IV

Circumstances and the Man:
Andrew Dickson White

From my first years in college it has been the steady aim of my life to aid in founding and building a worthy American university.

Andrew D. White

"Saying little, and that little dryly"—so Andrew D. White noted one of the salient characteristics of Ezra Cornell. That an intelligent man should say little must always have seemed strange to Andrew D. White: he was himself, on every occasion, so well prepared and eager to say a great deal.

One day in the fall of 1917 George Lincoln Burr took me to see Mr. White at his house on the campus. He was then eighty-five years old. We found him in his library, sitting before the fireplace, surrounded by his beloved books. Three walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling, and a large table was piled two or three high with the newest books, one of which Mr. White had been reading. He received us with unstudied courtesy and an air of pleased anticipation, as if we were both old and valued friends, the two men in the world whom he most wanted just then to see. He began talking before we were fairly in the room, and kept on talking for an hour and a half, not so much to us or with us as for us and for himself, and for the pure joy of practicing the art, as if cultivated conversation were God's best gift to men. He spoke of the good fortune of Cornell in inducing me to join its faculty, and of my good fortune in being associated with his friend George Burr whose learning and wisdom he had himself found of unfailing
Circumstances and the Man: Andrew D. White

assistance; spoke of the new book he was then reading, and of other new books he had recently read by authors unknown to him, and asked us what we thought of them, and then, before we could start anything, told us what he thought of them; spoke of the war and the Fourteen Points and of Bismarck whom he had known and liked, but now thought in some sense responsible, with his blood and iron, for the war; spoke of early Cornell days and difficulties, and of Ezra Cornell, a remarkable and lovable man, and of the realization of his early dreams for the university, and of its future prospects, which would always be good so long as the most eminent scholars could be got to come to it; spoke of many other things besides—a copious flow of narrative and commentary, of incidents and anecdotes and judgments light and serious, moving on, without haste, without rest, like a prairie river in spring, gently irresistible, swelling up and around and over all obstacles, all conversational reticences and awkwardnesses, filling all silences, carrying us and himself serenely along on the broad surface of his knowledge and experiences recalled.

We said, and needed to say, and had a chance to say, very little.

The voice was warm and persuasive, infinitely persuasive, so that one wanted nothing better than just to listen and take it in. The voice was also a little husky, as if it may have been going on in just this happy way, except for the minimum of unavoidable cessations, for eighty-three years, ever since the first full-blown sentence was uttered at the age, maybe, of two. It has occurred to me that Ezra Cornell, after having become closely associated with Andrew D. White, may have found it even less necessary than before, and on occasions perhaps even less possible, to say very much, however dryly.

There they were then, meeting in the Senate in 1864 for the first time—the two men, superficially so different: Ezra Cornell, the large, slow-moving, self-contained man, a bit dour and austere in appearance, as well weathered as a hickory knot by fifty-seven years of harsh experience in the world of men and affairs, knowing
much, saying little; and Andrew D. White, the slight, nervously active, buoyant and vital man, a young intellectual Lochinvar out of the academic world, fully equipped and armored with ideas newly polished and pointed by the battle of the books, eager champion of good causes, expatiating and expounding at length with friendly confidence and persuasive facility. I like to think of them in those first days walking down the Capitol steps, or sitting in the plushy room of the Delevan House: Ezra saying little, content to listen, benevolently wondering what the talkative youngster may be good for, wondering whether, under all this bookish lore and spate of words, the fastidious professor may possibly have after all some saving grace of guts and common sense.

It turned out that the professor had plenty of both; and in spite of superficial differences, perhaps because of them, the two men were soon drawn together in close friendship. There was every reason why they should have been, for in all essentials they had much in common. They were both honest men, ambitious to use their wealth to do some striking good in the world; and they were both profoundly convinced that nothing better could be done in the world than to make freely available to the people in it the means of acquiring an education. But apart from all this, there were in January, 1864, particular circumstances that would have thrown them together whether they liked it or not. Ezra Cornell was made chairman of the committee on Agriculture; Andrew D. White was made chairman of the committee on Literature (that is to say, education); and both committees were bound to be concerned in the immediate question of how the Morrill Act could best be used in case, as seemed likely, the People’s College failed to meet the conditions imposed by the act of May 14, 1863. We know that Ezra Cornell had formed, as a result of his experience in life and affairs, certain fairly definite ideas about education. It was a happy circumstance that Andrew D. White, having had a quite different experience, had formed quite different, although not necessarily
Circumstances and the Man: Andrew D. White

conflicting ideas about it. What then was this experience, and what were these ideas?

