

Centre County's Selection as the Site for the Farmers' High School

By Roger L. Williams

Originally printed in the CCHS *Mansion Notes*, Winter 2021

One hundred fifty years ago, a warm, sunny day in late June turned out to be profoundly significant for Centre County—indeed, the turning point to its future. On June 26, 1855, the site selection committee of the newly formed Board of Trustees for the Farmers' High School of Pennsylvania arrived at Centre Furnace to look over the lands offered by ironmaster James Irvin.

Headed by President George Boal, the Centre County Agricultural Society staged a gala welcome for the visitors. Irvin had offered three farms for consideration, which the committee inspected. Afterwards, "the Trustees and all the company repaired to the dwelling house of Moses Thompson of Centre Furnace where one hundred and fifty persons were entertained by a sumptuous dinner prepared by Mrs. Thompson," according to Linn's *History of Centre County*.

The three-person site selection committee included James Pollock, the newly elected Whig Governor of Pennsylvania; Frederick Watts of Cumberland County, a lawyer and leading agriculturalist who had recently resigned as founding president of the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society to devote more time to the new school; and Dr. Alfred Elwyn, a Philadelphia physician, scientist, and agriculturalist. Four more trustees came as well—including the "local" trustee from the town's wealth and in-school.

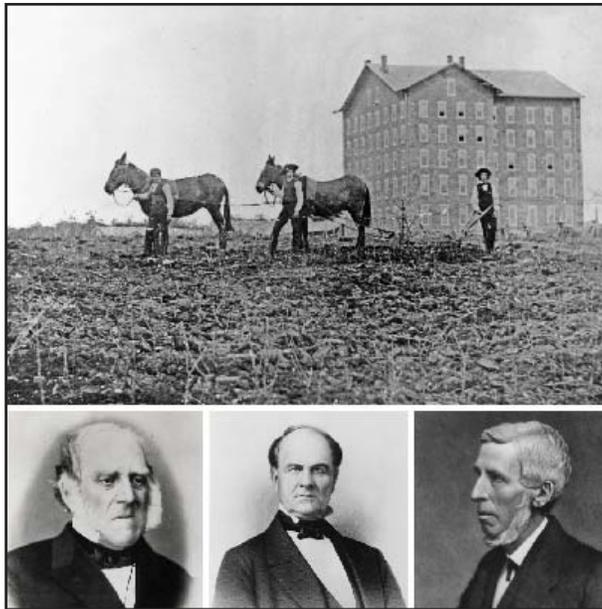
They were joined by minaries: Andrew Curtin, monwealth and superintendent to become Pennsylvania governor; James T. Hale, County's twentieth judicial elected to the U.S. House Thompson, Irvin's brother-owned one-third of the and William Waring, a who would soon be hired farm. But it took more than the deal for Centre

The Farmers' High originally chartered in by Watts to then-Governor re-chartered by the legisla- on February 22, 1855. The called for some 60-plus county, but a number far too large to ever convene in one place and time. So the state agricultural society asked that the charter be revoked and replaced with one specifying only 13 trustees—four ex officio and nine more appointed by name.

From the very beginning, the school was designed to be of collegiate grade, awarding baccalaureate degrees through scientific and practical coursework. The name "Farmers' High School"—which rings strange to modern ears—was chosen because the state agricultural society wanted to avoid the negative connotations that the word "college" implied to the farming community: a place a for idle "gentlemen" who disdained manual labor and hard work and who indulged in literary studies at the expense of more practical subjects.

The state charter of February 22 required the trustees to meet at Harrisburg on the second Sunday of June, 1855, to begin organizing the school and selecting a site. At the board's first meeting on June 14, Watts nominated Governor Pollock as chair. The board then began to consider the various proposals that had come in over the last few months.

There were lots of them. Offers to donate at least 200 acres came from Erie County, Blair County, and Centre County. Offers to sell land came from Perry County and Allegheny County. The board asked the site selection committee to quickly "view the lands" of the offers and examine "such other situations as to them



Top: Old Main in 1859. Bottom: Frederick Watts, James Irvin, Hugh McAllister. Photos are courtesy of The Pennsylvania State University Archives.

other Centre County lu- secretary of the Com- dent of public instruction, vania's great Civil War president judge of Centre district and soon to be of Representatives; Moses in-law who at the time Centre Furnace operation; respected horticulturalist to superintend the school's a star-studded gala to seal County.

