II

The Morrill Land Grant College Act

The one class have schools, seminaries, colleges, universities, apparatus, professors . . . for educating them . . . for the peculiar profession which is the business of their life; and they have already created, each class for its own use, a vast and voluminous literature, that would well nigh sink a whole navy of ships. But where are the universities, the apparatus, the professors and the literature, specifically adapted to any one of the industrial classes? Echo answers, where?

Jonathan B. Turner

Few things give historians more deep satisfaction, spiced as it is with a trace of malice, than to dig up evidence to prove that this or that celebrated document, until then supposed by every one to have been the work of some well known and honorable man, was really the work of some other fellow whom no one ever heard of before. It is because of this that I have to ask the question: Who was the originator of the so-called Morrill land grant college plan (until the point is determined it will be well to call it the so-called Morrill plan), and who was the author of the bill by which it was enacted into law? Not that it really matters very much, of course. But all the same, the question has been much and ardently debated; and since the honor of sovereign states is involved, and the right to wear laurels is at stake, I think we have a right to know what has been going on behind the scenes.

As every one knows (this is the lecturer’s friendly way of calling the attention of his listeners to something he supposes they don’t know)—as every one knows, the so-called Morrill Act provided for a federal grant of public land to each of the states as an endowment
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

for education in agriculture and the mechanic arts. And as every one knows, the act became a law on July 2, 1862. But perhaps every one does not know that some years later, when it became a distinct merit to have had something to do with the famous act, Senator Morrill (as he then was) said that the phraseology of the act was wholly his own; and he intimated that the plan itself was wholly his own too. "I do not remember," he said in 1894, "of any assistance in framing the bill prior to its introduction." And again: "Where I obtained the first hint of such a measure, I am wholly unable to say." But he as good as said that the measure was essentially the result of his own personal experience (that of a poor boy, the son of a village blacksmith), and of pure excogitation on his part. Thus Senator Morrill, after a lapse of years, gave the world to understand that he was the sole originator and author of the so-called Morrill Land Grant College Act. What more then do we want?

Well, in due course there were bound to be inquisitive historians who wanted a good deal more. They wanted to know whether, after a lapse of years, Senator Morrill hadn't forgotten some things. Had he not perhaps forgotten that in 1848, as a trustee of Norwich College, he was associated with its founder, Alden Partridge, and must have learned from him that many men throughout the country were discussing the need of agricultural colleges and the possibility of endowing them by grants of land from the public domain? More particularly, had he not forgotten that in 1856, the year before the so-called Morrill Act was first introduced in Congress, he was himself a delegate to the meeting of the United States Agricultural Society, and must at that time have heard the delegates discuss at length a specific plan for establishing an agricultural university in each state in the union, and for endowing each university with a federal land grant of a value not less than five hundred thousand dollars? This plan certainly did not originate with Mr. Morrill. It was drafted and promoted by Jonathan B. Turner, a professor in Illinois College; and those who are concerned for the honor of
The Morrill Land Grant College Act

Illinois say that this plan was the original form of the so-called Morrill Act. They say that the bill was not introduced by an Illinois congressman because Professor Turner and his friends thought it would have a better chance if introduced and sponsored by the representatives of some eastern state. They even say that Professor Turner and his friends requested Mr. Morrill to introduce the measure, turned over to him all of their documents relating to it, and, generally speaking, employed him as front man and mouthpiece for getting their plan enacted into law. And then, they say, the mere introducer of the bill got all the credit, whereas the laurels, such as they are, should rightfully be worn by Jonathan B. Turner of Illinois.²

