A PLAN FOR MODERN EDUCATION IN EARLY PHILADELPHIA

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In 1834, nearly a decade before Horace Mann returned from Europe to advocate modern educational reforms, a group of prominent Philadelphians, the Trustees of Girard College, pondered over a remarkably progressive plan for vocational education. It was the handiwork of Francis Lieber, a young intellectual, who in the 1820's had fled to the United States to escape Prussian oppression. Subsequently he was to become a distinguished political theorist.¹

Lieber incorporated in his plan the most modern European ideas on education—ideas which, if they had been put into execution, would have given Philadelphia a school many years in advance of any then existing in the United States.²

The school was to grow out of the spectacular bequest of Stephen Girard. In an era when large philanthropies normally ran only into the tens of thousands of dollars, Girard, a wealthy and eccentric merchant, had left a sum expected to reach five millions to establish a "college" for orphans in Philadelphia. The City Councils of

Philadelphia were to administer the legacy, and for almost forty years partisan politics rather than intellect were to dictate the operation of Girard College. As a result, the school that ultimately emerged offered only the conventional training of the period while a stack of copies of Lieber's plan gathered dust in a storeroom.

Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank of the United States, ironically enough was at least partly to blame. Biddle, who was the first president of the board of trustees, heartily favored an elaborate institution, and commissioned Lieber to prepare an ambitious plan of education for the college. But Biddle's name, so inseparably involved in national and local politics, was sufficient to bring down upon any plan he sponsored the extreme animosity of the Jacksonians. A newspaper friendly to him proclaimed in 1833 that "To prevent the opposition model of Girard College from being adopted is, in our opinion, motive sufficient for supporting the [Whig] ticket."

At first the trustees proclaimed a public competition, but subsequently they offered a five hundred dollar premium to Lieber for a plan of education. Biddle and Roberts Vaux, the Quaker reformer, had come to look with favor upon the energetic young man, who combined a broad knowledge of European educational institutions with their own soundly conservative political ideas.

Lieber was well qualified to execute the project. He himself had attended a model secondary school—the Grey Cloister in Berlin, from which Bismarck subsequently graduated. At the same time he had served as a youthful assistant to F. L. Jahn, founder of

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9 The ticket was called that "of the Independent Democrats and National Republicans." Philadelphia National Gazette and Literary Register, October 8, 1833, cited in Herrick, *Girard College*, p. 4.

the German Turner movement. His university education was highly irregular—it began with a doctor's degree—because of Prussian police interference. After an interlude in Greece, he supplemented it in Rome by becoming a protege of G. B. Niebuhr, first of the great modern scientific historians.  

Bubbling over with the intellectual ferment of contemporary Europe, the scholar was thoroughly conversant with the ideas of Pestalozzi, Cousin, and German educators. During a short interlude in England he became acquainted with the charming utilitarian, Sarah Austin, who helped him undertake a study of Lancasterian schools.  

The young German had come to the United States in 1827 to run a gymnasium and a swimming school in Boston. Both failed, but before they did so, he had audaciously begun editing the Encyclopaedia Americana for Matthew and Henry Carey's great Philadelphia publishing house. That task completed, Lieber searched anxiously for a new means of livelihood. Especially he eyed the educational field, and recently had attracted favorable attention through his proposals for the organization of New York University.  

With a will, Lieber entered upon the Girard project. When he accepted the commission, he solemnly stated his purpose: "I should consider it the noblest service that I could render to my adopted county—aye to mankind, could I become instrumental in carrying over some of the fruits of long and toilsome experience [in] Europe . . ., and [plant] them in the fresh and rich soil of this new world, to grow and branch out luxuriantly and vigourously in the healthy air of free institutions."  

