

Plans for the Williamsport Academy?

Rev. William James Clark served Williamsport's Christ Episcopal Church from October 11, 1846, to March 15, 1851. Located at Fourth and Mulberry Streets, the church was within a block of the Williamsport Academy, which was in severe financial difficulty and looking for a buyer. It appears from the following August 1847 letter that Rev. Clark may have been considering purchasing this school that just a few months later became Methodism's Williamsport Dickinson Seminary. Had Clark been successful, and if the property in question was indeed the failing Williamsport Academy, today's Lycoming College might be an Episcopal institution.

Early educational institutions in Williamsport developed as they did across the state – before there were mandated public schools, and when the local minister was usually the most educated person in town. The original Williamsport Academy building was erected in 1812 on the northeast corner of Third and West Streets. The state appropriated \$2000 on the condition that poor children (not to exceed 5) be taught free of charge, and the remaining funds were raised by public subscription. It was managed by a board of trustees and the first principal was Rev. Samuel Henderson, pastor of the Lycoming [Newberry] Presbyterian Church. It functioned until Pennsylvania's public school act of 1834 appeared to render it unnecessary.

Beginning in 1835 the trustees rented old Williamsport Academy to the new public school system for \$15 a year. But the city's first venture into public education was a struggle, and in 1840 the Academy trustees decided to sell the property to John B. Hall for \$2392 in order to purchase a lot and building and re-establish a private school at the head of what is now Academy Street. With two stories added, that building eventually became the west wing of Old Main for Williamsport Dickinson Seminary [now Lycoming College]. The original Academy structure on Third Street, which Hall remodeled into a private home, was located at the site of the present Federal Court House.

Less successful than its predecessor, the new Williamsport Academy went through several financial crises. In February 1845 it was purchased by John K. Hays and Peter Vanderbelt for \$432 at a sheriff's sale – after previous such attempts failed to produce any bidders. It was then sold for \$443.68 to the Williamsport town council, which apparently was unable to raise enough tax money to operate the school properly and began looking for ways to rid itself of the property. Negotiations with the Methodist Episcopal Church began in January 1848, and by April the arrangements had been completed. The Methodists renamed the school Williamsport Dickinson Seminary and assumed all the old debts – including \$239.37 plus interest still owed to Hays and Vanderbelt and \$204.31 plus interest to the borough of Williamsport.

Clark states that his female academy is “the only one now existent in the community” and repeatedly touts the prospects for a “large” academy. This suggests that he may have already been giving some instruction (perhaps to his own daughters and another female or two) in his home or at the church and wanted to expand the operation.

While it is possible that the August 1847 letter of William J. Clark represents a failed attempt by that clergyman to purchase the Academy property, that appears not to be the case for the following reasons.

- (1) The \$5000 purchase price, far more than the apparent value of the Academy, mentioned in the letter – plus the fact that Clark describes it as a “large and beautiful building” and says that it is “now rented” and unavailable until spring 1848. One possible explanation is that the \$5000 represented the total amount Clark thought necessary to get a school up and running at the site, and that for simplicity’s sake he just presented it to the letter’s recipient as “the building is offered to me for \$5000.” This is in line with the \$10,000 cost projected by the Methodists to remodel and adequately equip the seminary, but it doesn’t seem like an approach Clark would take.
- (2) The statement that Clark had already been approached about taking charge of the female department of Williamsport Academy – without any connection of that offer to the building under discussion.

Even if this correspondence refers to a Williamsport property other than the Academy site, it is a primary source document relating relevant dynamics in the city at the time the Methodists purchased the property. Also, the details it supplies about the manner in which the early nineteenth century Episcopal Church supported its work in the outlying areas is of interest. Endnotes provide additional information on people mentioned in the manuscript. The original document is housed in the Lycoming College archives, and *The Chronicle* thanks them for permission to reprint it in this form.

The letter is addressed to “Mr. Edward C. Biddle, corner of 5th and Union Streets, Philadelphia.” Biddle was a noted Philadelphia publisher of quality books. As a wealthy and successful businessman, he would be a logical source of advice and finances for Clark’s venture. While Biddle was a member at Grace, the church whose Missionary Society was underwriting the work in Williamsport, it appears that the association between Clark and Biddle runs deeper than the latter being an influential person in the former’s sponsoring church. Efforts to establish the exact relationship between the author and recipient of the letter have been unsuccessful.

