Cedarville University and the Legacy of Christian Higher Education in America

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Abstract: From the colonial period on through the 19th century, there existed a vital connection between faith and learning in higher education in America; virtually every private institution of higher learning founded during that period had a religious affiliation. At the same time, higher education was generally only the privilege of white males, with few opportunities afforded to females or people of color. Evangelical leaders, however, believed that the education of women was critical to the development of the nation and, after the Civil War, were also instrumental in the foundation of many historically Black colleges. Cedarville University, in Cedarville, Ohio, was founded by the Reformed Presbyterians in 1887; ownership was transferred to the Regular Baptists in 1953. Today, Cedarville and the over 100 institutions in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities carry on that tradition of the intersection of faith and learning in American higher education.

Key words: higher education, Christian education, faith and learning, women in higher education, African Americans in higher education, Presbyterian, Baptist

The Origins of Christian Higher Education in America

Back in 1887 when that group of Reformed Presbyterian leaders who saw the need for educating young men and women for ministry obtained a charter for a new college in Cedarville, Ohio, they were following an important tradition in our country. It would seem to be a forgotten fact today that the foundations of private higher education in the United States were fundamentally Christian. A number of books written on the subject show how the first colleges founded during the colonial period, such as Yale, Princeton, Columbia, William & Mary, Brown, Rutgers, and Dartmouth among others, came about as a primary result of the mass revivalism of the First Great Awakening in the 1730’s and 40’s.¹ The connection between faith and knowledge for those colonial leaders was critical:
The colonial leaders had a clear purpose when designing these institutions. They believed that the nation would need capable rulers, the church would demand an educated clergy, and society would require informed citizens. They sought to shape an environment not only conducive to intellectual development and cultivation of character, but one where the Christian faith and Christian morality influenced the students and ultimately society.²

Reflecting the Puritan commitment to Scripture and to society, “the colonial way thus comprised a New England religious community of learning and right behavior that was fused to a theological worldview whether students intended divine or secular occupations.”³

In this period, however, only white males of means had access to higher education; women were excluded on the basis of their gender, and people of color were excluded because of race, gender and/or socio-economic status. But even here we see the legacy of Christian higher education in that, while society in general expected girls to learn only the skills they needed for domestic duties, the Puritans recognized the value of literacy for both boys and girls and subsequently promoted literacy in their congregations for the purpose of Bible reading and limited religious education.⁴ Consequently, by the mid-eighteenth century, “female participation predominated in every religious group . . . [and] women carried more responsibilities in church.”⁵ Religion provided some women with opportunities for personal development, even while formal education was still off limits for them. For African Americans, prospects for obtaining formal education were extremely limited, as they were, with few exceptions, regularly denied enrollment in institutions of higher learning. According to Ringenberg, those who advanced beyond elementary instruction generally enrolled in apprenticeships, teacher training or non-
degree programs; by his estimate, probably fewer than fifteen blacks enrolled in American colleges before 1840.6

Major Developments in the Nineteenth Century before the Civil War

The second major development in Christian higher education in the U.S. also came after a national revival, the Second Great Awakening (around 1800-1835). One result of that event was a push to establish Christian institutions as part of the “home missionary movement” in the frontier regions west of the Appalachian Mountains.7 The number of colleges in the U.S. grew from around 29 before 1830 to over 160 just prior to the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. Two denominations at the forefront of establishing colleges were the Methodists and the Baptists, both motivated by the desire to train ministers to effectively preach the Gospel.8 Equally influential were the Presbyterians who, rather than founding Christian institutions, sought to direct the course of non-sectarian institutions such as Ohio University and Miami University through their dedicated service as trustees, presidents and faculty.9