Andrew Dickson White was born November 7, 1832, in Homer, New York.¹ His ancestors, on both sides, came to that region in the late eighteenth century from Massachusetts, the Whites from Munson, the Dicksons from Middletown. Great-grandfather Dickson was a member of the Great and General Court of Massachusetts Bay; Grandfather—"Squire"—Dickson was a prosperous business man and a member of the New York legislature. There was a tradition, which Andrew had not the time or the interest ever to verify, that the Whites were descended from the Peregrine White who came over on the Mayflower. Grandfather White was at all events once counted the richest man in Homer Township; and although a fire destroyed his mills and his fortune, his son Horace sufficiently retrieved the disaster to become the leading business man of the county. Andrew had not the advantage, therefore, of belonging to the great American aristocracy of poor boys who make good. "My first recollections," he says, "are of a big, comfortable house of brick, in what is now called 'colonial style,' with a 'stoop,' long and broad, on its southern side, which in summer was shaded with honeysuckles. . . . Spreading southward from this was a spacious garden filled with old fashioned flowers, and in this I learned to walk." Here, in this comfortable house and garden, he must also have learned to talk, and I like to think that his first intelligible word was "book."

Since the Whites were given to reading there were books enough in the house, and for the young Andrew the "Rollo Books," Sanford and Merton, and The Children's Magazine were thought the right sort of thing. In later life Mr. White could not remember a time when he could not read; but he could remember being frequently, at the age of three, in school, not as a pupil, but in charge of a colored servant who used to slip into the school in order to learn to read, and took the boy along, not knowing what else to do.
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

with him. He remembered also attending the public exercises of the Cortland Academy, and being impressed to the point of awe when he saw "Principal Woolworth, with the best students around him on the green, making astronomical observations through a telescope." When Andrew was seven the Whites moved to Syracuse; and there he was sent first to the public school, and then, at the age of twelve, to the preparatory department of the Syracuse Academy, where he had the good luck to be taught by "the best teacher of English branches" he was ever to know, Joseph A. Allen, who introduced him to proper selections from Shakespeare and Milton, and to Gray's Elegy, Goldsmith's Deserted Village, and other classics much favored at the time.

That Andrew should go to college was no doubt preordained from the time of his birth; and as a preparation he was of course drilled in Andrews and Stoddard, and learned to translate Caesar and Virgil correctly—well enough at least to recognize that a fellow pupil was off the rails when he turned Arma virumque cano into "Arms and a man and a dog." Besides preparing his Latin and mathematics in school, he appears to have read at this time a great variety of books, among others the Waverley Novels, Robinson Crusoe, The Pilgrim's Progress, Rollin's Ancient History, and Lander's Travels in Africa. Then, at the age of seventeen, came the first real frustration of Andrew's life.

He had set his heart on going to one of the famous eastern colleges; but his father, guided by the rector of St. Paul's Church, sent him to Geneva (Hobart) College, an Episcopal institution that claimed to be able, on account of the limited number of students, to "exercise a direct Christian influence upon every young man committed to its care." To this college, therefore, Andrew reluctantly went. There he found some excellent teachers, and a library of four thousand volumes, the largest collection of books he had ever seen. But he found also that the "Christian influence" was insufficient to prevent the boys from raising perpetual pandemonium—carried to the point, on one occasion, of burying a professor un-
Circumstances and the Man: Andrew D. White
der a “heap of carpets, mattresses . . . and blankets,” and, on another, of valiantly keeping the president himself “at bay with a shower of beer bottles.”

At the close of the year, deciding that he had had enough of this sort of Christian influence, Andrew urged his father to send him elsewhere. Unfortunately, he had done very well in his studies, so that his father insisted on his returning to Geneva. It was at this point that Andrew showed what he was good for in a way that would have brought to the eye of Ezra Cornell, could he have known of it, the famous “twinkle.” The incident is worth relating because it illustrates so well those qualities which, often exhibited in later life, were largely responsible for Andrew D. White’s achievements. The qualities in question were precise knowledge of the end to be attained, inflexible determination to attain it, and rare diplomatic skill in dealing with those who might assist or oppose him.

On this occasion his purpose was to go to Yale College. He could not go without his father’s consent. A frontal attack on his father having failed, he was therefore obliged, as he says, “to make a coup d’état.” What he did was not a coup d’état, but rather in the nature of an elaborate and well-conceived flank movement. Shortly after arriving at Geneva in the fall of 1850, he quietly left the place and took refuge with a former tutor, then the principal of Moravia Academy, and there waited for the enemy to move. The enemy moved quickly, wrote at once to say that he was inexpressibly shocked, regarded Andrew’s career as a thing wrecked, and refused to take any further interest in a son guilty of such flagrant disobedience. Andrew atoned for his disobedience by studying “more earnestly than ever before,” but still waited, knowing all the time that there was, within the enemy country, a competent and reliable fifth-columnist. The fifth-columnist, needless to say, was Andrew’s “dear mother,” who wrote to him affectionately, and bided her time for three months until one day when Mr. White, who was passionately fond of music, expressed his intention of
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

going to New York to hear the famous “Swedish Nightingale,” Jenny Lind. Then Andrew’s dear mother, with that feminine guile with which there is no contending, suddenly exclaimed, as if it had just that moment occurred to her, “What a pity that the boy cannot hear this; how he would enjoy it.” Poor Mr. White was no match for two such masters of finesse. “Tell him to come home and see us,” was his eminently male way of giving in.

