

# Cornell University

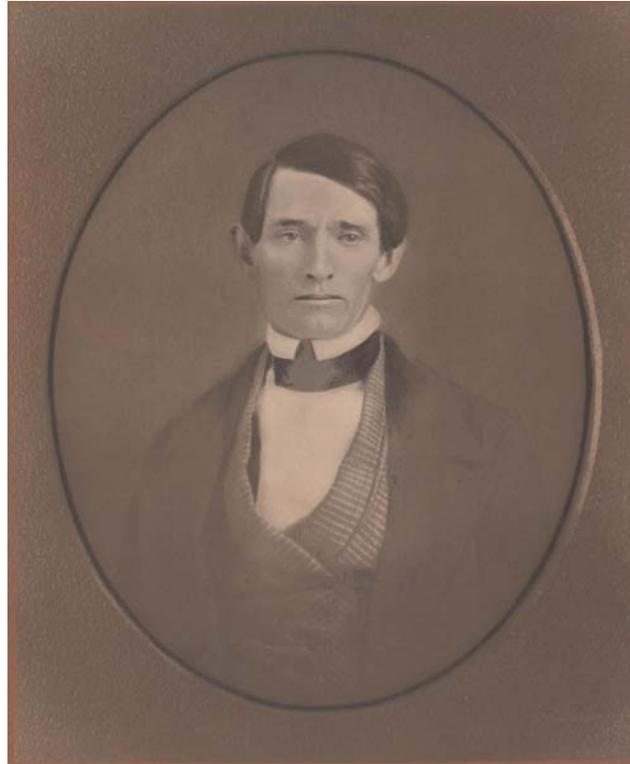
Elaine D. Engst



**The Cornell University [Detail].** Wood engraving from *Harper's Weekly*, June, 1873.  
Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

On April 27, 1865, New York State Governor Reuben E. Fenton, in his chambers in the old State Capitol in Albany, signed the bill that constitutes the charter of Cornell University. The ideals of the founders, Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White, were remarkable in their day and constituted a radical educational experiment. They have continued to inspire Cornell's distinctive evolution. In the small rural community of Ithaca, New York, can be seen the realization of the first truly American university.

The founders themselves were extraordinary men. Ezra Cornell, a birthright Quaker and self-educated and self-made man, was the son of a farmer and potter. His belief in education fits with William Penn's ideal of "liberal" but "useful" learning. His interest in practical and scientific subjects corresponded with Friends' emphasis on the natural sciences and mathematics. His commitment to coeducation reflected enlightened Quaker views on education for girls. While Cornell University has always been a non-sectarian university, it seems clear that Ezra Cornell's Quaker background and upbringing had a profound influence on the founding and development of the university.



**Ezra Cornell. Chalk drawing after a daguerreotype, ca. 1845.**

Ezra Cornell Papers. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

## **EARLY YEARS**

Ezra Cornell was born on January 11, 1807 at Westchester Landing in the town and county of Westchester, New York, the eldest son of Elijah and Eunice Barnard Cornell. Elijah Cornell and Eunice Barnard were both birthright Quakers, descended from farmers, artisans, and seamen. While their ancestors had come to Massachusetts as part of the seventeenth century Puritan migrations, at some point they had joined the Society of Friends. At the time of their marriage on July 4, 1805 in the Quaker meetinghouse in New Britain, New York, Elijah was thirty-four, Eunice seventeen. They were married for nearly fifty-two years and had eleven children, six sons and five daughters, all of whom lived to adulthood.

After the birth of their son, the Cornells joined other Quakers from Columbia and Dutchess counties to settle in De Ruyter, Madison County, New York. After trying farming in the pioneer community in De Ruyter, Elijah Cornell resumed his occupation as a potter. During his childhood, Ezra Cornell and his ten younger siblings would live in Westchester, Tarrytown, and Westfarms in Westchester County, and in English Neighborhood, Bergen County, New Jersey before the family finally settled again in De Ruyter, New York. There, with the help of his three sons, the family farmed and operated a pottery. From the time he was six years old, Ezra had helped in whatever way he could in his father's businesses. He began to work on the family farm in De Ruyter at twelve, and at seventeen learned carpentry skills when his father erected a new building for the pottery. In 1825 Cornell constructed a two-story house for his parents and family. Opportunities for formal education were limited. The children attended school only occasionally, and, as an adolescent, Ezra could only go to school for three months

each winter. While life was hard, there were also opportunities for recreation: hunting and fishing, quilting and apple bees, barn and house raisings, as well as time for Quaker meetings.

Ezra Cornell left home in the spring of 1826, and found work in Syracuse as a journeyman carpenter. He helped build sawmills and worked as a contractor getting out timber for shipment by canal. From Syracuse, he moved to Homer, New York, where he worked in a shop that produced wool-carding machinery. In his free time he studied mechanics handbooks. Throughout his life, he retained an interest in mechanical subjects that would eventually include millwork, the telegraph, railroads, coal oil, agricultural machinery, and photolithography.

## ARRIVAL IN ITHACA

In the spring of 1828 Ezra Cornell arrived in Ithaca, the town he would make his home. Ithaca in the 1820s was a growing community. Water from the creeks powered lumber, flour, plaster, paper, cotton, and woolen mills. The State Legislature had chartered the Ithaca and Owego Railroad, and there was talk of a canal link to Lake Ontario. Cornell first found work as a carpenter, before being hired as a mechanic by Otis Eddy to work at his cotton mill on Cascadilla Creek. On Eddy's recommendation, Jeremiah S. Beebe hired Cornell to repair and overhaul his plaster and flour mills on Fall Creek. During Cornell's long association with Beebe, he designed and built a tunnel for a new millrace on Fall Creek, a stone dam on Fall Creek, and a new flourmill. By 1832, he was in charge of all Beebe's concerns at Fall Creek. In the 1830s, Cornell also became active in local politics and speculated in real estate.

