

The River and the Valley

The light of the early morning sun sparkles on the water and a gentle haze hangs over the mountains to the north and west. This is the Hudson Valley, locale of the country seats of Livingstons, Astors, Roosevelts, and Vanderbilts. For 200 years this valley has provided one of the most gracious patterns of life in all America, and many who could live anywhere they wished, chose to live here. And, from these River homes, men went out to die before the ramparts of Quebec, to help draft the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, to administer the oath of office to President Washington, to purchase the Louisiana territory, to serve in the cabinets of Presidents of the United States — and two (Martin Van Buren and Franklin D. Roosevelt) themselves to be Presidents.

They were both gentlemen and men of affairs, and one of them was shrewd enough to back Robert Fulton in his belief that a ship could be driven by steam, and it was in front of Robert R. Livingston's Hudson River home of Clermont that Fulton's steamboat (later named the "Clermont") chugged on its first voyage and went on to become the first commercially successful steamboat.

And among their other achievements, the Hudson River estate families founded a college, named by them St. Stephen's, later called Bard College.

This book is an account of how that college was brought into being, and what kind of college it was, and how it changed and developed over the years.

In 1841 a 26-year old Newburgh, New York, nurseryman, Andrew Jackson Downing, published his *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*. The book was an instant success; it went through three more editions in the remaining ten years of Downing's short life and was followed by four other volumes. "It could be found," said a contemporary, "on almost every parlour table the country round."

"The essential principle of his unique and still-valid approach is that all landscape design is an abstract or idealized imitation of nature."¹

Collaborating at times with A. J. Davis, a gifted architect of the Gothic revival, and with his one-time partner, Calvert Vaux, and his pupil, Frederick Law Olmstead, Downing had a tremendous influence on 19th century America both as an architect and as a social philosopher.

Downing was engaged to plan the public areas and gardens surrounding the White House and the Capitol. Among other commissions his partner Vaux and his pupil Olmstead designed Central Park in New York City and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and Olmstead the grounds of Stanford University and the Vanderbilt estate of Biltmore near Asheville, North Carolina.

Downing and his associates did much to set both the esthetic tone and the social philosophy of mid-century America, and especially the Hudson Valley. The River-front estates were the scene of some of their most important work and served as examples in Downing's influential writing. There is a full chapter on Montgomery Place, Barrytown, in *Rural Essays* — "one of the superb old seats"²; and Blithewood, "one of the most charming villa residences in the Union"; Clermont, Hyde Park, Ellerslie, are all treated in *Landscape Gardening*.³

The villa, or country house proper, then is the most refined home of America — the home of its most leisurely and educated class of citizens. Nature and art both lend it their happiest influence . . . surrounded by the perennial freshness of nature, enriched without and within by objects of universal beauty and interest — objects that touch the heart and awaken the understanding — it is in such houses that we should look for the happiest social and moral development of our people.⁴

In short, Downing is here expressing the view of his age that the chief value of a refined and cultivated way of life is not that it represents ease and self-indulgence for those fortunate enough to enjoy it, but that it serves as an example and leaven for the life of the whole society, "for the social and moral development of our people."

The 19th century believed that it was possible by leadership and example to change the world. Especially was it possible to do so through special institutions formed for that purpose — and accordingly the 19th century proliferated such institutions. The estate culture was to embody those values of example and leadership — and so was the college the estate culture would create.

Bard College was founded on the grounds of one of the great 19th century Hudson River estates, John Bard's seat, variously known as Annandale or Blithewood and, especially in its early years, the College was both a part and product of "the estate culture." The twenty mile "continuous succession of fine seats,"⁵ as Downing phrased it, (roughly the stretch from Tivoli to Staatsburg) is still the environment of the College, and several of those estates are now part of the College's campus. It is a stretch of river-bank associated with such great family names as Livingston, Cruger, Stevens, Donaldson, Montgomery, Chanler, Armstrong, Astor, Aldrich, Delano, Aspinwall, Vanderbilt, Van Ness, DePeyster, Bartlett, Beekman, Roosevelt, Dows, Dinsmore, Hull, Huntington, and Schuyler. Life on the River estates

of the 19th century was very pleasant: as a rule the families were large, especially when you counted cousins and aunts and in-laws, and household staff included some lifelong employees who seemed to be part of the family too. It was an age of long visits and generous hospitality.