So they say. And there is a good deal in what they say, but not, after all, as much as they would like us to think. I can well believe that Senator Morrill was unable, not only after a lapse of years but at any time, to say where he got the first hint for his bill. I doubt whether Professor Turner would have been any better able to say where he got the first hint for his plan. It was not a question of anything so illusive as hints. When the so-called Morrill Act was first introduced in Congress in 1857 the idea and the practice of endowing schools by federal land grants was a commonplace. It had by then become the settled policy of the federal government to set aside, in each state as it was admitted to the union, a part of the public domain for the support of education in that state. More than sixty million acres had already been set aside for the support of common schools; and four million acres had already been granted to fifteen states for the endowment of state universities. If any one needed a "first hint" for a plan essentially similar to the so-called Morrill Act, here were hints in God's plenty. Strictly speaking, no one originated the so-called Morrill Act. It was an obvious adaptation of ideas widely current and of practices long established. And for this reason, and because it is customary to attach to a law the name of the man who introduced it in Congress, we shall do no
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

great violence to historic truth if we now revert to the established practice, and henceforth call the so-called Morrill Act the Morrill Act.

Let us not fail, however, to give all due credit to Jonathan B. Turner and Illinois. For some fifteen years prior to the introduction of the Morrill Act there had been a more or less active movement for the establishment of agricultural colleges. The movement was not started, nor much supported, by the farmers themselves. "The great and insuperable trouble," said James B. Angell, writing as late as 1869, "is to inspire farmers with the belief that science has anything to offer them." But there were prominent men in most states (more especially in New York and Massachusetts, in Michigan and Illinois) who realized that science had much to offer the farmers. They were acquainted with recent advances made, chiefly in Europe, in the chemical and biological sciences; they knew that in the older communities the farms were being exhausted, and in the newer communities wastefully cultivated; and they believed that science could do much to improve the quality of the farms and advance the profits of the farmers, if only the farmers themselves could be sufficiently educated to understand their own business. They were convinced, therefore, that an agricultural college in each state would serve a double purpose: it would be a center for advancing the science of agriculture, and for teaching the farmers how to make a practical application of that science.

By no one was this program urged with more persistence, or with more picturesque volubility, than by Professor Jonathan B. Turner of Illinois College. Some of the leaders of the movement believed that the need could be adequately met by establishing courses in agriculture and the mechanic arts in the older colleges; and certain colleges had done something in that way. But Professor Turner soon became convinced that all such efforts would fail. The old colleges, he said, "have hauled a canoe alongside their huge professional steamships and invited the farmers and mechanics to jump on board and sail with them; but the difficulty is, they will
The Morrill Land Grant College Act

not embark.” His own ideas were first clearly formulated in an address delivered before a convention of farmers at Granville, Illinois, on November 18, 1851; and this address, afterwards published and widely circulated, contained most of the suggestions in what came to be known as the “Turner Plan.”

Professor Turner began his address by pointing out that the professional classes already had “colleges, universities, apparatus, professors . . . for educating them . . . for the peculiar profession which is the business of their life; and they have already created, each class for its own use, a vast and voluminous literature, that would well nigh sink a whole navy of ships. But where are the universities, the apparatus, the professors and the literature, specifically adapted to any one of the industrial classes? Echo answers, where?” To fill this empty, rhetorical “where,” Professor Turner presented his plan—a plan that was perhaps a bit visionary, but not lacking in vision and imagination for all that. There should be, he thought, and potentially there already was in the Smithsonian Institution, a central directing organization at Washington. What was lacking was a national hook-up of this central organization with a network of institutions throughout the country—that is to say, “a university for the industrial classes in each of the states, with their consequent subordinate institutions, lyceums, and high schools in each of the counties and towns.”

Professor Turner then went on to describe in much detail the kind of university he had in mind—an industrial university with its specially trained professors, its specialized library, its laboratories for conducting experiments in all the relevant scientific fields, and of course its model farm to demonstrate the advantages, to farmers and to the community as a whole, of husbandry conducted in a scientific manner. The central purpose of his entire plan was to make the university an integral part of the life of the community, a fact which might well be played up a good deal at Commencement time. Commencement exercises should be, Professor Turner thought, in the nature of an annual fair, lasting several days, dur-
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

ing which agricultural products from all parts of the state would be exhibited, and prizes awarded for the best specimens of every sort. And maybe (Professor Turner does not say, but I would not put it past him) horse races, and contests with horseshoes to see who could throw the most ringers. In short, a glorified state fair conducted by the university on a scientific basis, and with an Arcadian simplicity and expansiveness—the spirit of ancient Olympian games reborn in the Illinois cornfields!