Ezra Cornell married Mary Ann Wood on March 19, 1831. Benjamin Wood, Mary Ann's father, was a friend of Elijah Cornell, and the Woods ran a model farm in Dryden, New York. Ezra bargained with Beebe for a building lot and acreage for a garden and orchard at Fall Creek, where he built a one-and-a-half-story frame house. In this house, called The Nook, Ezra and Mary Ann began housekeeping in the summer of 1831. The Nook remained their home for more than twenty years, and nine children were born there. Of these, three sons died in infancy and the eldest daughter died at fifteen. Three sons and two daughters were raised to adulthood. While both families were initially pleased with the marriage, there was a problem. The Woods were not Quakers. In a postscript to a letter from his father to Ezra, Cornell's sister, Lucretia, wrote: "Father says he forgot to give thee an invitation to come out to quarterly meeting and shew thy wife and so I must tell thee."<sup>1</sup> Cornell did not attend this or subsequent meetings, and early in 1832, he received written notice of his excommunication from the De Ruyter Society of Friends. The Society informed Cornell that he could be reinstated if he expressed proper regret for his marriage. Ezra answered:

*I have always considered that choosing a companion for life was a very important affair and that my happiness or misery in this life depended on the choice and for that reason I never felt myself bound to be dictated in the affair by any higher authority than my own feelings. I have done as reason directed me. I am satisfied at any rate with my choice. But as they have severed the member from the body it must be lost to them. I hope it will not wither and decay; perhaps it may flourish and increase in strength after it recovers from the hurt.<sup>2</sup>*

According to his son, Alonzo, the expulsion had a lasting influence:

*His only practical remedy was in direct, silent communion with his Heavenly Father, and this mode of worship was ever after the form which he observed. He held himself aloof from connection with other churches, as evidence of his faithfulness to the form of worship from which he felt that he had been unjustly and wrongfully excluded. He refused to recognize the right of any church organization to place themselves between him and the Divine Master, and attempt to exclude him from the right of worship. Beyond this he felt that the condition attached to his expulsion, of reinstatement upon his rendering an apology and expressing regret for his action was wholly inconsistent, to comply with which would be to dishonor himself. He, therefore, firmly and persistently refused.*<sup>3</sup>

While he would never again rejoin the Society of Friends, Cornell's religious sentiments continued to be influenced by his Quaker upbringing, including his sentiments about anti-slavery, women's rights, and temperance. Many years later, his brother-in-law, Otis Wood reminisced:

*The old gentleman, Ezra's father, was a thoroughbred Quaker, a potter by trade.... The old people wore Quaker garb and spoke the 'plain language.' Mr. Cornell married 'out of meeting' and did not wear the garb. In conversation with the family he always used the plain language, but not in talking with those outside. He had many Quaker ways. He liked the Sunday afternoon 'visitation' .... Mr. Cornell had a Quaker hospitality and generosity....*<sup>4</sup>

His own religious feelings were expressed in a letter he wrote on October 30, 1845 to Mary Ann and the children:

*Your going to church I approve as I do your doings in general, I think however the churches are not as usefull as they would be if they would teach their diciples...to practice upon the precepts laid down by Christ. Do unto others, as you would that should do unto you, Love your neighbour as your self, Let him who is free from sin cast the first stone, &c &c &c.*<sup>5</sup>

While his views about formal religion remained nonconformist, he contributed financially to different churches and helped to found Ithaca's Unitarian Church.

The prosperity that Ithaca had experienced in the 1830s declined severely after 1837. Reckless speculation in commodities, securities, and land prompted the Panic of 1837 throughout the nation. Debtors defaulted on loans, businesses failed, banks closed, construction projects stopped, and employers laid off workers, including Ezra Cornell. When Colonel Beebe sold his milling concerns in 1839 and 1840, Ezra Cornell had to find other ways to make a living. He turned his attention to raising sheep and to agricultural experimentation. He tried setting up a grocery store and built houses on land he had bought earlier. In 1842, he purchased the patent for the states of Maine and Georgia for Barnaby & Mooers' Double Mold-board Plow, a new plow designed for both side-hill and level-land use. He hoped to make a profit by selling the patent rights to machinists or merchants who would manufacture and sell the plows locally. In the spring of 1842 he left for Maine, and, after several months of traveling and selling there, went on to Georgia. He did not meet with a great deal of success in this business, but made the most of his travels as he passed, often on foot, throughout the counties of Maine and Georgia, displaying the plow at fairs, auctions, and plowing matches. He recorded keen observations of the land, the people, and the industries. While not an abolitionist, Ezra Cornell held very strong feelings about slavery. In his letters home during and after his trips through

Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia, he frequently commented on slavery, the plantation system, and the general backwardness of the area. In describing the malignant effect of slavery, he wrote his wife and children on August 18, 1844: “this ‘Sunny South’ this land of praise, is cursed with human slavery. The Soul of man is made an article of merchandize by his fellow man and can such a land be happy? No! Happiness does not dwell in any land that is scard by the blighting curse of Slavery.”<sup>6</sup>



