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Introduction

Amherst in the World

Martha Saxton

This volume celebrates the two hundredth anniversary of Amherst College. A group of historians, many alumni, and others with expertise on the college have written chapters on the school's substantial and far-reaching past. Amherst's unique history intersects and parallels those of fellow institutions. The histories in this volume illuminate the events, crises, and transitions that many educational institutions have confronted, including slavery; wars; the relations among religion, science, and the curriculum; the interplay of town and gown; the changing population of students; struggles over college governance; and funding.¹ The chapters implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, affirm both the vitality—and the utility—of a liberal arts education and Amherst's continual debates to improve that education to suit and sometimes challenge the historical eras through which it has passed.

Amherst is not the oldest liberal arts school in the country—that honor goes to Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland (established in 1782), but it is one of the most respected. Among the approximately two hundred and fifty-five liberal arts colleges in the United States, on a variety of indices, Amherst regularly scores at or near the top.²

This collection of essays helps explain Amherst's path to prominence. It also illuminates Amherst's two hundred years as a center of commitment to the liberal arts.

At its founding in 1821, Amherst per force entered into an ongoing controversy over what knowledge was worth having in the young republic. After the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin criticized Harvard for a curriculum designed to identify and decorate a ruling class, not to produce well-informed citizens capable of practical thinking and innovation. He founded an academy—later to be the University of Pennsylvania—and took a utilitarian stand in the debate over what constitutes a useful education.³ But Washington College, founded in 1782, offered a limited version of Harvard's curriculum, declaring its intention to educate citizens who would create the businesses and shape the institutions of the United States. Three years later, the New York Board of Regents founded Union College in Schenectady, New York. It was nondenominational and offered a classical curriculum initially, but in the early nineteenth century, its president, the reverend Eliphalet

Nott, responded to pressure for practical training. Union began offering a degree for its new science program, an alternative to the liberal arts curriculum.

Shortly after the Revolution, the second great awakening Protestant revivals began rolling over the East Coast and accompanying western settlers. Its converts produced Sunday schools, magazines, bible societies, and reform campaigns as well as schools: notably, Amherst College.

The college founders wished to prepare young men to evangelize the sin-ridden world, but it did not offer a religious curriculum. Amherst's admission requirements, not so different from Harvard's, required knowledge of Greek and Latin and "vulgar arithmetic." Like its competitors and peers, the college offered mathematics, philosophy, geography, and chemistry. The college adhered to what Yale's president Jeremiah Day articulated in 1828 as the recipe for liberal arts schools: "The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture, are the discipline and the furniture of the mind." Of these two, he thought, the first was undoubtedly the most important, as it would "throw the student upon the resources of his own mind. . . . The scholar must form himself by his own exertions. . . . We doubt whether the powers of the mind can be developed, in their fairest proportions, by studying languages alone, or mathematics alone, or natural or political science." He thought the differing demands required to master a variety of disciplines would train student minds in flexibility and self-reliance, giving them tools adequate to confront life's problems.⁴

In 2017, Cullen Murphy, a trustee of the college, wrote that a liberal-arts education at Amherst "means understanding that our diversity and our values are complementary ingredients."⁵ This volume illustrates the college's deliberations over these issues from its earliest years. Debate has reflected the changing historical and economic circumstances of the college, and students, faculty, alumni, and administrators have all participated.

Fredrick L. Hoxie's essay on Amherst graduates and their relationships with indigenous people also provides an example of the evolution of college teachings on the rights of nations and their responsibilities toward others. Early nineteenth-century imperialism blended with evangelical Christianity to shape the expansive "civilizing" goal of Amherst missionaries toward Native Americans. Amherst missionaries (like those from other schools) urged conversion to Protestantism as well as cultural assimilation as steps along the road to eventual statehood for indigenous people. As the juggernaut of manifest destiny made this increasingly unlikely, Amherst faculty began teaching a more free-market approach to political economy, which imposed a sink or swim attitude toward people who resisted capitalism or remained at its margins. The policies, which Amherst graduates helped craft, included forced assimilation through the now-notorious boarding schools for Native Americans and allotment of reservation land, including bringing white settlers onto large territories previously reserved for native peoples and support for the coup that toppled Hawaii's native monarchy.

