DURING a tour of Eastern cities in 1835, Lyman Beecher, famed New England preacher turned frontier seminary president, delivered his famous address, “A Plea for the West,” published at Cincinnati in the same year. In this address Beecher declared that the United States was destined to lead the way in the moral and political emancipation of the world, and that many of the resources for that destiny lay in the West. The need to Christianize and civilize these vast waste places of Zion was fervently urged, for “the religious and political destiny of our nation is to be decided in the West . . . . It is equally clear, that the conflict which is to decide the destiny of the West, will be a conflict of institutions for the education of her sons, for purposes of superstition, or evangelical light; of despotism, or liberty.”1 Beecher further urged that “the thing required for the civil and religious prosperity of the West, is universal education, and moral culture, by institutions commensurate to that result—the all-pervading influence of schools, and colleges, and seminaries, and pastors, and churches . . . .”2 The instrumentality of a learned and pious ministry educated in the West struck a responsive chord not only among Beecher’s Congregational listeners, but also among Unitarians, in whose circles the Lane Seminary president was not a favorite son.

The formation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825 was stimulated at least in part by a concern to alert New England liberals to the necessity for the spread of “rational and Scriptural Christianity” onto the frontier. Over a period of ten years, starting in 1836, this need was annually rehearsed to the association. In 1836 Beecher’s plea was first dramatized in the annual report to the

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2 Ibid., 121.
executive committee, which lifted up the trials and sad state of religion in the West and sought to rouse the conscience of New England Unitarians to their obligation. "The Committee lacks words to express the weight of responsibility which rests upon our denomination." With near apocalyptic urgency his first report sounds the "solemn call of duty" and pictures the West as a rich field in which thousands of liberal souls stand ready to be harvested. The committee made good on its determination to send laborers for the harvest by commissioning two missionaries and urged the necessity of increasing the attractiveness of Western fields for Harvard trained liberal ministers.

Waxing somewhat visionary, the 1836 report concludes:

our work is not done till our sympathy reaches and blesses the thousands of our faith in the distant parts of our land, who are denied the privileges we enjoy; till the religious spirit of New England pervades the vast multitudes beyond the mountain, and the moral condition of our country promises safety to its best institutions, its peace, its freedom. No. Our work is not done, till the whole country is brought under Christian influence . . . ."4

The report echoes much of Beecher's plea, and his case for education, especially theological education, as a means to rescue men from ignorance, servitude, despotism, and revolution did not go unnoticed.

At its next annual meeting in 1837 the association received a special report from its executive secretary, Charles Briggs, who had spent eight months in the West traveling extensively distributing tracts and promoting the cause of liberal religion. Briggs was convinced that the West stood on the brink of becoming Unitarian, for "it seems that a large portion of the more intelligent and influential people in those states are far from being disposed to embrace the prevailing doctrines of religion."5 Briggs discerned that the spirit of the West and the spirit of Unitarianism were so compatible that failure to seize this moment in history would spell doom for the forces of liberal religion: "Not only the destiny of our country, but the destiny of Unitarianism is to be decided in the West."6

4Ibid., 21.
5American Unitarian Association, "Twelfth Annual Report to the Executive Committee," Tracts, X (June, 1837), 22.
6Ibid., 24.
This sentiment was echoed also by the Reverend George W. Hosmer, one of the missionaries sent out by the American Unitarian Association. In a "Sermon on the West," Hosmer urged that "the antiquated dogmas of Calvin and Edwards, and the worn out forms of the Catholic church can never exert a lasting influence . . . ." Only a mode of faith that was Scriptural, reasonable, and virtuous could hope to survive in the West, and Unitarianism provided just that. The missing component necessary to carry the Unitarians to victory was the presence of a trained clergy. Failing the efforts of the association to attract Harvard graduates onto the frontier, the need was clear to establish a center for liberal theological education in the West.