But the endowment for these universities—what of that? In his Granville address Professor Turner said that, so far as Illinois was concerned, the lands already granted to the state, if not diverted to other purposes, were “amply sufficient.” Very shortly, however, he and his friends were urging something more than that; and on February 8, 1853, the Illinois legislature adopted a resolution that may have been drafted by Professor Turner and his friends, and at any rate expressed their ideas on the subject. The resolution directed the Illinois representatives in Congress to work, in cooperation with representatives of other states, for “a law of Congress donating to each state in the Union an amount of land, not less in value than $500,000, for the liberal endowment of a system of industrial universities, one in each state in the Union, to cooperate with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, for the more liberal and practical education of the industrial classes and their teachers; a liberal and varied education adapted to the needs of a practical and enterprising people.” This resolution may be taken to be the Turner Plan in its final and essential form; and in the same year Professor Turner and his friends organized “the Industrial League” to obtain support for it in Congress and throughout the country.

The first step, obviously, was to prepare a bill for congressional action. In 1854, at the request of Representative Yates of Illinois, Professor Turner himself drafted such a bill and sent it on; but for various reasons it was not thought advisable to introduce it at that time. In 1857 the circumstances seemed more favorable, and in October of that year Professor Turner wrote to Senator Trumbull
The Morrill Land Grant College Act

suggesting that the bill be introduced by the Illinois representatives at the coming session. In reply, Senator Trumbull said that he would gladly support such a bill—so much land at the disposal of Congress was, he thought, a perennial source of patronage and corruption, and the sooner the federal government got rid of the land the better; but, he said, Congress was just then reluctant to make any new grants of land, and particularly so if the request for them came from the western states, since so much of the public domain had already been turned over to those states. For this reason, Senator Trumbull thought, it would be advisable to have the bill introduced and sponsored by the representatives of one of the eastern states. This was in October, 1857; and two months later Mr. Morrill of Vermont introduced the Morrill bill.

That Mr. Morrill was at that time familiar with the Turner Plan can hardly be doubted. We know that he was a delegate to the meeting of the United States Agricultural Society in 1856, where the Turner Plan was discussed at length. We know that as late as 1856 he was still advocating the establishment of national agricultural colleges on the model of the West Point military academy—something quite different from the colleges contemplated in the Morrill bill. It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that in framing the Morrill bill he took over the essential feature of the Turner Plan—that is, the proposal to endow an agricultural college in each state by a federal land grant. But there is no good reason to suppose that Professor Turner asked Mr. Morrill to introduce the Turner bill, or that he turned over to him all of his papers relating to it. This is a claim that was made much later. At this later time there is reference to a “voluminous correspondence” between Professor Turner and Mr. Morrill, the only evidence that such a body of letters ever existed being the assertion that it must have been lost. About all that is extant, at all events, is a brief, formal note from Mr. Morrill, dated December 30, 1861, acknowledging the receipt of a letter from Professor Turner—such a note as a public man of many acquaintances usually writes in reply to a letter from some one whose name,
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

he vaguely feels, ought to mean something to him but in fact doesn't. 7

So far as the crucial years 1857–1859 are concerned there is no contemporary evidence that Professor Turner himself ever claimed, or that any one ever claimed for him, any credit for framing the Morrill bill, or for getting it introduced in Congress. On the other hand, there is a letter from Professor Turner to Senator Trumbull, dated January 4, 1858, which clearly indicates that he had nothing directly to do with the Morrill bill, and was not in any case very well satisfied with it. “I thank you much,” he writes, “for copy of the industrial university appropriation bill. I like its main features, but hope it may have some amendment. I send by this mail another copy of our reports, thinking you may not have one at hand and may desire to refer to the action of our state.” 8 This, to say the least of it, does not sound like the letter of a man who had asked Mr. Morrill to introduce his bill for him, had turned over all of his papers relating to it, and generally speaking was, with his Illinois friends, standing by watching and directing the whole performance. It is the letter of a man who, two weeks after the Morrill bill was introduced, learns for the first time what the provisions of the bill are, and wonders what, if anything, can be done at that late date to make it conform more closely to his own plan.

