THE SPIRITUAL AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF FRANKLIN COLLEGE

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The period of a hundred years preceding the founding of Franklin College in 1787 is of as much importance as any of the events in the one hundred and fifty years of its history. The history of a nation, or of a movement, or of an institution does not necessarily begin with the date of a constitution or a charter. It is not only concerned with what happened in the past, but with the study of how these things came to happen.

The founding of Franklin College in Lancaster in the eighteenth century was not simply an accident. An idea which has existed and developed over a century and a half may be expected to have a background of considerable interest, and this brief study is concerned with certain significant developments which were taking place before the idea became a reality.

Colleges and universities have sometimes been founded as a result of the planning and the vision, and perhaps the financial support, of a single individual. On other occasions they have been established as the result of a desire on the part of a government, or of a religious denomination, to extend its educational field, as in the case of Franklin College. There is a closely related chain of

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circumstances which leads to the conclusion that, in Lancaster or in the near vicinity, either in 1787 or within a very few years of that date, an educational institution particularly for the training of ministers, and for the benefit of the people of central Pennsylvania, was to have been expected.

The idea which was to result in the establishment of Franklin College has roots which extend back almost a hundred years before its founding and three thousand miles from its location. These roots reach beyond the efforts of certain Reformed and Lutheran clergymen, who were interested in providing higher education for the German population of central Pennsylvania; they reach beyond the problems and difficulties of the German denominations and their leaders during the colonial period; they reach back definitely to the spiritual background and the educational ideals which these leaders had received in Europe. This is the series of relationships which developed long before 1787.

In 1691 the University of Halle was founded in Saxon Germany. It was probably the first modern university in the European world—modern in the sense that it stood for a type of independence and freedom in education which was unusual then, and which is, even today not too widely practised in every twentieth century university. It was set apart from older and more orthodox centers of scholasticism. Rector Gundling, in 1711, called it “atrium libertatis,” the vestibule of liberty. Its purpose, he said, was to lead to wisdom, that is, the faculty of distinguishing between true and false. But, he continued, this is impossible when any bounds are set by investigation. No man has a right to compel any other by threats of punishment to profess an opinion not his own! “Has an attempt at improvement ever been made without experiencing the reproach of subjectivism, of anarchy? Compulsion in these matters is evil everywhere. Truth rises before us: let him who can ascend, let him who dares, seize here; and we will applaud!” (Veritas adhuc! qui potest adscendat, qui audet, rapiat et applaudamus!)

With such a standard the University of Halle was soon to occupy a distinctive position in eighteenth-century Europe as the center and source of academic liberty, and of independent experimentation. Instead of following the more conservative theory that the function of the university was to transmit acknowledged truths,
Halle stood for the belief that truth must first be discovered, and that a university must train the student to carry out this task. As might have been expected, such a policy brought liberals of every description to its doors.

The most important department at Halle was the department of philosophy, and it was in the field of philosophy that this intellectual experimentation was most noticeable. But in all the German universities philosophy and theology were closely related. The education of ministers in Germany always was a function of the universities, while in France, for example, seminaries were established for this separate purpose. Halle became the center of one of the most important theological developments of the century, and two of her theologians were soon to influence thousands of students. The theology was pietism, and the two leading exponents of pietism were Philip Jacob Spener and August Hermann Francke.

The pietist movement was to affect by far the larger majority of German emigrants to Pennsylvania, and since the term "pietism" has often been broadly used, it should be considered briefly. Spener, a Frankford pastor who was instrumental in the establishment of Halle, was chiefly responsible for it. He felt the time was ripe for a second Reformation, since the enthusiasm of the sixteenth century had now been supplanted by an orthodox theology as cold and unyielding as that which Martin Luther had opposed. To Spener, pietism was practical and definite—a simple principle which all denominations have long recognized: that individual religious piety is of first importance, and that all doctrines and regulations are secondary. Briefly, the pietistic school of Spener emphasized individual reading and study of the Bible; emphasized religious education for the laity; emphasized an individual sense of religious responsibility; emphasized, to its students, the importance of a missionary spirit—the need of education for the poor, the need of spiritual comfort for those alone in distant lands, the glories of a great democracy of mankind bound together by the common tie of a devout personal religious inspiration.

