

..... Chapter One



OF HER NATAL DAY

Cornell began as a university in a country of colleges. Its student body was large from the start when other schools were considerably smaller. Cornell was democratic where others prided themselves on being elite places that educated the sons of the well enough off. Cornell was nonsectarian when most colleges had been founded by one religious denomination or another. Cornell was at the beginning complex, diverse, and somewhat contrary—words that still fit the institution we know today. Some observers have feared that the loss of these qualities would mean that Cornell was slowing down, losing its distinctive edge, that Cornell would no longer be an educational leader. Without these qualities, some say, Cornell would become like other institutions, when in fact, it is the much more the other way around. Looking at universities in the United States today, in a number of key respects we might observe that they look amazingly like Cornell. Yet whether copied or part of academic trends, Cornell remains unique.

Cornell arose from three distinct impulses present at one time. The marvel is that these three generative forces connected in such a way that the result became greater than the separate currents from which it sprang. These origins could be called the governmental, the utilitarian, and the intellectual; their confluence occurred at a time when older ideas about higher education were proving inadequate and restrictive, when a new American educational system was needed to meet the emergence of what we consider modern and scientific. Cornell University provided an early answer to this need and served as a model of what might constitute an academic program and who might qualify to be a student.

Governmental support for education came only slowly, as Cornell's distinguished historian Carl Becker has shown. No federal role in education was specifically noted in the United States Constitution. Although there were schools for learning to read and write, and colleges that taught classical subjects such as mathematics and the ancient languages, no college offered to teach Americans to become more efficient farmers or more clever engineers. The idea of governmental aid to education is often said to have originated with Vermont Sen. Justin S. Morrill, for whom the first federal education act, passed in 1862, was named. Many people before the 1860s, however, had urged state governments to encourage agricultural education. As early as 1819 Simeon DeWitt, the New York State surveyor general and the man who laid claim to 1,400 acres at the headwaters of Cayuga Lake where



COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR

Henry Walton,
“East View of Ithaca,
Tompkins County,
New York,” hand-
colored lithograph,
1836.

he created the village of Ithaca, published a tract extolling progressive agricultural training for the children of the wealthy. On his East Hill farm in Ithaca, DeWitt kept a special strain of Merino sheep in the hope of improving his own stock and that of his neighbors. County fairs, too, were as much about agricultural education as they were about hucksters and picnics. By the 1820s, several New York lawmakers had endorsed the idea of teaching the agricultural and mechanical arts, although at the time the state took no action.

The germ of the land grant college idea, according to Becker, can be traced to ideas developed by Jonathan B. Turner of Illinois. In reaction against the classical education available at the colleges of his day, Turner believed the federal government should foster a practical education that would teach the latest principles of agriculture and the mechanic arts—subjects that would be of value to the young men of the expanding nation. Newspapers wrote about the idea, congressmen talked about it, and it picked up traction.

Practical subjects were not the usual stuff of university curricula at mid-century, nor were the young men then in our colleges—and they were almost all men at the time—likely to have been much interested in such earth-bound topics. The origins of the Western university can be found in Roman Catholic schools begun a thousand years ago, and at first the Church dictated what was taught. The universities of Bologna and Paris expanded somewhat, adding other subjects, as did Oxford and Cambridge, founded in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the colonies, college founders up to the mid-nineteenth century followed English university patterns, with local variations. This was the mold from which emerged Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Kings (renamed Columbia), and Queens (later Rutgers). But despite expanding beyond select subjects (by adding surveying, for example) and prescribed ways of teaching, the American college offered a classical curriculum through the first half of the nineteenth century. Education served those with elevated needs—the pious who sought to become preachers, the wealthy who had the time and means to study (but not so much as to cut into their social life or to make it appear that courses and grades mattered). In contrast, the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 would create seventeen academic institutions to educate men from all economic backgrounds and meet the needs of a developing nation—an entirely new and utilitarian justification for higher education, and one greeted with some disdain by the older institutions.

The Morrill Act stipulated that money derived from the sale of federal lands should be treated as a perpetual fund whose interest was to be appropriated by each state to support and maintain at least one college whose object was, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, to teach branches of learning related to agriculture and the mechanical arts. To this was added a requirement that these colleges also teach military science, a subject much on the minds of legislators at the time. In 1862, of course, Congress consisted only of members from the northern and western states, whose young men—the intended beneficiaries of

AN ACT DONATING PUBLIC LANDS
TO THE SEVERAL STATES AND
TERRITORIES WHICH MAY PROVIDE
COLLEGES FOR THE BENEFIT OF
AGRICULTURE AND THE
MECHANIC ARTS

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Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That there be granted to the several States, for the purposes hereinafter mentioned, an amount of public land [for] support and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the State may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.

—The Morrill Act, July 2, 1862
 (U.S. STATUTES AT LARGE, Vol. XII, 503)

this act—were by and large engaged in the Civil War. On July 2, 1862, even as the cannons boomed from gunboats on the James River and the Confederates were withdrawing from the Peninsula Campaign, Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Land Grant Act into law.

On its own, the Morrill Act only offered opportunity. It required each state to accept its terms and provide for implementation. It required, above all, vision and will. The source of the funding was federal land. This plan worked well in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and states west of the Mississippi River carved from the Louisiana Purchase—places where the land belonged to the federal government, which allocated acres to veterans and encouraged settlement. Despite homesteading, however, some tracts of land had remained in the government's hands. These parcels neither generated tax monies nor, more importantly, enlarged the population—necessary if a state was to increase its power in Congress. The offer made by the Morrill Act was enticing—colleges were believed to attract settlers, something that interested all frontier states—but in 1862, land prices were low, an acre sometimes selling for as little as 53 cents. Even as late as 1869 Ezra Cornell was warned by a land broker in the Midwest that the “demand for [land] Scrip is so very light I cannot make you a good offer for cash.” There was a glut of land out west, and the country was at war.

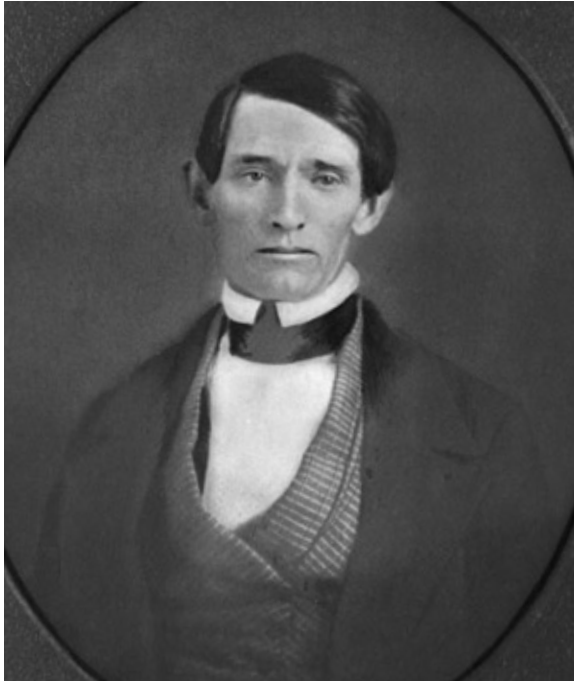
New York, on the other hand, had no federal land. New York had begun as a royal colony, claiming as its own all the land within its borders. Following the Revolutionary War, New York held meetings with Connecticut, Vermont, and Pennsylvania to settle contested state lines, and it treated with the few thousand Iroquois who remained within the state, finally restricting them to reservation areas. The act therefore provided that New York be given access to federal land in another state. In our governmental system, however, one sovereign state may not hold land in another, so the federal government gave New York the right to sell scrip to individuals who would locate, survey, and sell land in other states, the proceeds of those sales to be used to fund practical education as outlined in the Morrill Act. This bypassed the problem of state ownership of land but necessitated a person or persons with enough money to buy the scrip to make the scheme work. The state, for its part, would receive approximately 60 cents for each acre, and the resale of the scrip would benefit education—all without the state having to spend any of its own funds. Those states with ample federal land, such as Wisconsin, also welcomed this aspect of the Morrill Act because it put more of their federal land up for sale; future settlement would increase the population and consequently the state's power in Washington.

It was the population of each state that determined the amount of land that the state would receive. As the most populous state in the Union in 1862, New York received the most land. On May 5, 1863, the Senate and Assembly of the State of New York enacted legislation to accept and implement the Morrill Land Grant Act.