However that may be, one thing is certain: the bill actually introduced by Mr. Morrill differed from the Turner Plan in one very important respect, and the difference was highly prejudicial to Illinois. According to the Turner Plan each state was to receive an amount of land equal in value to $500,000; according to the Morrill bill each state was to receive 20,000 acres (in the final act increased to 30,000) for each senator and representative in Congress to which it was entitled by the preceding census. No wonder Professor Turner hoped the bill “would have some amendment,” since the difference was by no means a negligible one. It meant, for example, that New York would receive more than twice as much land as Illinois, and approximately one tenth of the entire grant.
The Morrill Land Grant College Act

This method of allocating the lands was adopted to win the support of the eastern states. "Many easterners," says Professor Paul Gates, "were now ready to support free homesteads and liberal land grants to railroads in exchange for [western] support for high tariffs, favorable immigration laws, a national banking system, and ship subsidies." But they felt that the western states had been granted more than their fair share of the public domain. The provision of the Morrill bill for allocating the lands was thus just an ordinary political bargain—give us a share-plus in the public lands, and we will give you your agricultural colleges.

The people of the West wanted agricultural colleges, but as it turned out were extremely reluctant to pay the price demanded in the Morrill bill. The bill, introduced December 14, 1857, was passed by a bare majority (25-22 in the Senate; 105-100 in the House), and the adverse vote came largely from the South and the West. Vetoed by President Buchanan, February 24, 1859, the bill was reintroduced, with slight modifications, three years later, passed by a larger majority (32-7 in the Senate; 91-25 in the House), and signed by President Lincoln July 2, 1862. As before, the favorable vote came chiefly from the eastern states, the adverse vote chiefly from the western states; and if the adverse vote was greatly reduced, that was because many of the southern states were not then represented in Congress. It seems odd, certainly, that there should have been so much opposition to the Land Grant College Act by the very states that most approved of those provisions that make it seem to us admirable, and that alone have made it famous. The reasons for this opposition need to be understood in order to appreciate certain circumstances connected with the foundation of Cornell University; but in order to understand them we must first have a somewhat detailed knowledge of the act itself.

The Morrill Act has the following title: "An act donating public lands to the several States and Territories which may provide colleges for the benefit of agriculture and the mechanic arts." The act is comparatively short, and if I wanted to be accurate at all costs
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

I could very well quote the chief passages verbatim. But since I want to make the act intelligible, I will venture, even at the risk of some slight error, to summarize its chief provisions in language that the non-legal mind can understand. To safeguard myself still further, I ought to say that in the course of drafting and passing the bill the framers appear to have suffered a slight attack of amnesia: the title of the act expresses the intention of donating lands to the several territories, but the act itself fails to donate them any.

The Morrill Act provided, first of all, that each state should receive 30,000 acres of public land for each Senator and Representative in Congress to which it was entitled by the apportionment of 1860. For this purpose public land was defined as “land subject to sale and private entry at one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre”; and if land acquired by any state had, at the time of entry, doubled in value as “a consequence of railroad grants,” the number of acres donated to that state should be proportionately reduced. But how were the lands to be transferred to the states? Here a distinction had to be made. Within the limits of some eight western states there was still a sufficient amount of public land to cover the donation to those states. In all such cases, therefore, the land donated to each state was to be selected from the public land within the limits of that state, and the state itself could acquire title to the land and either sell it at once or hold it for a better price.