Like many other movements, pietism was to be taken up by various radical groups, and to develop along lines which Spener would not have imagined nor approved. But at the end of the seventeenth century, about 1700, the movement was in the first stages of its progressive enthusiasm, and at Halle the theological
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department was deeply influenced, almost from the founding of the institution, by August Hermann Francke, one of Spener’s disciples, and the chief exponent of Spener’s pietism. The work of this man, and of his son Gotthilf, who succeeded him, is of very definite importance to Franklin College, because these were the men who inspired the missionaries who in turn investigated, directed and planned the spiritual and educational life of the Germans in Pennsylvania.

The theory of pietism was Spener’s, but its practical application was developed by the elder Francke. He had been left an orphan himself at an early age, and as a young graduate became interested in the religious education of young children and orphans. Education, he said, was not a matter of writing books; it was a matter of work. He felt that scholastic theology was a dry and heartless study, and in consequence was dismissed from several positions. Where could he go more appropriately than to the newly-founded, pietistic, liberal Halle? Through the efforts of his friend and teacher Spener, he was appointed to the Halle faculty.

Here he began the famous Halle Institutions, or Halle Orphan House, which was to become more prominent than the university itself. From the very start, while he was conducting a pastoral charge in the suburbs, he began a small one-room school for orphans and needy children—a sort of seventeenth-century relief station in which he attempted to feed neglected children both physically and spiritually. His work and his sincerity attracted attention and support and the Orphan House grew into many departments of various grades and functions, through which thousands of young German students were to pass, and from which scores were eventually to go to foreign countries to carry on, in their turn, the example set by Francke’s earnest efforts. It was an undertaking of some magnitude. By 1707, only twelve years after its inauguration, the Halle Institutions numbered nine departments with more than a thousand pupils.

This is not as remote from the establishment of a college in Pennsylvania as it may seem. The relationship becomes more significant when we discover that from this unusual institution, which so strongly emphasized the association between education and religion, there came in the eighteenth century, the man who organized the Lutheran Churches in America, Henry Melchior
Muhlenberg; his son Henry Ernst Muhlenberg, the first president of Franklin College; John Christopher Kunze, who founded the German department of the University of Pennsylvania; Heinrich Helmuth, one of the founders of Franklin College; and Frederick Melsheimer, the first vice-president of Franklin College. Eight members of the original board of trustees of Franklin College had attended the Halle Institutions.

The years of the elder Francke's career in Halle from 1691 to his death in 1727 are significant in the history of Pennsylvania. This is the period which witnessed the most intensive publicity campaign which was ever introduced in Europe for the benefit of an American colony, and the largest part of this propaganda was centered upon Germany. And to Pennsylvania the Germans came by the thousands, chiefly because it was more thoroughly advertised by hundreds of books and pamphlets than any other portion of North America. These years mark the initial period of mass emigration of German families to America and see the establishment of a field for missionary activity which would have stirred any young religious student in any century, whether he were influenced by pietism or not. For this is the age of the great and pathetic Palatine emigration through London, when thousands lived in a tent city on the outskirts of that metropolis, singing their hymns and reading their Bibles while they patiently waited to be crowded into the leaky boats which might or might not get them to their expected destination. This is the age when Pennsylvania had more different sects than it had cities. This is the age of frontier settlements, when cabins were more important than catechism, when school teachers and preachers were almost impossible luxuries belonging to an old and far-off world.