The editor wishes to thank the historians and/or pastors at Lycoming College, Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport, the Westmoreland Coal Company, the national Episcopal Archives in Texas, the diocesan archives in Philadelphia, and Grace Church and the Incarnation Episcopal congregation in Philadelphia for assistance and access to their records.

Williamsport
August 6, 1847

My Dear Sir,

I have intended to write to you for some time, but have waited until I should hear from Bishop Patterson in answer to a letter which I addressed to him at Schenectady. I wish the matter to be so far confidential, that I do not desire it to be generally known at present, as it might tend to defeat my plans while I attempt to carry them into execution.

In my late report to the Missionary Society at Grace Church, I intimated that I had plans respecting my present congregation which largely enhances the future. The development of these plans is that which I desire to call to your attention, and to solicit your advice. Ever since my settlement here, I have been favorably impressed with the importance of this place as a seat for a large female seminary. In the spring, during the Bishop's visitation to this place, I stated to him my views and feelings and received from him encouragement to proceed.

Several offers have been made to me to assume the charge of the female department of the Williamsport Academy. These I have declined as, should I access other proposals, I would place myself under a board of masters who would be very little sympathetic with me in my views of a Christian and Church education. The female department of the Academy has gone entirely down – and another female seminary hitherto prosperous, conducted by two ladies [M.A. Heylmun and P. Hall], has closed in consequence of the marriage of the principal teacher. My own is the only one now existent in the community.

At this juncture, a large and beautiful building is offered to me, at what I consider a reasonable price, in which to open a Female Institution in the spring. The building is offered to me for \$5000 (this is strictly *inter nos*), possession to be had in the spring. There is no Female Seminary in this neighborhood, or in the whole of northern Pennsylvania. And after consultation with some of my people, and with Rev. Mr. Natt, I am encouraged to undertake the work. Arrangements must be made early this fall if there will be a possibility of success – for unless the building (now rented) is acquired so that it will come into our possession in the spring, it will be of no avail to make other arrangements.

The first difficulty is about the purchase money. I have written to the owner, but have not yet heard from him to know the precise terms on which he will dispose of the property to me. The question is – as it appears to me – shall I obtain a loan of half the amount or of \$3000, leaving the balance a mortgage, or shall I issue certificates of stock for the same amount, leaving the balance on mortgage? I have been advised to adopt the latter plan – and have been assured that in this community from \$800 to \$1000 could be raised in either 3 or 5 years, and paying 6 per cent interest. This is the outline of the plan.

I have been interrupted in writing this – and as the mail closes in a few minutes, I must stop.

I have not yet received a remittance from the organization. The punctuality of the Society leaves me to fear that the draft may have miscarried. Write me early and advise me.

Yours Truly,

William J. Clark

Appendix

Biddle, Edward C. (1801-1893) – recipient of the letter. The Biddle name was prominent in Philadelphia society for several generations – and Edward C. always used his middle initial to distinguish himself from other Edwards in the extended family. Grace Church records indicate that he was elected to that congregation's vestry (similar to the board of trustees) on March 3, 1825, and served for several years. In 1847 he was head of an important Philadelphia publishing house that bore his name. Later, in 1857, a consortium of powerful Philadelphians gained control of the Westmoreland Coal Company and installed Edward C. Biddle as that company's president – a position he filled well for 27 years, making him the longest-serving president of that still-thriving national company now headquartered in Colorado. Biddle, who also maintained a home in New York City's Washington Square section, traveled in circles that included the noted lumber, railroad and industrial barons of the day.