But in many states (New York for example) there were no public lands at all; in others (Illinois for example) there were still some public lands, but not enough to cover the total donation. For donating lands to these states another method had, therefore, to be adopted. Carefully concealing this important distinction as long as possible, the act ever so casually slips it to the reader in the third clause of a long-winded sentence defining the method of donation: “and the Secretary of the Interior is hereby instructed to issue to each of the states in which there is not the quantity of public lands . . . to which it is entitled . . . land scrip to the amount in acres for the deficiency of its distributive share.” Just so. This means, to
take a concrete example, that New York State, instead of being given title to its share of public lands (989,920 acres), would be given 6,187 pieces of federal government land scrip (each piece good for 160 acres) which could be used by private persons to acquire title to that number of acres of public land in any of the states and territories where there was any.

But why not permit the state itself to use its scrip to acquire title in its own name? Well, it would never do of course to allow one sovereign state to walk in majesty and peace into the domain of another sovereign state and take possession of public lands therein. It could in effect get possession, that was the intention of the act; but it could do it only by indirection. The act therefore further provided: “said scrip to be sold by said States and the proceeds . . . applied to the uses . . . prescribed in this act.” To make what was perfectly clear a little clearer the act went on to say: “Provided, that in no case shall any State to which land scrip may thus be issued be allowed to locate the same within the limits of any other State, or Territory.” But then, thinking perhaps that a little obscurity would after all be good for the lay mind, the act added: “but their assignees may thus locate said scrip upon any of the unappropriated lands of the United States . . . but not to exceed one million acres in any one State.” What is obscure is the meaning of “assignees.” If a state sold the scrip to a private person the purchaser would be its assignee; but if, wishing to endow a particular college, it gave its scrip to that college, as Rhode Island gave its scrip to Brown University, would that college be its assignee within the meaning of the act? The act does not say, but the legal mind says not; it says that the clause “said scrip to be sold by said States” is mandatory, so that in giving its scrip to Brown University Rhode Island violated the act. I hope this is clear, or as clear as may be, since it was by the authority of this provision (a somewhat more ingenious and complicated manipulation of the provision than a strict interpretation of the act would seem to warrant) that Cornell University obtained by far the larger part of its endowment.
We now come to the central and controlling provision of the Morrill Act—the provision defining the purposes for which the lands and scrip were donated to the several states. The act states that all proceeds from the sale of lands or scrip “shall be invested in . . . safe stocks, yielding not less than five percentum upon the par value of said stocks; and moneys so invested shall constitute a perpetual fund . . . the interest of which shall be inviolably appropriated . . . to the endowment, 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 the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life.” And that this purpose might be faithfully fulfilled, certain subsidiary provisions were included. These were: (1) that each state should formally accept the act as a condition of benefiting by it; (2) that if the invested funds were lost or diminished the state concerned should replace the amount; (3) that if any state failed, within five years, to provide “at least not less than one college [admirable phrase!], as described in . . . this act,” it should pay back to the United States all proceeds received from the sale of lands or scrip; and (4) that not more than ten per cent of the proceeds of the sale of lands or scrip should be used to purchase land for experimental farms or sites for college buildings, and that no part of the proceeds or interest should be used for the purchase, erection, or maintenance of any buildings.

Such was the Morrill Land Grant College Act. Land Grant College Act is a proper name for it, since it was, obviously, two distinct measures joined together—a measure for granting public lands, and a measure for endowing colleges. What especially strikes one, in following the debates in Congress, is the singular indifference of the representatives to those educational provisions
that have made the act famous. Representative Morrill, it is true, defended the first bill on the ground that it was a great educational charter—a measure that would "enable the farmer to raise two blades of grass instead of one" (not a difficult thing to do one would suppose), that would do something for "cheap education," that would do something for all men "who love intelligence and not ignorance." Whether he was voicing his own deep conviction, or merely defending his bill at its least vulnerable point, is none too clear. But what is clear is that the Morrill bill, both in its earlier and in its later form, won support or incurred opposition chiefly because of its advantages or disadvantages as a measure for distributing public lands. The eastern states gave the bill very nearly a unanimous support, and their reasons for supporting it were well expressed in a resolution of the New York legislature, in 1858, instructing its representatives not to vote "for any further appropriations of public lands to the newer states until just provisions be made by which the original states shall receive their equitable proportion of said lands." 12 The Morrill bill gave them what they regarded as their equitable proportion, and they therefore voted for it, less because it gave them colleges than because it gave them lands.

