

Liberty and Learning

The Evolution of American Education

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HILLSDALE COLLEGE WAS FOUNDED IN 1844, a little nearer in time—and vastly nearer in thought—to the American founding than to the current day. Even as it was being established, seeds of change were being sown elsewhere in the country. These would sprout into an entirely different educational system than the one proceeding from the Northwest Ordinance and the Constitution. In the nineteenth century, then, we have two stories to tell. One provides an example of what was intended by the Founders. The other uncovers the roots of the system we have today. The contrast between them is stark.

Let us first consider what was intended: Hillsdale College began small and poor. It was built originally in Spring Arbor, Michigan, 30 miles up the road from its current location, and was called Michigan Central College. Its founders were mainly from western New York and New England. Several were preachers. All were devout. The first words the College proclaimed recall the themes of the Northwest Ordinance:

Whereas the denomination of Christians, known as free-will Baptist, with other friends of education, grateful to God for the inestimable blessings resulting from the prevalence of civil and religious liberty and intelligent piety in the land, and believing that the diffusion of sound learning is essential to the perpetuity of these blessings, have founded and endowed a college....¹

¹ These Articles of Association were filed with the Michigan legislature in 1855, the eleventh year of the College's operation.

This quote is from the preamble to the Articles of Association of Hillsdale College, which were accepted by the State of Michigan eleven years after the College began operation. This delay resulted from a law passed in the State Legislature that prohibited the incorporation of new colleges in order to protect the University of Michigan. Obstruction from the government came early in the history of Hillsdale College.

The founding of Hillsdale was singular in another respect. The Articles of Association speak of the “diffusion” of sound learning. They meant this broadly and seriously. The Articles promise to offer to “all persons who wish, irrespective of nationality, color, or sex,” a “literary, scientific or theological education.” Hillsdale College is, we believe, the first institution of higher learning founded, anywhere in the world, with an expressed commitment to accept black and white, man and woman, impartially. It is, so far as we can tell, the third actually to do it. In accordance with this commitment to the “diffusion” of sound learning, the College made vigorous efforts from the beginning to keep costs low and to find support from private sources to enable any qualified student to attend the College.

After nine years in Spring Arbor, several college leaders formed the view that the College should move to a larger town—in part to find more funds for the support of the students. In 1853 they chose Hillsdale. Hillsdale was at the time a tiny village of only 2,000 (today only 10,000), but it was located along the railway, which gave it the communications of a metropolis.

The decision to move to Hillsdale was influenced also by an accident of personality. The representative of the College to the town of Hillsdale was Ransom Dunn. A man of immense energy and determination, of fierce conviction and eloquence, of profound reflection and faith, Dunn would work for the College for 50 years, until the dawn of the twentieth century. One of his favorite sayings was that “the moment we fold our arms and cease to make aggressive movements, we die.”² It was no weak man who rode his horse into Hillsdale on the cold evening of January 14, 1853. It was no weak partnership that he would form there.

Dunn stopped at the larger of two local hotels and asked that the

² Arlan K. Gilbert, *Ransom Dunn* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2007).

town leaders be gathered to discuss education. Several came. They met first in the pharmacy, then adjourned to the courthouse. Dunn stated the purposes of the College: "One thing must be distinctly understood: that the school from the first is to be a denominational one but not sectarian, furnishing no special advantages to any denomination, nor refusing favor to any; neither does it propose to make distinctions on the ground of sex or color."³ Soon the town and the College agreed together to raise \$15,000 each for construction of a new facility to be called Hillsdale College.

A total capitalization of \$30,000 was no small sum in those days. Quickly the town exceeded its goal, and this put pressure on the College. Dunn—along with Edmund Fairfield, the key leader in the effort—undertook to raise \$10,000 from the territory west of the Great Lakes. He moved his family to Wisconsin and traveled the area month after month, from town to town and from farm to farm. He talked to individuals. He preached at church services. He asked whoever he met to give whatever they could. Receiving gifts of a dollar or two at a time, of \$5 or \$10 from the more generous or affluent, he raised money for 18 months. He came back with \$22,000. His report upon the campaign has the spirit of Caesar's upon his victory in Asia Minor:⁴ "Was sent after \$10,000. Secured."⁵

It was worth asking what the farmers and tradesmen of Michigan, Wisconsin, and elsewhere expected for the money they gave. Dunn did not promise that the students or faculty would give the farmers advice about agriculture or the tradesmen about trade. Nor did he promise that the students would become better farmers or tradesmen themselves. The goods he offered were to be found in the character and minds of the students and in their disposition toward things that Americans love. Of course this was not a direct good to the farmers themselves. Indeed, they were giving so that others unknown to them could have advantages that they themselves would never enjoy. This made them servants, not so much of the students and faculty, but of what the students and faculty would learn and teach. In that sense they were partners with those in the College who would do the work. The cause stated in the preamble to

³ Arlan K. Gilbert, *Historic Hillsdale College: Pioneer in Higher Education, 1844–1900* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 1991), 28.