Several preliminary explorations into possible sites for the location of a seminary were made, one at Buffalo and another at Louisville, but neither effort materialized. The need for an educated ministry to meet the growing demands of frontier Unitarianism was duly noted by the association each year. It was not until 1844 that the executive committee could report "that efforts are now being made by H. J. Huidekoper, Esq., and Mr. Frederic Huidekoper to establish a similar school at Meadville, in Western Pennsylvania." This rather innocuous notation contains within it one of the most fascinating stories of theological education in America.

Described as "a healthy and pleasantly located village on the main road from Pittsburgh to Erie," Meadville was founded in the late 1780s and busily set about acquiring the accoutrements of civilization—including a school, a permanent clergyman, a newspaper, and by 1807 the Meadville Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures and Arts. It became the seat of Crawford County and in 1815 the home of Allegheny College. By the early 1840s this community of nearly 2,000 inhabitants seemed to provide an ideal setting for the establishment of a theological school which would serve as a beachhead in Unitarianism's bid for the West. Meadville was close enough to maintain ties with New England and Harvard, yet near the edge of the ever-expanding frontier and away from the distracting influences of larger cities; it is little wonder then that the executive committee of the American Unitarian Association received with enthusiasm the report of the Huidekoper's interest in es-

3George W. Hosmer, "Sermon on the West," The Western Messenger, 1 (June, 1836), 783.
tablishing and maintaining a center of theological education for the liberal clergy west of the Alleghenies.

Among the early inhabitants of Meadville who left enduring impressions of their presence was Harm Jan Huidekoper. Huidekoper, a native of Holland but transplanted to western Pennsylvania in 1802 as an agent for the Holland Land Company, came to enjoy the security that successful business ventures bring with them. He determined to procure the finest tutors for his son Frederic, and to Pomona Hall, the Huidekoper estate in Meadville, came a steady stream of Harvard graduates including Ephraim Peabody, John Sullivan Dwight, William Henry Channing, and James Freeman Clarke.

The liberal religious views of these young scholars impressed the elder Huidekoper and led him to embrace Unitarianism. He contributed generously to the founding in 1825 of the Independent Congregational Church of Meadville, one of the strongest outposts of Unitarian Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century west of the Alleghenies. This remarkable Dutchman, who indulged himself in land sales, "a good table," and liberal theology, was an instrumental force behind the founding of The Meadville Theological School. He was involved in the publication of a small monthly periodical, The Unitarian Essayist, contributed to The Unitarian, and urged the founding of the The Western Messenger as an organ of liberal theology.

Huidekoper was determined that liberal Christianity had a stake in the future of the nation, but its current stagnation was due in no small part to inadequate training of ministers to serve congregations in the West. To this end, Huidekoper contributed generously both of his time, through efforts with the American Unitarian Association to secure a suitable president for the school, and of his money.

The contributions of the father to the founding of the Meadville Theological School are matched only by his son Frederic. The younger Huidekoper imbibed deeply the high culture of Pomona

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9See a fine biography titled Harm Jan Huidekoper by Nina Moore Tiffany and Francis Tiffany (Cambridge, 1904).
10See The History of Pomona Hall by Alfred Huidekoper (Meadville, 1889) for a sketch of this unusual household.
12Francis A. Christie, The Makers of the Meadville Theological School, 1844-1894 (Boston, 1927), chap. 3. Huidekoper's major works are Judaism at Rome, The Belief of the First Three Centuries concerning Christ's Mission to the Underworld, and The Indirect Testimony of History to the Genuineness of the Gospels, collected and published as Works (Boston, 1883).
Hall and much to the delight of his father chose to study theology at Harvard's Divinity School. He completed his work there in 1839, spent two years traveling and studying in Europe, and returned to Meadville where he determined to establish himself as an itinerant Unitarian preacher.

However, a father's money and a son's education combined to provide one of the most unique contributions to theological education in America. From 1844 until his retirement in 1877, excluding a two-year period in which he resigned from the school over a creedal dispute with its president, Frederic Huidekoper never drew a salary for his services first as Professor of Hermeneutics and New Testament, then as Professor of Church History. He also donated a valuable tract of land on which the theological school was to be built. His two volume *Works* stand as an additional monument to this extraordinary figure.

