FRANCIS ALISON
HIS LIFE AND INFLUENCE ON HIS TIMES

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I am honored to speak on Founders Day at the University of Delaware. This day recognizes and commemorates the very origin of our University.

Before getting on to my subject, Francis Alison, on behalf of the surviving Trustees of the Newark Academy, I want to thank President Trabant, the Board of Trustees of the University and all those responsible for the restoration of the Newark Academy building, for the manner in which the work has been done. We arc all very grateful for the attention which it has received.

But I should say, Dr. Trabant, that in preparing these remarks, I called upon your archivist, John M. Clayton, Jr., for some assistance. I suggested very tactfully, I thought, that it would be appropriate, since my subject was Francis Alison, that I see the original charter of the Academy, which was granted by the heirs of William Penn in 1769 to the Academy Trustees on application of Francis Alison and others. Just as tactfully, but quite firmly, John Clayton offered me a typed copy of the charter, and suggested that this copy should more than serve my purpose. I now realize, Dr. Trabant, that it was far easier for the surviving Trustees of the Newark Academy to turn over their land, building, all of their assets and records to the
University than it would have been for the Academy Trustees to have gotten their charter back from the University.

But seriously, I am grateful for John Clayton's valuable assistance in making materials available to me, as well as to Susan Brynteson, Director of Libraries. I also thank Dr. John A. Munroe, who was most helpful in providing resource information to me. It is an understatement to say that John has had a distinguished career at the University, and we wish him well in his retirement.

My subject today is Dr. Francis Alison - generally credited with being the founder of our University, and to touch on some of his significant accomplishments and his considerable influence during the early days of our country.

Who was this somewhat legendary person, Francis Alison, and why is his name so singled out for credit, when we speak of the founding of this great university?

First briefly, let me review a few of the facts of his life.

Alison was born in County Donegal in Northern Ireland in 1705, of Scotch-Irish parentage. I found little information concerning his early education, but we know that he studied at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, from which he graduated in 1732 at the age of 27 with a degree of Master of Arts.

Alison thereafter trained for the ministry and was licensed, in June of 1735 by the Presbytery of Letterkenney
in the County of Donegal. That same year he sailed for America landing in New Castle, Delaware. There he met and later married, Hannah Armitage. Six children were born of the marriage.

He apparently came well recommended. Scharf states that after his arrival in America, he entered the family of Governor John Dickinson as a tutor.

Thereafter, either in late 1736 or early 1737, Alison was ordained by the New Castle Presbytery and installed as pastor of the Presbyterian Church in New London, Pa, a small village a few miles from Newark on what is now Route 896, a post he was to hold for 15 years, until 1752. In that year he moved - somewhat abruptly - to Philadelphia to become master of the Latin School of the newly formed Philadelphia Academy, later to become the College of Philadelphia, then the University of Pennsylvania. Alison became Vice Provost of that institution in 1755, a post he held until his death. He also became assistant pastor of the 1st Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

What prompted Alison to come to this country? We cannot be sure, but Presbyterian ranks were greatly increased in 18th century America by wave after wave of emigrants from Northern Ireland and Scotland. There were numerous causes - poverty - tithes - rents - but it has been suggested that the Presbyterian ministers themselves may have done much to aggravate the grievances. Some, of course, were encouraged to come by letters from relatives and friends already settled here.
By way of background, early in the 18th century Presbyterians became deeply and emotionally involved in what was to be called the "Great Awakening", another phrase to define a recognition of Christian liberties.

This movement, however, led to a serious rift in the Presbyterian Church between what became known as the "Old Lights" or "Old Side" and the "New Lights" or "New Side". Alison was firmly a part of the old side.

The area to which Alison had come was sorely lacking in schools of any sort. In a letter to his friend, Ezra Stiles, President of Yale University, he noted that on his arrival "there was not a college nor a good grammar school in the four middle provinces - Maryland, Pennsylvania (which included Delaware), New Jersey and New York."

While there was a movement in the late 1730's and early 1740's to start a Presbyterian sponsored school, undoubtedly the rivalries and bitterness that existed between the two factions of the church delayed the opening of a school. The leader of the "New Lights", William Tennent, had begun a school at some time in the 1730's, derisively called "a log school" by some, but this was closed by 1742.

Alison, however, in 1743 set about to improve the meagre educational facilities in the Middle Colonies.