In Greene County, Ohio, specifically Yellow Springs, Antioch College was founded in 1852 by a group called the Christian Connection (also known as the Christian Connexion). The name of the college itself recalls the biblical reference to the city of Antioch in Acts 11:26.10 By the decision of the founding board, however, the college opened in 1853 as a secular institution even though church leaders had wanted a sectarian one. But with continuing support from the Unitarian Church, the college modeled progressive principles for the times by allowing the full participation of women and African Americans. The first president of Antioch, educator Horace Mann, cast a vision for the social activism that became Antioch’s signature characteristic: “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.”11
Also in Greene County, in 1856, the Methodist Episcopal Church purchased property for the creation of Wilberforce University, the nation's oldest private, historically black university, named in honor of the English abolitionist, William Wilberforce. The original school met with early success until the Civil War when enrollment and financial support dwindled, forcing it to close down in 1862. Then in 1863 Bishop Daniel A. Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, along with two associates, negotiated to purchase the facilities and re-open the university that year. Other religiously affiliated institutions founded in Ohio during this era include Kenyon (Episcopalian) in Gambier in 1824, Denison (Baptist) in Granville in 1831, Oberlin (Presbyterian) in Oberlin in 1833, and Wittenberg (Lutheran) in Springfield in 1845. Most of these schools drew their students from the local communities and in turn gave the communities the prestige and economic boost associated with having a college in their midst.

The Second Great Awakening also opened up more opportunities for white women in that, in the newly-created nation being swept by revival, “Republican and Christian rationales made a formidable combination justifying the education of women.” In particular, the profession of teaching became a primary goal for many single young women, not only for the purpose of Christianizing the frontier regions, but also to provide a means of self-support for those women who had few prospects of marriage because of a dearth of eligible men in a particular area. While some religious and educational leaders preferred establishing schools exclusively for women, small religious colleges in the Midwest opted for co-educational institutions for economic reasons but also because “they justified coeducation in ethical and religious terms of the equality of souls, male and female.”

Major Developments after the Civil War
As has been seen, before the Civil War, religiously-affiliated colleges proliferated at a rapid pace with many of the denominations in competition with each other for students. In Ohio alone fifteen denominational colleges and universities came into existence between 1825 and 1860 (see table 1.1 for complete list). Unfortunately, many of those schools struggled financially to survive while some existed only on paper and were never actually established or closed after only a few years. However, after the Civil War, with the expansion of the economy and successful investments by a number of entrepreneurs, many colleges—both public and private—were the recipients of significant donations which greatly enhanced their facilities and programs.

The orientation of higher education also saw a major societal shift after the end of the Civil War. In reaction to growing industrialization and urbanization, American colleges became more concerned with offering practical vocational training instead of the classical curriculum. Increasing immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe brought more religious pluralism to the United States to challenge Protestant dominance. In addition, new philosophies from Europe such as scientism and relativism questioned the authority and centrality of Scripture in the curriculum. In particular, the rising popularity of Darwinian evolution presented a daunting challenge to institutions of higher education that held to the biblical account of creation. Many universities including Harvard, Yale, Princeton and others became secular institutions while others kept their religious identity but in essence operated as secular institutions.

The consequences of the Civil War had an unprecedented impact on the status of women in opening up new opportunities for employment and education. During the war women served as volunteers, took over the management of family properties, and joined the workforce as men
fought and died on battlefields in the North and the South. After the war, the end of slavery and Reconstruction prompted a reconsideration of the status of women in general: “the question of whether an employed woman was stepping out of her domestic sphere became irrelevant in the face of an overwhelming need for labor.”\textsuperscript{20} In addition, the first and second Morrill Land Grant Acts (1862 and 1890) made public lands available to states for establishing colleges and universities with the expectation that education would become more accessible for both women and African Americans.\textsuperscript{21} Interestingly, co-education was more welcomed among the religiously-affiliated colleges than the state universities; while a number of religious colleges were founded as co-educational, some state universities resisted or established separate women’s colleges rather than admit women on an equal basis with men. Harvard, for example, established Radcliffe College for women and did not award Harvard degrees to Radcliffe graduates until 1965; women were denied admission to the University of Virginia until 1970.\textsuperscript{22} In 1903, in his remarks regarding the history of Ohio colleges, Ohio State University president W. O. Thompson noted the uniqueness of religious colleges such as Oberlin, which had been co-educational from the beginning:

This declaration of principles definitely committed Oberlin to co-education. In this she was the pioneer. The question was not even discussed. The work began and common sense did the rest. The history of Oberlin in this respect will bear the most careful investigation. The men have not been robbed of their glory nor the young women of their charms. Scandal has not invaded the campus, and the hosts of alumni and alumnae living for scholarship and good citizenship afford an evidence that cannot be set aside by modern objections.”\textsuperscript{23}
By 1890, of the 1,082 colleges in America, 43 percent were coeducational, 37 percent were for men only, and 20 percent were for women only.24

Regarding the opportunities of African Americans to attend college after the Civil War, there was a rush to establish educational institutions for blacks at all levels, including more than two hundred historically Black colleges and universities being founded between 1860 and 1890.25 Most frequently the founders were northern missionary societies, supported by philanthropic associations, churches, local communities, and private donors; according to Ringenberg, with few exceptions, “before 1900 to be a black college meant in almost every case to be a private Protestant institution.”26 For example, Howard University, founded in 1867, had as its primary focus the training of Black clergymen. However, most Black colleges founded during the late nineteenth century focused on training teachers for the estimated one million school-aged African American children and the more than three million adults who also sought an education. Unfortunately, these normal schools “often presented a paternalistic vision of black-white relations with the leadership and faculty of these schools being dominated by whites.”27 With time, the curricula of these colleges expanded and some institutions grew in reputation and resources while others continuously competed for talented students and financial support.28

Along with the presence and impact of religiously-affiliated liberal arts colleges in America in the nineteenth century, the 1880s saw the birth of the Bible institute movement, with schools designed to train not professional clergy but laymen and laywomen for practical ministry. The vision of men like A. B. Simpson and D. L. Moody led to the creation of schools such as the Moody Bible Institute; indeed, “Simpson and Moody’s efforts were the beginnings of an
avalanche of Bible institutes which were started from 1886 to 1915. In this 30-year period, no less than 32 institutes were formally organized.”

Over the years, even though some of those institutes such as Moody have maintained the same identity and mission while also adapting to new educational demands, many of the other institutes have gone on to develop into more comprehensive Christian colleges. The segregation that produced the historically Black colleges and universities of the nineteenth century also produced segregated Black Bible institutes, especially in the American South. In one such case, faculty and students from the Evangelical Theological College in Dallas (now known as Dallas Theological Seminary) were instrumental in the creation of the Dallas Colored Bible Institute, known today as the Southern Bible Institute, opened in 1927 to train African-American men and women to become pastors, missionaries, and Sunday school teachers.

In the twentieth century, the primary challenge for both Bible institutes and Christian colleges was how to maintain their relevance in a rapidly changing world. With the growing impact of higher criticism in theology and Darwinism in science, the secular academy increasingly discounted the relevance and credibility of Christianity in general and Christian education in particular. As a reaction to modernism, some Christian leaders, churches, and schools withdrew from fellowship with the so-called mainline churches (Methodist, Lutheran, etc.) and became identified as “fundamentalists” because of their adherence to the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith. They chose the path of withdrawal from society in all but spiritual matters. Other Christian leaders, churches, and schools began to self-identify as evangelicals, with the distinction that, while also adhering to the fundamentals of the faith, they chose to not isolate themselves from the other denominations or society in general.
Today’s evangelical colleges and universities continue affirm the centrality of the Christian faith and the integration of Scripture and knowledge. These institutions strive to bring a biblical lens to bear on every area of study, “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5 NASB). Rather than retreating from society, they encourage compassionate and humble engagement with the culture and demonstrate that faith and academic excellence must go hand in hand. As the CCCU Mission statement declares, their purpose is: “To advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth.”

