

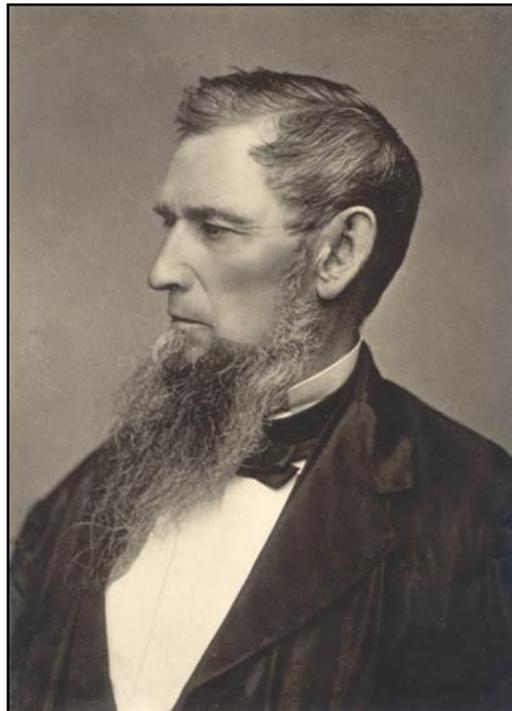
Perspectives on Veterinary Medicine

Without the Ithaca Library, Would There Have Been a Cornell University?

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
May 9, 2014

As Cornell University prepares to celebrate the sesquicentennial of its founding in 1865, there is a seldom-told story about the inauguration of Ithaca's public library one year earlier and how that event was integral in bringing together the two principals who founded the university.

Andrew Dickson White, a somewhat arrogant, Yale-educated elitist, took his seat as the youngest New York State senator on January 1, 1864. Fresh from a professorship at the University of Michigan, White had little in common with the *tall, spare, reserved and austere farmer* named Ezra Cornell, whose chair was nearby.¹ As the committees were formally announced—White would be named chairman of the Committee on Education, and Cornell of the Committee on Agriculture—White mused in his autobiography that “our paths seemed separated entirely.”²



Ezra Cornell

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Cornell was an older man, having spent a major portion of his lifetime in the arduous work of developing and constructing telegraph poles throughout broad sections of the northeast in an effort to fulfill Samuel Morse's dream of modern communication. When he retired to farm at his home in Ithaca, New York, his greatest passion became to find ways to use his wealth to bring education to the farming community surrounding him.

His wealth, Mr. Cornell reasoned, had come not simply from hard and incessant work (and a willingness to be separated from his family for vast stretches of time), but also through a fortuitous set of circumstances beyond his control. Biographer Philip Dorn said that Cornell "was beginning to see himself as a trustee for that part of his fortune which he did not need for his own wants,"³ and which he did not feel he should bestow in excess upon his children.

So Ezra Cornell decided to build a library, a public library, in Ithaca.⁴

The bill to incorporate the library would become the provenance of the Committee on Education and when it arrived on White's desk in Albany, something stood out. It was not so much the generous offer of \$100,000 as it was the organizational strategy that Cornell had developed to manage the library.



Cornell Public Library
(Photo provided by Tompkins County Public Library)

To prevent the library from being controlled by people with narrow interests,⁵

[Cornell] had named the best men of his town—his political opponents as well as his friends; and had added to them the pastors of all the principal churches, Catholic and Protestant. This breadth of mind, even more than his munificence, drew me to him. We met several times, discussed his bill, and

finally I reported substantially as introduced, and supported it until it became a law.

When the New York State Legislature recognized the Cornell Public Library Association in April 1864, it was only the sixth public library chartered in the state, and the first in a village. At its opening, Cornell donated 3,000 volumes himself and pledged an additional 1,000 per year for the next 12 years.

On other matters, there had been little to hold White and Cornell together, and some of their meetings were not very pleasant. In the Senate they squabbled over the designation of the land grant—the Morrill Land Grant Act had been passed in 1862 and Cornell was a trustee of a nearby state agricultural college. After interminable delays, many perpetuated by White’s resistance to splitting the land grant between Mr. Cornell’s preferred college in Schuyler County and another already-established institution, the two men finally settled on an agreement to keep the grant whole. That opened the door to the final agreement between them to establish a new university in Ithaca.

The designation of the land grant to the nascent university to which Ezra Cornell would designate the major portion of his money served as the catalyst for the chartering of the eponymous institution in April 1865. Adhering to the same inclusiveness as the Ithaca library—the model actually dates back to Union College’s charter of 1795—the “Board of Trustees was to be constituted so that at no time shall a majority thereof be of any one religious sect, or of no religious sect.”⁶

Was the goodwill engendered by their first successful collaboration over the chartering of a public library what kept these two men coming back to each other, so that their eventual founding of Cornell University would be possible?

Perhaps that is too esoteric a question to ever answer definitively, but I suspect it was at the least a major contributing factor. The lesson of this story, as we see over and over again in history, is that decisions have consequences, and sometimes those consequences have a significant impact that could never have been anticipated.

¹ White, Andrew Dickson. *Autobiography of Andrew D. White. Volume 1.* (New York: The Century Co., 1905), 294.

² *Ibid.*

³ Dorf, Philip. *The Builder. A Biographer of Ezra Cornell.* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1952), 255.

⁴ The library is now called the [Tompkins County Public Library](#).

⁵ White, *Autobiography of Andrew D. White. Volume 1*, 294-295.

⁶ Bishop, Morris. *A History of Cornell.* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1962), 65.

KEYWORDS:

Ezra Cornell

Cornell University
Andrew Dickson White
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Sesquicentennial

TOPIC:

Cornell University

LEADING QUESTION:

When did a village library provide the impetus for a major university?

META-SUMMARY:

The gift of \$100,000 to establish a library in Ithaca, New York, was the catalyst leading to the establishment of Cornell University a year later.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.