In that year, the Presbyteries of Philadelphia and New Castle (New London was part of the New Castle Presbytery) appointed representatives to a convention of ministers which met at the home of Mr. Samuel Evans in the Great Valley in
Northern Chester County, on the 3rd Wednesday of November, 1743, to initiate steps which led to the actual establishment of a school. Although it was decided that a matter of such importance should be referred to the Synod at its next meeting, the ministers present nevertheless adopted the following resolution: "that in the meantime a school be opened for the education of youth." Within two weeks a notice appeared in the Pennsylvania Gazette on November 24, 1743, as follows: "We are informed there is a free school the house of Mr. Alison in Chester County for the promotion of learning, where all persons may be instructed in the languages and some other parts of polite literature without any expense for their education." It was a free public school, supported by the Presbyterian Churches.

The Synod of Philadelphia, meeting in May of 1744, approved the action of the ministers, adopted the already established school as their own and drew up a set of rules and regulations for its administration. These rules, which provided in part that "all persons who pleased, might send their children and have them instructed gratis in the languages, philosophy and divinity." Alison was a chosen master and could select his own assistant. His pay was 20 pounds per year - his assistant, then called an usher - 15 pounds.

It was under these rules and regulations that the school operated from November, 1743 to 1752, about nine years, when Alison became the Rector and Master of the Latin School, of the recently founded Philadelphia Academy, later to become the University of Pennsylvania.
Classes were first conducted in the early days in Alison's home at Thunder Hill near New London, possibly on the 2nd floor of the spring house on the farm. The school was to move several times in the next few years, first to the crossroads at New London, then to Lewisville, not far from New London in Cecil County near the Pennsylvania-Maryland line, and finally coming to Newark under the leadership of Alexander McDowell, in the early 1760's. McDowell succeeded Alison when Alison took his post with the Philadelphia Academy in 1752. We can be reasonably sure the Academy was settled in Newark by 1765.

The school was located where we now meet, at the corner of Main and Academy Streets, and the original stone structure that stood here was to serve as the school until Old College was constructed in 1833.

This school then, started by Alison in 1743, who its first master, was the forerunner of Newark College, chartered in 1833, followed by Delaware College in 1834 and the University of Delaware in 1921.

The school was forced to close in 1777 during the Revolution. Indeed, the entire British Army marched past the school on September 8, 1777, 5 days after the Battle of Cooch's Bridge. In a letter from Newark, Delaware, dated October 8, 1777, Thomas McKean wrote to General Washington, "that on my arrival, I found that all of the records and public papers of the County of New Castle and every shilling of public money, together with the fund belonging to the
Newark Academy, had been captured at Wilmington." Unhappily, all of the school's records were also lost, and no minutes of the Trustees exist prior to 1783, although there is some evidence the school may have reopened in 1780.

Alison apparently had limited contact with the Newark Academy from 1752 until 1769, when he and others obtained from Penn's heirs a charter of incorporation. This charter was eventually and apparently reluctantly granted by the Penn's heirs — the then proprietaries — but without the authority to confer degrees. This is the original charter dated November 10, 1769, that the University has in its archives.

The Penns thought that one school in the province — the University of Pennsylvania — was a sufficient number to have this power of awarding degrees.

Alison was named in the charter from Penn as one of its original Trustees; he was then elected president of the Trustees of the Newark Academy — a post he held until his death in Philadelphia on November 28, 1779.

Among his activities in the years just prior to the Revolution was a fund drive for the Academy. In 1773 the Reverend Dr. Ewing and Dr. Hugh William were sent to England and Scotland for this purpose.

Alison's fame as a teacher at New London spread rapidly, and undoubtedly it was his reputation that led to his opportunity to take a position with the Philadelphia Academy. He soon became one of the outstanding leaders of the Colonial period.
College of Philadelphia.

Alison's first class, at the Philadelphia Academy — that of 1757 — was also distinguished. Six men were in this class: Jacob Duché, Jr., Chaplain of the Continental Congress; Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence; Samuel Magaw, a Vice Provost of the College; Hugh Williamson, a member of the Continental Congress and framer of the constitution of the United States; John Morgan, Chief Surgeon of the Continental Army and founder of the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania; and James Latta, 5th moderator of the Presbyterian Church in America, soldier, and Chaplain of the Continental Army.

These are some of the students, who on their graduation, were later to exhibit unquestioned ability and leadership. But did they achieve their greatness and distinction because of their natural ability, or did these students receive some inspiration and influence from Alison during their formative years to become the leaders of their day? Was there something about Alison's zeal in teaching, that brought out the best in his students?