The liberal views of the Huidekopers prevented from the beginning the imposition of any doctrinal standards upon students entering the school. For this reason it attracted a number of candidates from the Christian Connection. This loosely bound group shared with Unitarianism an antagonism toward Calvinism and its teachings on the Trinity, the total depravity of man and the doctrine of election, and hoped for a union of all Christians on a simple Scriptural basis. Generally comprised of a lower social class than the Unitarians and less concerned with rigorous theological training for its clergy, the Christian Connection nonetheless saw in the Meadville Theological School an occasion for informal entente with Unitarians. In turn the Unitarians welcomed the Christian Connection as a sign of nonsectarian theological education in operation and as a potential source of many students for the school.

The Meadville Theological School opened its doors to the first class of eight students in October, 1844. The generosity of H. J. Huidekoper was coupled to a commitment by the American Unitarian Association (of which Huidekoper was a vice president) to provide five hundred dollars per year for five years toward the salary of the school's president, provided the right man could be found. The call went to the Reverend Rufus Phineas Stebbins of Leominster, Massachusetts, who accepted a call both to the school's

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14On Stebbins see Christie, *Makers of the Meadville Theological School*, chap. 2.
PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

presidency and to the local Unitarian pulpit. The purchase of the property of a local Cumberland Presbyterian congregation provided the first quarters for the new school, and the dedication of the newly renovated Divinity Hall in October of 1844 provided an occasion for President Stebbins to discourse for nearly two hours upon the nature and necessity of theological education.

The discourse may not stand as a milestone in American letters, but it does provide important insights into mid-nineteenth century liberal attitudes toward the nature of the ministry and ministerial education. Degrees from Amherst College and Harvard Divinity School gave Stebbins credentials to speak with authority upon the subject, and he proceeded to detail the necessity for thorough ministerial training with high professional standards. There was much need for men of the cloth to exhibit a union of the intellect and the heart, of piety and knowledge, to the end that neither fanaticism nor skepticism gained the day. The liberal clergy was instructed to play a great role as a stabilizing influence against the excesses of both revivalism and infidelity. Acknowledging the great contributions on the frontier of untrained and long-suffering circuit riders and farmer preachers, Stebbins insisted that these were passing forms and that the conditions of society demanded a better educated and more cultured ministry.

The young scholars were instructed that the need to study was paramount and a sacred duty of the profession, to search the riches of natural theology and the wisdom of God, the mission of Christ and the nature of man. The wealth of Holy Writ and the salvation of the soul were matters of the greatest import. But the need for a well-trained clergy was made necessary by the present state of society in which "men are becoming more enlarged. A demand is made upon the pulpit for more profound discussion." The progress of the age in learning and culture must be reflected in the ministry, lest the profession fall prey to the ignorant such as "William Miller [who] is received as infallible expounder of the prophecies, and Joe Smith as a prophet of the most high God!"

A theological school was accordingly an indispensable instrument for the quelling of ignorance and the spreading of enlightenment in religion. To unfetter the mind, to discipline it in the search for truth,

\[15\] Rufus P. Stebbins, "A Discourse Delivered at the Dedication of Divinity Hall, Meadville, Pa., October 24, 1844," The Christian Palladium, XIII (January 8, 1845), 260.

\[16\] Ibid., 261.
to make it independent in judgment and courageous in investigation—these were the goals of theological education. The objective of the new school was not to train men in the dogmas of sectarianism, but to nurture them in truth and wash the scales of prejudice from their eyes. The school was to be further a nursery of the spirit where zeal, faith, devotion, and self-sacrifice were cultivated. With a burst of impassioned eloquence Stebbins concluded: “we would aid in the great, the glorious truth of awakening free thought, of inspiring men with an unquenchable desire, an irrepressible longing for something sounder, more reasonable, more scriptural, in theology, something more consistent, more Christian in morals, something more comprehensive, more earnest in philanthropy than they now enjoy.”