The state Senate designated that the proceeds from the sale of its scrip support the People's College in Havana, now Montour Falls, an institution sponsored by Sen. Charles Cook. The People's College had a handful of tutors and a stone building standing ready; what students it might have had, however, were at war. According to the conditions imposed by the state, within three years of receiving the Morrill designation, the trustees of the People's College were to hire ten competent professors to give instruction in agriculture, the mechanic arts, and military tactics, and to have adequate land and buildings to accommodate 250 students, with a library, a farm of at least 200 acres with farm buildings, implements and stock, and suitable shops, tools, machinery, and other arrangements. All this was to be owned by the college free and clear of debt. The state's regents would make an unannounced inspection to see that the conditions had been met.

In 1864, the New York State Comptroller acknowledged receipt of 6,187 pieces of scrip, each for 160 acres, making a total of 989,920 acres. This was 80 acres shy of the 990,000 due to New York according to the terms of the land grant. Morris Bishop, Cornell's historian, did not understand where the missing acres went, nor do I; we must chalk the discrepancy up to the vagaries of the federal government.

The second force that led to the creation of Cornell University was Ezra Cornell, an unlikely man to become the founder of a university. Cornell was born in 1807 to Quaker parents, in Westchester Landing, New York. The family moved about—to New Jersey, then back to Westchester, finally on to DeRuyter, in Cortland County. They were, like most Americans at the time, in search of prosperity, which remained elusive. Ezra attended school sporadically, going to classes for two or three years from late October to the end of March. His book learning was limited but he excelled at understanding the nature of mechanical devices and construction. As the eldest son, he assumed responsibilities for the family, and in 1826, with nine dollars in his pocket, he set out to make his fortune, walking first to Syracuse, where he found work but was robbed of his wages, then on to Homer to live with relatives. In 1828, Ezra made his way to Ithaca, where he found work as a carpenter, then as a mill worker, at which time he acquired the nickname Plaster Cornell,



Ezra Cornell,
chalk drawing after
a daguerreotype,
ca. 1845.

because of the wheat dust that clung to his clothing. He also met Mary Ann Wood of Dryden, who became his wife.

As their Ithaca family grew, Ezra worked at Colonel Beebe's mill, tended store, farmed a bit, tinkered, sold plow franchises in Maine and Georgia, and because he was in the right place at what ended up being the right time, found himself involved in the developing telegraph industry. Cornell learned what he could about the new technology, took chances, and acquired the rights to short telegraph lines, which seemed doomed to failure because of his lack of funds. Just when reasonable men would have given up, Cornell held on, only to emerge with locations central to the creation of a national telegraph company. After years of juggling payments, struggling with untrustworthy business partners, and facing debt and impending ruin, Ezra Cornell emerged—mostly because he was in the way—as a part-

ner in the newly created Western Union Company. Within a short time he had a fortune at his disposal.

It is at this point that Ezra Cornell veered from the pattern of other nineteenth-century self-made or newly rich men. With money beyond most men's dreams, Ezra Cornell did something unusual, something unexpected. With an annual income of many thousands of dollars, at a time when laborers earned but a dollar a day, Cornell counted his money and set out to do with it "the most good."

In a bound book that young Ezra had begun in 1823 as a mode of self-education in mathematical principles, where he had written out his multiplication tables, figured the mysteries of compound interest, and copied questions of volume, fractions, and profit, he made several notations of significance. In 1860 he picked up his Cyphering Book and under the heading "Loss & Gain" summarized his personal battle against debt, noting that the credit side seemed to have triumphed.

In 1861 the citizens of Tompkins County elected Ezra Cornell to serve a two-year term in the New York State Assembly, followed by two terms in the Senate. At the same time, as president of the New York State Agricultural Society, he joined the board of trustees of an agricultural college in Ovid, Seneca County, overlooking Seneca Lake. The school was to be called the New York State Agricultural College; it was sometimes known as the Ovid Agricultural College.

On August 29, 1864, Ezra Cornell made another entry in his Cyphering Book, noting that he now expected an income in excess of one hundred thousand dollars. “My greatest care,” he wrote, “is how to spend this Large income, to do the most good to those who are properly dependent on [me]—to the poor and to posterity.”

Ezra Cornell’s first act of philanthropy was to endow a free public library in Ithaca for the citizens of Tompkins County. This was, at the time, an extraordinary gift because where there were libraries at all, most were private; membership was by invitation, and annual fees of ten dollars or more put them beyond the means of most working people. Cornell’s library was to be free and open to all residents of Tompkins County. On the board of the Cornell Library were members of the local clergy and some businessmen. The building Cornell erected was large enough that the rents were thought to be enough to maintain the library.

We now have two of the elements in place: in addition to the Morrill Land Grant Act, there was also Ezra Cornell, a wealthy man desiring to do good. Had only these two—that is, government money and a philanthropist interested in useful education—come together without the third, they might have created a satisfactory, even a good, practical college—which is what Cornell and other members of the board of the nascent agricultural college probably had in mind.



That something so much greater emerged from this opportunity is one of the accidents of history, enough to cause one to wonder about that which is not planned, about that which happens because of circumstances. In this case, the unforeseen was that the Cornell Library in Ithaca, as a corporation, need the approval of the state, and so the library charter was sent off to Albany for review. The bill for the Cornell Library landed on the desk of the chairman of the Literature Committee, whose purview was education. The committee’s chairman, Sen. Andrew Dickson White, was impressed with Cornell’s generosity and his vision in creating a library for the citizens of Tompkins County. He was less pleased to learn, after asking about the Ithaca philanthropist, that Cornell proposed splitting the Morrill Land

**THE CYPHERING BOOK
LOSS & GAIN**

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In 1844, there was a balance perhaps of a couple thousand dollars on the cr side. In 1854 the contest was a doubtful one, and a debt with which I was then incumbered amounting to \$50,000 would probably have swept the board if the game had been stoped at that period, but the contest has been continued, with increasing success for the side of gain and at the present period Feb. 1, 1860, that mountain of debt has mostly been paid at the rate of 100 cents on a dollar with 7 per ct interest added, and a yearly income of \$15,000, seems to be a reliable guarenty that the cr. Side, has won the victory.

**Forest Park Ithaca, Tompkins Co. N.Y.
 February 1, 1860
 Ezra Cornell**

Grant funds between the People's College of Havana and the Agricultural College in Ovid.

In 1862 Andrew Dickson White was a young man of thirty. He had been born in Homer, and then his prosperous family moved to Syracuse, where he grew up. His passion was for books; that he would attend college was never in question. His father's choice was Hobart College in Geneva, but there, Andrew railed against what he considered inferior instruction and excessive reliance on religiosity as prescribed by the Episcopal Church. He also disapproved of his fellow students, who were more rambunctious than studious. Young Andrew, with the aid of his mother, wheedled his way from Geneva to New Haven.

Yale College proved only marginally better than Hobart, however, and upon graduation White headed for Europe—first Paris, then to Germany, where new ideas about education had aroused considerable excitement. White was in his element. When he completed his postgraduate studies, he returned to New Haven, where the college offered him a teaching position. He had heard of a western experimental college, however, and thinking Yale no place for innovation, went to Ann Arbor in 1860 to teach history at the University of Michigan. This experience, on top of his European travels and study, suited him well. He lectured on modern European history, attracted a student following, and developed innovative ideas about higher education.

White mused about what a great university might aspire to be, envisioning “distinguished professors in every field, with libraries as rich as the Bodleian, halls as lordly as that of Christ Church or of Trinity, chapels as inspiring as that of King's, towers as dignified as those of Magdalen and Merton, quadrangles as beautiful as those of Jesus and St. John's.” White would place this model institution in central New York, where it would become a “university worthy of the commonwealth and of the nation.” This dream, he acknowledged, “became a sort of obsession.” He thought of his university with “professors in the great modern literatures—above all, in our own; there should also be a professor of modern history and a lecturer on architecture.” White insisted that “my university should be under control of no single religious organization; it should be free from all sectarian or party trammels; in electing its trustees and professors no questions should be asked as to their belief or their attachment to this or that sect or party.”

In 1862 Andrew Dickson White's father died, and he returned to Syracuse to take over the family business and care for his mother. Now wealthy in his own right, White was desirous of creating a great work for himself. He was also newly elected to the New York State Senate. Writing to abolitionist and philanthropist

Gerrit Smith, White outlined ideas that echo his early dreams of a great university and prefigure his later thinking about education. He wanted to create a university that would “welcome all, regardless of color or sex,” a school that would provide an education for the public good rather than for commercial gain, and would encourage scientific exploration. It would be nonsectarian and would focus on living languages and literature. “My soul is in this,” he acknowledged.