**Western Union Pass for Ezra Cornell, 1869.**

Ezra Cornell Papers. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

## The Telegraph

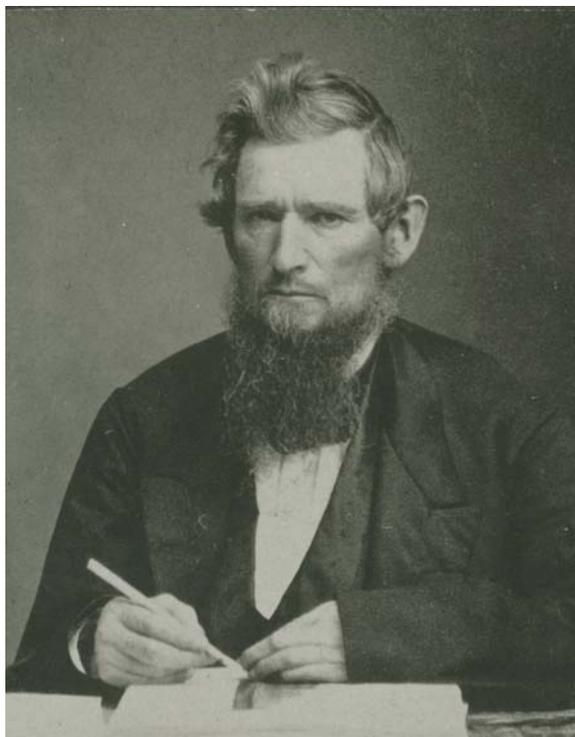
While traveling in Maine, Ezra Cornell met F.O.J. Smith, editor of the *Maine Farmer*. When Congress appropriated \$30,000 for the laying of a test telegraph cable between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Smith had taken a contract from the inventor, Samuel F.B. Morse, to lay the lead pipe that enclosed the telegraph wires. In the summer of 1843, on his second trip to Maine, Cornell visited Smith's office and found him struggling to design a machine to place the cable underground. At Smith's request, Cornell created a plow that would both dig the trench and put down the cable. Morse came to Maine for a demonstration of the machine, approved it, and hired Cornell to lay the cable for the test line. In October 1843, Cornell went to Washington to begin work on laying the telegraph line. As the work proceeded, he became concerned that the insulation of the wires was defective. He notified Morse, who ordered the work stopped. Cornell then devised a machine for withdrawing the wires from the pipes and reinsulating them.

Cornell spent that winter in Washington studying works on electricity and magnetism in the Patent Office library and the Library of Congress. His reading convinced him that underground wiring was impractical and that the wires should be strung on glass-insulated poles. Morse retained him as an assistant at the pay of \$1000 per year. In the spring of 1844, Cornell built the overhead line from Washington to Baltimore, and on May 24, Morse tapped out the historic message: “What hath God wrought.” Some of Cornell's earliest telegraph communications

relayed the results of the 1844 Whig and Democratic Conventions, which nominated Henry Clay and James K. Polk, respectively.

Always confident of the great commercial future of the telegraph, Cornell enthusiastically exhibited it, enlisted capital, and built lines. Although doing so frequently left his family destitute, he took a large part of his pay in stocks, and invested in the first telegraph company, which connected New York and Washington. He built lines from the Hudson to Philadelphia and from New York to Albany, as well as lines in New York, Vermont and Quebec, and west to Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee. He was involved in the rapid construction of subsidiary lines, especially in the Midwest, where the telegraph preceded rather than followed the railroad.

The early days of the telegraph industry were tumultuous. Many companies were formed, operated briefly and died. Stronger companies managed to survive despite conflicts, deception, and numerous lawsuits. Service on the hastily built lines was frequently unreliable. In 1851, Hiram Sibley and others in Rochester organized the New York & Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company, with the goal of creating one great system with unified and efficient operations. Meanwhile, Cornell had bought back one of his bankrupt companies and renamed it the New York & Western Union Telegraph Company. Originally fierce competitors, by 1855 both groups were finally convinced that consolidation was their only alternative for progress. Cornell insisted that the merged company be named The Western Union Telegraph Company. Western Union rapidly expanded operations to most parts of the United States and Canada. While Cornell now took a less active role, he continued to have great faith in the telegraph. He held on to his Western Union stock, and for more than fifteen years was the company's largest stockholder.



**EZRA CORNELL. LONDON, 1862.**

Ezra Cornell Papers. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

## **TOWARDS A NEW AGRICULTURE**

Ezra Cornell's parents owned a ten-acre farm in De Ruyter. As an adult in Ithaca, he resumed his interest in farming. He began by raising sheep and hogs, and wrote letters to the *Ithaca Chronicle* and the *Ithaca Journal* on agricultural subjects. His interest in livestock breeding led to his purchase of a pureblooded Shorthorn Durham bull. Early in 1840, he called for the revival of a county agricultural society. He was named marshal of the 1841 Tompkins County Fair and one of the judges at the New York State Fair in Syracuse. Early in 1857, Cornell purchased the 300-acre De Witt farm between Fall Creek Gorge and Cascadilla Gorge. He named it Forest Park and decided to concentrate on raising purebred cattle. He also worked to improve the general level of agriculture in the county. In letters to the *Ithaca Journal*, he surveyed the county's farm records from the 1855 State census and discussed agricultural improvement. In 1858, he became president of the Tompkins County Agricultural Society. He was instrumental in the formation of a Farmers' Club and an Agricultural Reading Room. Before long, he had moved into the front ranks of American Shorthorn breeders. In 1861 he was elected vice president of the New York State Agricultural Society, and a year later, became its president. As official delegate of the Society, Cornell attended the International Exposition in London in 1862. On the trip, he wrote a series of detailed reports for the *Ithaca Journal* and the State Agricultural Society. His interest in farm machinery led to his investment in the Albany Agricultural Works and the Steam Agricultural Company.

## A MAN OF POLITICS

Ezra Cornell was deeply interested and involved in politics. As early as 1837, he was chosen as a delegate to the Tompkins County convention of the Whig Party, and he backed William Henry Harrison and John Tyler in the 1840 election. He was not an abolitionist, writing:

*Slavery as it is garenteed in the states by the Constitution is bad enough and must be indured until it is removed by the fource of enlightened publick opinion acting upon the slaveholder, but for the sake of humanity let it not be extended.*<sup>7</sup>

His political sense, however, led him to support Henry Clay in 1844, even though Clay was a slaveholder. He also bitterly opposed the war with Mexico in 1846. On November 20, 1846, he wrote to his son Alonzo:

*I am so thurorly disgusted with the whole of this miserable Mexican War that I have no patience even to consider the good qualities of some of our best and bravest men. This war I firmly believe was provoked by our rulers to gratify a lust for conquest and extend the curse of human slavery. I don't believe that our constitution authorises the waging [of] a war of invasion and it only authorises a defensive war through the sanction of the peoples representatives in Congress. This is not such a war as any man in my opinion can justify by the sacred document the Constitution of the United States.*<sup>8</sup>