The course of study prepared by the board of instruction for the newly arrived students was patterned after Harvard’s curriculum to embrace the history and interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, Biblical Antiquities, Evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion, Mental and Moral Philosophy, Logic and Rhetoric, Composition and Delivery of Sermons, Ecclesiastical History, Systematic Theology, Pastoral Care, and Greek and Hebrew or Latin and German. This indeed was an impressive program of theological studies, and the first term student was plunged into it by being required to read Paley’s *Natural Theology*, Butler’s *Analogy*, Jahn’s *Archaeology*, Upham’s *Mental Philosophy*, the *Hoeae Biblicae*, Gerard’s *Institutes of Biblical Criticism*, and Campbell’s *Dissertations and Prefaces*. To this study applicants were required “to bring satisfactory testimonials of a good moral character; they must also be acquainted with English, Grammar, Geography, Arithmetic, and elementary principles of Natural Philosophy.” Clearly, something more than a good moral character was necessary to see the student through such an ambitious theological curriculum, and the school was plagued by candidates who lacked the proper preparation for the rigorous program. As for tuition and the use of textbooks, no charge was assessed; and the interested student was advised that “boarding and lodging can be obtained in private families from $1.25 to $2.00 per week. In some cases this includes fuel and lights, in others not.”

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17 Ibid., 266.
18 Meadville Theological School, *Catalogue* (Meadville, 1845).
19 Ibid., n.p.
When the American Unitarian Association met in August in 1845, President Stebbins was there to carry a glowing report on the school's first year of operation. Reminding the association of its obligation and commitment to the theological education of liberal Christians in the West, Stebbins likened the plight of "thousands of families who had gone out from the vallies and hills of New England, from the free altars of her churches, who find themselves entirely cut off from religious sympathy and Christian ordinance" to the plight of the Israelites in the wilderness.

He said that the need for leadership was desperate. If men were to be led from the wilderness of dogmatism and sectarianism to a more rational Christianity, only a well-trained clergy could accomplish this. The school at Meadville was designed to meet this demand and in fact was accomplishing its objectives. The president was delighted to report that the school was out of debt. He praised the self-sacrificing spirit of the students, some of whom walked twenty or thirty miles each Sunday to preach.

Stebbins's report also noted the easy cooperation between Unitarians and the Christian Connection in the enterprise of theological education. He discerned in this denomination the desire to unite all Christians on the simple foundations of Scripture, a spirit of free inquiry, and free religion akin to that of Unitarianism. Besides, the Christian Connection promised to be a great source of support in numbers of candidates for the ministry. The school's earliest catalogue made it clear that

persons wishing to know the religious sentiments of the school are informed that it has been established by the united efforts of the Christian and Unitarian denominations. To such as are ignorant how far these denominations acknowledge the right of private judgment, we would further say, that students of all persuasions are entitled to equal privileges, and will receive like attention.

This alliance, however, between Unitarians and the Christian Connection was an uneasy one, and both Stebbins and the board of trustees were somewhat too sanguine about the capacity for the two denominations to share the enterprise of a theological school. In the end the relationship foundered not only over rather deep cultural
and social differences between the two groups, but also over the nature of the ministry and of theological education. What was to have been a happy venture in mid-nineteenth century Christian unity ended as a rather bitter experience in Christian disunity.

Enthusiastic notices of the school's opening and of its design to meet the crying needs for proper ministerial training were carried in the Christian Palladium, the chief bimonthly organ of the Christian Connection. The Palladium a year later published the first report of the visiting committee to the school, which noted that "from its establishment we have looked to this institution with strong confidence and fervent hope, believing it is peculiarly fitted to exert a happy influence on the religious condition of the more Western portions of our country." The chairman of the committee, Elder J. E. Church, took great pains to assure his Christian brethren that "to think that the institution will 'Unitarianize' our students, and alienate them from us" was an unfounded fear. Church urged that for the present the Christian Connection, unable to support its own school, had little alternative but to go in with the Unitarians. He said, "There is no other religious body that would unite with us, in such an enterprise, upon terms so favorable. They furnish the teachers, we the students."

