THE SUSPENSION OF DELAWARE COLLEGE IN 1859 AND EARLY BUT UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS AT ITS RE-ORGANIZATION

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The history of higher learning in America reveals with respect to colleges and universities an almost universal record of meagre beginnings and slow growth, followed invariably by periods of decline and, later, in the more fortunate instances, by revival and great expansion. Delaware College was no exception to the general rule. The mere fact that the college during its first twenty-five years of existence was served by as many as nine presidents, betrays an extremely unsatisfactory condition of affairs. A further study of the history of the college brings quickly to light the more fundamental fact that its main weakness was the unstable financial foundation upon which the institution was built. Being neither a state nor a denominational school, it found little or no support in either the government or the church, and thus from its birth it lacked what most colleges and universities were favored with—either state appropriations, or church support consisting of money appropriations and student patronage. Being then to all intents and purposes a private institution, Delaware College could only look hopefully to a bright future if men of considerable wealth should come forward and present her with substantial endowments. But this hope, if ever entertained during the eighteen thirties, forties, and fifties, proved illusory for the simple reason that there were few colleges privately endowed anywhere in the country in those days, and certainly no great bequests could be expected from any one in Delaware, a state then with a very small and comparatively poor population.

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Always near the brink of financial disaster during the first phase of its history, Delaware College quickly declined during the administration of its ninth president, the Reverend Ellis James Newlin. Having fought against the inevitable from the time of his assuming the direction of the college in October, 1856, Mr. Newlin already on January 18, 1859, tendered his resignation to the Board of Trustees.

That the only reason for the President’s step was the unsatisfactory financial status of the college is clearly discerned in his letter to the Board, which I quote here in part. He wrote: “It may not require the vested fund of a million dollars of Harvard, with its 500 students, or the annual appropriation of $15,000 with the 600 students of the University of Virginia to give all the facilities of instruction which young men need. But there must be a sufficient endowment the interest of which will give a competent Instructor to each Department and meet all other necessary expenses, to give character and stability to a public Institution. In this a college differs from a Private enterprise and it must be reduced from its elevated position to be neither a College proper on the one hand, nor an efficient private school on the other, if there be no permanent fund from which it can be liberally sustained.”

Since Mr. Newlin¹ had already accepted a call to become pastor of the First Presbyterian church in Bloomfield, N. J. and therefore requested that his resignation take effect immediately at the close of the

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¹ President Newlin was born in Wilmington, Delaware, in September, 1821, the youngest of nine children of Joseph and Ann Newlin. He attended Newark Academy and College from 1834 to 1838 but graduated from Amherst College in 1841. Ordained in the Hanover Presbyterian Church in Wilmington in 1843, he held successively charges in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and Lynchburg and Alexandria, Virginia, before coming in 1856 to Delaware College as its President. Lafayette College conferred the degree of doctor of divinity upon him. After resigning from his collegiate post, Newlin remained as pastor of the Bloomfield, N. J., church until 1863 and later served the First Presbyterian church in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, from 1865 to 1871. He died at Perth Amboy, N. J., in 1885, at the age of sixty-four years.
meeting of the Board of Trustees, the Board had no alternative but to accept the resignation. At the same meeting the Board decided temporarily to close the college at the end of the winter term on March 30, appointing a committee of seven members “to take into consideration the present condition of the College, and recommend at the next meeting of the Board such action as may be necessary.”

The membership of the committee consisted of the Rev. George F. Wiswell, Dr. James Couper, John C. Clark, Esquire, the Hon. George B. Rodney, the Hon. S. M. Harrington, Dr. Lewis P. Bush, and the Rev. S. R. Slack. The chairman of the committee, the Rev. Mr. Wiswell, was appointed President pro tempore of the college without salary until the close of the term. The Board furthermore acted favorably upon a recommendation of the Faculty, namely, that one student, W. E. Reynolds, be granted the bachelor's degree “with the understanding that he remain until the close of the present term.”

At the next meeting of the Board, which was held on the last day of the winter term, the Committee reported no progress in its work. It was, therefore, authorized to continue its deliberations, but the President of the Board, Rathmell Wilson, was appointed to succeed the chairman of the Committee as President of the college without salary. That there was a glimmering hope animating the Board that all was not yet lost, is revealed in the resolution of this meeting passed immediately after Wilson was appointed acting President, namely, that the Rev. James L. Vallandigham be “appointed Professor of Greek and Latin Languages and Literature without Salary.”