White’s ideas were revolutionary; his university was unlike any institution in existence in the United States in 1862. He envisioned a school where the “current of mercantile morality wh[ich] has so long swept through this land” would be countered; where the “current of military passion” would be restrained and tempered; a place that would be an “asylum for Science—where truth shall be sought for the truth’s sake, where it shall not be the main purpose of the Faculty to stretch or cut science exactly to fit ‘Revealed Religion.’” It would be a center for the “new Literature—not graceful and indifferent to wrong but earnest;—nerved and armed to battle for the right.” White’s university would offer instruction in moral philosophy, history and political economy “unwarped to suit present abuses in Politics and Religion”; its legal training would ensure that “Legality shall not crush Humanity.” It would be a place “around which liberally minded men of learning,—men scattered throughout the land—comparatively purposeless and powerless,—could cluster,—making this institution a center from wh[ich] ideas and men shall go forth to bless the nation during the ages.”

Gerrit Smith, while interested, did not offer aid. White, estimating that on his own he had only enough money to endow the library, returned to the business at hand in Syracuse and Albany. His ideas, however, would soon reappear to great effect when he considered what New York might do with the funds from the Morrill Land Grant Act—and when he encountered Ezra Cornell in the state Senate.

In his *Autobiography*, White recalled the older man’s dilemma. Cornell had told him that he had “about half a million dollars more than my family will need.” He asked White, “what is the best thing I can do with it for the State?”

“In our country,” White responded, “the charities appeal to everybody. Any one can understand the importance of them.” Education, however, presented a different case. In his opinion, “the best thing you can do with [your fortune] is to establish or strengthen some institution for higher instruction.” He said that the needs of a large and great institution were greater than what the state would be able to fund; “that such a college or university worthy of the State would require far more in the way of faculty and equipment than most men supposed; that the time had come when scientific and technical education must be provided for in such

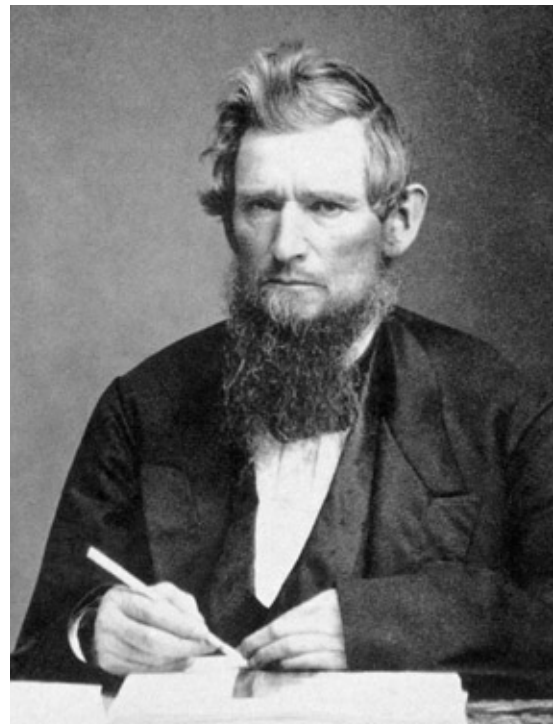
an institution; and that education in history and literature should be the bloom of the whole growth.”

What seems inevitable to us today, because we know the outcome, was then far from certain. For a moment in time, these three forces were still not united in purpose, nor had they even met the formidable obstacles they would have to overcome. And the People’s College, with the blessing of the state legislators, had time on its side.

When the state designated the People’s College in Havana as New York’s land grant university, the school’s wealthy and influential sponsor was State Sen. Charles Cook. Once the state’s conditions were met, the remainder of the land scrip would be turned over to him. Fate intervened, however, and Cook was felled by a stroke. Plans for his college hung suspended; months and then years passed. Then in 1865, the time granted by the legislature was about to run out.

Second in the running for the Morrill Land Grant funds was the New York State Agricultural College in Ovid, enthusiastically supported by State Senator Folger and the State Agricultural Society, on whose board of trustees Ezra Cornell served. The trustees had erected a stone building overlooking Seneca Lake in anticipation of the return of students and faculty from the war. In Albany, each time Cornell or Folger attempted to enter a bill suggesting that the land grant monies be split between the Havana and Ovid schools, Senator White stepped in to block the effort. Still, Cornell took the idea to the Agricultural Society meeting in Rochester in February 1864, and with the college floundering, Ezra Cornell suggested that if the trustees could obtain half of the Morrill grant, he would donate enough money to make up the entire sum. There must have been a moment of stunned silence in the room, followed by murmurs of astonishment and appreciation. The Agricultural College appeared close to becoming a reality. In Albany, however, when Cornell proposed that the land grant be split between the two schools, White blocked his bill.

Consider Andrew White, listening to Cornell’s generous proposal but refusing even under those fortunate conditions to allow a division of the land grant money. On no account, he said, should the funds be divided, for the needs of higher education in the State of New York required concentration. There had been a scattering of resources, he argued, and there were already more than twenty colleges in the state. Yet not one of them, he insisted, was “doing anything which could justly be called university work.”



White, in his own words, “persisted in my refusal to sanction any bill dividing the fund, declared myself now more opposed to such a division than ever; but promised that if Mr. Cornell and his friends would ask for the *whole* grant—keeping it together, and adding his three hundred thousand dollars, as proposed—I would support such a bill with all my might.” Senator Folger, in whose Seneca County district the Agricultural College was located, saw his plum about to slip away. He would have to be appeased.

In Albany, White and Cornell conferred. White must have suggested Syracuse as a suitable location, but Cornell did not have fond memories of that city, where as a young man he been robbed not once but twice. Later, Ezra Cornell countered with his own proposal. If you will locate the college at Ithaca, he said, “I will give you for that object a farm of three hundred acres of first quality land, desirably located, overlooking the village of Ithaca and Cayuga Lake, and within ten minutes’ walk of the Cornell Library, the churches, the railroad station, and steamboat landing.” He promised to erect suitable buildings for the use of the college and to give an additional sum of money—“on condition,” he added, “that the legislature will endow the college with at least thirty thousand dollars” a year, thereby placing the

Andrew Dickson White, albumen print photograph, ca. 1865.

Ezra Cornell, albumen print photograph, ca. 1865.

college upon a “firm and substantial basis, which shall be a guarantee of its future prosperity and usefulness, and give the farmers’ sons of New York an institution worthy of the Empire State.”

But nothing happened, for the legislature had given the People’s College an additional three months to meet the state’s requirements. Then, proving that the course of history is often shaped by serendipity, Dr. Sylvester Willard, long an advocate of compassionate care for the insane, arrived in Albany to plead their cause. Mid-speech, Willard died. Young Senator White thereupon demanded that a memorial to Willard in the form of a hospital for the insane be located in Seneca County, giving Senator Folger solace and making him an ally. He then suggested that the Morrill land grant scrip be allocated to a new university, to be sited on Ezra Cornell’s farm in Ithaca.

Speaking to the Senate in March 1865, White insisted that his bill to charter the land grant university in Ithaca would be “the most important of the session. . . . I know of none which so demands earnestness in thought and promptness in action.” The university bill, he pointed out, privileged no single person but promoted the highest interests of the state. It was a bill not for the present only, but for all time, as it would meet the “wants of our children and of our children’s children. From our action on this bill shall go forth influences to help or hurt what is best in this state for centuries.” There was more. The university would “bring modern science to bear upon those two great sources of State wealth—Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts”; it would “energize our noble system of public instruction,” which was at the heart of the undertaking. Finally, White played his trump card: the university bill needed no tax monies. “Not a dollar is asked from the treasury,” he pointed out, for “the fund already exists, and on a scale commensurate with the great interest it is to serve. Thanks to the wise policy of the government of the United States, you have a gift of lands worth a million; thanks to the patriotism of one”—Ezra Cornell—“you are offered half a million more.” The question, he posed to the senators, was “shall we accept these gifts?” How could they not?

It was in this Senate speech that White proposed to honor Sylvester Willard, noting that the buildings standing ready in Ovid could be appropriately used, for “the state to-day needs a place for the blind asylum, and the asylum for the incurably insane.” Placing one or both of these on the old Agricultural College property would save the state “tens of thousands of dollars” in building costs and would, more importantly, “save the reputation of the state for humanity.” This Senate, White pointed out, had “resounded for two years with complaints against the blind

asylum in its present position, and Willard's report shows that the condition of the incurably insane in the almshouses of our state would disgrace Dahomey." Could the senators act less nobly, he asked, "than those who have gone before us?"