Toward the turn of the twentieth century, Amherst students seeking to illuminate the world with evangelical Christianity became rarer, while those wishing to make careers in finance, business, government, and law became more numerous. Around the same time, some students, faculty, and local activists, like Helen Hunt Jackson, began challenging some of the colonialist practices of the nineteenth century and sharing in a

growing sympathy for indigenous people as well as others who were not benefiting from the expanding economy.

Before 1945, the curriculum and the college's admissions policies changed slowly and with reverses. In 1912, Amherst hired Alexander Meiklejohn as president, a political progressive. He opposed prejudicial admissions policies and hired a number of young, like-minded faculty members to replace more conservative professors. Meiklejohn reorganized the curriculum to engage students with contemporary social and economic problems. Strikingly, doctor Charles Eastman, a Dakota and advocate for Native Americans, spoke on campus the year after Meiklejohn was hired. The reasons for his abrupt and well-publicized firing in 1923 are disputed, but his liberal views did not characterize his next three successors.⁶ Conflict over the curriculum and diversity among students and faculty was part of the landscape at the college.

Amherst adopted new scientific theories and advances after passionate back and forth.⁷ The same president, Julius Seelye, who opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as discriminatory, also opposed teaching geology, as its newer findings potentially supported an evolutionary rather than a biblical history of the world. Amherst incorporated new disciplines like sociology and anthropology in the early and mid-twentieth century, and later it incorporated African American studies, women's and gender studies, Native American studies, and Hispanic studies.⁸ In the latter cases, activist students and some faculty advocated for new fields of knowledge that were relevant to the expanding student body, pushing against resistance from those who understood these disciplines as having a stronger political than intellectual basis.

Over the years, Amherst, like its fellow liberal arts schools, including Franklin's University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and Yale, have arranged, polished, reupholstered, added to, and sometimes discarded the furniture that Jeremiah Day spoke of. The search for the providential *feng shui* of courses—to stimulate students to intellectual discovery and continuing curiosity—remains a constant and defining liberal arts project.

These chapters portray two centuries of Amherst graduates, professors, and community members tied to the college. A significant number wound up in intellectually, economically, and politically rarefied circles. For most, a liberal arts education was not a useless luxury but a vital tool in continuing to educate themselves—in reasoning, in making decisions, and in participating in the world.

Humanistic inquiry, careful research, critical analysis, and precise writing betray the liberal arts training of the contributors to this volume. Their stories about Amherst tell us about changes in the college's populations, its economic fortunes, and the school's avowed purposes. We meet students, graduates, administrators, employees, faculty, and community members whose lives affected and were affected by the college.

Three groups of chapters follow. The first part, titled "Student Bodies and Souls," concerns the identity of Amherst students: who they were, how they lived, and how their beliefs influenced their purposes. (Clearly, questions about the soul of the students and the college pervade the whole volume, but the later works have other significant commonalities.) The articles unfold the evolution of the college's changing assumptions about itself, its rightful flock, and its goals.

The first three chapters explore the college's founding Christian ambitions, as they became reality. Collectively, missionaries produced considerable global ferment. They did not necessarily reap the religious and moral rewards they hoped for, but they established schools, made some converts, encouraged literacy among both men and women, spread ideas about capitalism and free labor, and made remarkable advances in philology. Gary Kornblith sees Amherst fulfilling its founding promise to "illuminate the lands" with Christianity, among other things. A full half of the first generation of graduates became ministers. (For the post-Civil War generation, it would be 17 percent.)

