THE FOUNDING OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE AND ITS FIRST PRESIDENT, 
DR. E. W. GILBERT 

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EMERSON'S words that "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" is as true of the University of Delaware in its early years as of any other institution of learning, and since the present school year of 1933-1934 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of our college, it has been thought desirable to include in Delaware Notes an outline of the early beginnings of the school and a brief biographical sketch of its first president, the Reverend Dr. Eliphalet Wheeler Gilbert.

I. The Founding of the University of Delaware.

Like all the early institutions of higher learning, except perhaps the University of Pennsylvania, our college enjoyed a church background—the Presbyterian. The forerunner of the college, namely, New Ark Academy, had been founded in 1741 by the Reverend Dr. Francis Alison, a Presbyterian minister of high scholarly attainments, and had during the succeeding years been under the influence of the Presbyterian Church, though not during the whole period under its immediate official direction. Some of the prominent Presbyterian trustees of the Academy became leading advocates of the proposed college, and when the latter institution was chartered, they naturally became trustees likewise of it. Consequently, it is not surprising to find the Presbyterians having much influence over the affairs of the college in its early years, although it would be an error to suppose that it was a Presbyterian institution in the sense of its being officially controlled by the Presbyterian Church.

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The early connection of the Academy to the college movement is easily seen in the fact that the first act passed by the General Assembly of Delaware in relation to a college on January 15, 1818, authorized the trustees of the academy to raise $50,000 by a lottery for the establishment of a college in Newark, Delaware. A glance at the names of these trustees, as they appear in the law, discloses them to be for the most part Scotch-Irish and of course of Presbyterian affiliations. Again, in 1821, the General Assembly granted to the proposed college the proceeds of taxes levied on stage lines and steamboat lines operating between Philadelphia and points in the State of Delaware. On January 28, 1824, the General Assembly authorized the establishment of a college endowment fund to consist of stocks purchased with the income from the lottery and the taxes referred to, and on February 5, 1833, it granted a charter for the establishment of a college in Newark, Delaware, to be known as New Ark College. Thirty-three well-known citizens of Delaware were named in the act as trustees, and to the control of this body was transferred the endowment fund which had been authorized nine years before.

When the board of trustees met at Newark on April 1, 1833, at the call of the Honorable Willard Hall, it elected as its permanent president, the Reverend E. W. Gilbert. On September 13, the same year, the board again met and adopted a plan of instruction and government for the college, and on December 23, it met a third time and elected Messrs. Albert Smith and Nathan Munroe as Professors. The former refusing to accept the appointment, the board met on March 27, 1834, and elected John Holmes Agnew in his place.

In the meantime, the first college building (the present "Old College") had been erected, and on May 8, 1834, the College was opened to students for instruction. New Ark Academy was merged with New Ark College in the same year and became its preparatory department. Only one student was enrolled in the college at its opening, namely, Alexander T. Gray, who entered as a
sophomore. The other 63 students enrolled the first term, were placed in the preparatory or academic department.

On July 9, 1834, the board elected another teacher, namely, N. Z. Graves, and on September 23, the same year, it elected its own president, the Rev. Mr. Gilbert, to be president of the college. Upon his acceptance of this honor, Mr. Gilbert resigned as president of the board.