The Origins and Early Years of Cedarville College

The legacy of the Reformed Presbyterians who founded Cedarville College is three-fold: fervent adherence to doctrinal beliefs founded in Scripture; fervent evangelism for all those who have not heard of salvation through Christ; and solid moral convictions regarding the society in which they lived, including in the early nineteenth century their public opposition to the institution of slavery. The seeds of the town of Cedarville and the future college were first sown in 1804 by a group of Presbyterians known as Scotch Covenanters when they settled along Massie’s Creek. In 1829 the congregation called a minister from South Carolina, the Reverend Hugh D. McMillan, who came accompanied by most of his congregation because of their opposition to slavery in their home state. The Rev. McMillan led an academy for young men in his home in the 1840’s and ‘50s and eventually that home became the first site of Cedarville College. Later, led by the Rev. Hugh H. McMillan and Dr. James F. Morton, the then current pastor of the Cedarville Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian congregation was instrumental in raising funds and support for a denominational college in the town. By the late 1800’s Cedarville had grown into a prosperous small town, the second largest town in Greene County next to
Xenia. Cedarville had the additional advantage of being located on the route of a major railway and was perceived to be free from the moral and physical dangers associated with larger cities such as Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. And, as the Cedarville College 1896-97 catalogue even noted, the area was “free from malaria”.

From its very beginning Cedarville College was co-educational; the following statement is from the second annual catalog, for the academic year 1896-97: “Experience has proven that the sexes should be educated together. It tends to higher culture, more refined tastes, and better order than where this privilege is not granted. Accordingly students of both sexes are admitted under the rule adopted in 1894.” (p. 11) Faculty for the first year of Cedarville College (1894-95) included five men—David McKinney, James F. Morton (Bible), W. Renwick McChesney (ancient languages), Frank Jurkat (modern languages), and Charles Schenck (English and science) and two women—Carrie Blair (mathematics) and Belle Beazell (music) (p. 3). The student body was comprised of twenty “ladies” and seventeen “gentlemen”, almost all from Cedarville and surrounding towns (p. 5). Within ten years (1904-05), the faculty had grown to eleven professors, including four women, and 55 students, including 33 men and 22 women. In 1915 when Dr. McKinney stepped down as president, there were sixteen individuals as faculty, administration or staff, including nine women, and 86 students including more than forty women. Cedarville’s first international student, Chang-Tong Walter Chu, from Hangchow (Hangzhou), China, began his course of study in 1917 and completed the Bachelor’s degree in 1920. He then enrolled in the College of Arts, Philosophy and Science at The Ohio State University in 1920 and received another Bachelor’s degree in 1922.
The first president of Cedarville College, Dr. David McKinney, led the institution from 1894 to 1915. He was only thirty-four years old when he accepted the leadership of the college, serving simultaneously as the pastor of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church on Plum Street in Cincinnati (1888-1928). As has been documented in other sources, Dr. McKinney would travel by train from Cincinnati to Cedarville to attend to college business several times a month; in his absence, Dr. W. Renwick McChesney directed the administration along with his teaching responsibilities. In addition to his leadership of Cedarville College, Dr. McKinney sought to have a significant social impact in his home city of Cincinnati. During his tenure as pastor in Cincinnati, Dr. McKinney was the secretary of the “Committee of Five Hundred” which led a campaign for municipal reform in Cincinnati in 1889, as well as a member of the executive committee of the Evangelical Alliance of Cincinnati. The 1895-96 and 1896-97 records of the 16th-17th Annual Report of the Provisional Central Board of the Associated Charities of Cincinnati show that Rev. David McKinney served on the committee for “Co-Operation of Churches in Charitable Work.” The stated objects of this association were:

1. The promotion of co-operation between public and private charitable institutions, benevolent societies, churches and individuals.
2. The maintenance of a body of friendly visitors to the unfortunate.
3. The encouragement of thrift, independence and industry.
4. The provision for temporary employment, and industrial instruction.
5. The collection and diffusion of knowledge on all subjects connected with the relief of distress.
6. The prevention of imposition and the diminution of vagrancy and pauperism.