The feeling that the college could soon be revived according to some definite plan no doubt was dominant at the next meeting of the Board of Trustees on July 5, for the Wiswell Committee of seven was then discharged, and a new committee of six members was constituted
with greater powers granted to it. This committee, consisting of Dr. James Couper, the Hon. George B. Rodney, the Rev. Alfred Hamilton, the Rev. James McIntire, George G. Evans, and Rathmell Wilson, *ex officio*, was not only instructed "to take into consideration the general interests of the College," but was given "power to make overtures to, or to receive proposals from, any persons, or body corporate, with a view to the revival of the College, and to report to any special or stated meeting of the Board for their final action."

The financial condition as reported by the Treasurer of the College and Academy funds, Rathmell Wilson, at this meeting of the Board, betrayed the weakness of the institution as complained of by President Newlin in his letter of resignation the previous January. The vested funds of the College proper consisted of a certificate of a mortgage loan of the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Rail Road, amounting to $2,400, and a claim due from the Benjamin Naglee estate estimated at $1,000. The Academy funds amounted to a little more. For this department of the institution the treasurer held a certificate of Pennsylvania State Stock, amounting to $5,280 and yielding 5 per centum interest annually, and stock of the Farmers Bank of the State of Delaware estimated at $1,350. The total funds yielding a return, therefore, amounted to the paltry sum of $8,830, not including the claim of $1000 from the Naglee estate. A conservative estimate of the income from this sum would be, say $500, barely sufficient to pay a single assistant in instruction not to mention overhead expenditures. Small wonder, therefore, that the Board at this meeting, when it repeated its call to the Rev. James L. Vallandigham to be Professor of Greek and Latin Languages and Literature, it significantly included in its resolution as in that of the previous meeting that he should serve "without salary." This peculiar action can only be explained by the fact that since Mr. Vallandigham held a joint pastorate in the vicinity of Newark (Head of Christiana and White Clay Creek Presbyterian Churches) he might also maintain a
technical connection with the College until such time the institution could be reopened under more favorable auspices. Legally, therefore, the College was still a going concern, for it had an acting president in Rathmell Wilson and one professor in Mr. Vallandigham, who might be available should the school be opened in the autumn of that year or later. Moreover, an attempt was made at this meeting of the Board to designate the Reverend Whitman Peck as Principal of the Academy but no election was effected. Finally, on March 28, 1860, the Board elected Professor Edward D. Porter\(^2\) to be Principal of the Academy, and during the following decade this department of the institution continued to serve the community of Newark and the State of Delaware. Two of its outstanding graduates were Mr. Alfred A. Curtis (Newark, Delaware) of the class of 1865 and Dr. Willard Springer (Wilmington) of the Class of 1867.

On the day Porter was appointed Principal of the Academy an attempt was made to discharge the Committee appointed July 5 of the previous year to consider ways and means for continuing the college proper, but this move having been defeated, Dr. Lewis P. Bush\(^3\) secured an enlargement of the Committee by the addition of three clergyman members of the Board, namely Messrs. Slack and Wiswell and Dr. Brainerd. That the Committee

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\(^2\) Professor Porter had been connected with Delaware College under Presidents Graham, Kirkwood, and Newlin as Professor of Natural Philosophy and Civil Engineering and on June 25, 1869, he was elected a member of the Board of Trustees. The next year, on May 13, when the Board elected William H. Purnell as President of the reorganized college, it elected Porter as Professor of Agriculture. He continued, however, as principal of the academy for a period of two years and thereafter devoted his whole time to his college work until about 1882 when he was called to the Minnesota College of Agriculture at Minneapolis. Professor Porter has been credited with having been mainly instrumental in prevailing upon the Board of Trustees to avail itself of the Federal Land-Grant Act which made possible the reopening of the College in 1870.

\(^3\) Dr. Bush was a practicing physician of Wilmington, Delaware. He was a member of the Board of 1850 to 1892, and took a very active part in the reorganization of Delaware College in 1870. He served as President of the Board from 1882 to 1892 and for several months was acting President of the college following the resignation of President Caldwell in March 1888.
functioned during the following months is evident from the fact that at the next meeting of the Board on November 1 (on the eve of Lincoln's election as President of the United States), Dr. James Couper, its chairman, reported that progress had been made. The Committee was, therefore, continued. The Committee had evidently consulted influential authorities of the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches for at the same meeting of the Board representatives of these church bodies appeared before it. Mr. S. M. Curtis of Newark, Delaware, represented a Committee appointed by the Episcopalians with a view to the revival of the College under their auspices, and the Reverend Dr. Edwards and the Reverend Mr. Ladd, appointed by the Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church (Old School) "conferred with the Board with reference to placing the College under the control of said Board of Education."

