WEST COLLEGE
First building erected to house Dickinson College, completed 1803. From an old print, circa 1811.
A FRONTIER EXPERIMENT WITH HIGHER EDUCATION:
DICKINSON COLLEGE 1783-1800

By Joseph B. Smith

When Benjamin Rush heard of the interest of some gentlemen of the village of Carlisle in expanding the facilities of a grammar school in their town, he took this opportunity to press for the establishment of a college there. He, and those whom he interested in the plan, were apparently mostly concerned with the fact that "the great number of representatives in assembly that this immense Western Country will furnish—makes it of the most serious importance to establish a seminary of learning amongst them." Rush had become alarmed at the operation of the state constitution, written in 1776 when Pennsylvania was at the height of revolutionary fever. This constitution had given the western counties a share in the government for the first time. When an act of the legislature made the University of Pennsylvania a state institution in 1779 on the grounds that it was a hot-bed of Toryism, Rush felt that it was time to act. The founding of Dickinson College in 1783 was evidently motivated, therefore, by the desire of the long-dominant seaboard minority to infiltrate the frontier which had become, at last, a politically equal part of Pennsylvania.

In their zeal, however, Rush and his friends did not give much thought to the reaction the frontier community might have to their scheme. One of the most colorful men who lived on the Pennsylvania frontier in this period has left a fictionalized but highly illuminated account of what that reaction was. Hugh Henry Brack-

enridge, born in Scotland in 1748, graduate of Princeton, 1774, chaplain in the American Revolution, 1777, sometime schoolmaster, editor, and judge of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, lived in Carlisle from 1801 until his death in 1816. While at Carlisle he published, in 1804-05, the final two volumes of his satire, *Modern Chivalry*. This novel, satirizing the manners and morals of the frontier, is a mine of information on popular attitudes toward such matters as the Whiskey Rebellion, the French Revolution, local politics, education and the law.

In the early part of the added matter published at Carlisle, the town in which the principal character lives is strikingly like the one in which the author resided. It is a small community with a college, newspaper, tavern and coffeehouse. Although there seems little doubt, whether he was talking about Carlisle is not so important as what he has to say about the attitude of the people toward higher education. This attitude he presents very vividly with the following incident:

The doctrine of abating nuisances had been much in conversation lately. It came so far that an incendiary proposed to abate, or burn down, the college.—A town meeting had been held on the occasion and whether from a wish to see a bon-fire; or from the hatred of the ignorant to all that places the informed above them, the proposition, however unreasonable, had its advocates. It had been actually carried and a person was on his way with a brand lighted to set fire to the building—The principal and professors had harangued in vain. It was threatened that if they did not stand out of the way they would be burned with the college.

This never happened in Carlisle, nor in the village in the novel, but the early history of Dickinson College was a grim struggle for survival. As Brackenridge later explained, “I will not say that people talk of burning colleges, but they do not talk much of building them up.” Rush had been warned that the community was not ready for a college, that students would be hard to find,

---

5 *Loc. cit.*, p. 163.
that funds would be difficult to raise, that what was needed was only an academy. An examination of the problems of the college in the light of a study of the community will show to what extent and why these warnings were accurate.

Carlisle had been incorporated by an act of the legislature a little over a year before Dickinson College received its charter. The village, hence, was emerging from the status of primitive frontier outpost. When it was founded, some thirty years before, it had been merely a collection of a few houses around a fort, a small cluster of white men in Indian country. The population was highly homogeneous, consisting in the first three decades of its existence, almost exclusively of Scotch-Irish families. By 1782, a few Germans had moved into the community, but of the 1500 souls in Carlisle in 1795, not more than a dozen or so were of this nationality. In 1778, the earliest record of population, which actually is a list of taxpayers although the unit of taxation was small enough to make the figures fairly significant, listed 233 persons and among the property were twenty-six Negro slaves. The inhabitants, then, should not be pictured as wearers of the coonskin cap when they are referred to as frontiersmen. The term frontier, as used here, is meant to describe the political and social attitudes that the people of Carlisle appear to have had. Those were: a tendency to place individual freedom above the so-called national interest, as seen in their attitude toward the Whiskey Rebellion, their support of the French Revolution, their Jeffersonian politics, and, their lack of enthusiastic support of higher education.