School of Pennsylvania, 1854 upon a plan outlined William Bigler, had been ture and Governor Pollock reason? The 1854 charter trustees, one from each

shall seem advisable.”

The site visits took ten days. They visited the sites in Centre and Erie counties first, followed by those in Allegheny and Blair counties. The trustees then convened at Harrisburg on July 17, electing Watts as chair. While they wanted to make the decision quickly, they also wanted to do so fairly and impartially, and so postponed any selection. Meanwhile, offers had come in from Franklin County, which the committee visited in September; Huntingdon County; Dauphin County, and Union County. Oddly, no offers came from southeastern Pennsylvania, the most agriculturally advanced region of the state.

But Centre County had prepared assiduously and sweetened its proposal. The groundwork was laid just after the annual meeting of the state agricultural society in mid-January 1855, a conclave to which Centre County sent delegates. On January 24, the Centre Countians passed a resolution endorsing the establishment of the Farmers’ High School and urging the legislature to issue the second charter. Ironmaster Irvin spoke vigorously in support of the resolution, offering to donate 200 acres of Centre Furnace land. On February 22, he made his official offer to the executive committee of the state agricultural society, which passed it on to the school’s new board of trustees.

Noting the value of the school to the state at large, Irvin observed that “It would be especially beneficial to the particular district in which it shall be established, and I therefore desire its location in Centre County—if we would add dignity to manual labor, if we should have it held in honor by the Community, we must associate it with Science, and if we would lessen the expense of acquiring Scientific Knowledge so as to bring the cost within the means of the farming community, we must connect its acquisition with labor.”

Irvin was not a man to be trifled with. He had been talking about a “Farm School” for Centre County since 1850. In addition to his vastly successful iron-making operations, he was general of a state militia division, a prominent Whig politician (favoring internal improvements to develop and unify the nation) and one of the wealthiest men in Pennsylvania. As a former two-term congressman (1841-45) and unsuccessful candidate for governor (1847), he was well connected in state politics and highly influential. Not incidentally, his site offered some political safety, being far removed from the power centers of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg.

In addition to his original offer of 200 acres, Irvin proposed to include an additional 200 acres of adjoining farmland, to be leased at \$600 per year and eventually sold to the institution for \$60 per acre or \$12,000 in all. That was followed by a guarantee—signed by Irvin, McAllister, and Curtin—providing an additional \$10,000 to be raised among the citizens of Centre and Huntingdon counties.

At the trustees’ next meeting in Harrisburg on September 12, Watts made the committee’s final report. Acknowledging the other bids that had come in over the summer, Watts moved to adopt “the proposition of General James Irvin,” noting that the Centre County site would “best promote the interests of the institution...”

Then things got interesting. Trustees James Gowen and Alfred Elwyn made substitute motions for the offers of Blair County and Franklin County, respectively, but both motions failed. Watts then moved for postponement of the vote, recommending instead a new selection committee of Gowen, Augustus Hiester, and John Strohm to examine the sites and propose a final location. Watts’s fair-handed motion was voted down, however. Another motion was made to select the Allegheny County offer, but it too was defeated. Finally, Watts’s original motion to accept the Centre County site was approved.

The trustees’ site visit and gala dinner at Centre Furnace in late June apparently did not sway the decision after all. Consider Watts’s impartiality in proposing a new site selection committee after his initial motion for Centre County was defeated. And then consider the subsequent motions by several trustees to accept other bids.

The decision incurred immediate and persistent criticism, however. The school’s remote location, inaccessibility by rail, questionable soil quality, and lack of running water were cited as major drawbacks. Watts—elected as president of the board of trustees at that same September 1855 meeting—defended the site in an 1857 speech:

“Let there be no adverse feelings founded on local preference. What motive could there be to induce those who examined and determined the locality of this school to do else than right? With the approval of my associates, I could gladly have taken it into my own dear valley of the Cumberland, but in the exercise of a sound and clear judgment...the Board having looked over all proposed lands and considered all circumstances, believe the one chosen to be best. It is possible that we were at fault, yet I have ever believed the selection made combined more advantages than any other offered, and I ask for myself and my associates the credit at least of honest motives, and of all to consider how many of the most essential advantages of soil, surface, exposure, healthfulness, and centrality are combined in the ground we have met upon.”

Criticism of the school’s location would not abate during Watts’s long tenure as board president (1855-74). But the die had been cast, the Rubicon crossed, and the stage set for the eventual emergence of one of world’s foremost research universities—though it would be decades in the making.