So Andrew came home, and it was understood that after Christmas his father would take him to Yale College. The battle seemed won, but was not quite; for on the train to New Haven Mr. White got into conversation with a student returning to Trinity College at Hartford—a college which, according to the student, was a most wonderful and truly Christian place. Still hoping, Mr. White tried once more. Would it not be well, he suggested to Andrew, to go on to Hartford and take a look at this Christian college before deciding definitely for Yale. Taken off his guard by this base betrayal of the Moravia Pact, Andrew countered by affirming confidently, without knowing anything at all about it, that Yale had “an infinitely finer library than Trinity.” Mr. White then played his last card, threw in, as it were, the Old Guard: “My boy,” he said, “if you will go to Trinity College I will give you the finest private library in the United States.” Said Andrew roundly: “No, I am going to New Haven; I started for New Haven, and I will go there.” A boy of eighteen! Mr. White gave it up. In thick, oppressive silence father and son rode on to New Haven.

Andrew remained at Yale College three years, and must, I think, have had a good time there. He was a member of the Psi Upsilon Society, and was variously known to his intimates as “Toots” and “Jock.” He won a literary competition with an essay entitled “Greater Distinction in Statesmanship,” for which he received a medal, very pleasing to his father, who wrote the boy that he would “rather have it than $1,000 in money.” He tried his hand at essays on other subjects, such as modern history and the dilemma of theology. He took part, I have grave reasons for believing, in the
Circumstances and the Man: Andrew D. White

“Burial of Euclid” in November, 1852; and in the Commencement exercises he appeared in the afternoon, the sixteenth on the program, with a dissertation on “Ancient and Modern Oracles.” There was surely nothing in all this to displease him; and surely he must have had a good time reading voraciously in the library that was “infinitely finer” than the library of Trinity College, in learning how to make friends and influence people, and in discoursing at length in a correct, easy manner on the state of the bright new world. I think he must have had a good time savoring Cicero and Seneca, and even, if the truth were known, in getting the better of Andrews and Stoddard.

So I think it must have been. But fifty years later, in the light of all that had occurred in the meantime, the Yale experience recollected, not altogether in tranquillity, seemed to Mr. White thin and unrewarding. There were, as he recalled, gifted professors—Woolsey and Porter, Silliman and Dana—whose personalities sometimes broke through the system which made “everything of gerund-grinding and nothing of literature.” But only sometimes. Even Woolsey taught history by hearing men “recite the words of a text book,” and that text book the Rev. John Lord’s Modern History. During his whole time at Yale there was not a single “lecture on any period, subject, or person in literature, ancient or modern.” Even the teaching of Silliman and Dana, masterly as he thought it, was “listlessly heard and grievously neglected” by the students, because the system put a premium on the neglect of all “studies that did not tell upon ‘marks’ and ‘standing.’” One day a Latin tutor said to Andrew: “If you would try you could become a first rate classical scholar.” To which Andrew replied: “Mr. B——, I have no desire to become a classical scholar, as scholarship is understood here.” Such was Andrew’s experience at Yale as he remembered it years later.

The remembrance was no doubt distorted a good deal by what he saw and heard in Europe during the next three years. A short visit to Oxford left its inevitable impression—an impression of
ancient towers and cloistered gardens, of excellent, leisurely dinners and cultured, donnish conversation evoking the enigmatic, provocative spirit of John Ruskin and other famous men. In Paris he lived with a professor’s family where nothing but French was spoken; and was soon listening at the Sorbonne to lectures on history and literature that confirmed his idea of what a university should be. In Paris he acquired a lifelong interest in the French Revolution—visited all the historic spots, practiced his budding French on veterans of the revolutionary wars hanging about the tomb of Napoleon, conversed with civilians old enough to remember the thundering Girondin orators of the Convention, and began to collect the library that would some day be at least one of the finest private libraries in the United States. From Paris he was fortunate enough to be taken, as an attaché of the American Legation, to reside for six months with Governor Seymour at St. Petersburg. There he witnessed the coronation of Alexander II, upon whom was devolved from Heaven all power over his subjects; and there he read Gibbon, made a special study of Guizot’s History of Civilization, and discussed at length with Governor Seymour the ideas of Jefferson and the significance of American history.