For biographical information on Lieber, see the present writer's forthcoming "Francis Lieber: Nineteenth Century Liberal." Joseph Dorfman and R. G. Tugwell, "Francis Lieber: German Scholar in America," Columbia University Quarterly (October and December, 1938), 30:161-90 and 267-93, is a brilliant interpretation. See also Thomas Sergeant Perry (editor), The Life and Letters of Francis Lieber (Boston, 1882); Lewis R. Harley, Francis Lieber: His Life and Political Philosophy (New York, 1899); and Lieber, Reminiscences of an Intercourse with Mr. Niebuhr . . . (Philadelphia, 1835), reprinted in Lieber, Miscellaneous Writings, 1:45-148.  

Mrs. Austin to Lieber, March 15, 1835, Huntington Library. Lieber, Uber die Lancasterische Lehrweise (Hamburg, 1826).  


Lieber used the word "planting" in his draft, which he subsequently revised before sending it to Biddle, September 1, 1833, Huntington Library.
Immediately Lieber wrote to Europe for data on polytechnic and orphan schools, then undertook a careful study of the terms and limitations of the bequest. While Girard had lavished his attention upon the architecture and equipment of the buildings, he had sketched the framework of education only in broad outline. To the consternation of the clerics, he enjoined in the strongest terms that no clergyman should hold a position in the institution, or even be admitted as a visitor to the grounds. Girard explained that he wished to “keep the tender minds of the orphans . . . free from the excitement, which clashing doctrines and sectarian controversy are so apt to produce,” and that the instructors should take pains to instil in them “the purest principles of morality.” Nevertheless from their pulpits the sectarians, who considered education their particular province, hurled brimstone at the departed blasphemer. Others even sought to break the will upon this ground. In 1844, with more pious precepts than legal precedents at his command, Daniel Webster argued the case before the United States Supreme Court, and lost.10

“The old gentleman unfortunately has made several narrowing conditions,” noted Lieber, “and it needs ingenuity to plan something noble and superior notwithstanding the enormous means at disposal.” Rather neatly he succeeded. He consulted Chancellor Kent, the great authority on common law, upon the legal points involved, then cleverly drafted his plan.11

Lieber’s plan did indeed involve a liberal construction of the will. It embraced no commonplace orphan school, but a comprehensive polytechnic and teacher-training institution with a wide range of courses. This by no means did violence to Girard’s intent, for the philanthropist was French-born, a disciple of the enlightenment, and had even named one of his ships the “Rousseau.”12

10 Lieber to Mittermaier, April 24, 1833 (copy), Huntington Library. Herrick, Girard College, 171-76, 379. Vidal et al. v. Girard’s Executors, 2 Howard 127; Webster, Mr. Webster’s Speech in Defence of the Christian Ministry . . . in the Case of Stephen Girard’s Will (Washington, 1844).
11 Lieber to Mittermaier, loc. cit.; Kent to Lieber, July 10, 1833, Huntington Library.
12 Biddle had likewise broadly interpreted the will: “They would err, who, comparing this institution with any ordinary standard, regard it as an Alms House. . . . It is not a poor school, nor a charity school, nor a free school, in their ordinary acceptation. It is as he [Girard] denominates it, a ‘College.’” Account of the Proceedings on the Laying of the Corner Stone of the Girard College . . . (Philadelphia, 1833), p. 16; E. E. Brown, The Making of Our Middle Schools (New York, 1902), pp. 341-45. See also, Herrick, Girard College, p. 202.
Lieber inferred from Girard’s use of the word “college,” and the large endowment, that the merchant wished advanced as well as elementary instruction, although along practical rather than classical lines. This fitted Lieber’s concepts, so he planned an eminently vocational program with a sound theoretical foundation in mathematics and pure science. He hoped that through experimental research and the diffusion of knowledge, the college could help establish new industries.\(^{13}\)

The educator proposed dividing the college into three four-year levels: preparatory school, common school, and high school. In the preparatory school the orphans would study the three “R’s,” history, geography, and religion. Since the work primarily entailed memorization, they could learn through the economical Lancastrian monitorial method, which would benefit the monitors as well as the pupils. The better monitors could continue to assist in teaching on the higher levels. There they could utilize more advanced methods and prepare themselves to be teachers.\(^{14}\)

In addition to the basic studies, the common school curriculum would include algebra, geometry, drawing, elementary science, citizenship, French, and Latin. Instruction in the advanced courses should go far beyond the rote method. It should train the mind and instill techniques and ideas.