White later wrote that there were three points he had endeavored to impress upon the Senate. The first was that "as regards primary education, the policy of the State should be diffusion of resources," while it should be, "as regards university education, concentration of resources." The second was that the existing sectarian colleges could not do the work required to qualify for the Morrill funds, and the third, that "any institution for high education in the State must form an integral part of the whole system of public instruction." And here was the nucleus of White's plan, for he saw the university integrated and having a "living connection" with the state public school system, and suggested that state scholarships be created, one for each of the 128 Assembly districts, to be awarded to the best scholars in the public schools, entitling the holders to free instruction for four years. The university and the schools would be "bound closely together by the constant and living tie of five hundred and twelve students."

George S. Batchellor, an Albany official sitting in the Senate that day, was impressed by Ezra Cornell and by the young senator "who during those early struggles stood courageously by the side of his elder colleague, displaying at all times . . . skill and energy." It was White, insisted Batchellor, who "did all the literary work, who directed all the legislation." And so it must have been.

Yet it was not easy: barbs came from a number of sources, and it soon became necessary for Ezra Cornell to defend himself and the new university he was endowing. The founder of the People's College, Charles Cook, his lawyer speaking on his behalf, grumbled more than others. They complained that what was being planned for Ithaca was an elite university. Cornell was shocked. He laid out his lineage as the son of mechanics and farmers, noting that these were the occupations and status even of his sisters' husbands! "I have no relation," he explained, "of any degree within my knowledge who is or has been a lawyer, physician, Minister of the Gospel, merchant, politician, office holder, gentleman loafer or common idler." Indeed, he went on, "None who have been drunkards or recipients of charity. All have procured an honest and complete support for their families by *productive labor*, none but myself have acquired anything like a fortune, and mine is placed at the disposal of the industrial classes." Who, Cornell asked, could be more thoroughly identified with the industrial, laboring, and productive classes than I? Further, he declared, "I find the only two institutions in the state which were organized on the basis of educating the industrial classes, failures, from the want of adequate

means, and from other causes, which in my judgment render it unwise to attempt to rear the desired edifice on their foundation.”

Never has a man had such trouble trying to give away a fortune. With some weariness, Ezra Cornell wrote to his eldest son Alonzo in February 1865 that the “College matter looks more hopeful, but I shall not go into fits to induce the state to accept 500,000 of my money.”

The name of the university was another issue. White simply states that Cornell had urged “Ithaca.” The suggestion of Cornell University, said White, “was mine. He at first doubted the policy of it; but, on my insisting that it was in accordance with time-honored American usage, as shown by the names of Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Amherst, Bowdoin, Brown, Williams, and the like, he yielded.”

On April 27, 1865, the legislature passed “An Act to establish the Cornell University, and to appropriate to it the income of the sale of public lands granted to this State by Congress.” The act’s first three sections created the university, called for a board of trustees, and located the campus on Ezra Cornell’s Ithaca farm.

The fourth section established the educational aims of the university: it would be responsible for teaching branches of learning related to agriculture and the mechanical arts, including military tactics, “in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” Other branches of science and knowledge “may be embraced in the plan of instruction and investigation pertaining to the university as the trustees may deem useful and proper.” This is crucial to remember because deviations from the prescribed curriculum are justified by this section: thus journalism, forestry, music, and other unconventional courses of study were added to the offerings as years went by, and later domestic science, hotel administration, and labor relations. In addition, the charter states that “persons of every religious denomination, or of no religious denomination, shall be equally eligible to all offices and appointments.”

The fifth section of the charter defined Cornell University as an educational institution with limited holdings “not to exceed three millions of dollars in the aggregate.” This provision would later come back to haunt the young institution. At the time, however, three million was the sum mentioned in the charter of other universities, and who then could have envisioned any school having or receiving or even needing more?

The sixth section dealt with revenue from the Morrill Land Grant Act, appropriating it to Cornell University but stipulating that it was necessary for Ezra Cornell

THE CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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Of all these recent munificent gifts, the most princely is that of Ezra Cornell, a citizen of Ithaca, who has offered to the State of New York more than half a million dollars, and about two hundred acres of land, to aid in the establishment of a university. Such generosity in the lifetime of the giver is almost unexampled. It surpasses the bequests of Astor and Smithson, and if it falls below the endowment of Girard, the terms of the gift are wiser and more liberal. . . .

The new university we presume will not be fettered by precedents, but will mark out for itself a new path, enlightened by the past but adapted to the present. In such a course there are great dangers, but also great advantages. The question is yet to be determined whether, in a higher seminary, the study of natural science, of modern languages, of history, and of political philosophy, may not lead to high intellectual culture, particularly fitted for American life.

The question often arises whether the city or the country is the place for the university. Experience shows that learning flourishes alike in the mart and in the field. In a metropolis like New York or Philadelphia or Boston, libraries and scientific collections, and art and eloquence abound. A country town like Ithaca can offer no such attractions. But quiet hours of study and reflection, simple modes of life, the wholesome and refreshing influences of good scenery, and moderate expenses, seem to be more than a balance for the advantages of a city.

. . . Let first-rate teachers be first secured. Let no expense be spared to secure the highest educational ability which the country will afford. Then, as the scholars assemble, as the courses and plans of the university are developed, let such buildings go up as will best provide for the wants which have been created.

—THE NATION, July 13, 1865, 44–45

to first deposit, free and without restriction, five hundred thousand dollars to which he and his heirs maintained no expectation of repayment. Here, too, was mentioned the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars, which Ezra Cornell was to pay to the Genesee College of Lima, New York, as part of the horse-trading involved in getting the charter through the legislature. The seventh provision of the charter spelled out what Cornell University needed to do to become New York's land grant institution, listing the buildings, fixtures, and arrangements to be made within two years and that an inspection by the state's regents should be expected. These were substantially the same provisions that the People's College had been expected to meet.

Financial considerations were addressed in the eighth provision, and in the ninth, the charter stipulated that the university was to be open at the lowest rates

to students without distinction of “rank, class, previous occupation or locality,” and that it was to accept one student per state Assembly district free of tuition, awarded for superior ability.

The tenth provision confirmed that there would be payments from the state; the eleventh that the charter when approved was to be “deemed the law, and shall prevail” whenever there might be a conflict in the various laws that pertain to the university. In the twelfth, the legislature gave itself authority to “at any time alter, or repeal this act,” and the last provided that the “act shall take effect immediately.” Yet this charter would only go into effect provided the People’s College did not fulfill its obligations as the Morrill land grant designee, for the three months’ extension had not yet expired.

But they were confident, and two days later, at Geological Hall in Albany, the Board of Trustees held its first meeting. Present were Governor Reuben E. Fenton, William Kelly, Horace Greeley, Josiah B. Williams, George W. Schuyler, J. Meredith Read, Francis Miles Finch, William Andrus, Victor M. Rice, and Ezra Cornell. Of this group, Williams, Schuyler, Finch, and Andrus were Ithaca men, along with Cornell himself. Kelly was appointed chairman, and Rice, secretary. Ezra Cornell, still stinging from the charge of elitism, described the trustees as being “three mechanics,—three farmers—one manufacturer—one merchant—one lawyer, one engineer—and one literary gentleman.” That was Horace Greeley, the New York City editor and friend of reform. There were, in addition, trustees representing the state government, the common schools, the State Agricultural Society, the County of Tompkins through its public librarian—and the Cornell family. “Can the industrial classes of the State select a board of trustees more likely to protect and foster its interests than the one here selected? I think not,” Cornell wrote.

The first business of this newly convened board was to accept the land scrip and elect seven additional trustees. It then set in motion the new university. Cornell was to manage the land scrip to create the financial foundation of the university. White would build the superstructure; he was designated chairman of the committee to design the university, but he was not yet its president. They were poised to begin.

For the next three months the Cornell trustees waited for the People’s College’s time to expire. When the extension ended on July 27, Ezra Cornell deposited a bond for five hundred thousand dollars with the New York State Comptroller. In addition, as Morris Bishop noted, Cornell dipped his pen into gall and paid Genesee College twenty-five thousand dollars to establish, at that school, a professor-

ship of Agriculture “and for no other purpose whatsoever.” For his part, Ezra Cornell noted that he had “just Endowed the Cornell University with the sum of \$500,000, and paid to the Genesee College at Lima my \$25,000 for the privilege of endowing the University as above. Such is the influence of corrupt Legislation.” The university did not have to suffer the effects of corruption long, however, for sixteen months later, in March 1867, with buildings beginning to rise on East Hill, the state legislature passed “An Act to refund to the Cornell University the amount paid by Ezra Cornell to the Genesee College at Lima.”