Carlisle was, as has been said, emerging from the earliest stage of frontier settlement by the time of the chartering of Dickinson College in 1783. It had become the county seat in 1751. A courthouse was erected in 1765-66. Thus the town had very early attained some distinctions to set it off from other communities of its type. On August 10, 1785, appeared the first edition of a newspaper, The Carlisle Gazette and Western Repository of Knowl-

---

9 Pennsylvania Archives, 3rd Series, vol. XX.
edge. Its publisher was George Kline whose activity as a printer gave him the distinction of being the chief disseminator of culture for the area. He was a staunch Jeffersonian. Kline and Archibald Loudon, who after 1790 ran a book store, bindery and printing office, turned out nearly one hundred imprints of various kinds.

The most ambitious literary activity of the period was the formation of a library company in March 1797. The committee that drew up the rules for the library consisted of such local leaders as Dr. James Armstrong, President Nisbet of Dickinson College and Dr. Davidson of its faculty. Besides some quaint rules, such as the one which cautioned: "the members will be careful not to hold the books too near the fire nor permit children to have them," the library company was notable for its collection. Later in the spring of 1797, appeared a "catalogue" of proposed books and books being purchased that was full of modern works; that is, of the writings of Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, Montesquieu, Adam Smith and others.

That the founders planned the library to have wide influence in the surrounding countryside is shown by another rule: "members living within five miles of Carlisle shall return folio and quarto volumes within four weeks, and octavos and smaller books within two weeks. Those living more than five miles from town shall have double this time to return their books." The company barely lasted nine years, however, and its disappearance from lack of interest is evidence that the town was not in the stage of development that some of its leading citizens thought it was.

Life was still closer to the pursuit of savage enemies than the pursuit of information from Johnson's Lives of the Poets. That this was so may be illustrated by the number of executions and public whippings Carlisle witnessed. In the nine years from 1779 to 1787 eleven men and two women were hanged, three having been found guilty of murder, three of robbery, two of burglary, two of counterfeiting, one of rape and one "of an unmentionable crime." There had been one hundred and fifty-three whippings,

39 Thompson, Carlisle Publications, p. 2.
38 Ibid., p. 21.
37 Ibid., p. 20.
36 Biddle, E. W., in Carlisle Old and New, Carlisle Civic Club ed. (Carlisle 1907), p. 22. I have been unable to find out the nature of the "unmentionable crime."
averaging twenty lashes, from about 1751 to 1785 when the practice was abandoned. Considering that the population of Carlisle was under 1500 and the population of Cumberland County was less than 18,000 in that period these statistics would seem to reveal a rather high incidence of crime. In November 1785, a horse thief was found guilty and sentenced as follows:

Judgement: that the prisoner, Daniel Clayton, be taken from hence to the jail and from thence on Wednesday next, the 30th of November, between the hours of 8 and 10 o'clock a.m., be taken to the common whipping post, that he stand in the pillory one hour, have both his ears cut off and nailed to the pillory, and then and there receive thirty-nine lashes on his back well laid on, restore the horse stolen to the owner, if not already done, or the value thereof, pay a like value to the President of the State for support of the Government, pay costs of prosecution and stand committed until the whole be complied with.

One poor creature had merely been hanged for “an unmentionable crime.”

Harsh punishment was, of course, common in America of this period. But there is other evidence of rough and ready living besides the number of severe punishments. “On Saturday morning last,” Kline’s Gazette reported June 27, 1793, “a duel was fought near this place by Messrs. John Duncan and James Lamberton, when the former unhappily received a ball in his head which instantly deprived him of life. By this melancholy accident his wife has lost an affectionate husband, his five children a tender parent, and society one of its most valuable citizens.” The victim of this duel was the son of Judge Thomas Duncan of the state supreme court. His second was James Blaine, son of Ephraim Blaine at whose home George Washington was entertained when he visited Carlisle in 1794 on his way to quell the Whiskey Rebellion. His conqueror later became a general of the militia in the War of 1812. It can be seen, therefore, that the participants of this duel were from the same level of society as the founders of the library company.