Leaving the land of the Tsars, with his “democratic creed” much deepened and strengthened, he went to Germany and matriculated at the University of Berlin. There he learned German well enough to listen with some profit to professors then eminent—Lepsius, August Boeckh, Friedrich von Raumer, and Carl Ritter. There he also listened to the most famous of all historians, Leopold von Ranke, whom he could not follow, however, because the great man had the unfortunate habit of “becoming so absorbed in his subject, as to sink down in his chair, hold his finger pointing toward the ceiling, and then, with his eyes fastened upon the end of it, to go mumbling on in a kind of rhapsody” which even the German students, listening “as priests might to a Sibyl on her tripod,” admitted they could not understand. It was an experience
worth while, no doubt—such an experience as, according to William James, Harvard undergraduates enjoyed in listening to Royce, the experience of not at all understanding what was said, but of having a vague and salutary sense that something big was going on. From Germany he went to Italy, in intimate company with two Latin scholars, one of whom, Henry S. Frieze, was later, from his class room at Ann Arbor, to do more than any other man to “make classical scholarship a means of culture throughout our western States.” Italy was another world, and there he met James Russell Lowell, who was studying German literature in preparation for a professorship at Harvard. And so, in 1856, with three years of travel and study to his credit, Andrew returned to Yale College to “take the master’s degree in course.”

With so much knowledge and fruitful experience accumulated at the age of twenty-five, young Mr. White was bound, as any one can see, to become a professor. But where, and what of? Not that there was any difficulty in choosing a subject or in finding a place to teach it. While still at New Haven taking his master’s degree in course, his friends Gilman and Porter virtually assured him a position at Yale in the art department to be presently created. But he was less interested in art than in history, and in any case he felt that he would be “fettered” at Yale by the “old fashioned orthodoxy” of the system of instruction. One day, by some odd chance glancing in through the open door of a class room, he heard Francis Wayland, President of Brown University, say to some students: “The best field of work for graduate students is now the West.” That decided him. He went home and wrote to sundry friends saying that he was a “candidate for a professorship of history in any western college where there was a chance to get at students.” Two offers were shortly forthcoming—one of them from the University of Michigan, which was promptly accepted. Thus it happened that in October, 1857, Andrew D. White went to Ann Arbor determined to “get at students” by teaching them history in unconventional ways.
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

It was certainly unconventional to prescribe, as text books, such formidable works as Robertson's *Philosophical View of the Middle Ages* and Guizot's *History of Civilization in Europe*; unconventional to require students to read widely in such classics as Gibbon and Hallam, Lingard and von Ranke, Thierry and Macaulay. To master these was the student's task; the highest duty of the professor, needless to say, was "giving lectures"—courses of interpretative lectures on the grand subjects, such as "The Development of Civilization During the Middle Ages," "The French Revolution," and "German History from the Revival of Learning." The young professor ventured boldly to lecture without manuscript, or even notes—a venture that occasioned, on his first entrance to the crowded class room, some inner trepidation and weakness of the knees. But President Tappan, who was present to introduce the new professor, gave him the right clue: "Never stop dead; keep saying something." To keep saying something was never difficult for Mr. White; and was all the easier in this instance since he could always fill in by reading or exhibiting the "original sources" collected in Europe for his private library. With a little practice all went smoothly enough. Both lectures and lecturer were immensely liked by the students: for one reason because the lecturer was so obviously in love with his subject; for another, because the great object and point of the whole business was "to promote the better training in thought regarding our great national problems," such as the evil institution of slavery or the false doctrine of protection. The great object of it all was to present history as philosophy teaching by example the purposes of God in the world. There were, it is true, some "storms"; the doctrine of free trade, for example, being regarded by some Michigan Republicans as no essential part of God's purpose for the United States. But these were mere trifles. The period of six years at Michigan could be later recorded as "one of the most fruitful in useful experience and pregnant thoughts" that Andrew D. White had ever known.

The "pregnant thoughts" maturing in the mind of Andrew D.
Circumstances and the Man: Andrew D. White

White at this time, and indeed throughout his life, came easily to birth. In the intellectual, no less than in the financial sense, Mr. White always lived, as one may say, in easy circumstances. There is no evidence that he ever experienced, even in the mildest form, any intellectual or spiritual crisis, or even that he was ever seriously troubled by doubt or disillusionment. He exercised in the happiest, unconscious way the will to believe. Never given to the critical examination of fundamentals, all of his thinking was in the nature of a facile manipulation of wide knowledge and varied experience in the support of certain general ideas which he, like so many men of his generation, appropriated from the main current of thought, and cherished with the emotional conviction that commonly sustains a religious faith.

These general ideas were what may be called the tenets of the nineteenth-century liberal-democratic creed. Mr. White believed that history is God's revelation to men, and that it can be properly understood only as a progressive, dramatic conflict between good and evil forces. He believed that the good would triumph ultimately, and that it had in his time already won the essential victories: evidence of which was to be found in the unprecedented progress recently made in material prosperity, in the increase and diffusion of knowledge, in the practical application of science to human needs, in the increase of humane sentiment and religious toleration, above all in the rapid spread throughout the world of democratic government in place of monarchical absolutism, of freedom of speech and the press in place of political and ecclesiastical censure of opinion, and of free economic enterprise in place of a regimented economy. The essential meaning of history, the essential test of civilization and the good life, was revealed in this progressive emancipation from age-old tyrannies and superstitions; so that any man might be sure that he was on the side of God and the right, might feel that he was leagued with the force, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness, by working for freedom of opinion in order that the truth might prevail, for freedom of status
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

and occupation in order that careers might be open to talent, and for freedom of government in order that no man might be compelled against his will.