To his wife Mary Ann, Ezra Cornell wrote that the “destiny of the Cornell University was fixed, and that its ultimate endowment would be ample for the vast field of labor it embraces, and if properly organized for the development of truth, industry, and frugality it will become a power in the land which will control and mold the future of this great state.” The man who had spent most of his adult life in straitened circumstances, who had been deeply in debt with little hope of gain, knew at that moment that he was doing a great and good thing.

There was much to do before opening day. The campus needed to be laid out, buildings designed and erected, contracts let, supplies located, courses decided upon, and men found to teach them. First, however, it was Andrew Dickson White’s task to design a university. Although this was something he had long considered, it was one thing to contemplate an ideal university on paper and quite another to erect a real one with buildings, a faculty, and students.

From the start, White’s vision of the university was broad; his thinking expanded well beyond the requirements of the Morrill Land Grant Act. As Ezra Cornell wrote, “the enterprise expands from an Agricultural College to a university of the first magnitude—such as we have to go to Europe now to find.” To justify this greater reach, White cited Ezra Cornell’s motto: “I would found a university where any person can find instruction in any study.” George S. Batchellor, hoping to see White receive due credit for his monumental efforts in creating the university, wrote in the 1880s that White’s “pen traced the present motto as the language of Ezra Cornell.” Morris Bishop was more blunt: “White liked to improve, for publication, the utterances of his rude companions.” Probably, Bishop suggests, “Cornell actually said something like: ‘I’d like to start a school where anybody can study anything he’s a mind to.’”

On October 21, 1866, White published the *Report of the Committee on Organization*, a distillation of his ideas about the new university. It contains an

explanation of what courses would be offered, how the faculty would be recruited, and the means by which the university would be governed.

The faculty would be divided into colleges, or what we would today call departments. There were colleges of agriculture, chemistry and physics, history and political science, languages, literature and philosophy, mathematics and engineering, mechanical arts, natural science, and military science. It is a wonder that so much was to be attempted at the outset and that on this list were subjects not routinely taught elsewhere in 1868. From that original list of courses emerged the modern university that we know. Not seamlessly, of course, for at the time some subjects could not have been envisioned, and others (such as journalism and pharmacy) were attempted but soon abandoned as being too vocational or not of sufficient interest to students. Nevertheless, White's initial plan established a broad path for the university to follow. In the years after 1868, a course would be offered and appear in the annual register because a professor chose to teach it, or because of students' demands for instruction in a particular subject, or because funds were available. In addition, some of the early book collections purchased by Ezra Cornell, often at White's urging, developed as areas of specialization for which the university became known. White, for his part, clearly recognized the interdisciplinary nature of academic work and called on each professor to fulfill more than the duties of a single department. His earlier educational experiences prompted him to be sure that Cornell offered a broad range of subjects as well as teaching methods. He wrote of university professors in Europe who lectured "to large bodies of attentive students on the most interesting and instructive periods of human history, [which] aroused in me a new current of ideas. Why not help the beginnings of this system in the United States?" He complained that he had "long deplored the rhetorical fustian and oratorical tall-talk which so greatly afflict our country, and which had been, to a considerable extent, cultivated in our colleges and universities." He wanted something better—a faculty that would teach with "clean, clear, straightforward statement and illustration." For this, he hoped to locate "clear-headed, clear-voiced, earnest, and honest" men.

To this resident faculty he planned to add nonresident professors—admirable men, known both as scholars and as lecturers. Men of such stature, of course, were beyond the means of the new school to attract on a permanent basis, but some might be persuaded to visit. "I was influenced," he said, "by the desire to prevent the atmosphere of the university becoming simply and purely that of a scientific and technical school. Highly as I prized the scientific spirit and technical training,

I felt that the frame of mind engendered by them should be modified by an acquaintance with the best literature as literature.”

In hindsight, Andrew Dickson White’s progression from state senator to university president appears preordained. Quite likely his appointment was in Ezra Cornell’s mind the entire time, but he kept his thoughts to himself while White recommended one able scholar after another to take the helm of the new university. It seems clear, however, that White wanted the position, and there was no question that he would accept when it was offered. Later he wrote that “although my formal election to the university presidency did not take place until 1867, the duties implied by that office had already been discharged by me during two years.” There is a discrepancy here, for the university dates White’s presidency to 1866. Both dates are actually correct. White was elected president of the faculty, meaning of the university, at the meeting of the Board of Trustees on November 21, 1866, after which he was referred to in the minutes as President White. Although he dated his official start as president to January 1867, he stressed that he had acted as president even without the title since 1865, when the Cornell Charter passed the Senate in Albany.

White’s ideas were bold and innovative, drawing attacks on the school that came quickly and from many quarters. Ezra Cornell, too, prompted criticism for his acts of generosity, which few could believe was without some hidden motive for personal gain. The rumble of discontent concerning the disposition of the land grant scrip could be heard from one end of the state to the other. In October 1868, as the university celebrated its opening, there came from the Rochester *Daily Union and Advertiser* a long and particularly nasty salvo. It was inconceivable to many, carped the newspaper, that a man with so much money would fail to secure a goodly portion of it for himself and his family: he must be up to no good. Regarding the legislation to finance the Cornell endowment, the writer complained, “These amendments are intended to cover up and perpetuate by their incorporation into the organic law one of the most stupendous jobs ever ‘put up’ against the rights of the agricultural and mechanical population of the state.” The funds rightfully belong to the people of the state, hectoring the newspaper, but they had been “wrested from them and put into the hands and management of Ezra Cornell, the founder of the Cornell University, by legislation as rotten as the worst that ever disgraced the State.” Harsh words indeed.

The attack went on: Cornell had bought off the railroad interest to gain support for the university; the university charter contained a provision that the eldest male descendant of Ezra Cornell be a trustee “no matter what may be his moral

character or the quality of his intellect”; and so forth. The crux of the complaint was that such a man as Cornell could hardly be interested in the idea of the university but was using it to gain control of “twenty-five or thirty millions of dollars in the future management of these lands.”

Ezra Cornell responded patiently, answering each charge and attempting to be reasonable, though by the end his tolerance was clearly running thin. “This whole transaction is so plain and simple in its nature,” he insisted, “that it surprises me to find it misunderstood by anybody.” To the amazement of many, and the open admiration of quite a few, Cornell weathered the slings and arrows that came his way with greater calm than might have been expected.

Other critics acidly observed that the president of Cornell University was not required to be a member of the clergy, and that the university itself would not be allied with a sect or denomination. Oxford and Cambridge, on which America’s colonial colleges had been patterned, were affiliated with the Church of England, and professors and students alike were expected to be communicants; nonconformists were thereby excluded, as they were from most public offices throughout the realm. From the very start, colleges and universities in the colonies and then in the United States had—with the exception of the University of Pennsylvania—a denominational affiliation, to attract those of a particular faith and to produce preachers for its churches. Cornell University, however, boldly asserted that among its special characteristics, as advertised in its annual register, was its nonsectarian character. Although the university’s principal aim was to “promote Christian civilization,” it had been established by a government that recognized no distinction in religious belief, and by citizens who held many different views. The State of New York operated under the same standard; its own public school system was open to boys and girls without prejudice or preference to any denominational affiliation. It would be false, insisted university officials, to “seek or promote any creed or to exclude any.” The Cornell charter ensured that no trustee, professor or student would be accepted or rejected on account of any religious or political opinions that he may or may not hold.

While recruiting professors for Cornell, White encountered a candidate from Harvard who had glowing testimonials. An eminent bishop, however, “felt it his duty to warn me that the young man was a Unitarian.” This incensed White, who wrote to the bishop that “the only question with me was as to the moral and intellectual qualifications of the candidate; and that if these were superior to those of other candidates, I would nominate him to the trustees even if he were a Buddhist.” In response, the bishop questioned whether “laymen had any right to teach at all,

THE COMMITTEE TO WHICH WAS REFERRED THE PROPOSAL OF
CERTAIN GENTLEMEN IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK TO BUILD AND
ENDOW A THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN THE VILLAGE OF ITHACA
TO BE CONNECTED WITH THE CORNELL UNIVERSITY

REPORT

.....
That Theology as usually understood, is human philosophy applied to revealed religion, and that this philosophy has never yet been so fully perfected as to account for all the phenomena of man's spiritual history or to be consistent with itself.