14 Day, ibid., p. 262.
15 Biddle, loc. cit.
Duelling was not the only violence known to Carlisle in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The year before the duel described above, Dr. Nisbet wrote,

A spirit of madness and riot seems to have taken possession of this place lately. The soldiers here have been several times fighting with Negros, and almost everyday with one another. Sundry people have been wounded; one Bovard, an Irish reedmaker has this day almost murdered a woman who lived with him as his housekeeper. Yesterday, a drunken Nailer sallied out with an ax and hammer to knock down everybody he could meet with. He wounded sundry persons among whom were two students and he is now in Gaol. But he will soon get out again as evildoers here have no punishment to dread.\footnote{Nisbet, Charles, letter, June 9, 1792, \textit{Himes Collection}, Dickinson College Library. The letters used here are all from the Dickinson College Library Collections and therefore further citations will merely note the author and date.}

One wonders what punishment the sturdy Presbyterian divine had in mind when the number and kind of punishments meted out are recalled.

Into this community Charles Nisbet had come in 1784 to take office as principal (the title then given the president) of the new college. He had been selected because of his reputation as a scholar and because he was considered politically safe.\footnote{Butterfield, \textit{loc. cit.}} As the years passed, this last qualification became a liability to him and to the school. Rush’s conservatism of 1783 faded before his abundant enthusiasms for numerous social experiments. He and his college president had many quarrels. Even more important, Nisbet’s views clashed more and more sharply with those of the majority of his fellow townsmen. As will be seen, he differed from them on every public issue, and he was not afraid to express himself. This frequent angry disapproval explains why he thought “evil doers have no punishment to fear.” He was convinced that the political views and activities of the townsmen were evil. The people of Carlisle thought and acted as though men were equal—an idea abhorrent to the reverend doctor.

When the new principal arrived he was given a public reception and conveyed to quarters in the “public works” or barracks, that
had been erected during the Revolutionary War. On June 5, 1785, he was inaugurated principal of Dickinson College. The new principal was immediately beset with problems that proved, in the main, unsolvable. First, there was the lack of funds; next, was the problem of acquiring enough students and keeping them at work once acquired; then there was the fact that the college building was "a small and shabby one fronting on a dirty alley;" and finally, there were innumerable quarrels between faculty and trustees over these and other matters. A study of these problems reveals two things; if there had been a "spirit to build colleges up" in Carlisle many of them would have been overcome; and, had Nisbet been a different sort of man that spirit might have arisen.

The basic financial problem was that the college had no money. There were the lands which John Dickinson, in whose honor the college was named, had turned over to it; and there was some assistance from the legislature. The trustees also relied upon various subscription drives. A sum of £2,839, 12s., 6d., was raised by the time of the second meeting of the board, April 6, 1784. But subsequent drives failed to live up to expectations. When it is remembered that one of the drives was an attempt by John Montgomery, a Carlisle trustee, to have his friend William Bingham try to raise money in England two years after the close of the Revolutionary War, the expectations of the trustees seem to have been a little high. Bingham reported in a letter dated December 29, 1783, that although, "I inform them—of the beneficial effects that would result to humanity from planting the seeds of knowledge in that western country, at present so remote from all access to the improvement of the human mind," his efforts met with no success. He rightly commented on the failure of his mission "whilst the effects of the American war were so visible in the marks of public and private distress;" and he said later in the same letter that "all solicitation for the support of American establishments would be ineffectual."

This was not the only scheme the trustees had in mind, however, and it is the attempts to raise money in the community and surrounding area that are of most interest to this discussion. Abraham Blumer, presiding over the assembly of the German Reformed

---

20 Taney, R. B., quoted in Biddle, Old College Lot, p. 8.
21 Wing, loc. cit., p. 104.
Church meeting at Reading in April 1785, lauded the "undertaking of founding a nursery of learning and religion." To the request for financial support, he replied, "we make no doubt that as many of us and of them under our care as have occasion will encourage it by sending their sons thither."

Dr. Nisbet, like many a modern college president, went on trips around the state trying to raise money. He had this to say about his reception on such business trips: "When it [Dickinson College] sought subscriptions from individuals it was met with the charge of sectarianism, when it solicited donations from the state, it was accused of political heresies and exposed to investigating committees."

The replies Nisbet reported receiving from those who were asked to contribute, take on added significance when the arguments that were advanced in support of the college at the time of Brackenridge's supposed arson are examined. The best that could be said for not burning the college was none too good. The "Captain," Brackenridge's principal character, took it upon himself to prevent this terrible deed from being done. But he had to be careful in what he said.