The doctrine of Karl Marx, that the emergence of democratic government and the freedoms it sanctioned was no more than a conditioned reflex induced by the economic factors of production—such a philosophy of history Mr. White repudiated as a blasphemy against God’s beneficence and the nobility of human nature. Nothing would convince him that men did not make their own history, or that they could not by deliberate purpose make it fair or foul, or that the course of events had not in epochal moments been shaped, for good or ill, by the responsible action of great heroes or great villains. He believed that eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, and that accordingly the essential condition for preserving the freedom of a republic was a sturdy and literate people, and leaders whose education enabled them to appropriate for themselves, and whose patriotism commanded them to place at the disposal of the community, the best that has been thought and said and done in the world. For a republic, therefore, the indispensable foundation was education—common schools for the people, colleges and universities for the leaders.

By this straight intellectual route Andrew D. White arrived, while teaching in the University of Michigan, at the most fruitful of his “pregnant thoughts”—the settled conviction that he could do nothing better with his talents and his fortune than to “aid in founding and building a worthy American university” for the increase and diffusion of learning and the intellectual and moral training of young men for leadership in the United States.

The beginning of this conviction Mr. White himself traced back to the day when, as a freshman in Hobart College, he came across Huber and Newman’s illustrated book on the English universities. Poring over the “engraved views of quadrangles, libraries, halls, chapels—of all the dignified belongings of a great seat of learning,” the limitations, both intellectual and aesthetic, of the drab
Circumstances and the Man: Andrew D. White

little American college became so obvious and so disheartening that he began at once to build "air castles," to dream of a great American university "worthy of the state and the nation." In this impalpable structural enterprise he continued for many years, until it became an "obsession"; and his subsequent experience, at Yale and Oxford, in Paris and Berlin, served only to make the airy structure at once more vivid and more clearly defined. On the "queenly site above New York's fairest lake" it stood, this imagined university—with its distinguished professors in every field, its "library as rich as the Bodleian," its "towers as dignified as those of Magdalen and Merton," its "quadrangles as beautiful as those of Jesus and St. John." Yes, and also, "as a leading feature, a gate tower . . . adorned with statues in niches and on corbels," and a "lofty campanile . . . a clock-tower looking proudly down the slope, over the traffic of the town, and bearing a deep-toned peal of bells."

Not that the great American university, although in outward semblance resembling Oxford and Cambridge, would in essentials be a mere imitation of them. In essentials the great American university would necessarily be adapted to American conditions and American needs of the present and immediate future time. Ample provision would, therefore, have to be made for other studies besides mathematics and the classical languages—provision for the "great modern literatures," for modern history, and for architecture; and also (as Mr. White's experience at the University of Michigan had convinced him) for natural science, the mechanic arts, and agriculture. These were for the time advanced, but not revolutionary ideas; but in two respects Mr. White would boldly commit the great American university to more radical policies. The great American university would be rigidly non-sectarian, and it would be hospitably co-educational.

One evening, it may have been in the year 1858, sitting before the fire in his Ann Arbor home, Mr. White related his dream to a distinguished visitor from the East—George William Curtis. In
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

his address at the opening of Cornell University, Mr. Curtis recalled this midnight conversation. On that evening, he said, the young Michigan scholar, “in the warmth and confidence of his friendship, unfolded to me his idea of the great work that should be done. . . . Surely, he said, in the greatest state there should be the greatest of universities; in central New York there should arise a university, which, by the amplitude of its endowment and . . . by the character of its studies in the whole scope of its curriculum, should satisfy the wants of the hour.” Of all this Mr. Curtis expressed his entire approval; and the two men, parting at a late hour, were encouraged to think that, since they lived “in a country open to every generous idea,” the young scholar’s dream “one day might be realized.”