All history and all experience shows that the promulgators and adherents of religious philosophies have never yet been able to hold and propagate their opinions with the same spirit of amity and good will which characterizes the adherents of other branches of philosophy, but on the contrary its tendency has been to engender strife without [illeg.] the purity of heart or the beauty of daily life and conversation, which revealed religion without the philosophy, has contributed so many striking examples of.

... Since there is no generally opposed system of Theology extant, if an institution for teaching it should be established, it must necessarily be devoted to some Sectarian guidance, Your Committee earnestly recommend to the Board to avoid what they consider a very great evil and rigidly confine the religious teaching of the University to that which is imparted through its chair of Christian Ethics.

Your committee therefore recommend that the board should respectfully decline the proposals that have been made to them for the foundation of a Theological Seminary in connection with the University.

—Minutes of the Board of Trustees
meeting, 1866

since the command to teach was given to the apostles and their successors, and seemed therefore confined to those who had received holy orders.”

The charges concerning Cornell University's nonsectarian nature persisted. The attacks “on our unchristian character are venomous,” noted White. In 1869, Willard Fiske, Cornell's first librarian and White's boyhood friend, advised him not to “bother answering the clerics. They will, like editors, wilt.” The press sputtered in outrage that at Cornell even atheists could become professors, that President White was not a member of a church, and that the university was peopled with nonbelievers.

In response, President White issued a pamphlet entitled *The Cornell University: What It Is and What It Is Not*, in which he wrote, “any institution under denominational control inevitably tends to make allegiance to its own form of belief a

leading qualification. It may become a tolerably good denominational college, like the hundreds already keeping down the standard of American education, but it can become nothing more.” So common were the complaints about Cornell that the “cry of ‘infidel’ is ceasing to scare, the claim of ‘sound learning’ and ‘safe’ instruction is ceasing to allure . . . As to ‘sound’ learning and ‘safe’ instruction, it has well-nigh killed the great majority of colleges which have boasted it.” Amid all the commotion, Andrew Dickson White worked on the organization of the university and created his ideal institution on the foundation stipulated by the regulations of the Morrill Land Grant Act. Ezra Cornell, meanwhile, kept up with his business interests, including the progress of Western Union, a proposed railroad from Elmira to Ithaca, and a telegraph line out of Philadelphia. And he engaged in extensive correspondence, exchanging letters with family and friends and answering letters from strangers—many requesting money, some seeking information about the university. He also supervised the agents locating the federal land in the forests of Wisconsin and oversaw the construction of university buildings. The first campus plan featured a fifteen-acre square, with South University (now Morrill Hall) placed on the western edge of the hillside to house students and to hold the library, president’s office, and classrooms.

To make clear to the public what Cornell University was all about, and to attract prospective students, Cornell sent a letter to the *New York Tribune* explaining “how a poor boy can pay for his education” by working his way through school. There was employment available in the machine shop, advised Cornell, where there were lathes, a twenty-five-horsepower engine, and many other pieces of equipment for working with iron and wood. The “erection of additional buildings required for the University will furnish employment for years to come to students in need of it.” There would also be employment in improving and beautifying the farm and grounds on which the university was sited. “It will be a constant aim of the trustees and faculty,” wrote Cornell, “to make the school attractive and to afford students the means for self-support and independence, while receiving all the advantages of the University.” He added that there were already some students who had come to Ithaca to work until classes opened, earning money for their expenses. “I will assure the boys,” he wrote, “that if they will perform one-fourth as much labor as I did at their ages, or as I do now at 60 years of age, they will find no difficulty in paying their expenses while prosecuting their studies at Ithaca.” Working one’s way through college has become part of American mythology, but at the time this exciting prospect attracted the attention of many ambitious young men.

For the moment, however, little in Ithaca was ready for them.



The inauguration was to have been in 1867, but the buildings were not ready, and the state granted the university an extension. One year later, while construction continued on campus, Cornell University opened. On October 6, 1868, young men who had passed the entrance examinations, given in a variety of subjects, gathered at the Cornell Library. Of those who had tried for admission, 412 were found academically qualified, while several with credit awarded for previous college work registered in the upper classes. The inauguration ceremony on October 7 was scheduled for ten A.M., but far earlier than that, students, townspeople, officials, and the curious began to arrive at the Cornell Library on Tioga Street to take seats. The hall had been decorated in red and white, and at the sides of the steps were urns filled with masses of ferns and moss. The citizens of Ithaca, reported the *Ithaca Journal*, had decided even before a class had met that the university was a grand success. The university, every townspeople knew, promised as much for the economic health of the community as it did for the incoming students. Ithaca might finally have an institution that would provide a secure economic base.

Ithaca at this time, however, had little to boast about. Mary White, the president's wife, "detested Ithaca" and had "urged her husband to try for a professorship at Yale." Although others decreed Ithaca picturesque and extolled its natural beauty, the English historian Goldwin Smith later found the waterfalls a crashing bore and hoped he would never be taken to see another. In the early days of the nineteenth century, Ithaca had been a collection of buildings at the headwaters of Cayuga Lake, a terminus for goods shipped down the lake. The Depression of 1837 highlighted Ithaca's isolation from major eastern markets, as had the Erie Canal when it opened in 1825. At mid-century, Ithaca still lacked a sound economic underpinning. When the university opened in 1868, the streets in Ithaca were hard-packed dirt, as they would remain well into the 1880s; there were no sidewalks and the commercial section was clustered on Owego Street. The Clinton House was the grandest building in town. Ithaca's population numbered not quite eight thousand, and there were just over thirty thousand residents in the county. Ithaca had sixteen churches, a private academy, a large grammar school on North Albany Street, and the Cornell Library. There were farms within the village limits and on the land ringing the flats at the head of Cayuga Lake. Ithaca received the designation of a city only in 1888.

A student writing in *The Cornell Era* in 1881 speculated that "very probably the gently-sloping infantile mountain, which we are compelled to ascend five or six times a week," had induced the founders to settle the university in Ithaca. Or it



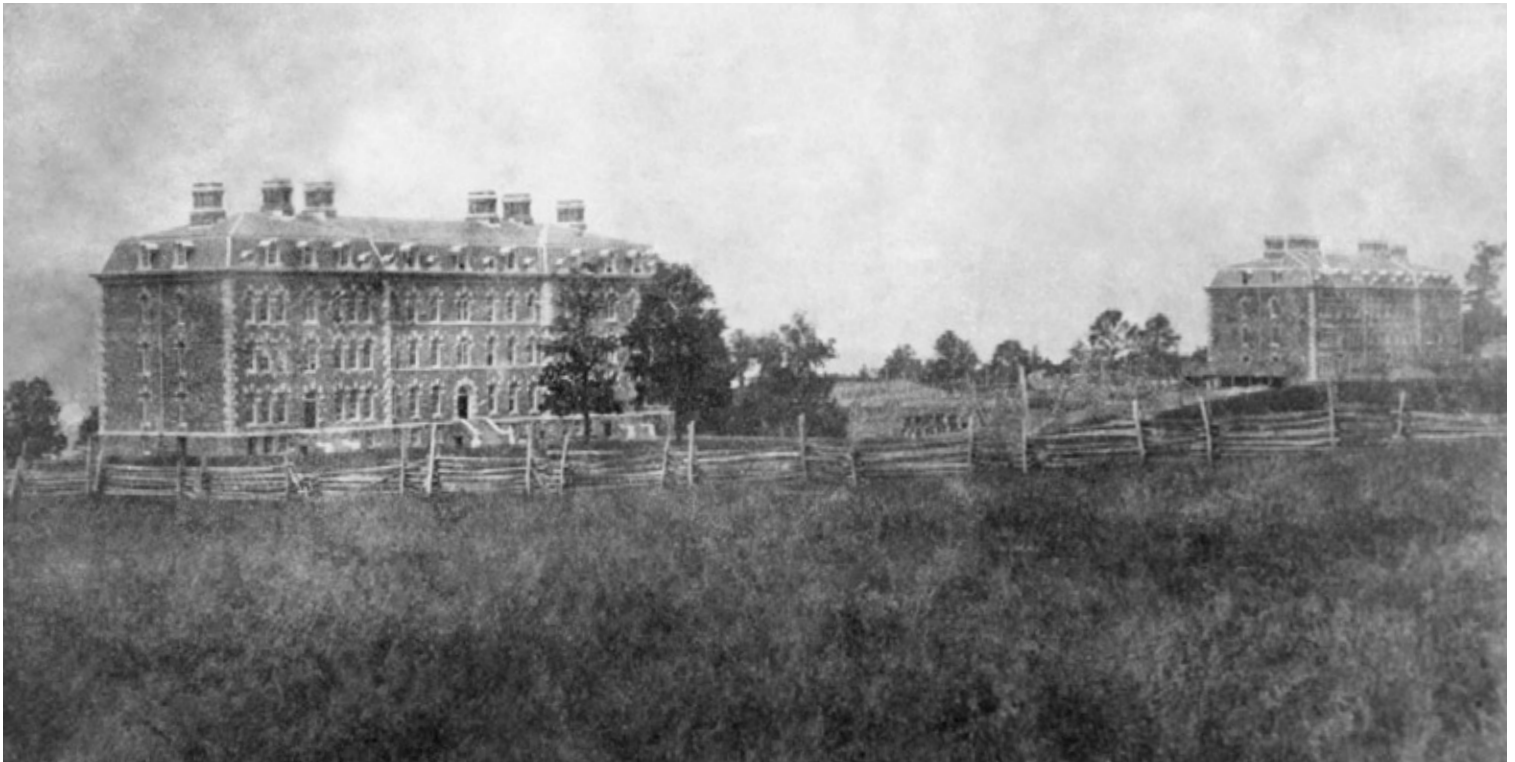
Early view of Cornell as seen from Ithaca,
with the Village Hall and the Cornell Library
in foreground, ca. 1870.

