

Building and Opening The Farmers' High School, 1855-59

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Every year, on February 22, Penn State faithfully celebrates Founders' Day. The anniversary marks the date in 1855 when Governor James Pollock signed the state legislature's charter establishing the Farmers' High School of Pennsylvania—a public institution designed to serve a statewide constituency and a new class of students, the sons of farmers, the “industrial class.”

But the better birthday might be September 12, 1855. That's when the newly formed Board of Trustees met in Harrisburg to select the site for this new experimental institution based on scientific agriculture. It's one thing to charter a college. It's quite another to figure out where it's going to be located.

After a six-month “competition” in which proposals from nine counties were offered—many but not all visited by the selection committee—the Trustees came to a decision. It wasn't preordained. Trustee Frederick Watts of Carlisle, Cumberland County, made the committee's final report. He then moved to adopt “the proposition of General James Irvin of Centre Furnace,” noting that the Centre County site would “best promote the interests of the institution.”

The selection committee's first site visit had, in fact, taken place at Centre Furnace. On June 26, 1855, they were greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of 150 people organized by the Centre County Agricultural Society and treated to a “sumptuous dinner” at Centre Furnace Mansion prepared by Mary Irvin Thompson, wife of ironmaster Moses Thompson and the sister of James Irvin.

A Contentious Trustees' Meeting

But the reception at Centre Furnace, in and of itself, wasn't enough to carry the day. The September 12 trustee meeting gave rise to intense debate, generating differing opinions as to where the school should be located. After Watts's initial motion for Centre County, Trustees James Gowen and Alfred Elwyn made substitute motions for the offers from Blair County and Franklin County, respectively. Watts then moved for postponement of the vote, recommending instead a new selection committee to further examine the sites and propose a final location. Watts's fair-handed motion was defeated, however. Another motion proposed to select the Allegheny County offer, but it too was defeated. Finally, Watts's original motion to accept the

Centre County offer was approved.

At the same meeting, Watts was elected as president of the Farmers' High School Board of Trustees, an office he would serve until 1874. Watts was eminently qualified: a prominent attorney and judge, a reporter for the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, a trustee of Dickinson College, president of the Cumberland Valley Railroad, but above all an agricultural reformer devoted to improving the political, economic, and social standing of Pennsylvania's farmers. Since 1851, Watts had served as founding president of the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society but stepped down in 1855 to devote more time to the Farmers' High School.

And so, on September 12, 1855, the legal framework was put in place to locate the school on the



Old Main in 1859. The central figure is Frederick Watts's son, Class of 1862, and also named Frederick.

Photo courtesy of The Pennsylvania State University Archives.

200-acre tract offered for free by General Irvin—a tract known today as Penn State's historic campus core. Now came the hard part: building this experimental school from scratch, and doing so amidst a growing chorus of critics. They complained of the school's remote location, inaccessibility by rail, poor soil, and lack of running water. Watts, however, defended the site on its combination “of the most essential advantages of soil, surface, exposure, healthful-

ness, and centrality...”

One Step Backward, But More Steps Forward

The next step was to find a president. Watts and the trustees had someone in mind, the obvious choice, in fact. He was Charles Trego, professor of geology at the University of Pennsylvania and before that, a state representative. In that post, he promoted a bill authorizing the first geological survey of Pennsylvania, which he conducted and then wrote the 400-page tome *Geology of Pennsylvania*. Trego was an elected member of the American Philosophical Society and, of course, the state agricultural society. In short, he checked all the boxes.

But Trego turned down the Trustees' effort to hire him, which he characterized as a clumsy, disjointed process that he found insulting. He was also wary of the school's remote location, the meager salary offered, and the requirement that he live at the school. With Trego's refusal, the presidency of the Farmers' High School would go unfilled for nearly four years.