Clark, Rev. William James (1812-1893) – writer of the letter. Clark was born in Philadelphia and received his preliminary education for the ministry under Episcopal rector Stephen H. Tyng (1800-1885) of Bristol – father of Episcopal rector/evangelist Dudley Tyng, whose tragic 1858 death was the inspiration for the hymn *Stand up, Stand up for Jesus*. He graduated from the Theological Seminary at Alexandria VA and served congregations in Wilmington DE, Wilkes Barre PA, Berlin MD and Churchtown PA before coming to Williamsport in 1846. His interest in starting a school was genuine, for he left Williamsport in 1851 to take charge of a female seminary in Washington DC – followed by one in Georgetown DC. He eventually returned to the pastorate to serve congregations in Shrewsbury MD, Portsmouth OH and Vineland NJ. Married in 1838, he was the father of 2 daughters and 3 sons – one of whom, Charles Heber Clark, is known by the pen name Max Adeler as the author of such works as *Out of the Hurly Burly*, *Captain Bluitt*, and *The Quakeress*.

Hall, Miss P. – see Heylmun.

Heylmun, Miss M.A. – along with Miss P. Hall, she opened a female seminary with 72 young women in 1836. They did this during the transition when the original Academy on Third Street closed and the new Academy and the public school were coming into existence. The seminary apparently operated successfully for several years. The Lycoming College archives have an 1841 advertisement for the Williamsport Academy that list Misses Hall and Heylmun as the directors of its female division. It is unclear whether their institution was always connected with the Academy, or whether they associated with the Academy subsequent to operating an entirely independent endeavor. Nothing more is known about these two ladies.

Missionary Society of Grace Church, Philadelphia – an active association that financially and spiritually supported mid-nineteenth century Episcopal outreach throughout the east. In 1845 the Society was concerned about the struggling work in Williamsport that had been without a rector for over two years. It pledged

\$400 a year for 3 years toward the salary of a rector if the local congregation would (a) raise the remaining \$200 per year of the salary and (b) commit itself to paying off their existing \$650 debt on the building. Clark went to Christ Church under those conditions, and apparently he and the local congregation and Grace Church all kept their ends of the agreement. Originally located at 11th and Cherry, Grace Church is now “Grace Church and the Incarnation” at Venango and Edgemont in the Richmond section of Philadelphia. The Grace and Incarnation congregations united and met at the former Incarnation building. They later united with St. Peter’s and moved to the St. Peter’s location, but kept the former name. The current church, which maintains an active ministry that includes a small elementary school, has the records of all three predecessor congregations.

Natt, Rev. George W. – rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Bellefonte. Most likely Clark’s closest regular denominational contact, he was an energetic visionary and a logical person with whom to consult about establishing a seminary. Before he arrived in Bellefonte in 1838, the congregation had no building and was served irregularly from Lewistown. As one report notes, “With a zeal and earnestness to which many men are utter strangers, Mr. Natt set about the work of building.” Later, in 1843, a rectory was built. Both the sanctuary, which became a Lutheran building, and the parsonage erected under Natt were disposed of in 1869 when the Gothic stone church edifice on the corner of Allegheny and Lamb streets was erected. While at Bellefonte, Natt made periodic visits under the direction of the bishop to the struggling congregation at Clearfield and deserves much of the credit for seeing that enduring Episcopal work survived there. In the 1850’s Natt served in St. Andrew’s in Philadelphia and resided at 6th and Sycamore.

Potter, Bishop Alonzo (1800-1865) – bishop of the Pennsylvania Diocese of the Episcopal Church. Ordained in 1824, he was on the faculty of Union College in Schenectady NY when elected bishop in 1845. His books *Political Economy* (1840) and *The School and the Schoolmaster* (1842) revealed an interest and effectiveness in administration and education he carried with him into the episcopacy. His many accomplishments include re-opening the Protestant Episcopal Academy (1846), establishing the Episcopal Hospital in Philadelphia (1860), and founding the Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Philadelphia (1863). Married in 1824 to Sarah Maria Nott, daughter of the president of Union College, he saw his religious and educational work carried on by his children. Edward Tuckerman Potter (1831-c1903), a noted architect who was asked to design Mark Twain’s Hartford CT home, specialized in designing church buildings. Henry Codman Potter (1835-1908) was also an Episcopal bishop, and his son Alonzo was one of the founders of the Big Brothers-Big Sisters organization. Eliphalet Nott Potter (1836-1901) was an Episcopal clergyman and president of Union College. William Appleton Potter (1842-1909) was a noted architect whose works include several buildings at Princeton University, the United States Treasury, and numerous majestic churches. In addition, Alonzo’s brother Horatio Potter (1802-1887) was also an Episcopal bishop.