might have been the “gorges scattered about in the most prodigal manner.” Theaters were probably not a reason, though their “boards are occasionally graced by the presence of some great theatrical or musical star. But the appointments of this popular place of entertainment are not exactly what one would call first-class.” There was, concluded one writer, “coasting.” The popular winter sport of sledding down the steep streets “divides the chances of being killed or of not being killed in so delightfully even a manner, that it cannot fail to be a source of great pleasure to many.”

There have been times when Ithaca was thought too rural to be home to a great university, times when Ithaca was regarded as a bucolic retreat for undisturbed study and research, and times when the scenery was extolled as compensation for low faculty salaries. Ithaca has been called both the most centrally isolated place on the East Coast and a well-connected regional hub; picturesque and antiquated; parochial and enlightened. In every era, however, Ithaca would grow because of the university’s presence.

On October 7, 1868, Ezra Cornell was sixty-one years old. The newspaper noted that the “ravages of his late illness were painfully apparent, but his voice was steady” as he spoke at the inauguration “in a quiet and simple manner” to describe the object of the university. That within one decade he had created a public library and endowed a university was most certainly amazing to the people of Ithaca, and surely it must have been something of a surprise to Cornell himself. In his talk that day, Cornell stressed the ongoing nature of a university. He cautioned the crowd against any feeling of disappointment at what they saw, citing a visitor who had come to Ithaca expecting “to find a finished institution.” Nothing was completed, he noted, and at no time thereafter could Cornell University ever be considered finished. “Such, my friends,” he continued, “is not the entertainment we invited you to. We did not expect to have a ‘single thing finished,’ we did not desire it, and we have not directed our energies to that end. It is the commencement that we have now in hand.”

It was the commencement of a new “institution of learning” that Cornell heralded, a school that would “mature in the future to a great degree of usefulness, which will place at the disposal of the industrial and productive classes of society the best facilities for the acquirement of practical knowledge and mental culture, on such terms as the limited means of the most humble can command.” Cornell directed the audience’s attention to the future: “I hope we have laid the foundation of an institution which shall combine practical with liberal education, which shall fit the youth of our country for the professions, the farms, the mines, the manufactories, for the investigations of science, and for mastering all the practical questions of life with success and honor.”



**South University
(now Morrill) and
North University
(now White) halls,
ca. 1869.**

“I believe that we have made the beginning,” he said, “of an Institution which will prove highly beneficial to the poor young men and the poor young women of our country. This is one thing which we have not finished, but in the course of time we hope to reach such a state of perfection as will enable any one by honest efforts and earnest labor to secure a thorough, practical, scientific or classical education. The individual is better, society is better, and the state is better, for the culture of the citizen; therefore we desire to extend the means for the culture of all.”

Certain words reverberate from the commencement to the present: useful, beneficial, poor young men and women, practical, scientific. Although Harvard was and continues to be a meritocracy, Cornell has always leaned toward democracy. Even today, when it is classed among the elite universities of the nation—an Ivy League school—it is a democratic meritocracy in so many ways, from the students to the faculty. And in his emphasis on the unfinished and the future, it is clear that Ezra Cornell understood that a thriving institution would always be in the process of becoming.

Ezra Cornell believed that this new education would serve agriculture by pairing it with science, thereby proving the usefulness of the new science taught at the university. “The veterinarian will shield” the farmer, said Cornell, “against many of the losses. . . . The entomologist must arm him for more successful warfare in defence of his growing crops. . . . we find ample opportunity for the applications of science in aid of the toiling millions.” The farmer too, had a part to play in this interchange because the improvement of his life and knowledge would benefit “the knowledge and power of the mechanic.”

In closing, Cornell linked the university to moral goals and to national needs “for the culture of all men of every calling, of every aim; which shall make men more truthful, more honest, more virtuous, more noble, more manly; which shall give them higher purposes, and more lofty aims, qualifying them to serve their fellow men better, preparing them to serve society better, training them to be more useful in their relations to the state, and to better comprehend their higher and holier relations to their families and their God.” At this point Cornell defended the school’s nonsectarianism. “It shall be our aim,” he said, “and our constant effort to make true Christian men, without dwarfing or paring them down to fit the narrow gauge of any sect.” The nonsectarian designation established the university’s link to the public schools of New York, and its commitment to educate the graduates of those schools, whose students were of both sexes and of every—and even no—religious faith. Cornell attempted to define the expansiveness of knowledge: this will be “an institution where any person can find instruction in any study.” He then commended “our cause” to the “scrutiny and the judgment of the American people.”

Andrew Dickson White followed Ezra Cornell at the lectern that day. He too had been ill, but this was surely his moment. He discussed the underlying ideas on which the university was built, beginning with the two “Eliminated Ideas.” Cornell University would not tolerate pedants—those who paraded learning or who were unimaginative and “unduly emphasized minutiae in the presentation or use of knowledge.” Nor would the work of the university be directed by or be conducted on behalf of “Philistines”—those guided by crass and material rather than artistic and intellectual values.

Let us take a brief look at what President White had in mind. The foundation ideas he spoke about on that October day in 1868 mirror in many ways what he had written so passionately to Gerrit Smith earlier in the decade. He insisted on a close union between liberal and practical education and on their equal status; he confirmed the nonsectarian nature of the university, including the charter’s stipulation that a “majority of the Trustees shall never be of any one religious sect or of no

religious sect,” and that “no professor, officer or student shall ever be accepted or rejected on account of any religious or political views.” Further, White reaffirmed Ezra Cornell’s motto and said that the university would represent a living union with the state school system and a “concentration of revenues for advanced education,” recognizing that such a vast undertaking required firm financial support.