Thus Andrew D. White’s dream slipped into the realm of the practical. But in the realm of the practical the first hard fact was the need of money. Fortunately, Mr. White was himself not a poor man. Upon the death of his father in 1862 he inherited about three hundred thousand dollars; and the greater part of this he was willing to devote to the establishment of a university in central New York (preferably, as he then thought, in Syracuse, on the rising ground where Syracuse University now stands) if a wealthy philanthropist could be found to bear the main burden. Hearing from Samuel Joseph May that Gerrit Smith “had thought of endowing a university,” Mr. White sat down on August 12, 1862, and drafted a long letter to him. In this letter, carefully revised and sent off on September 1, Mr. White set forth at length the need of a “worthy American university,” solicited Mr. Smith’s aid in founding it, and pledged himself to “throw in the bulk” of his own inheritance, which would be sufficient to found an adequate library, or “equip the finest observatory and laboratory in the world,” and further promised that to Mr. Smith, if he would join in this noble enterprise, should go “all the glory.” Unfortunately, Mr. Smith “gave reasons why he could not join in the plan”; and with this rebuff
Circumstances and the Man: Andrew D. White

Mr. White’s cherished scheme for the moment faded away, as he says, “like the baseless fabric of a vision.” This was very much his state of mind when, in January, 1864, he took his seat in the Senate chamber at Albany. And there, as if by the Providence of God, was Ezra Cornell.

Mr. White had never before seen Ezra Cornell, but he had heard of him, and favorably, as a man who by his own efforts had acquired a fortune, and then instead of living at his ease was willing to serve the state in the legislature by promoting measures for the public good, and instead of hoarding his wealth for his family was prepared to spend it lavishly for the benefit of his fellow men. Such would describe, to Mr. White’s way of thinking, the ideal citizen of a republic. For Ezra Cornell Mr. White had, therefore, the greatest respect and admiration. Nevertheless, the first thing he did in the Senate was to oppose with all his might Mr. Cornell’s pet measure.

The measure had to do with the Morrill land grant, which had been given by an act of the previous session to the People’s College on certain conditions. Since it seemed unlikely that the college would be able to meet the conditions, Mr. Cornell was still working, with his accustomed tenacity, to obtain at least some part of the grant for the Agricultural College at Ovid. To this end he asked Senator Folger, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, to draft a bill. January 11, 1864, Judge Folger sent the bill, with a covering note: “Inclosed herewith is the bill to amend the People’s College law of last session. You will see that it is simply a restriction of that college to one half of the avails of the law. . . . You could have the bill introduced in my behalf [Mr. Folger was to be absent for a week] and get a reference to the Agricultural Committee if may be. . . . I suggest the Agricultural Committee for obvious reasons, and also because I am told that the chairman of the Literature Committee [Mr. White] is in favor of having the whole appropriation go to one institution.” The next day, January
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

12, Mr. Cornell "on behalf of Mr. Folger" introduced a bill "to amend Chapter 511 of the laws of 1863" by which the land grant had been given to the People's College.⁷

The chairman of the committee on Literature, Mr. White, at once and vigorously opposed this bill, on the ground that the educational resources of the state were already too much dispersed. There were, he said, "more than twenty colleges in the state, ... not one of them doing anything which could justly be called university work." What the state needed was a real university. The Morrill land grant, kept intact and given to no matter which college, provided the opportunity for at least the beginning of such a university; to divide the grant would be to fritter it away and thereby defeat its purpose. When Mr. Cornell asked that the bill be referred to the committee on Agriculture, of which he was the chairman, Mr. White again objected, on the ground that the bill, being concerned with education, should properly be referred to his committee, the committee on Literature. There the matter rested until February 17, when there was presented to the Senate a resolution adopted by the State Agricultural Society on February 10, probably at Mr. Cornell's suggestion, protesting on behalf of the agricultural interests of the state against the grant to the People's College, and urging the legislature to rescind or modify its previous action so that the Agricultural College might "receive its full share of the noble grant." The next day, February 18, Mr. Cornell introduced on his own behalf another bill identical, except for a slight verbal change in the title, with the previous one. This bill was referred to a joint committee composed of the committee on Agriculture and the committee on Literature; and on this double-headed committee Mr. White, to use his own expression, "deliberately thwarted Mr. Cornell's purpose throughout the session," and prevented the bill from being reported.⁸

A vain or self-regarding man might well have been irritated by such prompt and vigorous opposition coming from a voluble young professor, bobbing up in the Senate before his newly won seat was
fairly warm. But Mr. Cornell appears to have taken it all in good part, with his accustomed serenity. Instead of becoming irritated, he considered how he could meet the objection without letting the Agricultural College down. This he thought might be done by adding to the half of the land grant an equal amount from his own pocket. Saying nothing of his intention, he invited Mr. White to attend the coming meeting of the trustees of the Agricultural College at Rochester in September. The principal business of the meeting was the report of the financial committee, which turned out to be a “melancholy exhibit of the . . . bankruptcy” of the college. After various plans for relief had been discussed, Mr. Cornell read a short statement to the following effect. He had listened, he said, to discussions which have “developed the hopeless situation of the college, and shown so little encouragement of its future prospects, until I have come to the conclusion that the trustees would be justifiable in changing the location of the college if it can be done with the approval of the citizens of Ovid.” If then the trustees would locate the college at Ithaca, he would give it a farm of three hundred acres within ten minutes walk of the post office, and donate three hundred thousand dollars, “on condition that the legislature will endow the college with $30,000 per annum from the Congressional Agricultural college fund, and thus place the college upon a firm . . . basis, which shall be a guarantee of its future prosperity . . . and give to the farmers’ sons of New York an institution worthy of the Empire State.” This noble gift, we are told, “at once relieved the trustees of all embarrassment.” It did not, however, satisfy the visitor, Mr. White. “Much to the disgust of the meeting,” he says, “I persisted in my refusal to sanction any bill for dividing the fund, . . . but promised that if Mr. Cornell and his friends would ask for the whole of the grant—keeping it together, and adding three hundred thousand dollars, as proposed—I would support such a bill with all my might.”

