

**MY REMINISCENCES OF EZRA  
CORNELL: AN ADDRESS  
DELIVERED BEFORE THE CORNELL  
UNIVERSITY ON FOUNDER'S  
DAY, JANUARY 11TH, 1890**

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My Reminiscences of Ezra Cornell: An Address Delivered Before the Cornell University on  
Founder's day, January 11th, 1890 by Andrew Dickson White

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**ANDREW DICKSON WHITE**

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MY REMINISCENCES

OF

EZRA CORNELL

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
ON FOUNDER'S DAY, JANUARY 11TH, 1890

BY

ANDREW DICKSON WHITE, LL.D., L.H.D.  
FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

*"I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study."*

—EZRA CORNELL.

ITHACA, N. Y.  
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## MY REMINISCENCES OF EZRA CORNELL.

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On the first day of the year 1864, on taking my seat for the first time in the State Senate at Albany, I found among my associates a tall, spare man, apparently very reserved and austere, and soon learned his name—Ezra Cornell.

Though his chair was near mine, there was at first little intercourse between us, and there seemed small chance of more. He was steadily occupied, and seemed to care little for making new acquaintances. He was, perhaps, the oldest man in the Senate; I, the youngest: he was a man of business; I was fresh from a University professorship: and, upon the announcement of committees, our paths seemed separated entirely, for he was made chairman of the committee on Agriculture, while to me fell the chairmanship of the committee on Education.

And yet it was this last difference which drew us together; for among the first things referred to my committee was a bill to incorporate a public library which he proposed to found in Ithaca.

On reading this bill I was struck, not merely by its provision for a gift of one hundred thousand dollars to his townsmen, but even more by a certain breadth and largeness in his way of making it. The most striking sign of this was his mode of forming a board of trustees; for, instead of the usual effort to tie up the organization forever in some sect, party, or clique, he had named the best men of his town—his political

opponents as well as his friends ; and had added to them the pastors of all the principal churches, Catholic and Protestant.

The breadth of mind revealed by this provision, even more than the munificence of his purpose, drew me to him : we met several times, discussed his bill, and finally I reported it substantially as introduced, and supported it until it became a law.

Our next relations were not, at first, so pleasant. The great Land Grant of 1862, from the general government to the State, for industrial and technical education, had been turned over, at a previous session of the Legislature, to an institution called the "People's College," in Schuyler County ; but the Agricultural College, twenty miles distant from it, was seeking to take away from it a portion of this endowment ; and among the trustees of this Agricultural College was Mr. Cornell, who introduced a bill to divide the fund between the two institutions.

On this I at once took ground against him, declaring that the fund ought to be kept together at some one institution,—that on no account should it be divided,—that the policy for higher education in the State of New York should be concentration,—and that we had already suffered sufficiently from scattering our resources.

Mr. Cornell's first effort was to have his bill referred, not to my committee, but to his : here I resisted him, and, as a solution of the difficulty, it was finally referred to a joint committee made up of both. On this double-headed committee I deliberately thwarted his purpose throughout the entire session, delaying action and preventing any report upon his bill.

Most men would have been vexed by this ; but he took my course with calmness, and even kindness. He never expostulated, and always listened attentively to my arguments against his view : in the meantime I omitted no opportunity to make these arguments as strong as possible, and especially to impress upon him the importance of keeping the fund together.

After the close of the session—during the following summer—as it had become evident that the trustees of the People's College had no intention of raising the additional endowment and providing the equipment required by the Act which gave them the land grant, there was great danger that the whole fund might be lost to the State by the lapsing of the time allowed in the Congressional Act for its acceptance. Just at this period Mr. Cornell invited me to attend a meeting of the State Agricultural Society, of which he was the president, at Rochester; and, when the meeting had assembled, he quietly proposed to remove the difficulty I had raised, by drawing a new bill giving the State Agricultural College half of the fund, and by inserting a clause requiring the College to provide an additional sum of three hundred thousand dollars. This sum he pledged himself to give, and, as the Comptroller of the State had estimated the value of the land grant at six hundred thousand dollars, Mr. Cornell supposed that this would obviate my objection, since the fund of the Agricultural College would thus be made equal to the whole original land-grant fund as estimated, which would be equivalent to keeping the whole fund together.

The entire audience applauded, as well they might: it was a noble proposal. But, much to the disgust of the meeting, I persisted in my refusal to sanction any bill dividing the fund, declaring myself now more opposed to such a division than ever; but saying that if Mr. Cornell and his friends would ask for the *whole* grant—keeping it together, and adding his three hundred thousand dollars, as proposed—I would support such a bill with all my might.