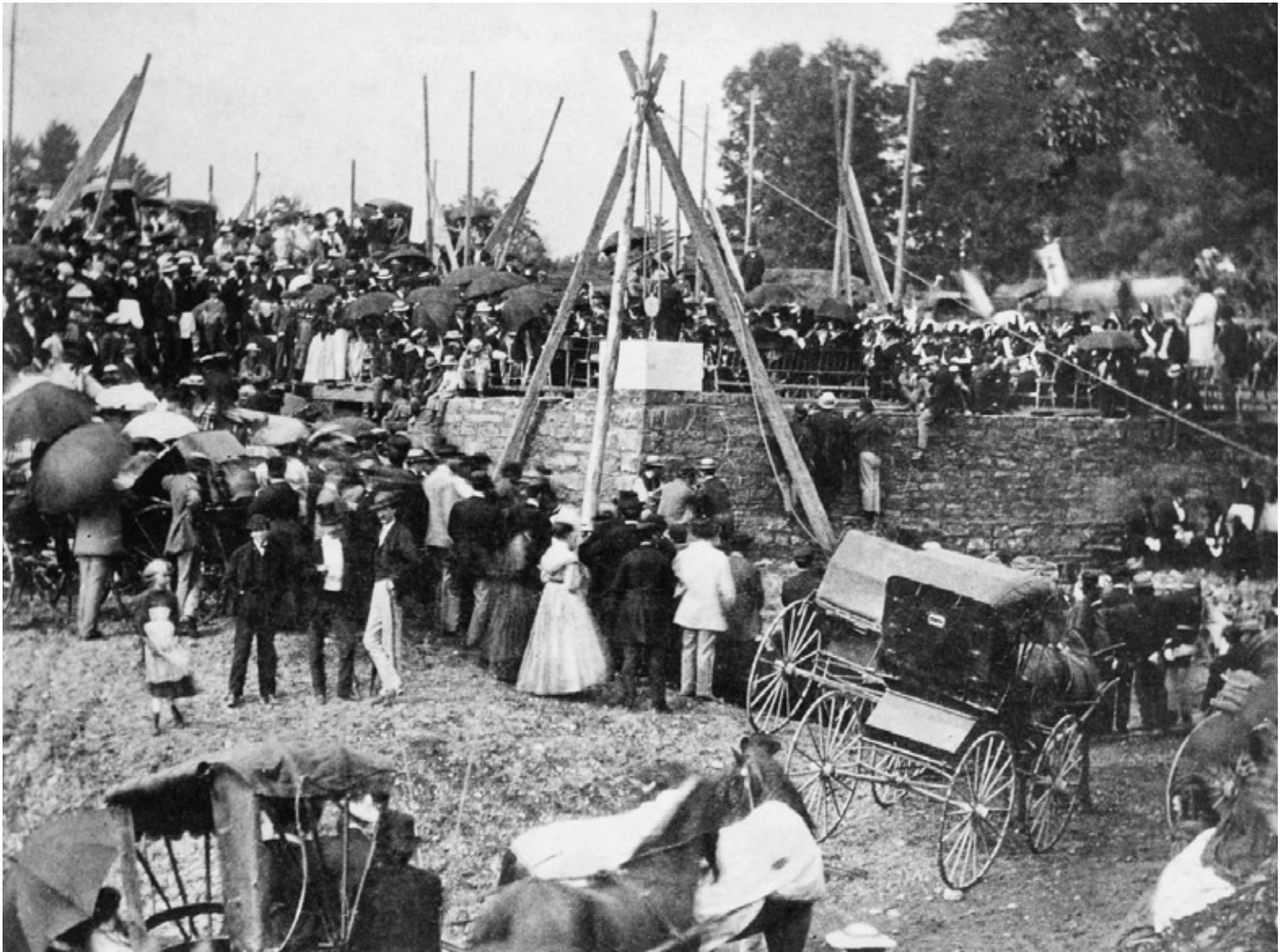
White then explicated a set of “Formative Ideas”: that at Cornell University there would be an “equality between different courses of study” and compatibility between study and labor, thereby incorporating Ezra Cornell’s plan by which poor boys could attend the university. And there would be emphasis upon scientific study, for at Cornell the accepted truths of the past would always be challenged.

White’s “Governmental Ideas” ensured that the Board of Trustees would not perpetuate itself and that the students would be self-governing—they would arrange and manage their own housing and dining while at the university. This feature of the new school was intended to relieve the administration and faculty of oversight of the students’ private lives and to scatter the students among the householders of Ithaca, whose positive influence, White believed, would ensure better behavior than that of students massed into dormitories. Students were to be treated as adults capable of managing their own domestic arrangements.

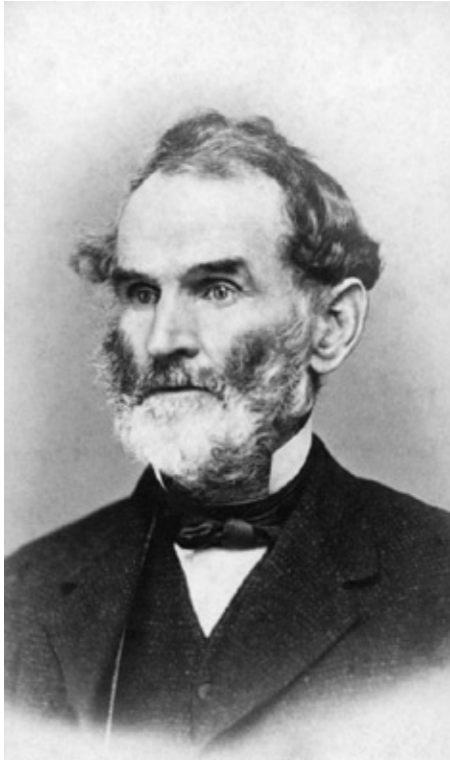
There were two “Permeating or Crowning Ideas”: that obtaining an education required effort, and that its ends were noble—education was to have an importance and bearing on society.

How thrilling it must have been to be in Ithaca on that first day. Everyone was filled with hope and expectation; all things, at that moment, seemed possible. This, crowed the *Ithaca Journal*, was the fullest and most perfect exposition ever given of the fundamental ideas on which the university rested. It was a most “scholarly and logical defense of great principles, a fervent plea for true Christian culture, and training untrammelled by the fetters of narrow minded sectarianism and bigotry.”

White closed his long oration by addressing the founder of the university: “You have been accused, sir, of creating a monument to yourself—would to God more men would erect such monuments to themselves!” Even while explaining the new institution to the assembled crowd, White was conscious of the difficulties ahead and the snubs to be endured. In his printed copy of the Order of Exercises, White noted acidly that “the governor, bowing to Methodist & Baptist & other sectarian enemies of the University,” had sent the lieutenant governor to represent the state so that he might avoid criticism from those quarters by being present. White fully realized the political and religious tensions with which the new university would have to cope.



Cornerstone of McGraw Hall, "laid with all ceremony by the Grand Lodge of Masons of the State of New York," 1869.



John McGraw,
albumen print
photograph,
ca. 1865.

That afternoon, stores in Ithaca closed in honor of the inaugural festivities. Throngs of people made their way to the campus to witness the presentation of the chimes by Jennie McGraw. Hung in a wooden scaffold, they would later be placed in the tower of McGraw Hall and in the 1890s be moved once again, to McGraw Tower, where they hang today. Although the wind on that October day of commencement was so high that many could not hear the addresses, the bells wafted their music over all.

Louis Agassiz, a noted professor at Harvard and White's adviser during the time he was organizing the university and collecting faculty, spoke of Cornell's uniqueness. His audience was celebrating an "institution of learning such as never existed before," said Agassiz, looking out over the hillside where all was under way and nothing finished. He then voiced a comment often heard about Cornell: "I trust this University will do something more. It starts on a firm basis; it starts with a prosperity which the world has not contemplated before." Agassiz believed the new university presented an opportunity for teachers unlike any other: "They break soil on a fresh ground. There is no proscription here. No absolute authority imposes appointed textbooks on the student or on any special department of learning. The teacher will come before his class with his own thoughts, with what he brings in his own head rather than in a stereotyped print. The students will select their studies and attend the instruction of the man of their choice." The students, too, would not be like students elsewhere but would be examples to others. "We appeal to them," he shouted over the wind, "to show themselves worthy of this confidence, and thus help in emancipating their fellow students throughout the world. The students of this University are in a position to do this." Agassiz predicted that Ezra Cornell would be remembered as "one of the greatest benefactors, not only of America, but of humanity" and heralded the university as inaugurating "a new era" of public education.

And there it was: the challenge that the community of people who formed the university would launch a new era of education in the United States. It was the signal that at the university on East Hill, the classes offered would be well taught, everything would be thoroughly debated, and all would be welcome. The students took Agassiz's words to heart and named their first literary magazine, launched that fall, *The Cornell Era*.

Everyone recognized that the university was a great and important undertaking. At the close of the exercises, Henry Sage, a wealthy businessman who lived in Ithaca, turned to his friend John McGraw, a man from Dryden who had made a fortune in the timber industry, and remarked, "John, we are scoundrels to stand doing nothing while those men are killing themselves to establish this university." McGraw would give the means to erect McGraw Hall. Later, when the time was right, Sage would add his own contributions.

Despite worry and problems, buildings still unfinished, and preparations somewhat haphazard, students made their way to Ithaca, some by boat down the lake, others on the train from Owego, still others by wagon or carriage or on foot. They were eager to be part of this new experimental enterprise, to help usher in the Cornell era. They, like those who followed them, would meet many challenges; the first was the climb up East Hill.