The representatives from the western states were not in a position to vote with much enthusiasm either for or against the act, since they regarded the method of granting the lands as a bad means of obtaining a good end, which was the endowment of agricultural colleges. Those who voted for the measure did so in spite of the bad means; those who voted against it did so in spite of the good ends. The means were bad, they all thought, partly because the eastern states were given more than their proper share of the endowment, but chiefly because the method of granting the lands would open a free field for unscrupulous land speculators, of whose activities they had seen more than enough. The evil was already notorious, especially in Illinois and Iowa, where enormous tracts of land were held by absentee owners for a rise
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

in prices. The Homestead Act was the result of a long effort to end this evil by reserving public lands in small farms for actual settlers, and the western states supported it for that reason. How then could they support the Morrill Act, which was so obviously calculated, in effect if not in intention, to defeat the purposes of the Homestead Act? Senator Lane declared that the Morrill Act was "in contradiction to the Homestead proposition," and that it "contained the ruin of the state" of Kansas which he represented. Senator Wilkinson of Minnesota voiced the general opinion in those states that still had vast tracts of unappropriated public lands within their borders. "The scrip," he said, "will pass into the hands of speculators, a remorseless class of vampires, who care little for the general prosperity, and still less for the cause of education." 18

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that in 1862 the Morrill Act was less well known as a land grant college act than as a land grant grab act. And not without reason, as it turned out. For our purpose the point is important, since it helps to understand certain circumstances connected with the founding of Cornell University. It was this attitude towards the Morrill Act that gave credit and currency to the charges against Ezra Cornell. He was charged with being an ordinary land speculator. He was charged with conspiracy to rob the state. He was charged with being primarily interested in grabbing land for the enrichment of the Cornell family rather than for the endowment of Cornell University. As it happens the charges were false, because Ezra Cornell happened to be an honest man; but that was something which, in that golden age of free economic enterprise, no one but a Diogenes would have thought it worth while to light a lantern to look for among the buoyant, pushing crowd of western land buccaneers.

We need not be surprised, therefore, to find that an act so impregnated with the odor of the political trader and the land speculator was not hailed throughout the country as a great edu-
The Morrill Land Grant College Act
cational charter. It is true that in 1862, when the country was engaged in a desperate civil war, there was less interest in education than there had been in 1858. But even the avowed friends of agricultural education found singularly little to say in commendation of the Morrill Act. It was in no sense played up in the newspapers, or even much commented upon in the agricultural journals. The New England Farmer ignored it altogether. The American Agriculturalist gave it a twelve-line summary, and promised to comment later, but did not, for some reason, find time to do so for more than a year. As late as 1891 the founders of Poole's Index to Periodical Literature could find no more than six articles on the subject that were worth listing. Indifference to the act is reflected in the general belief that not many states would think the value of the grant worth the obligations they would assume in accepting it. Even Horace Greeley, who defended the act with more spirit than most, seems to have shared this belief: he could only say that the act would have been worth while if even five states took advantage of its provisions.\textsuperscript{14}