I was led to make this proposal by a course of circumstances which might, perhaps, be called "Providential." For some years, ever since passing a year of my college life in a little sectarian college in the western part of the State, I had been dreaming of a University, had looked into the questions involved, at home and abroad, had approached sundry wealthy



and influential men on the subject, but had obtained no encouragement, until this strange and unexpected combination of circumstances—a great land grant, the use of which was to be determined largely by the committee of which I was chairman, and this noble pledge of Mr. Cornell.

Yet for some months nothing seemed to come of our conference. At the assembling of the Legislature in the following year, it was more evident than ever that the trustees of the People's College intended to do nothing : during the previous session they had promised through their agents to supply the endowment required by their charter ; but, though this charter obliged them, as a condition of taking the grant, to have an estate of two hundred acres, buildings for the accommodation of two hundred students, and a faculty of not less than six professors, with a sufficient library and other apparatus, yet, when our committee again took up the subject, we found that hardly the faintest pretense of complying with these conditions had been made. Moreover, their charter required that their property should be free from all encumbrance ; and yet the so-called donor of it, Mr. Charles Cook, could not be induced to cancel a small mortgage which he held upon it. Still worse, before the Legislature had been in session many days, it was found that his agent had introduced a bill to relieve the People's College of all conditions, and to give it, without any pledge whatever, the whole land grant, amounting to very nearly a million of acres.

But even worse than this was another difficulty. In addition to the strong lobby sent by Mr. Cook to Albany in behalf of the People's College, there came representatives of nearly all the smaller denominational colleges in the State,—men eminent and influential, but clamoring for a division of the fund among their various institutions, though the fragment which would have fallen to each would not have sufficed even to endow a single professorship.

While all was thus uncertain, and the fund seemed likely

to be utterly frittered away, I was, one day, going down from the State Capitol, when Mr. Cornell joined me and entered into conversation. He was, as usual, austere and reserved in appearance, but I had already found that below this appearance there was a warm heart and noble purpose : no observant associate could fail to notice that the only measures in the Legislature which he cared for were those proposing some substantial good to the State or Nation, and that political wrangling and partisan jugglery he despised.

On this occasion, after some little general talk, he quietly said, "I have about half a million dollars more than my family will need : what is the best thing I can do with it for the State?" I answered, "Mr. Cornell, the two things most worthy of aid in any country are charity and education ; but, in our country, the charities appeal to everybody ; any one can understand the importance of them, and the worthy poor or unfortunate are sure to be taken care of : as to education, the lower grade will always be cared for in the public schools by the State ; but the institutions of the highest grade, without which the lower can never be thoroughly good, can be appreciated by only a few : the policy of our State is to leave this part of the system to individuals : it seems to me, then, that if you have half a million to give, the best thing you can do with it is to establish or strengthen some institution for higher instruction." I then went on to show him the need of a larger institution for such instruction than the State then had ;—that such a college or university worthy of the State would require far more in the way of faculty and equipment than most men supposed ;—that the time had come when scientific and technical education must be provided for in such an institution ;—and that literary education should be made the flower and bloom of the system thus embodied.

He listened attentively, but said little : the matter seemed to end there ; but not long afterward he came to me and said, "I agree with you that the land-grant fund ought to be kept

together, and that there should be a new institution fitted to the present needs of the State and the country : I am ready to pledge to such an institution five hundred thousand dollars as an addition to the land-grant endowment, instead of three hundred thousand as I proposed at Rochester."

As may well be imagined, I hailed this proposal joyfully, and the sketch of a bill embodying his purpose was soon made. But here I wish to say, that, while Mr. Cornell urged Ithaca as the site of the proposed institution, he never showed any wish to give his own name to it : the suggestion to that effect was mine : he, at first, doubted the policy of it ; but, on my insisting that it was in accordance with time-honored American usage, as shown by the names of Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Amherst, Bowdoin, Brown, Williams, and the like, he yielded.

We now held frequent conferences as to the leading features of the institution to be created ; in these I was more and more impressed by his sagacity and largeness of view, and, when our sketch of the bill was fully developed, it was put into shape by Charles J. Folger, of Geneva, then chairman of the Judiciary committee of the Senate, afterwards Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals, and finally Secretary of the Treasury of the United States. The provision forbidding any sectarian or partisan predominance in the Board of Trustees or Faculty was proposed by me, heartily acquiesced in by Mr. Cornell, and put into shape by Judge Folger. The State-scholarship feature and the system of alumni representation on the Board of Trustees were also accepted by Mr. Cornell at my suggestion.

I refer to these things especially because they show one striking characteristic of the man, namely, his willingness to give the largest measure of confidence when he gave any confidence at all, and his readiness to be advised largely by others in matters which he felt to be outside his own province.

On the other hand, the whole provision for the endow-