By 1854, the anti-Catholic and anti-immigration movement had emerged as an important political force. Officially called the American Party, it was popularly known as the Know-Nothing Party. Cornell's attitude towards the new party is expressed in a letter to the *American Citizen* of Ithaca, August 20, 1856 in which he writes: "As for the Pope, I am too old to be frightened by his shadow, and am quite sure his shadow or Substance will do less harm to the liberties of my country than will a party, who seek to acquire political power by exciting religious bigotry in the minds of their duped followers."<sup>9</sup> Popular dissatisfaction with the Kansas-Nebraska Act also led to a realignment of political forces in the North and West. In 1854, a coalition of Whigs, Free-Soilers, and antislavery Democrats met to recommend the formation of a new party and suggested the name Republican. Cornell early identified himself with the new party, serving as a delegate to the first national Republican convention in February 1856. The new Republican Party met in Philadelphia later that year, nominating John C. Fremont on a platform that included the upholding of congressional authority to control slavery in the territories and the admission of Kansas as a free state. That year, the Democratic Party nominated James Buchanan and the Know-Nothing Party nominated Millard Fillmore. Cornell supported Fremont and continued to be active in the Republican Party, campaigning for Lincoln in the 1860 election. He attended Lincoln's inauguration in 1861.

In 1861, Ezra Cornell was elected to the New York State Legislature. Because of his experience with farm issues and his position as President of the State Agricultural Society, he was appointed Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture. In the 1862 election, the Democrats made major gains in New York State, but Tompkins County remained firmly Republican. Cornell was reelected to the Assembly. In 1863, he was elected to the State Senate, where he served for four years, representing Broome, Tioga, and Tompkins counties, and, in 1866, there was talk of nominating Cornell for governor of New York State. His son Alonzo B. Cornell served as governor from 1880 to 1883.

## THE CIVIL WAR

Seven Southern states had seceded from the Union by February 1, 1861, and formed the Confederate States of America. On April 12, shore batteries in Charleston Harbor opened fire on Fort Sumter. After thirty-four hours of bombardment, the fort surrendered. On April 15, President Lincoln declared that “insurrection” existed and called for volunteers. With this pronouncement of the American Civil War, Lincoln introduced all nineteenth-century Americans to the event that would inexorably alter their lives. In Ithaca as elsewhere, there were meetings, rallies, and enlistment drives. The Cornell family was caught up in the war effort. Ezra Cornell headed a citizens' committee to organize aid for the dependents of volunteers and personally subscribed \$1,000. Mary Ann Cornell was president of the Ladies' Volunteer Aid Association.

In mid-July, as a member of the Volunteer Aid Committee, Ezra traveled to Washington with medical supplies. Refused a pass through the lines to the main camp of the Union Army, the group journeyed to Alexandria and joined a troop train to Fairfax Station. Setting out on foot for the front, they found themselves at the first battle of Bull Run, an adventure Ezra recounted in letters home and to the *Ithaca Journal*. He remained in Washington, visiting hospitals and traveling to the camp where the Tompkins County volunteers were stationed. While in Europe at the International Exposition in 1862, Cornell sponsored the passage of four volunteers who were anxious to join the Union Army. Despite their Quaker background, many of his relatives served in the army. His younger brother Daniel was wounded while with Grant's army at Vicksburg, and his nephew Irving died of wounds received in battle. As a state legislator, Cornell received letters from constituents requesting his assistance in obtaining promotions for local officers. Throughout the war, he continued to visit the wounded and to aid soldiers and their families.



**Cascadilla Place. Stereoscopic photograph [detail], ca. 1866.**  
 Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

### **“TO THE POOR AND TO POSTERITY”**

The creation of Western Union had made Ezra Cornell a wealthy man, with an annual income of \$140,000. On July 20, 1864, he wrote in his old Cyphering Book, “My greatest care now is how to spend this large income to do the greatest good to those who are properly dependent [on me], to the poor and to posterity.”<sup>10</sup> Cornell had always been generous, particularly when the cause embraced his own values of education and honest hard work. His personal philanthropies were numerous, and he often made small grants to individuals. During the Civil War, he was active in local and state war-relief activities, heading the Ithaca relief committees.

For Cornell, however, the greatest good was always education. In 1858, he had been instrumental in founding an Agricultural Reading Room, personally purchasing books and subscribing to journals. He took an active part in creating the New York State Agricultural College at Ovid, and served on its Board of Trustees. He had always had an enormous respect for books and for their influence, purchasing books for his family, even when he had very little money. In 1863, he built and endowed a public library for Ithaca and Tompkins County, with space for 30,000 volumes, rooms for the Farmers' Club and Museum, and a place for the new Tompkins County Historical Society, which he also was helping to organize. He also supported Dr. Samantha Nivison's proposed establishment of a water cure sanitarium and school for the education of women doctors and nurses. Both charters would come to the attention of the New

York State Senate's Committee on Literature (Education), a committee chaired by Andrew Dickson White of Syracuse.



**Cornell University, ca. 1875.**

Archives Picture Collection. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

## FOUNDING A UNIVERSITY

In contrast to Ezra Cornell, Andrew Dickson White came from a prosperous and prominent family. From his parents he gained a love and respect for education. Educated at Hobart College, at Yale University, and in Europe, White had served as a professor of history at the University of Michigan. When his father died, he became a wealthy man, with an estate of about \$300,000. He had long been interested in educational reform; in 1862, he wrote to Syracuse abolitionist and philanthropist, Gerrit Smith (a cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton), with a proposal for “a new university, worthy of our land and time.” Smith replied that his health was poor and he could not think about such a massive project.

