls who "tore each other's clothes and demolished their hats." Dr. King in his *Reminiscences* called it "the most remarkable and saddest commencement of which I have any knowledge." The following day beloved President Fellows died, and the trustees, called into sudden meeting, elected young William F. King acting president.

Elder Bowman preached the funeral sermon of President Fellows "before a large and sympathetic audience in the college chapel." The Elder had



himself been compelled to retire in 1853 from active work as college agent because of ill health. His tall, sinewy figure astride his horse, with vizored cap pulled low and ear flaps to protect him from the biting cold, was seen no longer facing the winter blasts of the open prairie. But in those first heroic years the Father of Cornell had seen his vision become a reality. His seedling had grown into a sturdy sapling.

MARJORIE MEDARY