From a seed thought in the Girard will, Lieber germinated schemes of teaching through laboratory methods. Should not the agricultural student intersperse his theoretical courses with periods of actual work upon farms? Should not the embryo navigator study the stars through a telescope rather than merely from a text? This was startling doctrine, for few laboratories and shops existed in the entire American educational system. Lieber tied it to another equally novel proposition: the student must learn to use his knowledge through thoughtful discussion, not recitational regurgitation. Subsequently, in mulling over his Girard plan, Lieber emphasized the need to train children to “form definite and dis-

\(^{13}\) Girard stipulated that orphans should enter the College between the ages of six and ten, and, depending upon their merit, remain until fourteen to eighteen when the authorities should bind them out to suitable trades or occupations. Their training should be “in the various branches of a sound education, comprehending reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, geography, navigation, surveying, practical mathematics, astronomy, natural, chemical, and experimental philosophy, the French and Spanish languages,” and so forth. Lieber, *Girard College*, pp. 18-19, 43, 45-47, 55-56, 87.

tinct ideas, and not to allow themselves to be satisfied with vague smattering. . . . How few citizens of the U. S. know anything positively if questions respecting our Constitution arise?"15

The curriculum of the high school should encompass far more courses than even the more liberal academies of the period. Foremost came religious and moral training. Lieber felt that this was quite within the spirit of the will, for clearly Girard had intended to bar the clergy only in order to prevent sectarian controversy. Elsewhere the philanthropist had stated his concern over the moral character of the orphans, and how else than through religious instruction could that morality develop?16

Political education should exist as a corollary, since every young American should understand the government and institutions which he would participate in operating. Likewise the student should investigate the natural world around him through a study of biological and geological sciences. When he reached a sufficient maturity he should prepare for adulthood through zoology and sex education. Lieber granted that sex information was difficult to teach, but through a judicious, reverent presentation, the instructor could "take from it the dangerous and attractive veil of mystery."17

The plan likewise emphasized the practical aspects of physical sciences and mathematics. Every student should learn enough bookkeeping to manage his own finances. Some should study surveying, statistics, or navigation. All might learn their trades, augment theoretical education, and enjoy themselves in workshops and gardens. In addition to these, Lieber recommended an observatory, which could largely maintain itself through fees for adjusting chronometers and the sale of astronomical publications.

Just as they studied the physical world in laboratory, workshop, and observatory, the orphans should inquire into the nature of man through history, "the anatomy and physiology of human society." Writing at a time when not a single American college maintained a separate chair of history, Lieber recommended, "It is not only the history, or rather enumeration of great political events which I desire to be taught in the college, it is the history of civilisation with respect to politics, religion, sciences, fine arts, discoveries and

15 Ibid., pp. 85-87, 161, 183, 190, 192. Note in interleaved copy, Johns Hopkins University.
16 Ibid., pp. 35-36, 79-82.
17 Ibid., pp. 82-83, 112-14.
inventions; the progress of society, commerce, and industry; of laws and manners—the history not only of turmoil but also of comfort.”

Another key to an understanding of one’s fellow man was language study. Lieber recommended it not so much for its commercial advantages as because through it “we learn a different logic, a different way of seeing and feeling.” He lauded Girard’s de-emphasis of Latin and Greek. Much less of human knowledge was now stored in those idioms, and their study would steal time from more useful courses. The students should learn modern languages, and should concentrate upon writing and speaking in addition to reading and grammar. Their approach to English should be similarly functional. For recreational as well as practical purposes they should learn to sing and draw, and to participate in sports and exercises in indoor and outdoor gymnasiums and a swimming pool on the Schuylkill River. With himself in mind, he proposed that the president should be in charge of physical education.