By 1864, Cornell's family, his personal philanthropies, and the public library required only a small part of his considerable fortune. Through discussions with White, the idea of a university grew in his mind. The opportunities also were there. In 1862 the United States Congress had passed the Morrill Land Grant College Act to provide public lands to fund higher education. While the Morrill Act provided a mandate and support for the teaching of agriculture and the mechanic arts, both Cornell and White considered it essential that these studies be integrated with a broad liberal education. When the Legislature met in 1865, White introduced a bill in the Senate “to establish the Cornell University and to appropriate to it the income of the sale of public lands granted to this State.” After much political maneuvering, the bill was passed in the Assembly on April 21, in the Senate on April 22, and was signed by Governor Reuben E. Fenton on April 27. The first meeting of the Board of Trustees was held on April 28. Cornell endowed the university through an outright gift of \$500,000, to which would be added the sum realized by Cornell's purchase of the Morrill land scrip from the state. White was named a member of the Board of Trustees and appointed to draft bylaws. His *Report of the Committee on Organization* was presented to the Board on October 21, 1866. The trustees applauded the plan and unanimously elected Andrew Dickson White as the first president of the new University. On October 7, 1868, Inauguration Day, 412 students, the largest entering class admitted to any American college up to that time, came to Ithaca.

The founding of Cornell University brought together all of the themes that were important in Ezra Cornell's life: his deep and abiding concern for education, his interest in agriculture, his philanthropic impulse, and his political sense. Although there were numerous unique circumstances surrounding the university's creation, there are four characteristics that particularly distinguish Cornell. The first is the integration of the study of the mechanical arts and the liberal arts, treating both on an equal basis. The second is Cornell's non-sectarian nature, with no denominational affiliation. The third is Cornell's commitment to equal education for both men and women. And fourth is the university's goal of educating students of all races.

From its inception, the Cornell curriculum was unique in its diversity, embodying the unconventional thinking of its founders. The early course offerings for Cornell students ranged from modern history and political science to applied mechanics and horticulture to Greek and Latin. That modern languages and literature and theoretical and applied sciences were taught side by side with classical studies was innovative in terms of both educational philosophy and practice. Cornell's interest in practical education reflected his Quaker upbringing as well as his own interests in technological and scientific innovation. His ideas on education, while blurring the distinctions between pure and applied science, were always clear. In 1846, he wrote his son Alonzo: "You had better pay very close attention to Mathematicks, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Civil engineering &c &c, with that you want to learn thurorly the English language, History, Composition, Writing, Geography, Phylosophy, Chemistry &c &c."<sup>11</sup> Cornell was closely involved in all aspects of the new university. He superintended construction and purchased equipment, books, and collections. White was largely responsible for recruiting faculty to come to the new institution, and particularly for the idea of non-resident professors who could enhance the educational atmosphere. He traveled in Europe to purchase collections and to learn about the newest innovations in technical education. As President, he was instrumental in the development of the university's library and of its other collections, by his own purchases and through encouraging the gifts of others. White was responsible for other educational developments. He suggested the establishment of mechanical laboratories and workshops for the Department of Mechanical Engineering and bought the first piece of equipment, a power lathe. He promoted the first Department of Electrical Engineering in the United States; taught and encouraged historical studies, appointing the first professor of American History; founded a Department of Political Science "for practical training;" and developed the first four-year architecture program in an American university.

Ithaca New York  
May 13<sup>th</sup> 1873

To The Coming man & woman

On the occasion of laying the corner stone of the Sage College for women of Cornell University, I desire to say that the principal danger, and I may almost the only danger I see in the future to be encountered by the friends of education and by all lovers of true liberty is that which may arise from sectarian strife.

From these halls sectarianism must be forever excluded, all students must be left free to worship God, as their conscience shall dictate, and all persons of any creed or all creeds must find free and easy access, and a hearty and equal welcome, to the educational facilities possessed by The Cornell University.

Coeducation of the sexes, and entire freedom from sectarian or political preferences, is the only proper and safe way, for forming an education that shall meet the wants of the future, and carry out the famous idea of an institution where "any person can find instruction in any study." I herewith commit this great trust to your care.

Ezra Cornell

**Ezra Cornell. Letter to "the coming man & woman." May 13, 1873.**

University Archives. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

## A NON-SECTARIAN UNIVERSITY

The breadth of instruction envisioned at Cornell relates closely to its nonsectarian tradition. Both Cornell and White opposed any sectarian control since they believed that religious orthodoxy frequently limited the scope of instruction in universities. White had from his youth been opposed to sectarian orthodoxy. While he grew up in an Episcopalian family and was strongly influenced by his parents' ideas, even as a child he simply could not accept his minister's statement that infants who died before they were baptized went to hell or that his grandmother was doomed to damnation because she joined the "wrong" denomination. As a result, he refused confirmation in spite of his parents' pleas. This instinctive disapproval of religious dogmatism was reinforced by his educational experience. Although he wanted to attend Yale University, his father insisted that he attend Geneva College. After a thoroughly

disappointing first year, White arranged on his own to transfer to Yale. Although White enjoyed his time at Yale, Congregationalists dominated the school. White's experience convinced him that education could not be conducted freely in a religiously affiliated institution. The “truly great University” that White proposed to Gerrit Smith in his 1862 letter, would “afford an asylum for Science – where truth shall be sought for truth's sake – where it shall not be the main purpose of the Faculty to stretch or cut Science exactly to fit ‘Revealed Religion.’”<sup>12</sup>

White was impressed to learn of Cornell’s commitment to a non-sectarian ideal, initially in the charter for the new public library. In his *Autobiography*, he later reminisced:

*On reading this bill I was struck, not merely by his gift of one hundred thousand dollars to his townsmen, but even more by a certain breadth and largeness in his way of making it. The most striking sign of this was his mode of forming a board of trustees; for, instead of the usual efforts to tie up the organization forever in some sect, party, or clique, he 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 him to me.*<sup>13</sup>