As it turned out, most of the states then in the union did accept the act, but not with much eagerness, or any conviction that they were embracing a splendid opportunity to promote the cause of agricultural education. And after all there was no good reason for any such conviction. The grants were in fact less munificent than we (here at Cornell at any rate) are apt to think. To say that ten million acres of public land was made available for agricultural education sounds very impressive; but when the acres are translated into dollars the result is much less impressive. So much land suddenly dumped on the market inevitably depressed the price, so that quotations fell as low as forty-three cents an acre. Indiana, a fairly typical case, sold its 390,000 scrip acres for an average price of fifty-three cents per acre, netting $206,700; a sum which, invested even at seven per cent (a possibility at that time) would provide an annual income of $\textdollar\text{14,469.}\textsuperscript{15} Fourteen thousand dollars is fourteen thousand dollars, no doubt; and no college at
that time would think it a bagatelle—a little loose change which
might be slipped to the Superintendent of Grounds for beautify-
ing the campus. But even so, fourteen thousand dollars was only
about one fifth of the income of the University of Michigan in
1867, or of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1871—
that is to say, quite inadequate, even at that time, for maintaining
a first-class college. In accepting the grant, therefore, any state was
confronted with the not too agreeable fact that the obligations
involved, if adequately met, might very well cost it more than
the value of the land received.

Generally speaking, the states did no more than was necessary
to meet the obligation. Unwilling or unable to make the appro-
priations necessary for founding a new college, they commonly
followed the line of least effort by selling the land or scrip for
what it would bring, and turning over the proceeds, such as they
were, to whatever existing college was prepared, or could at least
make a formal show of being prepared, to give instruction in
agriculture and the mechanic arts. In many cases the proceeds
were less than they might have been. Some states managed the
business badly, others were swindled by speculators, or by govern-
ment officials in cahoots with speculators. “The story of the dis-
posal of the agricultural scrip by the states,” according to Professor
Gates, “is one of neglect, carelessness, and something closely akin
to corruption.” So closely akin as makes no matter, one is apt to
think in view of the specific examples given by Professor Gates in
support of his statement. His conclusion, at all events, is that “the
meager returns received from the land and scrip were [so] dis-
couraging” that “the early history of many of the agricultural
colleges is marked with promising beginnings, followed by quick
retrenchments.” The carelessness and neglect, the “something
closely akin to corruption,” might have been avoided, no doubt.
But that would not, after all, have added a great deal to the sums
actually obtained. The truth is that, apart from some extraordinary
good luck or the exercise of a questionable ingenuity, it was not
The Morrill Land Grant College Act

possible, under the existing conditions, for any state to derive a very large endowment from its share of the Morrill land grant, or to make an effective use of its share without substantial appropriations on its own account.

Of all the states, New York was the most favored by the Morrill Act. Its share of the gift was approximately one tenth—to be exact, 989,920 scrip acres. On March 4, 1863, the New York legislature passed an act “declaring the acceptance . . . of the provisions” of the Morrill Act, and then on May 5 of the same year it passed an act authorizing the Comptroller to receive the scrip and to sell it under certain conditions.18 There was at that time no reason to suppose that New York would manage its scrip better than other states did, or get more for it per acre. The general expectation, inside and outside of the legislature, was that the scrip would soon be sold, and that it would bring in at most a sum of $600,000, so that there would be available annually a sum of from thirty-five to forty thousand dollars to be turned over to one or more of the existing colleges.

There were plenty of colleges. According to the Regents' Report for the academic year 1863–1864, there were, subject to the visitation of the Regents, 236 academies in the state. Of these, some twenty odd were classed by the Regents as colleges, with a total registration of 1,527 students. To any one of these colleges, with the possible exception of Columbia, an addition of $35,000 to its annual income had all the appearance of inexhaustible manna from Heaven, and most of them, having no expectation whatever of obtaining the entire grant, were in favor of having it divided among them all.19 But there were two colleges that could make a plausible claim for the entire grant, since each one was founded to give instruction in those subjects (agriculture and the mechanic arts) specifically mentioned in the Morrill Act. These were the Agricultural College at Ovid, and the People’s College at Havana (now Montour Falls). It is true that in 1863 neither college had any students, nor was either college in a position to meet the
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

conditions imposed by the Morrill Act; but any friend of either college could point to its charter and say that its intentions were of the best, since they conformed so exactly to the purposes for which the grant was made.