An obdurate fellow, this young White—so Mr. Cornell must have thought. And so, indeed, he was. But Ezra Cornell was an
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

obdurate fellow himself, and one sure way to win his respect and liking was to stand up to him, always provided one had anything to stand up to him with. Mr. White had something. His argument against dividing the land grant was, after all, a sound one, and Ezra Cornell could appreciate the fact as well as any one. His conception of a great American university was a sound one too; and during the year 1864 Ezra Cornell must have heard him expounding it many times, and at length. He listened attentively, no doubt, and no doubt he said little. But if Mr. White could say a lot to good purpose, Mr. Cornell could listen and say little to good purpose also. Although slow to change his opinions, Ezra Cornell was a man of intelligence and imagination, quick to grasp the essentials whether of general ideas or grand enterprises; and I think he must have realized, much sooner than he let on, that Mr. White's idea of a university was both more comprehensive and better worth working for than his own relatively limited idea of a college primarily designed to give the sons of farmers instruction in agriculture and the mechanic arts. Not that he would forego his dream of an agricultural college; but I think he learned from Mr. White to see it as part of a larger institution, and all the more effective for being on the same campus with schools of literature, history, and political science. And if it should have a quadrangle of its own, as beautiful as those of Jesus and St. John, so much the better; and if young Mr. White had a fancy for gate towers with statues in niches and on corbels, and a lofty clock-tower looking proudly down the slope and bearing a deep-toned peal of bells—well, that wasn't the main thing, of course, but there could surely be no harm in it.

At all events by January, 1865, Mr. Cornell had come, by whatever route, to Mr. White's way of thinking. His method of announcing the fact was characteristic. "I was one day going down from the State Capitol [this is Mr. White's account of it] when Mr. Cornell joined me. . . . After some little general talk, he quietly said: 'I have about half a million dollars more than my
family will need: what is the best thing I can do with it for the State?” Andrew D. White could answer that one—no man better, since for ten years he had been looking for a chance to tell some rich man what he could best do with his money. “Mr. Cornell,” he said, “the two things most worthy of aid in any country are charity and education; but, in our country, the charities appeal to everybody. . . . As to education, the lower grades will always be cared for in the public schools by the State; but the institutions of the highest grade, without which the lower can never be thoroughly good, can be appreciated by only the few. . . . It seems to me, then, that if you have half a million to give, the best thing you can do with it is to establish or strengthen some institution for higher instruction.” He then discoursed at some length on the need for “a larger institution for such instruction than the State then had”—emphasizing the fact that “a university worthy of the State would require far more in the way of professors 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.”

To all this Mr. Cornell, so Mr. White says, “listened attentively, but said little,” so that the matter seemed to end there. But not long afterward he came to Mr. White and said: “I agree with you that the land-grant fund ought to be kept together, and that there should be a new institution fitted to the present needs of the State and the country. I am ready to pledge to such an institution a site and five hundred thousand dollars as an addition to the land-grant endowment, instead of three hundred thousand, as I proposed at Rochester.” With this announcement Mr. White was, as he says, “overjoyed”; and he immediately set about (no doubt with as much satisfaction as he ever experienced) to “sketch out a bill” for the new institution.

But meantime, as both men realized, it would be well before presenting any bill to the legislature to obtain as much support
for it as possible. The Agricultural Society and the trustees of the Agricultural College could be trusted to follow Mr. Cornell’s lead in the matter; if the trustees of the People’s College, or some of them, could be won over, it would be a great help. To this end the trustees of the two colleges were invited to attend a meeting at Albany on January 12, 1865. So far as is known none of the trustees of the People’s College accepted the invitation. One of them, Horace Greeley, had his reasons. “I do not choose to be present at Albany just now,” he wrote to Amos Brown, the President of the People’s College. “If Senator Cornell and the agriculturists will invite the People’s College men to a conference with the single intent to blend the two bequests in one grand institution I will either attend or record my assent. If, on the other hand, he proposes to go his own gait, and thinks himself strong enough to over-ride us, I prefer to wait here.” 11 Waiting in New York Mr. Greeley must have been reassured; for the meeting at Albany on January 12, after hearing Mr. Cornell’s proposal, adopted a resolution in the very sense of his letter to Amos Brown. “Resolved, that a committee be appointed to correspond with gentlemen concerned in the management of the People’s College, and with other persons prominent in the educational interests of the State, and invite them to meet the gentlemen concerned with the management of the State Agricultural College to take into consideration a plan for joint action in regard to the proffer of $500,000 for educational purposes by the Hon. Ezra Cornell.” 12