The spiritual and educational condition of these Germans in Pennsylvania was to grow worse rather than better. The mother churches in Europe were not really aware of the serious plight of these American settlers until it was brought definitely to their attention by the investigations and reports of two outstanding missionaries, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and Michael Schlatter. As a result of the interest and concern they stirred up, students who were leaving German universities to teach and preach throughout Germany became aware of the new and fertile field in Pennsylvania.
Both of these men were unusual personalities. Muhlenberg was a young German student who had been interested, like Francke, in starting a school for neglected children at Göttingen, which later was to develop into Göttingen Orphan House. This led to his being recommended as a teacher at the Halle Orphan House, when he was twenty-seven. The interest of Halle in the outside world at this time is shown by the fact that he was almost sent, the following year, to East India for educational and missionary work. However, he remained in Germany and in 1741 Gotthilf Francke, interested in the young man's abilities and ideas, offered him a chance to work with the dispersed Lutheran congregations in Pennsylvania, and asked him to make a trial of it for a few years.

The story of Muhlenberg's work and his travels in Pennsylvania is told in detail in his journal, and need not be repeated here. It will suffice to say that he was never to return to his native land, and that in the face of hopeless confusion and many sectarian differences, he organized the various pastors and congregations in Pennsylvania into a Lutheran Synod in 1784. We are particularly interested in his detailed reports to Halle, published by the Halle authorities in the Hallesche Nachrichten, which furnished that progressive institution with comprehensive information about the pitiful condition of the Pennsylvania Germans. Muhlenberg wrote of wedding and funeral customs, of the hardships of his endless travels, of hundreds of individual families and their spiritual need, of churches without pastors and schools without teachers. The reports were widely distributed, and gave the Europeans a first-hand account of the Pennsylvania problem.

Michael Schlatter presented the situation even more dramatically for the Reformed Church. Schlatter was from Switzerland. His youth indicated that he had a restless, roving disposition, and when he finally went to the Netherlands and offered his services to the Holland Synods in 1746, for work with the destitute congregations of Pennsylvania, he was promptly accepted. He proved to be one of the most active and energetic of the missionaries, and he rapidly organized a Synod of Reformed churches. A few years after his arrival, the Synod decided that more help was needed and selected Schlatter to carry back its report. The report, or "Appeal" was widely circulated throughout
England, Holland and Germany, and he was sent through Germany and Switzerland to secure more men and more money. His "Appeal" contained, like Muhlenberg's reports, a detailed journal of his own travels and experiences and a stirring petition for relief. "Blessed are those children," he said, "that have parents who in the absence of schools, have qualification, desire and time themselves to train their tender offspring. But how few there are with whom all this is found; and what a host of parents there is who have no desire for it, neither are in circumstances to attend to it. If there are no schools, provided with qualified school-masters, of which there are here almost none, or very few, will not the children who are not instructed in reading and writing, in two or at least in three generations become like the pagan aborigines, that neither book nor writing will be found among them. O Reverend Fathers, let your bowels of mercy be moved toward these innocents! Your gifts may be the means of establishing schools, and of procuring suitable teachers, so that the youth may be instructed in useful knowledge and led to the fear and worship of God."

When Schlatter returned to America in 1752, he had with him six ministers, financial assistance from Germany, Holland, and England, and the support of the royal family of England, who allotted a large sum for the establishment of a free school system among the Germans in Pennsylvania, evidence that his appeal was comparatively successful.

The connection between German universities and educational progress in Pennsylvania now begins to become more apparent. From Halle alone there were twenty-four missionaries who came to the Lutheran church in Pennsylvania. Throughout Germany, Holland and Switzerland, the Reformed church supplied educated ministers as rapidly as funds would permit, but they could not come fast enough. At the middle of the century, German immigrants were arriving at the rate of about 5,000 a year, and by 1776 there were about 100,000 in the province.

Most of the preachers served four or five different congregations, taught school at the same time, and were not always as able men as Muhlenberg and Schlatter. The records are full of accounts of miserably unfit opportunists, some of whom could not write in English or German, or who preached sheer nonsense
from the pulpits. Some of them, as one might expect in a frontier country, were little more than rascals, who made the work of more sincere men difficult by their petty thievery, drunkenness or radical ideas. The level of the teaching profession is fairly well illustrated by a note from the minutes of the Lutheran Synod, in which it is recorded that a man named Butler appeared and begged earnestly for admission into the Ministerium. “As his character was very poor,” reads the record, “indifferent, and no signs of improvement were noticed, it was unanimously resolved that he must be forever regarded as incapable of serving in the ministerial office; and that he be advised to serve as a school teacher.” Occasionally one reads of a minister who did more harm than good, like the Lancaster preacher who was compelled to resign in 1746 for lying, drunkenness and adultery, but continued to preach elsewhere.