Nevertheless, Watts and the trustees forged ahead. At their January 4, 1856, meeting, in Harrisburg, they appointed a committee to request a \$50,000 appropriation from the legislature. (The enabling legislation for the school did not offer any financial support.) The board also approved “the plan of the College as presented by H.N. McAllister and of the plan of the Barn presented by Frederick Watts.” Needing a knowledgeable agriculturalist to supervise operations, they hired William Waring, a Centre County nurseryman, teacher, farmer, and expert in fruit growing, to lay out the plan, clear the farm plots, and otherwise improve the grounds. (Long after his death, Waring gained fame as the grandfather of Fred Waring, the nationally eminent choral director of Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians.) Finally, the trustees accepted the offer of James Irvin for an additional 200 acres, to be rented at first and later purchased for \$12,000.

Construction Gets Under Way

In May 1856, Watts contracted with the Carlisle firm of Turner and Natcher to construct the main building—then called the “College Building”—for \$55,000. Watts was a Carlisle resident, knew the firm’s owners, and was able to hire them quickly. Another contractor was brought in to build Watts’s large barn—the first building to be completed on the campus, in late 1856. An expert in farm and barn design, Watts located his barn on the site of present-day Carnegie Building. Other facilities such as corn cribs, wagon sheds, cisterns, a farmhouse and the like got under way as well.

Construction on the College Building began on June 24, 1856, with brick makers and excavators doing the preliminary work. Workmen laid the first stones of the foundation on August 18, 1856—166 years ago this month. The limestone was quarried from a pit at the southeastern corner of the present-day Old Main lawn, near the intersection of the Health and Human Development Mall, College Avenue, and Pugh Street. Today, a small stone marker sits atop the site.

Things progressed quickly. Watts’s annual report of 1857 noted that the “walls of the west wing are



Campus Barn of Watts’s design, built in 1856 on the site of the present-day Carnegie Building. It was moved to West Campus in 1889 and was burned to the ground in 1891.

Photo courtesy of The Pennsylvania State University Archives.

up three storeys and are plainly but very substantially built of superior, gray lime stone. They are four feet thick at the base, and are founded entirely upon solid rock.” The wing, when finished, was to contain a suite of rooms for a private residence on the first and second floors, four recitation rooms on the first floor and two on the second, a “society hall” on the third floor, five store-rooms, and sixty-nine dormitory rooms. The hope was to have the wing completed and ready for occupancy by November 1858.

Meanwhile, the effort to secure a state appropriation had come to fruition. On May 20, 1857, the legislature granted \$25,000 free and clear and promised an additional \$25,000 if an equal amount could be raised through a private subscription campaign. This was the first appropriation in the institution’s history; the second would not arrive until 1861.

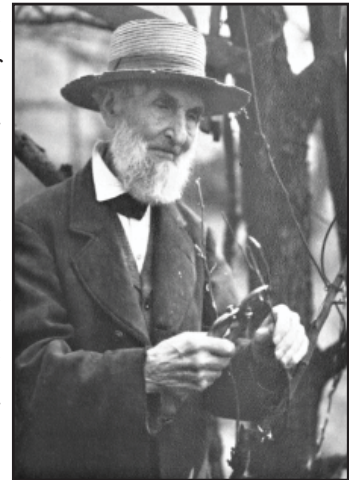
The Celebratory Spirit of September 1857

The high-water mark of those early years came in September 1857, as construction continued apace, roads leading to the school were laid out, and petitions for a mail route to the school were submitted. The trustees met at the school, in Watts’s barn, for their annual election. It was a celebratory evening.

In what thereafter would be called his “Barn Speech of 1857,” Watts characterized the new education offered by the Farmers’ High School as the lever that would lift the farming community into parity with the more powerful industrial and mercantile sectors of the Commonwealth. Although the state was industrializing quickly, its wealth in the 1850s was still generated largely by agriculture. The farming community, Watts believed, had received nothing in return for their contributions, having been ignored by the state’s power brokers for far too long.

The power of the great agricultural body, Watts said, could be increased only through education. “Education will impart influence,” he noted, but it had to be the right kind of education, a new form combining science, art, and labor. The Farmers’ High School “is intended to supply this great social, political, moral and economic want, and while it improves the agricultural mind, and trains the hands, it will do both at less expenses than the purely literary training can be obtained for.”

Watts and his colleagues did not envision a mod-



William G. Waring (1816-1906), hired in 1856 as general superintendent of the Farmers’ High School.