In light of his involvement in bringing a Christian influence to society in Cincinnati, it was inevitable that he would eventually decide to turn all of his attention to his pastorate and give
over the reins of Cedarville College to a president who could give the school his full attention. In his resignation letter written in 1915, McKinney observes that “My desire has always been to promote the good of the college” but at the same time, the preaching of the gospel in his dear old Cincinnati was “the one work of my life.” That burden to preach the gospel and minister to the needy is reflected in his remarks regarding the mission of Cedarville College published in the 1903 *Memorabilia*:

> Above all Cedarville College believes that the culture of the mind without the nurture and growth of spiritual life is a mistake. Education without morality is a menace to the state. Morality to be deep and abiding must have its springs in religion. Accordingly the Bible is the textbook of the college. No student can graduate who has not taken a thorough and systematic course in it.  

The importance of commitment to Scripture, to evangelism, to having an impact on society, and having the proper preparation to do so are echoed in the words of the first president. According to the history of Cedarville College written by Dr. Cleveland McDonald, McKinney’s legacy was faithful stewardship in that “[h]e assumed leadership of an organization that had only a charter and a piece of bare land, and left it a thriving college, free of debt, with three substantial buildings, a dedicated faculty, loyal alumni, and an increasing number of faithful supporters.”

The second president of Cedarville College, W. Renwick McChesney, continued the legacy of his predecessor in directing the academic and spiritual development of the students. In addition to leading the college and teaching ancient languages, rhetoric, and other courses, he briefly served as interim pastor at the Presbyterian Church in Cedarville (1903-04, 1906-08) and also served five terms as the Greene County representative to the Ohio State Assembly in the 1930s.
There he served on the Education Committee of the House of Representatives and worked on behalf of higher education in the state. McChesney’s vision for Christian higher education is stated clearly in his inaugural address:

That college and that faculty are rendering the greatest service to humanity and bringing the greatest glory to God that are... developing character which will ring true to principle whether it be popular or unpopular...

Citizens of Cedarville and community, Board of Trustees, Alumni, Students and Faculty, let us here and now dedicate ourselves anew, with the like devotion which characterized our illustrious fathers... and in so doing we pray not for lighter tasks but greater strength; not for passing honor, whose getting is unworthy of earnest effort, but for potent influence so holy, rational, and serviceable and devoid of selfish purpose that it shall uplift fellowmen as it breathes upon them its beneficence and so continue, after our work is done, to carry its blissful charm and power to coming generations.

Dr. McChesney served as president of Cedarville College for twenty-five years (1915-1940) and for fifty years as a faculty member (1894-1944). He served during the so-called “golden years” of the Presbyterian leadership when the college experienced continual growth and economic prosperity but also saw the difficult years of two world wars and the Great Depression. In 1939, in one of his final reports to the board of trustees, he expressed his faith in God’s favor toward the college: “Thankful to God for His goodness, trusting in Him to guide us, and praying continually that He will lead men and women of means to bestow liberally of their gifts upon Cedarville College, and fully believing that God will bring Cedarville College into an enlarged place, I respectfully submit my report.” The faith and service of men such as Dr. David
McKinney and Dr. W. Renwick McChesney contributed to the firm foundations of Cedarville University.

Karlh Bull, Presbyterian trustee of Cedarville College and author of the “Cedarville” section of the Official Greene County Sesquicentennial program (1953), summarized the impact of Cedarville College in this way:

Several hundred young men and women have graduated from the institution and are scattered over the nation as well as foreign nations in religious and educational work. Its success cannot be measured in financial results but the training of youth for life’s work cannot be estimated as to true value to mankind.