The Charter of Cornell University explicitly stated that “persons of every religious denomination or of no religious denomination shall be equally eligible to all offices and appointments.” The University's nonsectarian stance was very controversial in 1868. The Governor of New York State had been scheduled to speak but feared the political consequences of attending. White scribbled a note on his copy of the program for the Inauguration exercises: “But Gov. Fenton was afraid of Methodists & Baptists & other sectarian enemies of the University & levanted the night before leaving the duty to Lieut. Gov. Woodford who discharged the duties admirably.”<sup>14</sup> In the letter he placed in the cornerstone of Sage Hall (the university’s first women’s residence), Ezra Cornell wrote on May 15, 1873:

*To the Coming man & woman*

*On the occasion of laying the corner stone of the Sage College for women of Cornell University, I desire to say that the principal danger, and I say almost the only danger I see in the future to be encountered by the friends of education, and by all lovers of true liberty is that which may arise from sectarian strife.*

*From these halls, sectarianism must be forever excluded, all students must be left free to worship God, as their conscience shall dictate, and all persons of any creed or all creeds must find free and easy access, and a hearty and equal welcome, to the educational facilities possessed by the Cornell University.*

*Coeducation of the sexes and entire freedom from sectarian or political preferences is the only proper and safe way for providing an education that shall meet the wants of the future and carry out the founders idea of an Institution where “any person can find instruction in any study.” I herewith commit this great trust to your care.*<sup>15</sup>



**Emma Eastman, Class of 1873, Cornell University's first female graduate.**

University Archives. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

**“... regardless of sex or color”**

As this letter also indicates, the inclusion of both male and female students was also basic to the University from the first. Ezra Cornell's support of education always meant educational opportunities for all. His sentiments are most poignantly expressed in his letter of February 17, 1867 to his four-year-old granddaughter, Eunice. He wrote:

*I shall be very glad when I get through with the business here so I can go home and see you and your little brothers, and have you and them go with me up on the hill to see how the workmen get along with the building of the Cornell University where I hope you and your brothers and your cousins and a great many more children will go to school when they get large enough and will learn a great many things that will be useful to them and make them wise and good women and men. I want to have girls educated in the university as well as boys, so that they may have the same opportunity to be come wise and useful to society that the boys have. I want you to keep this letter until you grow up to be a woman and want to go to a good school where you can have a good opportunity to learn, so you can show it to the President and Faculty of the University to let them know that it is the wish of your grand Pa, that girls as well as boys should be educated at the Cornell University.<sup>16</sup>*

Cornell's interest in education for women may also be traced to his Quaker heritage. As Thomas D. Hamm reminds us, as early as the seventeenth century, Friends asserted a scriptural justification for the calling of women as well as men to preach. Quakers believed in the value of education regardless of gender, and many early Quaker schools were coeducational. Cornell's wife Mary Ann was also an influence. For many years, while he traveled widely, attempting to develop his telegraph companies, she remained at home, taking care of their nine children on

income from a small farm, some cows, pigs, and sheep, and rent from a few tenants. Cornell knew first hand the plight of a woman with children dependent upon others for economic support. Cornell was also aware that the new technology could provide new opportunities for women, and hired them as telegraph operators. In the New York State Assembly, he supported the bill for the chartering of Vassar College, and two of his daughters attended Vassar.

Andrew Dickson White's mother had attended Cortland Academy, one of the most prominent schools in the region. While White himself did not attend Cortland Academy, he credited it with influencing his education in two ways: "it gave my mother the best of her education and it gave to me a respect for scholarship."<sup>17</sup> When White was seven, his father became president of a bank, and the family moved to Syracuse. Syracuse during that period was a very political city, and White was able to attend frequent public debates between the various abolitionist groups, represented by such men as Gerrit Smith, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and, particularly, Samuel Joseph May. Many abolitionists also supported women's rights. In 1845 White may have heard May preach sermons, such as "The Rights and Conditions of Women" (published in both United States and England), which demanded equal education for women. In September 1857, May wrote to the twenty-five-year-old White exhorting him to devote himself to the cause of coeducation:

*But I would have both sexes educated equally well – educated together.... I pray you, turn your attention to this great subject. I am sure that contempt for women - the denial to them of a full participation with our sex of the advantages of education, and crippling their powers of self support - is the source of some of the direst evils that debase and afflict mankind.*<sup>18</sup>

In his 1862 letter to Gerrit Smith, White first required "a truly great University," "to secure a place where the most highly prized instruction may be afforded to all regardless of sex or color." And he continued: "To admit women and colored persons into a petty college would do good to the individuals concerned; but to admit them to a great University would be a blessing to the whole colored race and the whole female sex, – for the weaker colleges would be finally compelled to adopt the system."<sup>19</sup> Cornell University's charter itself is explicitly inclusive in its choice of words, repeatedly using the term "persons," rather than gender-specific references.

During these years, there was still considerable debate about the merits of coeducation as opposed to single sex colleges. Catharine Beecher wrote a series of letters to Andrew Dickson White opposing coeducation, and recommending the creation of an adjacent institution designed for the particular needs of women. Coeducation unless properly managed, she wrote, would be like "bringing gunpowder and burning coals into close vicinity."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Maria Mitchell, the famous astronomer and professor at Vassar, wrote Cornell in March 1868: "I consider Vassar the best institution in the world of the kind; it is not of the right kind...."<sup>21</sup> She then urged Cornell to admit women students. The New York State Teachers' Association also submitted a memorial praying for coeducation at Cornell.

While women from Ithaca took advantage of lectures and classes at the new university, difficulties remained. In March 1869, Susan B. Anthony came to Ithaca and gave a speech in Library Hall, declaring that the day Cornell University would admit women on the same basis as men would be celebrated by posterity as sacredly as the Fourth of July. The first woman

student was said to have been Jennie Spencer of Cortland, who won a state scholarship in 1870, but only remained for a week after passing her entrance exams with distinction.