Lieber accompanied his curricular suggestions with an elaborate set of recommendations. He suggested an evening continuation school for orphans who were apprenticed out of the college before their eighteenth birthday. He planned a press upon which to print an improved series of textbooks, sketched a seal for the college, and drew up an elaborate set of disciplinary regulations. These firmly barred corporal punishment from the upper levels. Few American schools functioned without it, but Lieber reasoned that pupils if angrily whipped became resentful rather than penitent.

Lastly, Lieber proposed sending “a proper and well-prepared person” to Europe to inspect orphan asylums and polytechnic institutes and to acquire books and scientific apparatus. By no accident, the qualifications for this person, as also those for the president, corresponded closely to those of Francis Lieber. Privately he had confessed earlier, “To be sure, it is no lofty idea, to beat orphan-bottoms all one’s life along but—I would be perhaps not

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Ibid., pp. 105-11.

Ibid., pp. 87-98.

Ibid., pp. 66-79, 139-40, 142, 193. On October 24, 1834, Lieber visited the new Haverford College with his friend Warden Samuel Wood of Eastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary. The chemistry professor commended the Girard report as useful—especially the section on reward and punishment, “which as he is a Quaker and very calm reasoner, is very acceptable to me.” Note opposite p. 72, in interleaved copy, Johns Hopkins University.
quite useless." Hopefully he submitted his report to Biddle and the Trustees. They ordered it printed, paid him the premium, and even considered the European mission.21

From New England friends, Lieber received laudatory comments. Joseph Story, the erudite Supreme Court Justice, considered the plan "invaluable for the materials it affords, the principles which it develops, & the sound doctrine which it inculcates." John Pickering, a leading Boston lawyer and philologist, hoped that Lieber would become "the soul of the new body in that Institution."22

Utilitarians welcomed the proposals with equal warmth. Mrs. Austin reported Lord Brougham's approval, and wrote that Lady Byron, who had started a school near London, was trying some of the suggestions. Dr. Thomas Arnold, that pious paragon of Rugby headmasters (and no utilitarian) commended Lieber's sound precepts on religious education as further proof that candidates for University of London degrees should be required to pass scriptural examinations.23

Nevertheless, as Justice Story had forewarned, the work augmented the German-American's reputation more than his purse. Though Carey, Lea and Blanchard printed the book, Lieber owned the edition, and found few buyers. Despairingly, at the end of the year, he pressed the New York legislature to buy a quantity for fifty cents a copy or less. A decade later, Girard College still had fifty copies on hand.24

The plan which so delighted intellectuals made no impress upon the practical Philadelphia politicians who were to control the Girard legacy. Even when sponsored by native-born Americans, German

21 Ibid., pp. 145-48. Lieber to Sparks, February 20, 1832, Sparks papers, Harvard University Library. The present writer wishes to thank the Library officials for permission to quote from the Sparks manuscripts. Perry (editor), Lieber, p. 98; Herrick, Girard College, p. 8.

22 Story to Lieber, February 15, 1834. Subsequently Story wrote from Cambridge, July 24, 1834, "Your Girard College Report has been very highly spoken [of] here by all, who have read it." Pickering to Lieber, February 19, 1834, Huntington Library.

23 Lieber to Story, April 23, 1834, Story papers, Library of Congress. A. P. Stanley, The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D.D. (New York, 1846), pp. 269-302-03. K. M. Muncke favorably reviewed the plan in "Dr. Lieber on Girard's College (Beschluss.)," Heidelberger Jahrbücher der Literatur (1834), 27:369-84, and in Magasin für die Literatur des Auslandes (October 8, 1834), pp. 483-84.

educational ideas were slow to win acceptance among the nationalistic American public, which saw a taint in anything introduced from abroad. Had Lieber been another Horace Mann, his task would have been difficult; laboring under a thick accent and a turgid Germanic writing style, he found it impossible. Worse still, he frankly prefaced his plan with a bibliography of sixty-three titles, every one of which was either German or French. That alone was sufficient to frighten away those wary of European influence; the ideas, radically in advance of American educational custom, chilled those who read further.25