"Gentlemen," said he, "it is not for the college I speak, it is for yourselves. Your object is to put down learning and do you not know that it is put down already,—the Methodists are the best preachers. Take a horse jockey and in two weeks from the jump, he is in the pulpit—why burn the college? The building will serve useful purposes when the professors are driven out of it.—

"I do not know," said a sedate man among the crowd, "whether after all a little learning may not be in some cases useful.—I mean to say, that a young man before he comes to years of discretion may as well be employed in learning to make marks on paper as playing at nine-men's-morrice, and it does him no more harm to try to read Greek, than to trace partridge tracks. The mind must be employed in something to keep it out of harm's way, and seclusion in a seminary is useful if for nothing else at least it keeps young people within doors.—And tho' a great part of learning is but the knowledge of hooks and crooks, yet the exercise of the mind renders

Blumer, Abraham, letter to trustees of Dickinson College, April 28, 1785.
Dickinson trustees, memorandum, undated.
Nisbet, letter, quoted in Nevins, ibid., p. 42.
them more expert in thinking and tho' Latin is of no more use to raise the devil these days than English, yet it is a gentle exercise to learn it and makes the boys grow faster.  

A statement of Nisbet corroborates this. In 1792 he commented sharply to his friend William Young, a Philadelphia Bookseller, “I know of no body here who buys any books except Mr. Tate. You know we are all so wise here already, that we do not need any instruction.”

This was evidently the state of mind of the people of Carlisle, for on Nisbet’s journeys and in his local attempts he was able to raise practically no money. In 1791, and again in 1798, the legislature had to come to the aid of the struggling college by grants of £1500 and £3000, respectively. “Planting the seeds of knowledge” among the frontier farmers was evidently viewed by them as an investment in a losing crop.

In lieu of financial support, it will be recalled, the German Reformed congregation had promised students. But an examination of the college class lists in the first sixteen years of its existence fails to reveal that they lived up to this less exacting promise. Judging by the names, the predominant racial component of the student body was Scotch-Irish. This, of course, is not surprising when it is remembered that the college was Presbyterian and that the Pennsylvania frontier as a whole, not only Carlisle, was predominantly of that national group.

An examination of these class lists reveals other interesting information besides the homogeneity of the student body. The majority of the students entered the ministry. Since it was a Presbyterian school, this was natural, for the Presbyterians were insistent on college educations for their clergy. Hence the remark in Brackenridge concerning the evangelical Methodists. Finally, this vocational pattern, training students for the ministry, was common to all the colonial colleges.

There were nine graduates in the first graduating class, the class of 1787; there were thirteen of the class of 1788; nine of the class of 1789; twelve of the class of 1790; thirty-three of the

---

25 Brackenridge, loc. cit.
26 Nisbet, letter, June 9, 1792.
27 Reed, G. L. Alumni Record of Dickinson College (Carlisle, 1905).
class of 1792; thirteen of the class of 1794; thirteen of the class of 1795; nine of the class of 1797; twenty-four of the class of 1798; eight of the class of 1799; and five of the class of 1800. There were no graduations in the years not mentioned. One of the most striking things about these early classes is the unexpectedly advanced age of the graduates. The youngest graduate of the class of 1787 was nineteen, for example, but the oldest was thirty. Of the 148 graduates of these classes, only twenty-two were under twenty years of age, while eight were over twenty-five. A comparison with Harvard in its comparable early period, as presented by Samuel Eliot Morrison, reveals just how high the average age of the Dickinson graduate was.\(^2\) The oldest Dickinson graduate was William Stewart of the class of 1795, who was born in Ireland in 1759, and hence was forty-six when he received his degree and when he entered the ministry.

The above figures are not complete. Vital statistics for about one-fourth of the students are missing and in some classes many members were not graduated. On the basis of existing material, however, one conclusion might be ventured. That is, the college evidently fulfilled one type of frontier need, namely, the opportunity for self-improvement. Only thirty of the students of the college in this period were from Carlisle or nearby, however. The principal area from which students seem to have been drawn appears to have been the South and Southwest. When it is remembered that Carlisle was located in the Cumberland Valley, one of the highways to the early Southwest, it is clearer why students came from those areas. From the standpoint of enrollment, then, Dickinson did not receive much support from the community, yet the location of Carlisle was an important factor.