Obviously, ministers and teachers would have to be trained in this country in large numbers. Some idea of the advantage of proper university training is apparent in the case of Muhlenberg’s youngest son, Gotthilf Henry Ernst, who was sent back to Halle when he was ten years old, and returned to Pennsylvania at the age of seventeen to enter the ministry. At the examination by the Synod, he translated fluently from Hebrew into Latin, and answered analytical questions in the same language. This was the type of educated ministry which the Lutheran and Reformed churches hoped to secure.

In this respect the English colonies had developed much more rapidly. Harvard University was established shortly after the arrival of the English in New England, and William and Mary College had been supported by Episcopalian funds since its beginning. The Presbyterians, with the help of Scotch friends, could educate their ministry at Princeton. For the German churches, there was nothing.

The first general attempt at a uniform plan was the establishment of the free, or charity schools, as the result of Schlatter’s Appeal, and Schlatter was named superintendent of the project. Unfortunately, they were not introduced tactfully, and met with much opposition. Too much emphasis was placed upon the so-called ignorance of the Germans, by which was meant, in most cases, their ignorance of the English language. Reverend Chand-
ler, of London, wrote in 1760, "The German Protestants . . . are the dregs of the people, poor, rude, ignorant of divine things, and so occupied with their rustic labors and domestic affairs, that they are scarcely able to find time enough to instruct and teach their children in matters pertaining to religion. What will become of them if your charity grows cold?" This was persuasive, but not flattering.

Leading Germans, notably Christopher Saur of Philadelphia, voiced their opposition to apparent attempts to Anglicize the Germans. Why, asked Saur, were the Irish, the Swedes and the Welsh allowed to retain their language, while the Germans were expected to speak English? The minutes of the Reformed church state: "Of what use they (the charity schools) will be to us we do not know thus far. Apparently, at least, and most likely, they will not be of much public or private service to our church, because, 1. The only object of these schools is the introduction of the English language among the Germans, which is purely a political matter, hence, 2. Our German schools can expect nothing, as examples show. 3. What has appeared to us especially wonderful and strange is that the direction and management of these schools under the auspices of the Trustees has been entrusted—the Reformed in Lancaster for example, having been entirely passed over to Moravians, Quakers, Separatists, perchance even Deists and others of this class. Can you think of a wolf caring for the pastures of fleece-bearing sheep?"

And yet many of the English element may have felt as Benjamin Franklin did in 1753, when he wrote: "Those who came hither are generally the most stupid of their nation . . . and few of the English understand the German language, and so cannot address them either from the press or pulpit, it is almost impossible to remove any prejudices they may entertain. I suppose in a few years interpreters will be necessary in the assembly." This was harsh, and probably unjust, but it was the type of attitude which turned the Germans from any attempts made by English initiative, and most of the criticism was directed against Schlatter. By 1756 the charity schools seem to have disappeared, and the movement was considered a failure. The plan had to come from the Germans, and it could not be a plan to turn the Germans into educated Englishmen.
While the mass of Germans concentrated in central Pennsylvania were of the laboring classes, and not greatly interested in higher education, there were among the German emigrants to America some of the most eminent scholars and cultural leaders of eighteenth century colonial life. There were more newspapers printed in German than in English in Pennsylvania before the Revolution. The first religious magazine in America was Saur's *Geistliches Magazien*. The first Bible published in a European language in America was the Saur Bible. Melsheimer, Pastorius, Rittenhouse and Koster were scholars and scientists of the first rank in colonial history. The first president of the first national Congress was Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg.