⁴ Julius Caesar wrote: "Veni, vidi, vici" ("I came, I saw, I conquered").

⁵ Arlan K. Gilbert, *Historic Hillsdale College*, 36–37.

the College's Articles of Association—the cause of “civil and religious liberty and intelligent piety”—requires the service of many and offers many ways of serving.

The College was not then, nor is it now, in any sense what we today would call a policy shop. Its earliest catalog describes the curriculum for the 1845–1846 academic year. It was divided into the Preparatory Department and the Collegiate Department. The preparatory courses included English grammar, geography, arithmetic, Latin grammar, Sallust, Cicero, Virgil, Greek grammar and reader, the Gospels, and weekly declamations. The College department curriculum included algebra, geometry, trigonometry, Livy, Virgil, writing in Latin and Greek, physiology, and history. The sophomore level introduced Cicero, Demosthenes, *The Iliad*, logic, rhetoric, botany, and more writing of Latin and Greek. Later came chemistry, astronomy, philosophy, Tacitus, and Hebrew or French. In 1849, a significant new course was introduced: “The Constitution of the United States, Constitution of England, and Constitution of Man.” By the late 1850s this course had been truncated to “The Constitution of the United States.” In this context it is worth noting that beginning with the freshmen who will enter Hillsdale College in August 2004, each student will be required to take a full-semester course titled “The Constitution of the United States.”⁶ Historian David McCullough has recently remarked that there are but three institutions of higher learning in the nation that require such a course: the three service academies.⁷ Now they are joined by a fourth.

One may wonder why, with such devotion to the ideas and purposes of America, the curriculum would not focus on its history and institutions more tightly. Most of it did not. The answer lies in the character of sound learning itself. Liberal education is the kind that deals not so much with means as with ends, not so much with the how of things as

⁶ The course syllabus is available from Hillsdale College. Also available is the course reading packet of primary source documents, prepared by the Hillsdale College political science faculty members who teach it.

⁷ Congress, Senate, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, David McCullough, “Putting the Teaching of American History and Civics Back in the Classroom,” 108th Cong., 1st sess., 10 April 2003, 13.

with the why.⁸ In one sense this is irrelevant to the everyday pressures of life and especially the hard job of making a living. The doctor must know the body and its workings; does he need to know its purposes? The accountant must know the ways of financial transactions and how to keep track of them; does he need to know the purpose of the business, or the best uses of the profits that it generates? The general needs to know how to assemble, supply, transport, and deploy his troops so as to defeat the enemy; does he need to know if the cause of his country is superior to the cause of the enemy? Are these people in fact experts in the ultimate questions that are inherent in their activities, and would they be better at these activities if they were?

The answer to this question given by the College in its first days is yes. Every self-governing person—every mother and father, every manager of a task or of other people—will find himself involved during his life with important decisions that reach up to the ultimate. Each must account to his Maker. Each must raise his children and answer their questions. Each must choose his field of labor and decide how honestly, diligently, and fairly he will pursue it. Each will face occasions when his own immediate interest conflicts with that of another, and each must decide then how far to pursue it or when to surrender that interest. The ability to do so is a product of liberal, as opposed to simply technical, education.

“Civil and religious liberty” are named as one of the two beneficiaries of “sound learning” in the Hillsdale Articles of Association. These are also the highest principles of the nation. In other words, the purposes of education are political as well as academic. The curriculum of Hillsdale College invites the student—nay, promises the student that he will be taught—to understand these purposes in light of the highest human ends. This is especially vital in America because in a free society governed by consent, each person is both governed and governor. Each must then practice the art of the statesman to some extent.

⁸ Hillsdale College faculty members Drs. David Whalen (English) and Mark Kalthoff (History) teach a course titled “*Artes Liberales: The History and Literature of Liberal Education*” that explores this subject extensively and well. The syllabus is available from Hillsdale College. See also Dr. Michael Bauman, “The Second Death of Socrates” (<http://www.boundless.org/features/a0000913.html>).