The Presbyterian proposals were acceptable to the Board and it promptly passed the following resolution:

"The Board having had a conference with a Committee of the Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church 'O. S.' with reference to placing this College under their patronage, It is Resolved that this Board entertaining a favorable view of this suggestion as offering a hopeful prospect of reviving this institution, and placing it on a permanent basis, will fill vacancies in their body to the number of twelve of such individuals as they may select, so as to place this institution under the control of that denomination; it being understood that the said Board of Education will secure patronage and support to the extent at least of the current expenses of the college while under their control."

On motion of the Hon. S. M. Harrington the Board then adjourned to November 15 to receive the answer of the Presbyterians to its proposal. When the Board reconvened on that day the Reverend Dr. Edwards appeared before it, submitting an extract from the minutes of a meeting of the Presbyterian Board of Education held
during the interim to consider the proposals of the Delaware College Board. The Presbyterians declined to accept the College\textsuperscript{4} and the matter of reviving the College was left exactly in the position it was at the beginning of the negotiations of the Board. To be sure, the Board decided to continue the Committee "with all the authority conferred upon them by the original resolution" but since no further meeting of the Board was held until February 19, 1867, some six years and three months later, when the Land-Grant College proposal was taken up, the Committee evidently held no more meetings.

An action taken by the Board at its last meeting on November 15, 1860, concerning the Academy is interesting in view of the subsequent separation of the two departments of the institution and the reestablishment of Newark Academy under a separate board before the reopening of Delaware College in 1870. It was resolved that Rathmell Wilson, Dr. James Couper, and the Honorable George B. Rodney should be a committee "to make application to the General Assembly of the State of Delaware, for an act of Said General Assembly authorizing and enabling the Trustees of Delaware College to sell, convey and retransfer the Academy Lot of Land with the Buildings and improvements thereon erected and the appurtenances belonging thereunto to the Trustees of Newark Academy with the Proviso that the said Trustees of Newark Academy shall use and appropriate the Lot of land with the buildings and improvements thereon erected and the appurtenances thereunto belonging as aforesaid for the purpose contemplated under the original charter of said Academy." The committee carried out the mandate of the Board, and on March 7, 1861, an act was passed by the General Assembly for the purposes enumerated in the above resolution. On January 27, 1835, the General Assembly had passed an act enabling the Trustees of Newark Academy to sell the Academy

\textsuperscript{4} The reasons for the negative action are at present unknown, although the extract from the minutes of the Board of Education was filed with the papers of the College it has not been found.
building and land and transfer the proceeds to the "Trustees of Newark College" as a fund to be kept intact for the support of the academic department of the College. Whenever the College Board should cease to maintain an academic department, the Academy Board was authorized by the same act to resume its functions and reopen a separate academy. Although the Academy to all intents and purposes had been merged with the College from 1834, the Board of the Academy did not avail itself of the authority to convey the property of the Academy to the College Board until the year 1847 and only under a definite condition. Not having sold its property as authorized in the law of 1835, it then conveyed it to the College Board together with its vested fund with the proviso that the College Board erect additional buildings on the Academy grounds and reconvey all the property to the Academy Board "whenever or as soon as the income arising and received from the [Academy's] vested fund" should equal the cost of the new Academy building.

On March 2, 1870, when the College Board was making arrangements to reopen Delaware College, it decided to carry out its pledge to the Academy Board, Rathmell Wilson being "authorized to make, execute, and deliver a Deed of Conveyance . . . ." The only surviving members of the old Academy Board in 1870 were the Hon. Willard Hall and William T. Read. They elected ten other members of the Board including Rathmell Wilson and George G. Evans⁵ and thus the Academy became again an independent entity although its relationship with the reopened College continued close throughout the Academy's existence until its final closing in 1898. As a gesture of good will and friendship the

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⁵ Rathmell Wilson of Philadelphia and Newark, Del., and George G. Evans of Newark, Del., were both long connected with Delaware College and Newark Academy. Wilson held the following offices in connection with the college: Trustee from 1847 to 1888; president of the Board from 1851 to 1872; treasurer of the Board from 1856 to 1870; acting President of the College, 1859. Evans was, a member of the Board from 1856 to 1904, and held the office of secretary from 1856 to 1886 and the office of treasurer from 1870 to 1896.
Academy Board in 1870 donated to the College Board the sum of $500 "for the purpose of repairing and fitting up the two Society rooms in Delaware College."  

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The only source used in the preparation of this historical sketch has been the Minutes Book of the Board of Trustees of Delaware College from 1833 to 1872. Some information concerning Rev. Newlin was obtained from Miss Clara C. Jones, Church Registrar of the First Presbyterian Church of Bloomfield, N. J.

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6 Minutes of Board of Trustees, July 6, 1870. The Athenaean and Delta Phi Literary societies were revived at the reorganization of the college, and in anticipation of this event, the Board had repaired their former rooms as well as the rest of "Old College."