In God’s providence, the tradition of Christian higher education in the United States, the vision of the Reformed Presbyterian founders of Cedarville College and the vision of the Regular Baptists of Baptist Bible Institute of Cleveland all converged to produce an academically-solid institution known first for “the crown and the covenant of Christ” and then “for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ”.

table 1  Denominational Colleges Founded in Ohio 1800-1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>Kenyon College</td>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>Gambier</td>
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<td>1831</td>
<td>St. Xavier’s College</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
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<td>1831</td>
<td>Denison College</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Granville</td>
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<td>1837</td>
<td>Muskingum College</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>New Concord</td>
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<td>Ohio Wesleyan College</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Delaware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>College Name</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Location</td>
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<tr>
<td>1845</td>
<td>Baldwin University</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Berea</td>
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<td>1845</td>
<td>Wittenberg College</td>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>Springfield</td>
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<td>1846</td>
<td>Mt. Union College</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Alliance</td>
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<td>1847</td>
<td>Otterbein College</td>
<td>Church of United Brethren in Christ</td>
<td>Westerville</td>
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<td>Hiram College</td>
<td>Disciples</td>
<td>Hiram</td>
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<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>Urbana College</td>
<td>New Church (Swedenborgian)</td>
<td>Urbana</td>
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<td>1850</td>
<td>Heidelberg College</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>Tiffin</td>
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<td>1850</td>
<td>Capital University</td>
<td>Evangelical Lutheran</td>
<td>Columbus</td>
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<td>1850</td>
<td>Defiance Female Seminary</td>
<td>Christian (Defiance College 1903)</td>
<td>Defiance</td>
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<td>Methodist Episcopal</td>
<td>Wilberforce/Xenia</td>
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<td>Scio College</td>
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<td>Scio, Harrison Co.</td>
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<td>1863</td>
<td>German Wallace College</td>
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<td>Berea</td>
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<td>University of Wooster</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Wooster</td>
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<td>1870</td>
<td>Buchtel College</td>
<td>Universalist</td>
<td>Akron</td>
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<td>Wilmington College</td>
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<td>Ohio Northern University</td>
<td>Non-sectarian</td>
<td>Ada</td>
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<td>Rio Grande College</td>
<td>Free Will Baptist</td>
<td>Rio Grande</td>
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<td>Ashland College</td>
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<td>1882</td>
<td>Findlay College</td>
<td>Church of God</td>
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<td>St. Ignatius College</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Cleveland</td>
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<td>Lima College</td>
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<td>Lima</td>
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<td>1894</td>
<td>Cedarville College</td>
<td>Reformed Presbyterian</td>
<td>Cedarville</td>
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5 Solomon, p. 4.
6 Ringenberg, p. 85.
7 Goodchild, p. 13.
8 Ringenberg, p. 57.
12 “About WU—History,” Wilberforce University website (http://www.wilberforce.edu/welcome/history.html) accessed 4 June 2014. In 1887 the State of Ohio began to fund Wilberforce University by establishing a combined normal and industrial department. This department later became the University's sister institution, Central State University. Wilberforce also spawned another institution, Payne Theological Seminary. It was founded in 1891 as an outgrowth of the Theological Department at Wilberforce University.
13 Solomon, p. 16.
14 Solomon, p. 16.
15 Solomon, p. 50.
16 Thompson, pp. 446-478.
17 Ringenberg, pp. 84, 97.
18 Ringenberg, pp. 116-117.
20 Solomon, p. 45.
21 Solomon, pp. 44-45.
22 Solomon, pp. 55-56.
23 Thompson, p. 439.
24 Solomon cited in Goodchild, p. 15.
26 Ringenberg, p. 88.
28 Ringenberg, pp. 89-91.


33 House, p. 486.

34 House, p. 487.


36 As noted in the Introduction to this book, the history of Cedarville University has been ably chronicled by Dr. Cleveland McDonald (*The History of Cedarville College*, 1966) and Drs. Murray Murdoch and Thomas Mach (*Cedarville College: A Century of Commitment*, 1987, and the revised version, *Cedarville University: Inspiring Greatness for 125 Years*, 2012). The purpose of this section is to provide a complementary background for the events they have documented.


39 C. McDonald, pp. 11, 15-16.

40 C. McDonald, pp. 32-33.


42 “Resignation of Dr. M’Kinney” Cedarville College Gavelyte (1915), p.3.


44 C. McDonald, p. 48.


46 C. McDonald, p. 57.

47 Inaugural Address quoted in C. McDonald, p. 53.

48 Report quoted in C. McDonald, p. 72.