Writing of the classical authors Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, Bishop Berkeley said famously: “And, whatever the world may say, he who hath not much meditated upon God, the human mind, and the *summum bonum*, may possibly make a thriving earthworm, but will most indubitably make a sorry patriot and a sorry statesman.”⁹ Related to this, the elder Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Henry Lee about the sources of the Declaration of Independence. He identified these sources as the “harmonizing sentiments of the day.” These harmonizing sentiments, he says, are to be found in “conversation, in letters, in printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.”¹⁰ Thus the discussion of ordinary citizens, if properly instructed, reflects and reveals the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” that distinguish good action from bad, justice from injustice, liberty from license, and freedom from tyranny. This, too, is the promise of liberal education.



Among the people who devised, taught, and implemented the early curriculum at Hillsdale College was Edmund Fairfield, the second president of the College, who would later become lieutenant governor of Michigan and one of the founders of the Republican Party. Fairfield gave a speech upon the laying of the cornerstone of the new college building at Hillsdale on July 4, 1853. Titled “The College and the Republic,” this speech makes plain why liberal education is important to liberty.¹¹

The history of liberty, Fairfield said, is the history of intelligence. Ignorance is prerequisite to slavery: the more ignorance, the more slavery. The purpose of the College will be the cultivation of character and mind. The student will be taught to see the whole human being. He will be reminded of the sentiment of Webster: “[T]he greatest thought of my life is that of my individual responsibility to God.” A man who knows

⁹ George Berkeley, *Siris* (London: 1744), 350.

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, to Henry Lee (May 8, 1825), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. XV, 118–19.

¹¹ The full text of this speech is in Appendix III.

this, said Fairfield, is “forever above that level where the tyrant may find a facile subject.”

Fairfield explained why education must be diffused. In any nation, the “heir of sovereignty must be qualified to meet the responsibilities of kingly office. In a Republic the people are the kings.” Those he addressed at this Independence Day ceremony were not “merely” lawmakers, but “make those that are lawmakers.” They lack the insignia of aristocratic nobility “in the shape of ribbons, red and green and blue.” They have instead the insignia of “nature’s nobility,” which are “the hand hardened by toil, the face radiant with intelligence and manly virtue.”

Fairfield’s speech finds an echo in one of the finest speeches of recent times: Ronald Reagan’s first inaugural address. Reagan had broken tradition in his inauguration in order to elevate it. For the first time he moved the ceremony around to the west side of the capital, the side of the building that looks out toward the National Mall. This permitted him to take his fellow citizens upon a tour of the National Mall as his first executive act.

Reagan spoke of several of the heroes memorialized on the Mall. Of George Washington: “a monumental man...of humility who came to greatness reluctantly.” Of Jefferson: “The Declaration of Independence flames with his eloquence.” Of Lincoln: “Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln.”¹² From these heroes Reagan turned to the rest of us and issued a challenge. Here in America we have “unleashed the energy and individual genius of man.”¹³ **We**—meaning ordinary Americans—provide for ourselves and our family. **We** make the economy go. And yes, **we** fight the wars. Reagan quoted from the first of many private heroes that he would name in his speeches as president: Martin Treptow, who is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. He read the following from Treptow’s World War I diary: “America must win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.”¹⁴

¹² Ronald Reagan, “First Inaugural Address,” (January 20, 1981), *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents*, ed. John Gabriel Hunt (New York: Gramercy Books, 1995), 477.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 474.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 478.

Edmund Fairfield and Ronald Reagan each asserted that in America, every citizen is a prince and a ruler. Because each is responsible, each must cultivate the virtues by which responsibilities can be discharged. These include, of course, the commercial virtues, such as industry, frugality, and honesty. They include the family virtues, such as faithfulness, devotion, and love. They include also the public virtues: justice, courage, and moderation.

The setting of Fairfield's speech was also elevated, if more rustic and not so high as Reagan's. The College was built upon the highest hill in southern Michigan. Down below was a small town. Early photographs exhibit a panorama of houses and barns and sheds, fences and livestock, muddy roads and dust in the air. The citizens gathered to hear Fairfield were local eminences, but no one of national influence was present for the dedication. They were a long way from anywhere. Yet Fairfield asserted that these people were kings, and that this college would train the kings of the future. In these surroundings, one might be tempted to think that Fairfield's high themes appeared pretentious.