In the fall of 1871 two young women, Emma Sheffield Eastman and Sophie Phillipa Fleming, attended Cornell classes and worked in the laboratories with the understanding that their work be counted toward a degree. They did not come as beginning freshmen, and in 1873 Emma Eastman, who had also studied at Vassar, became the first woman to graduate from Cornell. Under the strong leadership of President White, women were able to take advantage of all of the educational opportunities at Cornell. Like men, they were admitted on the basis of their abilities and performance on the entrance examination. They competed equally for the state scholarships offered by Cornell. One of Cornell's major benefactors, Henry W. Sage, continued his support of women's education by providing funds for the building of a women's residence and three additional scholarships to be awarded specifically to women, based on competition in the entrance examinations. All students were assigned to a class level based on their educational qualifications. Women attended all classes along with men, taking full advantage of Cornell's elective system and freedom of choice in selecting a curriculum.

Cornell University was also notable for its support of racial and ethnic diversity. Ezra Cornell's own views were dramatically influenced by his travels in the South in the 1840s. In describing the malignant effect of slavery, he wrote his wife and children: "I don't know as it can be different where people are bred as stock and sold in the market as cattle. It is one of the evils of the cursed institution that hangs like a plague spot over a portion of America."<sup>22</sup> From his youth, Andrew Dickson White was, like his parents, a fervent abolitionist. He was deeply influenced by prominent abolitionists of the period, including Gerrit Smith, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Samuel Joseph May. At Yale University, when White served as editor of the *Yale Literary Magazine*, the editorial board found it necessary to forbid him from using the journal as a forum for abolitionist thought. After graduation, his first historical writings focused on the pernicious effect of slavery on European societies. White's interest in modern history was always stimulated by his belief that scholars should use their knowledge to influence contemporary politics.



**Andrew Dickson White. Albumen print photograph, ca. 1868.**

Archives Picture Collection. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

After a “Grand Tour” and study in Europe, White sought a position as a professor of history. He recounts that he “received two calls – one to a Southern university, which I could not accept on account of my anti-slavery opinions; the other to the University of Michigan....”<sup>23</sup> As a popular lecturer in Ann Arbor, White wrote that his “main wish was to set people thinking on various subjects, and especially regarding slavery...”<sup>24</sup> With his return to Syracuse, White was elected to the New York State Senate, where he became chairman of the Education Committee. At this time, in Troy, New York, a young black woman had petitioned to attend a white high school. When she was rejected, her father sued in state court and lost. While he was planning an appeal, an interracial group of Troy citizens decided to approach the state legislature. In February 1864, the Troy group found a local state senator who was willing to introduce such a bill for them. The Senate referred the bill to White’s education committee. White’s committee held hearings on the bill. Representatives of the Troy Board of Education spoke against admitting blacks to their high school, but other Troy whites spoke in favor. The education committee twice reported in favor of the bill, but the Republican legislature would not enact it into law. White continued his efforts towards opening all of the public schools in the state to blacks. When drafting a revised state education law, he tried to write into it a provision prohibiting separate public schools for blacks. He requested the opinion of his mentor and friend, the Reverend Samuel Joseph May, the Syracuse abolitionist and Unitarian minister who, as a member of the Syracuse school board, had been a major factor in preventing Syracuse from establishing a separate Black public school. May wrote back on March 11, 1864 that the existence of separate schools for blacks was a “perpetual imputation of ... inferiority.” In most of New England, blacks had been admitted to schools with whites, May wrote, “and everywhere it has led to good results.” In

New York State, too, there had been favorable results where it had been tried. In New York Central College of which he himself had been a trustee, blacks “were good scholars.” And in Syracuse, he said, “for more than fifteen years, we have had no separate schools for colored... They are to be seen in all our schools.”<sup>25</sup>

White’s attempt to abolish all black schools in New York State by state law failed, but with his help, the legislature wrote into the education law for the first time a section that provided that the black schools in any district were to be “supported in the same manner and to the same extent as the school or schools supported therein for white children” and that districts must provide to the black schools “facilities for instruction equal to those furnished to the white schools.”

As a New York State Senator, Andrew Dickson White had argued for black suffrage and sponsored legislation to integrate New York’s public schools. His bid was unsuccessful, but he continued in the struggle, believing that quality education was essential to building a democratic society. It was the founders’ hope that Cornell University could play a leading role in the effort. There is evidence that others also saw the possibilities. In 1869, Malvina Higgins wrote to Ezra Cornell from Maryville, East Tennessee:

*Mr. Cornell will permit one who has been teacher among the Freedmen in different states, to thus tax his valuable time with a note of thanks that he does not exclude colored persons from the benefits of his University. Seeing the universal horror with which such a suggestion is received in our schools at the south, and yet seeing that “Cornell” has become a subject of interest among the intelligent of these places far beyond my expectations, even, we can but regard this step in your institution as greater than a political victory--and an important aid in re-construction, notwithstanding the fact that a few northern colleges have thus done. That such an institution as yours has taken this step in recognition of the brotherhood of man seems to be of special consequence just now.... It is with pleasure, that on returning to East Tennessee, where this Maryville College has struggled so hard, I am able to say that the beautiful University which graces my home has taken this step.*<sup>26</sup>

In 1874, in response to a letter inquiring as to whether the university had any black students, White wrote:

*In answer to your letter..., I would say that we have no colored students at the University at present but shall be very glad to receive any who are prepared to enter. Although there is no certainty of the entrance of any such students here during the present year, they may come and if even one offered himself and passed the examinations, we should receive him even if all our five hundred white students were to ask for dismissal on that account.*<sup>27</sup>

Cornell also admitted international students from almost the very beginning. Ezra Cornell’s 1870 diary includes a list of “where students are from.” In 1870 there were students from twenty-eight states, Washington, D.C., and eleven foreign countries, including a student from Japan. While there were black students during the 1870s, most were from Cuba and the Caribbean. Three African American students, Charles Chauveau Cook, Jane Eleanor Datcher, and George Washington Fields, graduated in 1890. Today, minority students comprise over 25% of the undergraduate population.



