

HISTORY OF THE COLLEGE

The chartering of Williams College in 1793 was an act of faith and certainly an act surpassing the modest intentions of Colonel Ephraim Williams, for whom the college is named.

Colonel Williams had not intended to found a college. Enroute with his regiment of Massachusetts militia to join the battle with the French and Indians at Lake George, the Colonel had tarried long enough in Albany to write his last will and testament on July 22, 1755. In it he bequeathed his residuary estate for the founding and support of a free school in West Township, where for some years he had commanded a detachment of militia at Fort Massachusetts, farthest outpost of the province. The will stipulated that West Township, then in dispute between Massachusetts and New York, must fall within Massachusetts and that the name of the township must be changed to Williamstown, if the free school was to be established at all.

On September 8, 1755, Colonel Williams was killed at the Battle of Lake George. On October 26, 1791, after many delays, fifteen scholars were admitted to the free school in Williamstown. Within a year the trustees, not content with the original modest design of the founder, were captivated by the idea of creating a college where, as they put it, “young gentlemen from every part of the Union” might resort for instruction “in all the branches of useful and polite literature.” The proposal was extremely ambitious, to be sure, but ambition was a common American ailment. England did not develop a third university until the nineteenth century; Williams was the twenty-first institution of higher learning to flower in onetime British colonies, the second in Massachusetts, the sixth in New England. On June 22, 1793, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts granted a charter to Williams College.

I

The bold decision to plant a college in the wilderness betrayed the intentions of Colonel Williams; yet the new vision had been fed by the same sort of dreams that had led Ephraim Williams to see a school and a comfortable community where only a military outpost had stood. The early trustees and the legislature of the Commonwealth were to be remembered for their foresight, but in the decades after 1793 they had reason to acknowledge that the soil they had chosen was stubbornly uncongenial—so uncongenial, in fact, that for many years the trustees of Williams spent more time and energy in trying to close the College than in trying to keep it open.

In 1819 they petitioned to move the college to Northampton, and in 1821, having been spurned by the legislature, President Zephaniah Swift Moore took matters into his own hands. Convinced that almost everything about Williams was impossible—its location, its funds, its enrollment—he led a group of students over the mountains into the Connecticut Valley. There he became their president once again, at the struggling new college known as Amherst. As for Williams, one member of the senior class wrote home to his father: “It remains for us to say whether it shall die suddenly, or whether it shall linger along for two or three years.”

In the past the public had come to the support of the institution. A lottery furnished funds essential to the opening of the free school. A public subscription was the answer of Berkshire County to the threat of removal in 1819. What saved the College in 1821 was the willingness of the Reverend Edward Dorr Griffin to take the job of president and the determination with which he drew upon the College’s reputation for religious conservatism to collect much-needed funds. By 1828, the Reverend Griffin could be seen standing in the middle of Main Street, supervising the construction of a handsome new building, housing a chapel, a library, and classrooms, a testament to his confidence and his skill. The building is now known as Griffin Hall.

The College which had been taking shape under Griffin and his predecessors was not unlike many other New England colleges where the classical curriculum and a moral atmosphere served as the basis for training young men for professional life. The college turned out its share of clergymen, doctors, lawyers, and teachers, serving the needs of Western Massachusetts and surrounding communities in New York and Vermont. But Williams was not yet a place to which “young gentlemen from every part of the Union” resorted. In fact, Nathaniel Hawthorne, attending the commencement exercises in 1838, jotted in his notebook some observations on the Williams students he saw there: “Country graduates—rough, brown-featured, schoolmaster-looking...A rough hewn, heavy set of fellows from the hills and woods in this neighborhood; unpolished bumpkins, who had grown up as farmer-boys.”

Williams seldom knew financial security until the end of the nineteenth century. But it did have assets that enabled it to develop into a prototype of the small New England liberal arts college. Scenery, a reputation for moral soundness, a loyal body of alumni, and a devoted faculty went a long way toward compensating for inadequate funds.

Of the scenery, Thoreau remarked, after a visit in 1844, “It would be no small advantage if every college were thus located at the base of a mountain.” For Thoreau the location of Williams was “as good at least as one well-endowed professorship.”

In the early years the religious reputation of the College depended on the essential orthodoxy of its presidents and faculty. It gathered strength from the famous episode of the “haystack meeting” in the summer of 1806. Five Williams undergraduates, seeking to continue their prayers and conversations in spite of a sudden thunderstorm, retired from a grove of trees to the shelter of a nearby haystack, where they were inspired to launch the great adventure of American foreign missions. The extremely informal ties with the Congregationalists saved it from the sometimes stifling stranglehold of an organic denominational connection.

During a crisis in the affairs of the College in 1821, a group of alumni met in Williamstown and organized the Society of Alumni, dedicated to the future welfare of the College. Their action gave Williams the distinction of organizing the first college alumni society in history. Alumni loyalty was rewarded when, in 1868, the College provided for official alumni representation on the board of trustees, an act of recognition in which only Harvard, among American colleges, anticipated Williams.