But consider: In 1854, a year after Fairfield delivered his speech on "The College and the Republic," a convention of the new Republican Party was held in Jackson, Michigan, 35 miles up the road from Hillsdale. It would be the first national convention of the party that would become the majority party in the United States for more than 70 years. Fairfield and Hillsdale faculty member Austin Blair (who would later become governor of Michigan) were among the chief organizers of the convention. And the convention proved to be significant. In its proceedings are to be found the central ideas that would bring the Republican Party to power: that slavery is wrong and was condemned by the American Founders uniformly, including those Founders who were holders of slaves themselves; that the federal government has no power to eradicate slavery in states where it exists; but that it does have the power effectively to forbid the spread of slavery into the federal territories. The principles and policies articulated at the Jackson convention reflected an understanding of the Constitution as a document committed to human liberty, but also an awareness that the Constitution requires restraint.

Hillsdale's part in the momentous events of the mid-nineteenth century did not end with helping to build one of the most important

political movements in American history. When civil war broke out in 1861, the Latin and Greek scholars of the Hillsdale student body showed an unsurpassed propensity to volunteer for military service. Before the war ended, over 500 young men enlisted. Sixty of them would be killed. Three would win the Congressional Medal of Honor. Three would rise to the rank of general. At least half would become officers.¹⁵ On April 19, 1861, the Hillsdale faculty passed a resolution in favor of enforcing the laws, supporting the Constitution, and suppressing the rebellion.¹⁶ In so doing they swept aside fears that the College would be bankrupted by the absence of its male students.

The anti-slavery credentials of the College were well-established in its earliest days. In 1847, it received a note of greeting from former president John Quincy Adams, then an anti-slavery leader in the House of Representatives. This reputation continued through the war years. In 1863, the great Frederick Douglass gave a speech on campus titled "Truth and Error," during a visit organized by the Ladies Literary Society. Edward Everett, who spoke before Lincoln at Gettysburg, was a benefactor of the Hillsdale College Library and spoke at Hillsdale in May 1862. Clinton Fisk, a Hillsdale College student, was a noteworthy supporter of the underground railroad who became a friend of Abraham Lincoln and a general in the Civil War. After the war he opened the Fisk School for Freedmen, soon to become Fisk University, in Nashville, which is today one of the most distinguished black colleges in the land. Just as the students at Hillsdale, so the students at Fisk received a classical education in those first days. They too were being prepared for self-government.

The spirit that produced the service—military, academic, and political—of Civil War-era Hillsdale students is manifest in an 1861 article by Loretta E. Crane, a Hillsdale student herself, in a publication of the Hillsdale College Ladies Literary Society, the *Souvenir*. It reads like a letter from a Spartan mother:

¹⁵ Arlan K. Gilbert, *Hillsdale Honor: The Civil War Experience* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 1994), xvi.

¹⁶ Hillsdale College Civil War Faculty Resolution, "Hillsdale College Standard, April 23, 1861.

This republic, that has been the wonder and admiration of the world, must not be allowed to crumble in pieces, and become a matter of history. Every lover of liberty should go forth in the strength of right to battle for freedom and his country. In this crisis, the country calls for the assistance of every true freeman, and this call has met with a noble response. There is no shrinking from this duty.

It is true, a battlefield, with the roaring of cannon, the clashing of arms, the groans of the dying and the pale faces of the dead presents no pleasing picture to the mind. But who would not rather meet this, than fill a coward's grave? That the Union may be preserved, the Constitution respected, and the flag of our country honored, is the governing principle of every true son of liberty.¹⁷

Today it may seem paradoxical that the federal government—the Union—should have received so large and marvelous an outpouring of support from a college to which it had given precisely nothing. It would not have seemed so to Edmund Fairfield or to Ransom Dunn, who himself lost a son in the Civil War. To them, patriotism in a just cause would have seemed the natural harvest of liberal education in a regime of limited government, a regime of local control of local matters, including education.



As Hillsdale College was building its foundation and surviving through the Civil War, changes in thought about education were beginning to emerge and gather strength elsewhere. In the twentieth century these changes would become established as the dominant practice, and both education and the workings of the Constitution would be fundamentally altered. Just as our nation developed its original constitutional forms under the influence of certain ideas, so its new and different forms have developed under new and different ideas. It is easy to see the changes in forms. To see the ideas behind them takes more digging.

¹⁷ Loretta E. Crane, "War," Hillsdale College Souvenir, June 1861.