Edward Jones (class of 1826), unusual in background but not vocation, was the first African American to enroll at the college. He became one of its earliest missionaries, as principal from 1841 to 1856 of the Anglican mission and school in Fourah Bay, in what is now Sierra Leone. David W. Wills pieces together Jones's somewhat hesitant journey from his undergraduate days to his successful years in Sierra Leone. Wills pays particular attention to what Jones's experience reveals about the significance of race in the college's early years.

Native people, on this continent and in Hawai'i, intersected with the college nearly from its founding. Fredrick L. Hoxie marks three periods in Amherst's involvement with native people, beginning with the college's support for the national goals of "civilizing" them. A second period distinguished by rapid dispossession, paternalism, and forcible assimilation followed. Gradually and unevenly, a period of reckoning with the costs of earlier policies emerged. This more reflective era continues to the present, as native students and faculty push for a more historically aware and inclusive institution.

Born and raised in Japan, Niijima Jō arrived at the college in 1867, having stowed away on a Yankee merchant ship owned and piloted by evangelical Christians. Niijima earned degrees from Amherst and Andover Theological and returned to Japan where he founded the Dōshisha in Kyoto, a liberal arts college modeled on Amherst but that included Christian study. Trent Maxey explains how Niijima created an intellectually and theologically rigorous educational center for the small-but-growing number of Christians in Japan.

The next two chapters discuss the arrangements that accommodated student appetites for nourishment and companionship. During its first century, Amherst College, as a residential college, provided some rooms but no meals for students. Consequently, students dined with local families until the 1930s. As Daniel Levinson Wilk shows, administrators, worrying about the centrifugal force of fraternities and scattered lodgings, looked to give students a unifying experience. Beginning in the Great Depression, college dining halls and new fraternity dining facilities supplanted the boarding houses, removing students from these long-standing commercial and social relationships with townspeople. Eventually Valentine, which opened in 1941, fully centralized campus eating.

Fraternities, as Nicholas Syrett relates, began attracting students from the 1830s on. Members—mainly wealthier students, not bound for the ministry, whose ideas of manhood contrasted sharply with those of their more pious classmates—sought out the companionship of others like themselves. The growing strength of fraternities during the late-nineteenth century and their insistence on their right to exclude became, after World War

II, hard for Amherst faculty and administrators to reconcile with the college's liberal principles. The slow and painful abolition of fraternities paralleled other cascading changes at the college, some of which are detailed in the last three chapters of this section.

Young Jewish men began studying at Amherst in the very early twentieth century. Their welcome fluctuated with both the reputation of Jews in US culture and the attitudes of Amherst's admissions officers. Wendy Bergoffen judges Amherst's admission policy toward Jews as similar to that of many other schools. She singles out, however, a few administrators like Eugene Wilson for challenging traditional bars to the admission of Jews and Rabbi Yechiel Lander for encouraging Jewish students to enjoy a rich religious life at Amherst.

Matthew Randolph recounts the remarkable story of the Dunbar School in Washington, DC, that produced a stream of extraordinary African American students who started attending Amherst at the turn of the twentieth century. Dunbar graduates included some of the most prominent thinkers and reformers of the century, including Dr. Charles Drew, Charles Hamilton Houston, and William Hastie. College rules, racism, and the pressure on these young men to blend in isolated them. It was not until the 1960s that the admission of more African Americans from a variety of schools and backgrounds made it possible for black students to create a fuller community and work openly to improve their college lives.

Amherst held off going coeducational until 1975 to 1976—late compared with similar schools. Saxton's essay documents some of the social and intellectual barriers women faculty and students fought in trying to find equality at the college. Integrating women into a previously all-male school uniquely challenged the school's identity. It not only required rethinking educational offerings and teaching methods, but also providing a safe environment for all students.

Professor Rick Lopez tracks Latinx activism in search of equality and acceptance at the college. Lopez illuminates the pressures on Latinx men and women to integrate into the dominant culture, to be responsible for educating others about themselves, and to refrain from retreating into the comfort of the company of other similar students. Their difficulties parallel those of many minorities trying to find a comfortable existence at the college.