**Ezra Cornell, 1865.** From *The Photographic Senatorial Album of the Empire State, 1864-65*. Albany, N. Y.: Churchill & Dennison, [1865] Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

## **OPENING THE UNIVERSITY**

In his address at the opening of the University on October 7, 1868, White reiterated his fundamental ideas for the new university: the union of liberal and practical education; equality in prestige among the courses of study; variety of courses and freedom of choice among them; the magnification of scientific study; the need for full cultural development of the individual; student self-government; continued renewal of the Board of Trustees<sup>28</sup> and election of alumni trustees; a close relationship between the University and the state school system, with state revenues provided for higher education; non-sectarianism; and a refusal to make any distinctions by race or sex.

Cornell reinforced these ideas in his inaugural address:

*I hope that we have laid the foundation of an institution which shall combine practical with liberal education, which shall fit the youth of our country for the professions, the farms, the mines, the manufactories, for the investigations of science, and for mastering*

*all the practical questions of life with success and honor . . . I trust we have laid the foundation of a university – ‘an institution where any person can find instruction in any study.’<sup>29</sup>*

During the debates in the State Legislature, Cornell’s motives in founding the university were attacked. He was accused of seeking “to erect a monument to himself,” and other charges. He responded by submitting a statement “made while the CU bill or charter was pending before the committee of the Assembly 1865” describing his background:

*My parents were quakers, and I was brought up in that faith and have only deviated from the direct line by marrying a lady who was not a member of the society, and by falling into the popular form of dress and speech. My grand parents and great grand parents on the side of both father and mother were of the same religious denomination. I am a mechanic and farmer and my wealth is the legitimate fruit of those pursuits.... My wealth has arisen from carefully investing my surplus earnings in a business which has grown with the growth of the country (the Telegraph).... My father was a mechanic and depended on his trade to support his family – his brothers were all mechanics or farmers, as were my mothers brothers. My father’s father was a farmer, my mothers father was a mechanic- My brother and sisters husbands, are all either farmers or mechanics.... I have no relation of any degree within my knowledge who is or has been a lawyer, physician, Minister of the Gospel, merchant, politician, office holder, gentleman loafer or common idler – None who have been drunkards or recipients of charity. All have procured an honest and compleat support for their families by productive labor, non but myself have acquired anything like a fortune, and mine is placed at the disposal of the industrial classes. I cannot conceive it to be possible that any man can be more thoroughly identified with the industrial, laboring, and productive classes, than I am, and my ruling desire is to dispose of so much of my property as is not required for the reasonable wants of my family, in a manner that shall do the greatest good to the greatest number of the industrial classes of my native state, and at the same time to do the greatest good to the state itself, by elevating the character and standard of knowledge of the industrial and productive classes.<sup>30</sup>*

While Ezra Cornell left the Society of Friends as a young man, his Quaker upbringing had a lasting effect on his personal philosophy. His personal characteristics, frankness, industry, perseverance, and patience combined with a practical intelligence to make him a radical and original thinker. The new university which Cornell and White founded would reflect these ideals, combining liberal and practical education with equal opportunities for all regardless of sex, color, politics, or religion.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lucretia Cornell to Ezra Cornell, May 19, 1831. Ezra Cornell Papers, #1/1/1. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>2</sup> Ezra Cornell to Nehemiah Merritt, February 24, 1832, Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Alonzo B. Cornell. *“True and firm”*: *Biography of Ezra Cornell, Founder of the Cornell University: A Filial Tribute*. New York: A.S. Barnes, 1884, p. 276.

<sup>4</sup> “Reflections of Ezra Cornell by Otis E. Wood,” quoted in Carl L. Becker. *Cornell University: Founders and the Founding*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964, Documents 14, pp. 180-187.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra Cornell to Mary Ann Cornell, October 30, 1845. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Ezra Cornell to Mary Ann Cornell, August 18, 1844. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Ezra Cornell to Mary Ann Cornell, August 18, 1844. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Ezra Cornell to Alonzo Cornell, November 20, 1846. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Ezra Cornell to the *American Citizen*, August 20, 1856. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Ezra Cornell Cyphering Book, 1823-1864. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Ezra Cornell to Alonzo Cornell, December 6, 1846. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Dickson White to Gerrit Smith, September 1, 1862. Original in Gerrit Smith Papers, Syracuse University. Copy in Andrew Dickson White Papers, #1/2/2. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Dickson White. *Autobiography*. New York: Century Company, 1905, Volume 1, p. 294-295.

<sup>14</sup> Inauguration Program, October 7, 1868. Andrew Dickson White Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Ezra Cornell, May 15, 1873. Sage Hall Cornerstone Collection, #1/1/3251. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>16</sup> Ezra Cornell to Eunice Cornell, February 17, 1867. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Dickson White. *Autobiography*. New York: Century Company, 1905, p.6.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel J. May to Andrew Dickson White, September 1857. Andrew Dickson White Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Dickson White to Gerrit Smith, September 1, 1862. Original in Gerrit Smith Papers, Syracuse University. Copy in Andrew Dickson White Papers.

<sup>20</sup> Catharine Beecher to Andrew Dickson White, March 28, 1872. Andrew Dickson White Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Mitchell to Ezra Cornell, March 10, 1868. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Ezra Cornell to Mary Ann Cornell, April 18, 1843. Ezra Cornell Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Dickson White. *Autobiography*, p. 257.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 269.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel J. May to Andrew Dickson White, March 11, 1864. Andrew Dickson White Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Malvina Higgins to Ezra Cornell, October 19, 1869. Ezra Cornell Papers

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Dickson White to C. H. McCormick, September 5, 1874, “copy of letter sent,” Andrew Dickson White Papers.

<sup>28</sup> According to the Charter, “...at no time shall a majority of the board be of any one religious sect, or of no religious sect.” None of Cornell University’s first trustees were Quakers.

<sup>29</sup> *The Cornell University Register*, 1869-1870. Ithaca, N.Y.: University Press, 1869, pp. 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> “Ezra Cornell’s Defense Against the Charge of Being the Founder of an ‘Aristocratic’ University, 1856,” quoted in Carl L. Becker. *Cornell University: Founders and the Founding*, Documents 11, pp. 168-170.