A more attractive college building and some sort of accommodation for the students would have helped to increase the enrollment and prestige of the school, Nisbet believed. In this, after about fifteen years, his hopes were realized. During those first years, however, college classes met in the grammar school. Nowhere does the original college building receive a flattering description. It was located on lot 219 of the original plan of the town, extending from Pomfret Street to Liberty Alley, and was situ-

ated some sixty feet west of Bedford Street. The original deed to the property is dated 1773, but the exact date of the erection of the school building is not precisely known. It is known, however, that an addition to the original building was built in 1785.

During the period in which it was used by the college, the grammar school was taught on the first floor and the college classes met on the second. There were only four rooms, two upstairs and two down. It was evidently not the pleasant place that a college advertisement in the Philadelphia papers in 1786 made it appear. John Penn, who came to Carlisle in April 1788, described it as a “small patched-up building of about 60 by 15 feet.” Nisbet went further in expressing his disapproval. He said in a letter to the trustees, written November 13, 1786, “the mean appearance, the small dimensions and dirty entries of the building prepared for the accommodation of students must create a considerable prejudice against the college in the eyes of the public who are commonly led by appearances. For proof of this the trustees may ask every stranger who passes through this place and enquires for the college.” As time went by, his words grew sharper: “The managers of all the seminaries in the world, except this one,” he said in a letter to the trustees dated October 31, 1791, “have always taken care to provide some convenient building—which might attract the notice and attention of students; whereas, the very mean appearance of that hovel in this town wherein classes are taught at present and its situation in a deep pit of thick clay, naturally suggest the most disagreeable ideas.”

Not only was the building undesirable for classroom uses, but it provided no accommodations for the students, and as the president complained, “there are very few convenient lodgings to which they can have access.” The faculty and local trustees took in some of the boys, for there were not adequate public houses in which they might lodge. Nisbet was very worried, in any case, about the moral problems involved in students living there.

Prodded by these and similar remarks the trustees did consider

---

20 Biddle, E. M., Old College Lot, p. 3.
21 Ibid., p. 7.
22 Ibid., p. 8.
23 Nisbet, letter, November 13, 1786.
24 Nisbet, letter, October 31, 1791.
25 Loc. cit.
an idea suggested by John Dickinson and warmly supported by Nisbet in several letters, namely, that the college purchase from the government the "public works," in which Nisbet himself had been temporarily deposited. Dickinson once, and Rush another time, attempted to get the national congress to sell, but the plan failed both times. However, money was the principal obstacle, and when aided by the state legislature in 1798, the trustees finally were able to purchase a tract of land from the "out-lots." There followed fairly soon, the first successful subscription campaign and work was begun on a "suitable building." It seems safe to conclude that Nisbet was correct, and had there been a building to "attract the notice and attention of students" the drawing power of the college would have been greater; but money was hard to obtain from a community not overly enthusiastic about its college.

Not only was it difficult to draw many students to the little "patched-up" college, but it was difficult to keep them and to make them do any work. The reasons for this were partly financial, again, but also might be attributed to the desire of the frontier lads to get their book-learning fast. These matters were not easily settled because the faculty could be overruled by the trustees on all matters of discipline.

The college did not have sufficient funds to make it independent of tuition fees. The students were aware of this. As one critical analysis of the situation puts it, "when students know the faculty depends on them for daily bread and that their withdrawal or expulsion will close the doors of the institution, they have a firm conviction that they are masters of the situation."37

This situation persisted long after the period reviewed here, and was made worse because the students could appeal over the faculty, directly to the trustees. As late as 1829, President Neill complained about this to the trustees. Alexander McClelland had to defend himself before the board because he made a mild suggestion that one of the students had plagiarized an English theme. Neill wrote, "When a student is presented for dismission or expulsion do the Board claim the right of pardoning him in toto, thus taking all discipline in the case out of the hands of the faculty."38

36 Nevin, op. cit., p. 110.
37 Neill, letter, November 13, 1829.
38 Neill, letter, November 13, 1829.
A more serious complaint was that the trustees, under pressure of the financial problem, were willing to ignore academic standards. Nisbet wrote his friend, William Young, in 1792:

We sent out so many students at our late commencement that we are much at a loss for recruits. Our trustees gave a great many degrees by mandamus, to whom they chose, but concealed this circumstance in the account they gave the papers to throw the infamy of the thing on the masters.\(^9\)

About 1798 they went still further and decided to grant A.B. degrees for one year’s work. This infuriated the president, but pleased the students and actually made the financial problem worse. “Their act for annual commencements which restricted the time of study to one year, had taken away 2/3 of the tuition money and reduced the reputation of the seminary more than 3/4,” Nisbet wrote.\(^{40}\) Although a three year course was restored after 1800, the damage had been done. No one wanted to wait that long to get a degree. “With regard to the few we have at present,” the president wrote to the trustees in 1802, “all that entered since 1798 expected to finish their studies in a year, . . . each class that entered since 1798 thought that they had a right to be as ignorant and to pay as little for their learning as their predecessors.”\(^{41}\)

Nisbet had other worries with the trustees besides these matters of academic standards. He never received the salary that had been promised him. The bickerings over this matter were long and complicated. He threatened several times to institute law suits for his arrears. And once he complained bitterly that “they [the trustees] have . . . ordered an application to the legislature for altering their charter, no doubt, to enlarge their own powers and to take away those of the masters. The cup of slavery is a bitter one but I must drink it. They never deign to talk with me of business. How miserable to be the subject of the meanest of men.”\(^{42}\)

The life of Dickinson’s first president was not a happy one. Besides financial worries, the responsibility of teaching the hardy

\(^9\) Nisbet, letter, June 7, 1792.
\(^{40}\) Nisbet, letter, November 8, 1803.
\(^{41}\) Nisbet, letter, October 18, 1802.
\(^{42}\) Nisbet, letter, June 9, 1792.
sons of the American frontier, who were mainly interested in quick degrees, was onerous for the Scottish minister, accustomed as he was to old world respect for learning. Even more difficult was living in a community where "the people expect to get good by their ministers tho' they seldom pay them or hear them," and where radical ideas were prevalent.  

An examination of some of the political history of the early years of Dickinson's existence and Nisbet's tenure as president of the institution will reveal sharply the cleavage between college and community. In the year in which the college graduated its first class, the convention in Philadelphia finished its work on a new instrument of government. The Constitution of the United States was not well received along the frontier. The people of that area were especially jealous of local rights and fearful of strong central government. They were worried, also, because the original draft of the constitution contained no bill of individual rights.

On December 26, 1787, a public meeting was called in Carlisle to express agreement with Pennsylvania's ratification. A cannon was placed in the public square, which was to be fired off for each of the ratifying states. The foes of the Constitution broke up the meeting. The cannon was spiked. Instead of the planned celebration, the figure of Thomas McKean, chief justice of the state supreme court and ardent supporter of the Constitution, was burned in effigy. The issue had been clearly drawn and succeeding events, the French Revolution, the Whiskey Rebellion, the election of Jefferson, were to widen the gulf between the democratic frontier and the friends of a strong national government who cared less for freedom than for what they considered to be law and order.

Nisbet was on the side of law and order. The rights of man, the idea of equality, offended his religious and political beliefs alike. This he made very plain to his students of the history of philosophy. "The French," he said in one of his lectures, "have done all in their power to make all things appear equal . . . to release the vicious from all fear of punishment," and, he continued, "it would be easy to show that modern fashionable philosophy [by which he meant the ideas of Paine, Jefferson, and the French Revolutionaries] is entirely composed of the drops and dregs of

Nisbet, letter, January 8, 1790.
those of the ancients." Some of the students, Taney noted in his memoirs, although they were required to reproduce the exact words of the lecturer in their notebooks, refused to take this sort of thing down. The student from whose notebook the above is quoted wrote at the top of the page, "lecture 62, and last, I hope."

Doctor Nisbet's ideas began to make life in Carlisle uncomfortable and even physically dangerous for him during the period after the levying of the excise tax on whiskey in 1791. In the years that immediately followed the adoption of Hamilton's tax, the people of Carlisle sympathized strongly with the Whiskey Rebellion which the tax incited in western Pennsylvania. They sympathized also with the French Revolutionary armies. Nisbet was violently opposed to both movements. As he did not keep his ideas to himself either in teaching or in preaching at the First Presbyterian Church, there is little wonder he was forced to write that although he was "in very much anxiety for the peace of this poor country... I believe that my neighbors reckon me as an enemy to it."

