

Continuing Cornell's Historical Legacy

As Cornell University celebrates its sesquicentennial around the world, the Cornell Historical Society is celebrating its own fifth anniversary. Perhaps it's no coincidence that both the Society and University were co-founded by historians named Andrew White. Since 2010, the Cornell Historical Society has fostered an appreciation and understanding of historical topics and methodology, primarily through its speaker series and this journal, *Ezra's Archives*.

The teaching of history has been of particular importance to Cornell University since its inception, in large part due to the commitment of Cornell's founding president, Andrew Dickson White. In White's own words, "The main means of instructing thinking men for the future must be a thoughtful study of the past." Having studied history at Yale and taught history at Michigan, White referred in his autobiography to Cornell's fledgling Department of History as the department he "cared for most." Despite his administrative duties as President, White taught courses on history and continued to collect books for his historical library. He dreamed of creating a great school of history and political science at Cornell, and in 1881 he appointed the first professor of American history at a US university.

White's personal book collection, one of the largest in the country, focused on a variety of historical subjects, from witchcraft to the French Revolution to the American anti-slavery movement. His books were an important component of his teaching, and he strongly believed that lectures were enriched through the use of primary sources. According to White, "Passages actually read from important originals during my lectures gave a reality and vividness to my instruction which were otherwise unattainable." When he formally presented the "President White Library of History and Political Science" to the university at the opening of the University Library building (now Uris Library) in 1891, he described the library as showing "the making of history, especially in its greatest epochs." Many of the volumes included bookplates with the Latin proverb "Discipulus est prioris posterior dies" ("The following day is the student of the previous day"), an apt description of White's personal philosophy on the importance of understanding history

In 1884, White and one of his former students at Michigan, Charles Kendall Adams, became founding members of the American Historical Association, and both would serve as President. The association's journal, *The American Historical Review*, was established the following year by the departments of history at Cornell and Harvard. In its 150 years of existence, Cornell's Department of History has been home to some of the university's most esteemed faculty and students, continuing the legacy of its founder.

Congratulations to the Cornell Historical Society and its student leaders on the organization's fifth birthday. Andrew Dickson White would likely be proud of their efforts to promote historical scholarship and appreciation.

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