II. Eliphalet Wheeler Gilbert

Born on December 19, 1793, at Lebanon, Columbia County, New York, Gilbert was the eldest of ten children of Elisha and Ellen (Vanderpoel) Gilbert. His grandfather, Elisha Gilbert, had emigrated to New York from Hebron, Connecticut, and had become a large farmer and mill owner. Eliphalet's elementary education was provided for by his grandfather, who, when the boy had reached the age of 13 years, sent him to Schenectady, where he continued his education for the Presbyterian ministry under the direction of Dr. Nott, the then president of Union College. The young man graduated from the college in 1813, and then lived for a short time with an uncle in Philadelphia named Branch Green. Here he is said to have experienced conversion and in the autumn of 1814 he entered the Theological Seminary at Princeton. He remained at this school until 1816 but did not graduate. The fact that he did not fulfill all the requirements for graduation should not be held against him, however, writes the Rev. J. H. Dulles, Librarian of the Princeton Theological Seminary, to the present writer, for "only one of his class of sixteen did graduate." In the year 1814, a religious revival occurred in Wilmington, Delaware, continuing for two years. During this period Gilbert made his first visit to the place in the company of several students from the Seminary. Licensed to preach in 1817, he shortly afterwards went on a mission of six months duration to the West, and upon his return to the East at the close of the year, was unanimously elected pastor of the Second or Christiana
Presbyterian Church at Queen (now Fifth) and Walnut Streets in Wilmington. His ordination by the Presbytery of New Castle quickly followed on May 20, 1818. The next year (October 21, 1819), Gilbert was married to Lydia Munro, the eldest daughter of Dr. George Munro, an elder in his church and a trustee of New Ark Academy. In the same year, he was elected a trustee of New Ark Academy and became identified with the several attempts to establish a college during the succeeding fourteen years.

During the early part of his ministry in Wilmington, Gilbert became engaged in a theological controversy with leaders among the Society of Friends of that city. Letters by him and by his opponents appeared in a current publication from time to time over the signatures of Paul and Amicus and later these were republished in book form as The Letters of Paul and Amicus.

A schism occurring in Gilbert’s congregation in 1829 over the question of building another church edifice, a new congregation was organized by a majority of the members of the Second or Christiana Church, the new congregation locating at the corner of Hanover (now Sixth) and King Streets under the name of Hanover Street Presbyterian Church with Gilbert as its pastor. Gilbert severed his connection with this church in April 1834, and, following a short connection with the American Educational Society, he was chosen, as already stated, on September 23, as president of New Ark College.

In a letter to Willard Hall, an elder in his own church, Gilbert expressed himself as willing to accept the position provided the board of trustees recognized the right of the faculty to be sovereign in their own field, especially with regard to the question of student discipline. The reply of the trustees was satisfactory, and Gilbert accepted the election to the presidency with the salary fixed at $1,000, without board in the college or allowance therefor. He entered upon his new duties as an educator on October 29, 1834, but his term proved short-lived due to his disapproval of a lottery which early in
1835 was authorized by the General Assembly for the support of the school. Gilbert resigned on August 11, 1835.

Recalled by the Hanover Street Church on October 10 of the same year, Gilbert's second connection with that congregation continued for five years, making his whole ministry at Wilmington to cover upwards of a quarter of a century. This ministry marked a new era in the pastorate, no other pastor leaving such an impression upon the church as Gilbert.

In the great controversy which divided the American Presbyterian Church during the latter part of the eighteen thirties, Gilbert's convictions and acts placed him definitely in the ranks of the New School. When the schism actually occurred, he was elected clerk at the same time as Dr. Samuel Fisher was elected the first moderator of the progressive branch of the church.

On October 9, 1835, the Board of Trustees had elected as Gilbert's successor the Rev. Dr. Richard Sharp Mason, an Episcopal clergyman, who at that time was serving as president of Geneva (now Hobart) College in New York State. It fell to the lot of Dr. Mason, therefore, to give degrees to the first graduates of New Ark College. The graduation exercises occurred on September 28, 1836. Although a fine scholar for his day, Dr. Mason proved to be lacking in administrative ability and resigned his post October 12, 1840. Dr. Mason's presidency was notable, however, for the reason that during this time two outstanding teachers were attracted to the college, namely, Professors George Allen and William A. Norton. The former was professor of ancient languages from 1837 to 1845, in which year the University of Pennsylvania elected him professor of the same subjects of study. The latter served the college as professor of mathematics and natural philosophy from 1839 to 1850, and, for a few months in 1850, as its president. Upon his resigning the presidency, Professor Norton was elected professor of natural philosophy and civil engineering in Brown University, and from 1852 until his death in 1883,
he held the chair of civil engineering in the Sheffield
Scientific School in Yale University.