There can be no doubt where Alison stood on the subject of civil liberties. In a letter to his friend, Ezra Stiles dated August 1st, 1769, seven years before the Declaration of Independence, Alison wrote:

"The Present Critical Situation of our affairs, give me great uneasiness. I fear the British Parliament are determin'd to twist the yoke
around our Necks, & I expect no good from ye next meeting of that body, unless ye colonies unanimously & firmly persist in their resolution to import no goods, till these severe acts be repealed. It happen'd well for American liberty that ye first attempt was made against Boston; they have behaved with great temper & wisdom, & strong'y entrenched themselves within ye Laws of an English constitution. I pray God to give them Wisdom & Patience to persist. Had the attempt been made against us, I fear that we had not persisted with so much Firmness; tho we have now catch'd the infection, and are as firmly determin'd to support ye common cause, as any of the Colonies. Virginia is a Colony of great reputation in England, & I think their Conduct gives vigor to ye common Cause; our three Low counties have adopted their resolves; and Mary-land is determin'd to stand or fall with her neighbours.--
What can England do, we have more religion & more political virtue than any as many people in the King's Dominions, or possibly in the whole world; they distress us, but can never enslave us; all Europe ows England a Spite, & if they send their Armies to distress and destroy us, they will distress & destroy
themselves at the same time; & (every power yt ever they offended will be their enemy."

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This remarkable letter, I believe, tells us much of the views of Alison in the critical days before the American Revolution. It seems quite likely that this powerful figure did indeed influence the people such as George Read, Thomas McKean, Francis Hopkinson, Charles Thompson and others in the critical days before the American Revolution.

What kind of a man was Alison?

He was, I believe, a compassionate person. Even on his meagre salary he took the two motherless McKean boys into his home. He started the first pension fund for widows and orphans of Presbyterian ministers.

He was a deeply religious person. He studied early for the ministry and was a practicing minister all his life. Involved in the Great Awakening, he was a champion of civil and religious liberties, although he did oppose the consecration of an Anglican bishop in America. He involved himself actively in the church and political affairs of the day. His opinion was one to be heard.

On July 20, 1775, he entertained the Continental Congress at church and meeting. It is said that a Sunday was never so well observed in Philadelphia as on that day. He later became chaplain for the Continental Congress.

* From Journal of Presbyterian History
If he had a fault, it was his "proneness to anger", but he was readily placated. Thomas McKean said that in the 4 years he lived in Alison's home, he had yet to see him smile; yet another who may have known him better, Benjamin Rush, said he had a "facetious wit". He had strong opinions, which led him to have some enemies.

* Thomas Pears once wrote about him that two high purposes were in the background of all his thinking and all his activities, two simple virtues: "Love of Country and Love of God", but he was first and foremost a teacher: Ezra Stiles stated he was the "greatest classical scholar in America." Franklin described him as a person of "great ingenuity and learning" and "his particular friend". He was capable of teaching several fields: it was agreed in 1756 that he should teach, besides classics, logic, metaphysics and geography, and other arts and sciences.

Bishop William White, who was a student of Alison, was later to describe Alison as a man of "unquestioned ability", a person of "sterling integrity".

He was awarded an honorary degree in 1775 from Yale in recognition of his "extraordinary erudition and conspicuous virtue." He also received an honorary degree from Princeton in 1756.

The University of Glasgow, in 1758, awarded him the degree of Doctor of Divinity, believed the first to an

American, because of "his genius, his erudition and knowledge of sacred letters."

Ezra Stiles once requested Alison to enumerate his principal contributions to his day and generation. Alison replied, after noting the absence of any educational facilities in the provinces, that he had made learning "reputable" at a time when such an undertaking was a "desperate cause", that in this undertaking, success was beyond all their expectations at New London, and had roused a spirit in Philadelphia to erect an academy; and then a College. (Emphasis is mine).

If in fact Alison's success and reputation at New London "roused a spirit" in Philadelphia which led to the establishment of a similar institution, as Alison himself suggests, Pennsylvania and its three lower counties, now Delaware, are indeed doubly indebted to him.

In a letter of introduction to a friend, Franklin wrote on September 1, 1755, about Alison as follows:

"By entertaining this gentleman with your accustomed hospitality and benevolence, you will entertain one of the Nobility: I mean one of God's nobility; for as to the kings, there are many not worthy of your notice."

I said at the beginning, Alison was a somewhat legendary person, but in reality he achieved what few accomplish, he became a legend in his time.
These buildings that are the bricks and mortar of our University are in a way monuments—in the words of Franklin—to the "ingenuity and learning" of Francis Alison. But perhaps more importantly, Alison set a standard of excellence which has been the hallmark of our great University from its very beginning, one to which we all can aspire.

As Henry Brooks Adams once wrote, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

Possibly Alison was such a teacher.

Thank you.

* Adams, Henry Brooks (1838-1918) "The Education of Henry Adams"