Mile-long drives led through shady woods to sloping, sweeping lawns, and wide verandas overlooking the River. Inside the houses were ballrooms, and libraries stacked to the ceiling with matched sets of favorite authors, many in tooled leather bindings. Carriage roads wound through each property and joined the roads of the neighboring estates — and people are still alive who can remember when you could drive all the way from Tivoli to Staatsburg on the estate roads, hardly touching the public highway.

Most of the River houses had been located with care to enjoy the best possible views of the Hudson and the mountains beyond. This meant that they were set well out on the high ridges which extended like fingers toward the River. In many places the banks were so steep that you could not see the nearer shore at all. And when in the mid-19th century the railroad was built right on the edge of the River from New York to Albany, from most of the houses the tracks did not show, and their occupants were scarcely aware of the passing trains.

Almost every estate had an extensive farming operation to which the owner usually gave personal attention. (But the farm did not support the estate, which usually depended upon the owner's capital and income for its continuance.) As a matter of fact, the river-front acres were not the best farming lands, being often of hard, rather unproductive clay, baking like rock when dry, and unstable and unworkable when wet. The land was better for farming in the flat valleys three or four miles back from the River.

Usually it was not the founder of the family fortune who established the estate. The men of that generation generally had been too busy building up their businesses and establishing their fortunes to have any time for the gentlemanly interests of riding, estate farming, architecture, or book collecting. It was the next generation of the younger sons (or sometimes a wife or widow) who poured interest and energy into the Hudson River lands.

But the estates shaped a culture and that culture built St. Stephen's College. And so any proper treatment of the College must first look at what life was like on the 19th century Hudson River estates.

Most important was the richness and beauty of the land itself. For the first Europeans to see it, the Valley was a place of unsurpassed loveliness and breathtaking abundance.⁶ Trees, vines, flowers, berries were everywhere.

Contemporary ships' logs report that the aroma of the lush growth reached crews far out to sea.

Next was the dominant fact of the River — the Hudson, running deep and clear, abounding in fish, lobsters, oysters, and clams. The River led straight northward without rapids, cataracts or falls, 150 miles to Troy. From there on, "the water-level route," one could go by stage or canal across upstate New York to the Great Lakes and the heart of the continent. Because the River offered comfortable and convenient transportation when such transportation was a rarity and luxury, the residents along its shore journeyed back and forth, becoming "two homes people," with one home on the River estate and the second a winter town house in New York City.

Finally there was the presence of the Episcopal Church. Along the 20-mile stretch there came to be a succession of stone Gothic Episcopal Churches, each usually serving both an adjacent estate and a neighboring village. But these parishes were not the ordinary "country churches." Their leading families were usually members also of strong and prestigious congregations in Manhattan, so the rural estate parishes were actually outposts of the urban ecclesiastical establishment, with some access to the establishment's money (and to its policy councils).

And, in due course, the New York City leadership of the Church joined with the estate parishes and their families to found a college — originally for the education of future clergy. To establish a neighborhood college was no strange thing in 19th century America. Though few people realize it, publicly supported colleges and universities were a rarity in the United States until quite recent times. Through World War I, the larger part of higher education in this country was the work of privately founded and privately supported colleges and universities, and the overwhelming majority of these private institutions were founded by church groups, and were for much of their history controlled by those bodies.

St. Stephen's College came into being as the product of two social forces and the efforts of three men. The social forces were the church-related denominational college movement and the pattern of living developed in the 19th century on the Hudson River estates. And the three men were John McVickar, Horatio Potter, and John Bard.

In the new land of America, the establishment of colleges occurred almost simultaneously with the settling of the country. Boston was settled in 1630 and Harvard founded only six years later, in 1636. A very practical consideration underlay this prompt attention to education — the need to provide,

for a future ministry. These lines from *New England's First Fruits* are carved over the gates of Harvard:

"One of the first things we longed for and looked after was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the Churches when our present ministers shall lie in the Dust."

Religious bodies played a major part in the founding of all nine of the colleges established within the present boundaries of the United States before the Revolutionary War: Harvard, 1636, Congregationalist; William and Mary, 1693, Episcopal; Yale, 1701, Congregationalist; Princeton, 1746, Presbyterian; Columbia (King's College), 1754, Episcopal; Pennsylvania, 1755, Episcopal; Brown, 1765, Baptist; Rutgers, 1766, Dutch Reformed; Dartmouth, 1769, Congregationalist.