Such was the situation and such were the expectations in New York in regard to the Morrill land grant in 1863. No man in his right mind supposed that the scrip could be made to yield any such fantastic sum as five million dollars. There were indeed only two ways in which any state could realize from its scrip any such sum as that. One way was to violate the law, as Illinois apparently did, by locating its scrip in another state on its own account, holding it for fifteen or twenty years for a rise in price, and gamble on getting away with it. The other way was to sell its scrip to some individual sufficiently public spirited to locate the land and hold it for a similar period, and then turn the proceeds over to the college selected by the state as the beneficiary of the act. No state could count on there being, at the right time, just that sort of altruist with sufficient ability and capital to carry the business through. New York could not, and did not, count on it either. Yet that is precisely what happened. At precisely the right time, in 1864 and 1865, Ezra Cornell, a member of the Senate much interested in agricultural education, was wondering what he could best do for the public good with some four or five hundred thousand dollars more than he thought his family would need.

The presence of Ezra Cornell, with the settled conviction that he ought to spend his extra cash for the public good, was certainly a most fortunate circumstance for New York, and for higher education in the United States, since it was one of a series of related events which led to the founding of Cornell University. In itself, however, it would not have been sufficient to achieve that result. In 1863, when the Morrill Act was accepted by New York, Ezra Cornell had no intention of founding a new university. He was then working to obtain the proceeds of the land scrip for the State Agricultural College at Ovid; and in 1864, when it seemed
The Morrill Land Grant College Act

impossible to obtain all of it, he introduced a bill in the legislature to divide the proceeds between the Agricultural College and the People's College. It had not yet seriously occurred to him that anything more than six hundred thousand dollars could be realized from the scrip, and he seems to have thought that by adding his extra cash to that sum, or to half of it, for the rehabilitation of the Agricultural College, he would be doing all that he could for the promotion of agricultural education in the state of New York.

The presence of Ezra Cornell was perhaps the most important, but after all only one of many odd chances, designs of fate, or interventions of Providence (call it what you like) that seemed, during the crucial years from 1863 to 1865, to be always conspiring to prevent the state of New York from making any but the best use of its gift from the federal government. That fate, or Providence, or the laws of probability should have thus exhibited, at many crucial moments, such unaccustomed interest in the public good is an arresting thought—something that obviously needs to be carefully looked into. But an inquiry into the mysterious behavior of the higher powers is always, or should be, a delicate matter. There are those, of course, who think otherwise—those who regard such an inquiry as in the nature of a bold frontal assault, with vast and heavily armored generalizations, in the hope of reducing the behavior of the higher powers to some simple, invariable law, such as the conflict of economic classes for material gain, or the foreordained, perennial conflict between the clearly discernible forces of light and of darkness. The advantage of proceeding in this way is that, by reducing the individual man to a mere chance deposit on the surface of the world, and the odd chance and recalcitrant event to a negligible exception to the rule, the historian is relieved of the hard task of thinking on his own account—has no longer to make terms with the fact that human life is always exceedingly complex and often inexplicable, or take into account those curious conjunctions of fortuitous circumstances
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

and exceptional individuals which, to the unsophisticated, so frequently seem to be the trivial causes of great events.

The founding of Cornell University seems to fall into this category. In relating the story of its founding I shall, therefore, at the risk of being classed with the unsophisticated, ignore the invariable laws of history, and proceed to inquire into the interesting and apparently fortuitous conjunction of circumstances without which it seems extremely unlikely that Cornell University would ever have existed. And this inquiry into the mysterious behavior of the higher powers may well begin, I think, by exploring the minor mystery of Ezra Cornell, a rich but honest man who could make a case of conscience out of the prosaic fact that he had five hundred thousand dollars more than he thought his family would ever need.