Photo courtesy of The Pennsylvania State University Archives.

est enterprise. Despite the school's name—intended to assuage farmers suspicious of “literary” colleges that would take their sons off the farm and turn them into idle gentlemen disdainful of manual labor—the institution was designed to be a college from the start. It would offer baccalaureate degrees through a rigorous, science-based, four-year curriculum.

“Our school is founded on a scale that will afford complete instruction, equal to that of our leading colleges, for should not the education of Farmers’ sons be superior, rather than less than equal to that of any other class?” Watts asserted.

Economic Depression Descends

September 1857 was notable for another reason, this one ominous, foreshadowing tougher times ahead. The Panic of 1857, a national financial crisis, began that same month. It crippled the nation’s economy and severely impacted Pennsylvania’s iron industry. Centre County was one of the leading iron producers in the state. Local banks soon found themselves in trouble and many workmen lost their jobs. The crisis also crippled the trustees’ efforts to raise the \$25,000 needed to match the state’s promise of an additional \$25,000.

Despite the depression, Watts’s report of January 19, 1858, waxed optimistic. He reminded legislators that the institution had built itself thus far



Frederick Watts at about age 50.
Photo courtesy of The
Pennsylvania State University
Archives.

with \$45,000—\$10,000 from the state agricultural society, \$10,000 from the citizens of Centre and Huntingdon counties from the original subscription campaign, and \$25,000 in state appropriation. He projected that the College Building would be completed during the coming summer—“two hundred and thirty-three feet in front and five stories high, with wings at either end.” He noted the prospects for more money: \$5,000 from the estate of Elliott Cresson, \$25,000 from individual subscriptions to match and release the \$25,000 the legislature had promised. As things turned out, only the \$5,000 bequest would come to fruition.

The trustees did not meet again until June 1858, and by then things were in disarray. The pressing issue was a threatened halt to the completion of the College Building. Watts’s building and business committee reported the “embarrassment” of Turner and Natcher, the Carlisle construction company, that “they may fail” from finishing the project. Bills for materials and supplies were overdue and liens upon the building were looming large. Turner and Natcher had severely underestimated the cost of the building. It would take twice

as much as their original contract of \$55,000. Three weeks later, on July 7, 1858, work stopped entirely.

By this time, the five stories were substantially completed, but still much work remained. The trustees were now committed to readying the building for occupancy by the coming winter. With the help of architect C.B. Callahan, directing construction for the remainder of the project, they completed the task on time.

Preparing to Open for Instruction

The sense of urgency was on display when Watts and the trustees convened in Harrisburg on December 8, 1858. They resolved to recruit students and open the school for instruction on February 16, 1859. With the west wing now completed, the trustees authorized the business and building committee to hire faculty, buy furniture, and otherwise do everything necessary to get the school into operation.

The trustees set sixteen years as the minimal age for the students, all of them male. They wanted to begin the inaugural academic year with 100 Pennsylvania students, each to be recommended by their county agricultural societies; students applying from counties where no such society existed would be judged for admission by a special committee of trustees. With hopes of generating \$10,000 in operating income that first year, the trustees set tuition at \$100, which included room and board. Following the agricultural calendar, the academic year would begin in February and end ten months later, in mid-December, with no vacations in between.

The trustees also refined the criteria for admission, requiring “a good knowledge of reading, writing, geography, arithmetic, and grammar.” Those with grounding in natural philosophy, geometry, and algebra would be given extra consideration. In addition, students needed to present evidence of “good moral character and industrious habits.” Students would be required to perform three hours of labor daily, on the farm, in the shops, and around the College Building.

“A new light is about to break upon the agricultural community,” Watts wrote in his annual report in early 1859. “The institution will afford a place where their sons may be educated to a fitness for a high position in any of the walks of life; as well to enable them to conduct the operations of the farm with the aid of scientific attainment.”

And so on February 16, 1859, with 69 students present, four faculty members but no president, a building one-third complete in an improbable location, but with well-defined purpose and lofty ambition, the Farmers’ High School of Pennsylvania opened its doors and went to work.