All nine of the colonial colleges ultimately broke away from any tight control by their founding religious bodies, beginning with Pennsylvania right after the Revolutionary War, and ending with Brown in 1942.

The great period of the founding of private colleges and universities in the United States was the era of "the settlement of the west" — and especially the half-century from 1815 to the end of the Civil War. (The Roman Catholic colleges are an exception, most of them dating from after the Civil War.)

Interestingly enough, Donald Tewksbury, who more than any other single person developed the modern Bard educational program, is also the foremost authority on the founding of the American private colleges and universities.⁷ His volume in the Columbia University Contributions to Education series, entitled *The Founding of American Colleges and Universities before the Civil War* (an expansion of his Columbia Teachers' College doctoral thesis) is still the definitive study in this field, and is so important that it was republished in 1966. Tewksbury lists 182 permanent institutions founded before the Civil War, starting with Harvard in 1636 and ending with St. Stephen's in 1860, and Vassar and Seton Hall in 1861. (Tewksbury classifies as "permanent" any college that was still alive and functioning in 1932, at the time of his study.)

St. Stephen's is number 180 in the Tewksbury list. Eighteen of the 182 pre-Civil War institutions are public, created by state or city governments. Every one of the remaining 164 was founded by a religious denomination. It is a startling but incontrovertible fact that apart from the churches, practically no other non-governmental agency founded any appreciable number of colleges and universities in the United States.

Most new colleges tended to be started on the frontier, wherever the frontier happened to be at that time, because most land transportation was limited to mud-roads and the ox-cart, and the college had to be near to where the students lived, near where they were going to be needed when their education was completed.

Harvard was "founded in a struggling frontier village numbering only 25 houses, and surrounded by a stockade against the Indians . . ."⁸ Dartmouth was located in the New Hampshire woods, with part of its stated purpose the evangelization of the Indians. Williams was built where it is to be a "citadel of orthodoxy in the far corner of the Commonwealth."⁹ Bowdoin, under Congregational auspices, was founded "on the frontier." Middlebury was launched largely as an outpost of Yale, and of Congregationalist orthodoxy. (And though only 100 miles from New York City, St. Stephen's in 1860 was in a very rural setting and — except for the fringe of river estates — in a very unsophisticated area.)

Starting with Harvard in 1636, the chief stated and main pragmatic purpose of the colleges was to educate clergy. More than half of the graduates of Harvard for the first 60 years of its existence (1636-1696) became ministers. Dartmouth's first ten classes, with 99 graduates (1779-1789) gave 46 to the ministry. Of Amherst's first six classes of 106 graduates (1820-1826) 68, more than one-half of the entire number, went to the ministry. Of the 800 graduates of Middlebury from 1800 to 1847, nearly one-half devoted themselves to the ministry.

In fact, in "The West: Its Culture and Its Colleges," a pamphlet by G. F. Magoun, "it was stated in 1855 that approximately 10,000 of the 40,000 graduates of American colleges . . . had become ministers."¹⁰ Of the approximately 3,000 alumni of St. Stephen's College from its founding in 1860 up through 1960, 636 were ordained as Episcopal clergy.¹¹

The other part of the story of the American colleges is the widening of their role beyond that of preministerial training. As the country developed, a more complex society began to require a wider range of skills, — first teaching, then the law and medicine, and eventually business and technical skills. Also, the denominational concentrations in the population were steadily diffused as travel and trade expanded. A college originally established by a given sect to meet the needs of its own believers in its own region soon found itself serving a more general and diverse population. Increasingly its strength and quality depended on the way in which it handled the transition from narrow sectarian goals to a wider social purpose.

In his book, *Piety and Intellect at Amherst College 1865 — 1910*, Thomas LeDuc analyzes the metamorphosis of Amherst in the years 1865 to 1912 in this light, — "how the college found new life in new aspirations." Somehow — and helped by some strong presidents and able faculty over this 50-year period — department after department at Amherst made the transition from Biblical fundamentalism to the new intellectual climate of the 20th century. Of one president, for example, it is said: "he found Amherst little more than an academy for training prospective theological students; he left it equipped . . . to do the work of a liberal arts college."¹²

All of these goals and trends were expressed in the life of St. Stephen's College. It clung to its original classical program with unusual conviction and for a longer time than did most other small colleges. But when it did widen and update its programs, it went further than most others, making in a decade or two the leap from classical St. Stephen's, with its black gowns and concentration on Greek and Latin, to the mid-20th century avant-garde liberal and progressive Bard.