Not at all surprisingly, the Girard trustees found no further place in their plans for this foreigner. Biddle had favored sending him to Europe immediately, but in October 1834 the Committee on Scholastic Affairs flatly vetoed the plan. Less than two years later the trustees elected a descendant of Franklin Alexander Dallas Bache, to the presidency of the college, and sent him on the very mission they had denied Lieber. Bache prepared another admirable report, and introduced advanced European methods into the Central High School in Philadelphia, but was dismissed from the Girard presidency in 1841.26

In subsequent years, Lieber persistently sought a position at the college. In 1838 and again in 1847, although he was a well-paid professor at South Carolina College, he applied. Lieber enlisted the aid of prominent persons: Joseph Reed Ingersoll, George Mifflin Dallas, John L. Hodge, and Joseph Henry, but his candidacy received only slight attention. Aged William J. Duane, who had been the author of Girard’s will, candidly wrote Lieber in 1847 that he had not received a single vote in the election of the president—“and solely because this is not your birth-place.”27

25 Lieber, Girard College, pp. 21-25. Most of these pamphlets are now in a seven-volume bound set entitled “Miscellaneous Pamphlets” in the University of California Library.

26 Biddle to Lieber, October 2, 1834, in interleaved Lieber, Girard College, Johns Hopkins University. Perry (editor), Lieber, p. 101, records the scholar’s disappointment. In hope that the Girard appointment would materialize, he delayed too long before accepting Henry Clay’s invitation to apply for the presidency of Transylvania University at Lexington, Kentucky. Freidel, “Henry Clay’s Efforts, in 1834, to Obtain Francis Lieber, as President of Transylvania University,” The Filson Club History Quarterly (January, 1943), 17:28-38. On Bache, see Herrick, Girard College, pp. 134-37.

27 James Bayard to Lieber, June 8, 1838 (copy in Matilda Lieber to Lieber, June 20, 1838) ; Ingersoll to Lieber, June 25, 1838; Lieber to Matilda Lieber, September 8, 1838, July 28, 1847; Henry to Lieber, November 5, 1847; Hodge to Lieber, October 9, November 21, 1847; Lieber to [Dallas?], September 3, 1847; Duane to Lieber, December 6, 16, 1847, Huntington Library. Lieber to Hodge, November 21, 1847, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
After the college finally began operations in 1848, Lieber’s plan made only a slight impression. As he had suggested, the college was divided into three schools; the president did assume supervision of a scanty physical education program. Significant recommendations, including those relating to mechanical training, received only belated attention, although in 1848 Duane pointed emphatically to the wishes of Girard. More than a decade elapsed before the curriculum provided strong courses in manual arts; other phases of the program, with the exception of religious education, similarly lagged. In time Girard College became a great educational institution, but as late as 1890, Richard Vaux, a philanthropist long active on the board of directors, deplored its failure to achieve the high ideals of Lieber and Bache.

Early in 1834, Lieber, glowing from the congratulatory letters of the intelligentsia, did not realize his defeat. He even planned to utilize the quantities of German materials he had gathered, to prepare a two-volume work he would entitle “Letters on Education.” Practical-minded Jared Sparks, later to become president of Harvard, gently warned Lieber that this would be of undoubted value but problematical success. Lieber must think not in terms of Europe with its cheap labor, but the United States, “where the young men crowd in throngs into active life, and fill up spheres in which intellectual attainment or culture is not necessary to success. When do you think the time will come, that the University of Berlin, with its brilliant array of professors, would flourish in Philadelphia? Not till the forests shall all be felled to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, and ‘every rood of ground maintains its man.’”

28 Herrick, Girard College, p. 207 et passim.
29 Lieber to Sparks, January 25, 1834; Sparks to Lieber, February 4, 1834, Harvard University.