The Rev. Mr. Gilbert was elected president for a
second time on the same day that Dr. Mason resigned, and
agreed to accept the offer on condition that the board
accept three proposals, first, that the president of the
College be made an ex-officio member of the board of
trustees; second, that the lottery plan for the support of
the college be abandoned by the board (the legislature to
be requested to appropriate the same amount for the
support of the College as was raised through the lottery);
and third, that the college "be gradually brought under
Presbyterian influence by filling in future the vacancies
in the board of trustees, as they occurred, by members of
that denomination." In return for the third concession,
Gilbert promised the board the patronage of the Third
Presbytery of Philadelphia and the Synod of Pennsyl-
vania, which bodies, he assured the board, were quite
able "to furnish of themselves enough students to fill any
ordinary college and competent also to supply any
reasonable amount of funds for the endowment of the
institution."

The board acceded to Gilbert's proposals in May,
1841, and Gilbert's second term as President began. In the
fall of the same year, the University of Vermont con-
ferred the degree of doctor of divinity upon him. During
this period of Dr. Gilbert's presidency the name of the
college was changed by an act of the General Assembly
from New Ark College to Delaware College on April 4,
1843. In passing, it might be added that this name was
retained by the institution until it was changed again in
1921 to the University of Delaware.

Remaining at the head of the college until April
1847, Dr. Gilbert left upon the school an impress which
was not obliterated for many a year. These years of his
second term are known as the "golden era" of the college
between its founding in 1833 and its suspension in 1859,
for it was during this time that the college flourished as
a true center of learning, due to the sincere efforts of
President Gilbert to make it so, aided by a devoted band of fellow scholars, Professors Allen and Norton, who, as already noted, had come to the school during Dr. Mason's time, and Professors John Addison Porter and Eben Norton Horsford, who joined the teaching staff during Dr. Gilbert's second term as president.

Professor Porter was a graduate of Yale in the class of 1842, and in 1844 he was called to Delaware College first as tutor and later as professor of rhetoric. Leaving Delaware in 1847, Professor Porter studied three years in Germany and in 1850 was elected professor of chemistry at Brown University. Two years later he was elected professor of chemistry at Yale University, which position he held until he resigned in 1864, two years before his death. In 1871, the Scroll and Key Society of Yale College, a society which Porter in his senior year had founded in 1842, established the John Addison Porter Prize in his memory.

Professor Horsford came to Delaware College in 1843 as a lecturer in chemistry, and, although his appointment called only for two or three courses of lectures of six weeks duration each year, he nevertheless left a reputation as a great teacher. Following his connection with Delaware College, and after studying two years in Germany, he was elected in 1847 as the Rumford Professor of Science in Harvard University. Assisting in the planning of the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard, Professor Horsford was connected with that school for sixteen years.

In 1889, Dr. Hayes Agnew, the eminent Philadelphia surgeon, and one of Dr. Gilbert's students, wrote as follows concerning his teacher: "President Gilbert was in person of a slender build, of medium size, with sleek gray hair, and of an active nervous temperament. He had an intellectual face, was always interesting in the chapel and excellent as a disciplinarian."

On February 10, 1843, Dr. Gilbert lost his first wife through death. While still president of Delaware College, he married Mary Ann Singer of Philadelphia. It was
during this period, too, that Gilbert in 1842 was invited to act as stated supply of the Newark Presbyterian Church, and continued in this capacity until he left Newark.

In the spring of 1847, Gilbert accepted a call to the Western Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where he remained until his death July 31, 1853. Simultaneously, he served as co-editor with Benjamin J. Wallace of The Presbyterian Quarterly Review. Another writer says of Gilbert: "He was a man of clear mind and of decided views; skilled as a controversialist, yet of such courtesy to his opponents, that when the joust was over they were among the first to sit down in his tent. He was 'mighty in the Scriptures,' and studied them with constant care." Though a reader of many books, "Dr. Gilbert was no mere bookworm." It was said of him that "like the wandering Ulysses, he loved to study men. He was, by a law of his nature, a constant friend and patron of a sound education and of all solid learning."

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