II

But essentially the College has built its reputation around teachers and teaching. Mark Hopkins, who was a Williams professor from 1830 to 1887 and president of the College from 1836 to 1872, has become a symbol of this emphasis. In American education Hopkins pioneered in making the student the center of the educational experience, and he did it so well that one of his former students, U.S. President James A. Garfield, immortalized his achievement in an aphorism which has passed into the lore of American education: “The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.” The Hopkins tradition has become one of the College’s great assets. It has been perpetuated in the lives of generations of teachers.

Scenery, a reputation for building sound character, loyal but not especially affluent alumni, and devoted teachers could keep the College open, but like most other colleges Williams did not experience growth and prosperity until the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The scenery, of course, remained constant, but it developed into an even greater asset as the United States became more urbanized and industrialized. Williams was still a country college; a Massachusetts court decision of 1888 declared that cows owned by the college were tax exempt. The discovery that businessmen could profit from liberal education sent college enrollments upward as the century drew to a close; now more Williams alumni were men of affairs, fewer were clergymen. By 1906, of all the colleges in New England, Williams drew the largest percentage of students from outside New England.

From 1793 through 1870 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts appropriated for Williams College over \$150,000, a sum of such importance that Mark Hopkins himself observed that he did “not see how the College could have got on” without state aid. A new and more dependable source of financial support was developed as the century drew to a close. In the 1890’s Frederick Ferris Thompson of the Class of 1856 became the first of many individuals to supersede the Commonwealth as the largest benefactor of the College. Ephraim Williams’ original bequest of \$9,297 has since grown by additional gifts and bequests to an endowment valued at approximately \$1.3 billion.

III

Williams moved into the twentieth century firm in its intentions to remain a college, at a time when aspirations toward university status were unsettling many of the old colleges. It adhered to a curriculum that was designed for undergraduates; it made room for the elective principle, but it subjected course election to safeguards and controls. The idea of a liberally educated man was not jettisoned in favor of the widely accepted idea of almost complete student freedom in course election. A survey of the college curriculum in 1925 showed that Williams had combined the principles of prescription and election, the goals of concentration and distribution, in such a way as to be the only major American college without any absolutely required courses and without any uncontrolled wide-option electives. The Williams curriculum has continued to evolve, but it has not undergone such a series of major overhauls as characterize curriculums inspired by the popular educational fancy of the moment. Not having abandoned itself to the elective principle in the nineteenth century, Williams did not need to rescue itself with the general education principle of the twentieth century.

During its long history much of the life and tone of the college was shaped by students. While the same influence continues, the competitive pressure for admission since World War II has allowed for a new and significant degree of selectivity on the part of the College. Among the consequences of this change have been a quickening of the intellectual life of the College and a reconsideration of traditions and emphases no longer considered appropriate for an institution of liberal learning.

Among the first traditions to go was compulsory religious exercises, abandoned in 1962 after a hundred years of gradual but steady erosion. Voluntary worship in the form of ecumenical chapel services and the activities of student religious organizations carry on another long tradition. In response to the concern of undergraduate leaders and the faculty and in recognition of the failure of Greek Letter Fraternities to fulfill adequately objectives consistent with college purpose, the Trustees in 1962 took the first of a series of actions that replaced fraternities with a residential house system. Williams became, as a result, a much more open community. The decision to become coeducational and the admission of women to Williams as degree candidates in 1970 have reinforced the spirit of equality and freedom conducive to a climate of learning.

In this atmosphere of change and heightened purpose the curriculum underwent appropriate transformations, as a careful comparative study of the yearly catalogues readily shows, leading to the present 4-1-4 curriculum and a more flexible and wide-ranging schedule and program both on and beyond the campus. Changes in the curriculum included the addition of majors and the introduction of interdisciplinary programs, along with the expansion of language offerings to include full, four-year cycles in Chinese and Japanese. Continuing the tradition of putting the student at the center of the educational experience, Williams in the Fall of 1988 introduced in each department at least one course taught as a tutorial, in which, typically, pairs of students meet weekly with the professor to discuss a paper, problem set, or work of art produced by one of the students. By 1992 some 40 percent of the graduating class had experienced at least one tutorial course either in Williamstown or in the Williams-Oxford program, run in association with Exeter College, Oxford, which provides each year for some 30 Williams juniors a year-long immersion in the life of Oxford University.

This curricular expansion, and another in the first decade of this century, reflected, and in part resulted from, the fact that the makeup of the college community was changing to mirror more closely the growing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity of American society and of the world more broadly. The percentage of students who identified themselves as members of one or more American minority group or were overseas citizens rose to 40 percent, of faculty to 22 percent.

At the same time, programming and structures were introduced to student residential life and major projects were completed to enhance greatly the College's student center, its facilities for theatre and dance, and its office and teaching spaces for faculty.