The cultural and religious traditions of the Germans in Pennsylvania were closely connected with their language. Preachers educated in the best English universities could give them no intelligible spiritual comfort. Family prayers in English would have been ridiculous, almost sacrilegious, and the hymns which parents and grandparents knew by heart could not be altered for their children. The most intelligent among their leaders felt that provision for higher education must first be made in German, and that the infiltration of a new language would not be accomplished in a generation.

A brief period of stagnation followed the failure of the English charity schools, and the approach of war hindered plans for organization. Soon a new group of German university men took up the problem again. The first important development was in 1773, when John Christopher Kunze recommended a plan to the Lutheran Synod for a German Seminary in Philadelphia, to educate young men for the ministry of German congregations. Kunze had come from the University of Halle. In 1779 he founded the German department of the University of Pennsylvania, to prepare German students for university work. This was the year in which that college was incorporated as a university, and Kunze, a member of the board of trustees, insisted that something must be done for the counties which were occupied entirely by Germans whose children could not speak a word of English. The following year Kunze was succeeded by Justus Heinrich Helmuth as head of the department. Helmuth had come from the University of Halle.
This German department was fairly successful for a number of years, but it was too far removed from the heart of the German element in Pennsylvania to accomplish all that had been hoped for it. In addition, it was almost exclusively a Lutheran project. Under the circumstances, it was necessarily inferior to the English portion of the university, and movements toward the establishment of a similar institution, in the central part of the state, and with the support of all denominations, began to develop.

In 1784, at a Synod meeting in Lancaster, Helmuth plead for a more scholarly educational system for the youth. In 1785 the Reformed Church Coetus wrote to Holland, asking for help for the "establishment of a school in the central part of the state of Pennsylvania, in which young men might be prepared for the ministry. Many young men," the report states, "in this country who have great ability would like to devote themselves to the service of the church, if they only had an opportunity, and many inhabitants have for some time had a greater confidence in natives than in foreigners who just arrived, because they have several times fared badly." The Dutch Synods were not, however, anxious to establish the new college.

In the same year Frederick Valentine Melsheimer, pastor of several congregations in Lancaster County, organized a high school for his community, for both German and English pupils.

In 1786 the actual negotiations to carry out the projected plan were under way. The initiative toward the founding of what was to be Franklin College came from a Lutheran and a Reformed pastor in Lancaster—Reverend Henry Ernst Muhlenberg and Reverend Hendel, and from a Lutheran and a Reformed pastor in Philadelphia,—Reverend Helmuth and Reverend Weiberg. It seems to have been largely due to the influence of these latter two men that the original petition for a charter was signed by prominent Philadelphians, who lent financial and moral support. It is perhaps of some consequence that we recall the disturbed condition of Pennsylvania government in 1787, and note that among the first contributors to the college which was to serve the large German population of central Pennsylvania, and among its first trustees, were prominent leaders of both the Federalist and the anti-Federalist factions.
This brief survey of certain related incidents in the background of Franklin College seems to indicate several rather definite conclusions. In the first place, the influence of the pietist movement, and the Halle emphasis upon missionary work was definitely responsible for a close relationship between the ministry in Pennsylvania and European universities. In the second place, the fact that the Reformed and Lutheran churches required an educated ministry made the Pennsylvania problem particularly important, because Europe could not supply them in sufficient numbers. Finally, we can see in the movement to establish Franklin College several factors which indicate that progress had been made. There was cooperation between denominations, for among the trustees were representatives of the Moravian, Episcopal and Catholic churches, as well as of the Lutheran and Reformed groups. There was popular recognition of its need, for the sponsors included men of national prominence. And there was a worthy standard established, for its first faculty was made up of some of the most prominent scholars of their day, with a background of European university training which set the ideals of the institution as high as those of any in America. We can understand Helmuth's feelings when he wrote to Muhlenberg in 1787: "The fortunate moment appears to have arrived when the Germans of America are offered an opportunity of advancing their educational institutions to the fortunate position occupied by those of their brethren in Europe. The first German college in America is about to be founded, and the project is supported with great zeal even by persons who are not Germans, so that there can be no doubt that the whole movement is directed by more than a human hand."