The second part, "College and Beyond: Views and Refractions," offer oblique angles on the college and those attached to it. Some chapters portray the quests of people associated with the college. Others reflect on changes in the school that would affect its standing and image in the world. K. Ian Shin picks up the missionary theme in his study of Amherst's complicated relationship with nineteenth-century China. Amherst's few missionaries to China exerted a disproportionate influence on its forced opening. Despite the imperialism bound up with the missionary project, religious sympathies contributed to Amherst's president Julius Seelye's outspoken opposition to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In Shin's chapter, we learn about Amherst in China, as well as about the experiences and perceptions of the rare Chinese men who came to the college.

Emily Dickinson, tied to the college through her male relatives and to the town through convention and circumstance, nevertheless traveled the world imaginatively. David S. Reynolds portrays the surprising combination of her familiar appreciation of the exquisite details of the natural world with her less-familiar enthusiasm for the sordid exploits of

drunks and criminals. That she could satisfy her catholic curiosity in Amherst provides a complex, mid-century view of the town, praised by the college founders only four decades earlier for its distance from urban temptations.

Amherst's faculty, like others, confronted Charles Darwin's unsettling ideas and evidence in the aftermath of the Civil War. The debates, as Jane F. Thraillkill shows, infused scientific work while making a shadowy appearance in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Marble Faun*. At the college, geologist Edward Hitchcock and his son Edward "Doc" Hitchcock Jr. both believed that science and religion could coexist, and Hitchcock Sr. pursued research that potentially substantiated the claims of Darwin. President Seeley, however, cancelled geology classes in 1880 for just that reason.

In Julie Dubrow's study of David, Mabel, and Millicent Todd, Amherst, both the town and the college, exerted a centripetal force that helped hold that increasingly chaotic family together. Mabel Loomis's marriage to David Todd, professor of astronomy, endured despite her thirteen-year affair with Austin Dickinson, brother of Emily. Millicent Todd Bingham, Mabel and David's daughter, sacrificed a career as a geologist teaching in New York City, returning to assist her mother in Amherst, collecting and publishing Emily Dickinson's poetry. Millicent made sure the poems and papers ended up with the college.

In investigating the abrupt and widely publicized firing of president Alexander Meiklejohn in 1923, Richard Teichgraber III attributes its remarkable newsworthiness to the underlying growth of wealth and power among the college's graduates over the previous generation. Marking this striking change, two men representing the greatest fortunes of the country—Standard Oil and Phelps Dodge mining—joined the three-man board of trustees in 1890. Joining them was a partner at J. P. Morgan.

Debby Applegate's search for the typical Amherst man of the roaring twenties provides a literary and historical backdrop for the trustees' distrust of Alexander Meiklejohn's intellectual and social idealism. Applegate finds the Amherst man's image in popular books "starchy" and unimaginative. In tracking down the Amherst graduates who became the power brokers to elect Calvin Coolidge (class of 1895) to the presidency in 1923, she unearths Amherst's contributions to the underlying economic conservatism of the Jazz Age. Meiklejohn's liberal views contrasted markedly with those of the business-friendly conservatives characterized in roaring twenties fiction.

The chapters in the final part, "Emergencies," examine the interplay among the college, political conflict, and war. Michael E. Jirik analyzes the pre-Civil War disagreements between student abolitionists and the more conservative colonizationists, largely made up of Amherst faculty, with presidential support. Amherst administrators and faculty had the example of the 1834 antislavery disruptions at Lyman Beecher's Lane Seminary in mind, which caused fifty students to leave and go to Oberlin. The college, not wishing to provoke such a crisis, did not prohibit debate on campus as Beecher had. Students and faculty disagreed with one another but preserved their mutual respect and affection. Eventually, when the student abolitionists turned from William Lloyd Garrison's insistence on moral suasion to politics, they took the debate largely off campus.