The fall of 1794 was a period of disorderly expression of sympathy for the Whiskey boys. In July of that year Nisbet had commented:

The majesty of the sovereign people have arisen in a mass within the counties of Washington, Allegheny, Westmoreland and Bedford, and being animated with the purest principles of Liberty lately imported from France by the Democratic Society they have resolved to resist Congress and the excise act and destroy all its abettors by fire, rapine, and massacre and other constitutional methods common in republics having begun their campaign with burning the house, barn and fences of General Neville since which time they have prevented the publication of the Pittsburgh Gazette in order to show their zeal for the liberty of the press and the Revolutionary Convention next appointed a committee of public safety for robbing the post at Greensburgh which was executed immediately.

The Whiskey Rebellion had begun.

44 Nisbet, lecture 62 in Student Notebook, 1795, Dickinson College Library.
45 Nisbet, letter, March 15, 1794.
46 Nisbet, letter, July 29, 1794.
On September 8, a liberty pole was erected in the Carlisle square proclaiming "no excise." Colonel Blaine, one of the town's first citizens, was attacked by the adherents of the rebellion and was pursued for two miles out of town. The Sunday preceding the erection of the liberty pole, Nisbet had preached a sermon urging support of the Federal government. This infuriated the Whiskey sympathizers. A group of them determined to assault his house, but finally refrained "only from a regard to an invalid member of his family." Perhaps they might not have been so considerate had they seen the description of their cause quoted above.

The next month George Washington passed through the town on his way to suppress the rebellion. Nisbet's sermon on this occasion, which Washington noted in his diary, was better received. The reception given Washington as he rode into town to review his troops was interesting. A newspaper account in the Philadelphia Gazette and Daily Advertiser for October 7, 1794, reported: "the crowds were assembled in the streets, but their admiration was silent." One might speculate that the silent admiration was caused by awe, but one might also recall the events of the previous month. Nisbet, by the way, felt that the whole affair was "something ridiculous." Washington's neutral attitude toward France irked him. And "that our government which has given so unequivocal and so public an approbation to the cause of the French Revolutionists should be obliged by the law of self-preservation to take arms against their fellow-citizens for acting on those very principles which they have so often approved" seemed to him a kind of poetic justice. He hoped that it "might teach . . . that the custom of flattering the people as sovereign is a natural cause of sedition and insurrections."

That the Washington administration had countenanced the French Revolution even for a moment may have bothered Nisbet, but the community in which he lived and struggled to keep alive his infant college, felt quite differently. On May 22, 1793, a news item appeared in Kline's Gazette stating that interested citizens should meet at the home of James Pollock to send an

\[47\text{ Wing, op. cit., p. 110.}\
\[48\text{ Flower, Lenore E., Visit of President George Washington to Carlisle 1794. Hamilton Library Papers, 1933.}\
\[49\text{ Nisbet, letter, October 14, 1794.}\

address to Citizen Genet, minister from the French Republic.\(^5^0\)

About a week later another item appeared in the paper.

Yesterday evening a subscription was opened in this borough for the benevolent purpose of aiding the distressed friends of freedom in the Republic of France. In the course of a few hours upwards of 80 barrels of flour were subscribed. "Tis hoped this measure will meet the approbation of every good citizen and that similar exertions will be made in every part of the state to afford relief to a people whose blood and treasure have been liberally expended in the establishment of the independence of this country.\(^5^1\)

This measure did not meet the approbation of Dr. Nisbet who wrote in June, "a subscription is going on here for the support of the French and the people are eager to contribute in order to show their contempt for the President's proclamation."\(^5^2\)

Throughout the summer the flour subscription continued. The Gazette gave some eight additional items concerning it. One reveals that the idea was receiving support in the surrounding countryside. At a meeting held during the summer at Silver Springs Meeting House, it was resolved unanimously "that we will concur with the inhabitants of this county in procuring and raising money and wheat toward the relief of the said citizens of France."\(^5^3\)

Kline's busy press turned out a number of broadsides in this period supporting the drive.