In accord with this resolution the committee, consisting of Andrew D. White, William Kelly, and B. T. Johnson, at once sent out invitations to the gentlemen concerned to meet in Albany on January 24. True to his promise, Horace Greeley was present at this meeting; but other trustees of the People’s College, as Mr. White intimated with a certain amount of irritation, made excuses—“couldn’t get there,” the “trains wouldn’t connect,” and so on. 13 It was a disappointment, certainly, since the principal purpose of the meeting was to obtain some sort of official commitment
from the People’s College in support of the new institution. Neverthe-
less, the meeting made the best of a bad situation by adopting
unanimously the following resolution: “Resolved, that it is the
opinion of this meeting that the courses of the Agricultural and
People’s Colleges, be united in a single institution; that such in-
stitution be placed under a single Board of Trustees selected
mainly from the Boards of the existing colleges, and that the in-
titution thus formed be located in such place in the central part
of this State as shall, at an early date, present the greatest pecuniary
inducement. Resolved, that the institution thus formed ought to be
the recipient of the endowment from the United States, known as
the Agricultural and Mechanical College Fund.”

This resolution could not of course be regarded as an official
action by the trustees of the People’s College, since Horace Greeley
was the only one present to vote for it. But Mr. Cornell said that
he “consulted the best and most influential” members of the Peo-
ple’s College board, and that they “advised the new organization
for the new institution”; and late in February Mr. White obtained,
by correspondence, similar assurances of approval from four of
the People’s College trustees—Horace Greeley, Erastus Brooks,
D. S. Dickinson, and Edwin B. Morgan. In addition, the Rev. Amos
Brown, convinced that Senator Cook would do nothing more for
him or for his college, and perhaps with his eye already on the
presidency of the new institution, had assured Mr. Cornell of his
support.

Meantime, Mr. White had “sketched out a bill” and had had
several conferences with Mr. Cornell (at some of which Senator
Folger was present as their legal adviser) in order to revise and
amplify the sketch in such a way that it would be agreeable to
both, and as little offensive as possible to hostile critics. The finan-
cial provisions of the bill were determined mainly by Mr. Cornell;
the educational provisions mainly by Mr. White. In no essential
matter was there any friction or difference of opinion between
them. Who first suggested the name “Cornell” for the new uni-
87
Cornell University: Founders and the Founding

versity is not certain. In his Autobiography Mr. White says that he first suggested the name, and that Mr. Cornell “at first doubted the policy of it; but, on my insisting that it was in accordance with time-honored American custom, as shown by the names of Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth . . . and the like, he yielded.” Mr. Cornell’s own account, written in 1865, is that after consulting with some of the trustees of the Agricultural and People’s Colleges they “tendered the name ‘Cornell University.’ The name I demurred to, fearing it would be charged that I have an undue ambition in that particular. I was met by assurances that it was eminently proper that the institution should bear my name, and I made no further objection.” 16

One clause in the bill, which was later to provide the basis for the disastrous McGraw-Fiske law suit, Mr. White and Judge Folger were responsible for. “As we were blocking out the bill,” Mr. White says in the first draft of his autobiography, “Judge Folger said to me, ‘there must be a limit stated as to the amount of property the university can hold. How much will you make it?’ My answer was, ‘It is understood that the endowment of Harvard is about three million, and that of Columbia about the same. Why not adopt the same figure?’ He thought it was very large, and so did I. Neither of us dreamed that the endowment of the university would ever reach any such sum, and both of us feared that its magnitude might alarm the legislature. Still we agreed to try it.” 17 The magnitude of three million dollars as an endowment for a university! Fancy that now. Yet so the troublesome clause was inserted.

At one of their conferences, or it may have been at some other time, Mr. Cornell “expressed the hope that in the proposed institution every student might find instruction in whatever study interested him. Hence came,” says Mr. White, “the legend . . . upon the university seal: ‘I would found an institution in which any person can find instruction in any study.’ ”

Thus the essential features of the bill were agreed upon after
many conferences in which Mr. White no doubt said a great deal, and Mr. Cornell no doubt said little, and that little dryly. With that agreeable task completed, it may very well have seemed to Andrew D. White that his long cherished dream of a great American university was about to come true, and to Ezra Cornell that his generous desire to spend his "large income to do the greatest good to . . . the poor and to posterity" was about to be realized. We can then perhaps imaginatively recover, and in some measure share, the profound satisfaction of both men when, on February 7, 1865, Mr. White asked and obtained leave from the Senate to introduce a bill entitled, "An act to establish the Cornell University."