The advent of the Civil War compelled most southern students to return home and graduates to enlist in the Union army. Bruce Laurie reveals a range of motives among Amherst

soldiers, tracing their evolving views as the war progressed. A few started out as abolitionists, but the majority fought initially to preserve the Union. Encounters between freed African Americans and Amherst-educated soldiers persuaded a number of the latter to embrace black freedom. Many from the college fell in the war, including the son of the college's president.

Two authors consider student and community responses to the injustices of the 1960s; most prominently, the war in Vietnam and racism. Christian G. Appy describes the radicalization of many faculty, administrators, and students. Using the views of Amherst's famous liberal historian, Henry Steele Commager, Appy charts the rise of campus dissent against the Vietnam War and racism. He uses the experience and testimony of numerous students to describe the growing antipathy to the war, including the voice of an Amherst GI who resisted the war on the battlefield in Vietnam. Appy also makes the point that the intimacy and respect prevalent in the Amherst community kept it from the most violent ravages of political and social disagreement that occurred on other campuses, paralleling Jirik's findings on the containment of disagreement in the years before the Civil War.

Molly Michelmore looks at tax resistance that two Amherst students recommended as an antiwar tactic. She opens up its history and its brief popularity with war protestors in the 1970s. It was not particularly effective in that fight, but she found that the practice and philosophy remained tools of resistance against arbitrary government for decades in the Amherst community.

This volume only concerns a few of the people, disputes, crises, and achievements that have emanated from or enveloped Amherst College in its two hundred years. These chapters recount stories of students of the liberal arts engaging coherently in the debates and projects animating their communities. They display the strong bonds of affection and respect that develop between students and faculty, as they struggle to understand together. And, bracingly, they often show students of the liberal arts taking their college to task for not living up to its ideals.

Cullen Murphy's inspirational description of Amherst's ambition pertains to its past as well as its future. He writes of the college as "a place where all three words in the phrase 'diverse intellectual community' have as much meaning as the middle one has always had. . . . The task is educational, and it is cultural. It means sending graduates into the world who can be effective across boundaries of every kind in an increasingly global environment. It means equipping them with respect for diversity in many forms, including points of view and modes of argument, and with a bedrock commitment to critical thinking and freedom of expression." The college has been engaging in this pursuit for two hundred years. These chapters help illuminate moments along that unfinished trail.

PS

As we finish the last preparations for this volume, Amherst College, like schools and institutions across the country, has closed to keep us safer from the menacing pandemic. I am most thankful for the work of the participants and all the people involved in editing and producing this volume, completed under conditions we could scarcely have imagined when we set out.

Professor and contributor Richard Teichgraeber has written about the College in World War I, observing that for reasons of geography and timing, it was fortunate to lose only fifteen people associated with Amherst to the influenza outbreak of 1917–18. It will require another group of historians in another volume to describe and analyze what, if any, marks COVID-19 will leave on Amherst.

Martha Saxton

April 8, 2020

Notes

1. Cullen Murphy, "Statement of Board of Trustees' Meeting," January 26, 2016, <http://arial2.amherst.edu/CT00365403MDEyMzg0LTAwNTQ2NjQ=.HTML?D=2016-01-26>.
2. William Smith, "An Act Founding a College at Chestertown [in Maryland]," www.washcoll.edu/centers/starr/revcollege/firstcollege/index.html; Victor Ferrall Jr., *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 15; Amherst College is number 2 in the National Liberal Arts ranking.
3. Michael Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 95–100, 103; Christina Elliot Sorum, "Vortex, Clouds, and Sun': New Problems in the Humanities?" *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges*, eds. Steven Koblik and Stephen Graubard (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 241.
4. Hugh Hawkins, "The Making of the Liberal Arts College Identity," in *Distinctively American*, eds. Koblik and Graubard (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2; Sorum, "Vortex, Clouds, and Tongue," 245.
5. Murphy, "Statement," 74.
6. See Teichgraeber and Applegate in this volume.
7. See, in particular, Thrailkill and Dobrow in this volume.
8. See Appy, Saxton, Lopez, and Hoxie in this volume.