The inhabitants of Carlisle also engaged in less practical but even more enthusiastic demonstrations of their feeling. December 26, 1792, the following item appeared in the paper:

On Thursday last the bells rung in this town with short intervals from 3 o'clock until 9 in the evening. At night the courthouse was elegantly illuminated. Two beautiful transparencies were displayed from the upper windows of the courthouse with the following inscriptions in large letters which could be seen at a great distance—the one to the east significant to the event then celebrated [evidently the declaration of the French Republic September

\(^{50}\) Kline's Gazette, May 22, 1793, quoted in Thompson, op. cit., p. 17.

\(^{51}\) Loc. cit.

\(^{52}\) Nisbet, letter, June 1793.

\(^{53}\) Kline's Gazette, August 23, 1793, quoted in Thompson, op. cit., p. 18.
22, 1792, news of which had reached this country only a short time before this celebration took place] being in that quarter—Let Man Be Free. The other was to the south intimating that despotism prevails most in that unfortunate hemisphere—Tyranny Is About To Cease. Bonfires accompanied the illuminations and the evening was passed by the citizens in convivial meetings expressive of their satisfaction.  

There is little wonder, then, that Nisbet became convinced that the terrible heresies of liberty and equality had been firmly planted in the town of Carlisle. The townspeople generally, as has been seen in the description of their reaction to the Whiskey Rebellion, were equally convinced that Nisbet was not their kind of man. It is interesting to speculate upon the fact that when the mob was dissuaded from burning the college in Brackenridge's story, it next thought of burning the church. "‘It is not our intention to abolish Christianity,' said one of the mob, . . .‘but to put down the preacher at this place, who is not an American Republican.’"  

Nisbet certainly was not. He was a Scotchman with strong anti-democratic leanings. The local political ideas show a marked coloring of Jeffersonian hue. This can be seen in the support given Jeffersonian candidates, and in the kind of candidates who ran for office. Brackenridge may not have been describing actual incidents, but his story of the politician hard pressed to explain the fact that he was seen carrying two books certainly could have occurred in Carlisle. Nisbet gives an account of an actual election in which appeared the new kind of candidate for "public honors," as elective offices were called by the minority accustomed to holding them in the eighteenth century.  

This is our election day [he wrote in 1794] in which all free citizens of the several sections of the municipality are to exercise the inestimable right and privilege of electing each a four-thousandth part of a delegate in Congress. . . . A shoemaker, who is our sheriff, is the candidate for Congress set up by the Sovereign People on the merit of having conducted their mobs and deliberations and liberty pole meetings with consummate
judgement and exemplary decency. . . . It may be expected that he will know what laws are suitable to his constituents as he has often taken the measure of their feet for many years past.\textsuperscript{56}

Nisbet may not have liked these things but they are evidence of one of the great facts of American history. The events in France and the activities of Jefferson's political lieutenants brought about a revolution among the American masses, especially along the frontier. Americans, like their English forebears, had been accustomed to acting with some degree of political freedom, but always with proper deference to their betters: clergymen, lawyers, and other educated or wealthy members of society. In the closing years of the eighteenth century they became aware, however, that they really had political power. They naturally grew impatient with the old order and its representatives. The candidate who was accused of being seen with two books and who boasted, "I am an illiterate man, God be praised, and free from the sin of learning," may well have been real—may have been, in fact, the shoemaker of Nisbet's letter.

These eventful years of our history were years of struggle for the young college in Carlisle. By 1803 some progress was being made: a college building had been successfully subscribed for and even a heart-breaking fire could not prevent its ultimate completion in 1804. The difficulties of the earlier years can be ascribed to two causes. The frontier community in which the college was located did not take enthusiastically to higher education. Despite his devoted efforts to maintain academic standards and recruit new students, Charles Nisbet was not a leader whom the people of Carlisle could easily follow. A man who could declare "how long a just and holy God may permit the world to be desolated by the fire of liberty and equality,"\textsuperscript{57} could hardly expect to raise money from the still-keepers of the Cumberland Valley in 1794 nor keep their sons attentively at work copying his lectures.

\textsuperscript{56} Nisbet, letter, October 14, 1794.
\textsuperscript{57} Nisbet, letter, December 1795.