However, relations between Unitarians and the Christian Connection were not destined to persist upon such a high level of cooperation, despite even the best efforts of the school's president to insist that "it is a great mistake which some are making in reference to the school, that it aims to make Unitarians. It aims to make freemen." Perhaps in New England such a venture in Christian unity might be looked upon as an impossibility, but under frontier conditions anything is possible, even the co-operative maintenance of a theological school.

Again, Stebbins's prognosis of Christian unity on the frontier proved too sanguine, for the first number of the Palladium in 1848 carried a damaging article by Elder W. R. Stowe voicing strong criticism of Meadville student attitudes toward miracles, the second coming of Christ, the authority and inspiration of Scripture, and the resurrection. This article precipitated a series of events which led to

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22 Christian Palladium, XIII (June 12, 1844), 19.
23 Ibid., XIV (June 27, 1845), 86.
24 Ibid., 93.
the eventual withdrawal of the Christian Connection from support of the school.

Stowe's charges were refuted by David Millard, a Christian Connection minister and member of the Meadville faculty, as well as by Meadville students who published a letter in the *Palladium* defending the school's name and denying the views imputed to them. But the damage had been done, and beneath these outward events was an underlying ambivalence and uncertainty about the place and nature of theological education.

This ambivalence was revealed by the editors of the *Palladium* who saw fit to enter the fray with a lead article on theological education which revealed a fundamental cleavage in attitude between themselves and the Unitarians. The editorial doubted the necessity of theological education for the ministry, questioned its desirability under conditions where any threat to Biblical truth was present, and denied the possibilities of the Christian Connection fraternizing with another denomination in ministerial training.26

The debate over the nature of education in general and theological education in particular dragged across the pages of the *Palladium* for several months, issuing a call for the Christians to build a school of their own.

It would be one of our greatest misfortunes to continue there [Meadville]. Our connection with that school is based upon false principles, and will diminish our strength, and prevent our growth . . . . We may be called poor, rude, and low. But let us not voluntarily be so low as to be dependent . . . . They look upon us as uneducated Unitarians, they speak of us as Unitarians, and they even represent our mission as to promote Unitarianism.27

By September of 1849 James Elliott could declare of Meadville that "I believe a large proportion of our denomination look upon that school with doubt and fear its influence . . . . I can see nothing in the conduct of graduates of that school calculated to inspire confidence in it."28

The hoped for admixture of Unitarian intellect with Christian Connection piety was not to transpire, and the Christian unity perceived to be so necessary for the civilizing and Christianizing of

26*Christian Palladium*, XVI (April 8, 1848), 794.
27Ibid., XVIII (August 4, 1849), 174.
28Ibid., XVIII (September 1, 1849), 268.
the West suffered yet another setback. Despite their insistence upon the need for a professionally trained clergy, there were those within the Christian Connection who were suspicious of Harvard divinity degrees and who "dreaded the rise of a ministerial class whose pride of learning might limit the Spirit's authorizations." 29 Genuine differences in attitude toward revivalism, millennialism, social reform, and the nature of the ministry all contributed to the broken dream of healing the sectarian divisions of Christianity. A short-lived monthly, The Christian Repository, was issued in 1852 by the joint effort of the Meadville professors and members of the Christian Connection. Stebbins continued to court the Christians and even became a member of the Western Reserve Conference of that body in 1855, and David Millard, the Christian Connection member of the faculty, continued at Meadville until 1866. However, the withdrawal of Christian Connection students beginning in 1849 effected the school by "extruding the Christian emphasis on the training of preachers of the common people for the common people, of imposing on its students—many of whom were to pass to Western pulpits—the patterns of New England Unitarianism's upper- and middle-class ministry." 30

Despite this setback the school continued to look to the future. In a circular distributed in 1850 soliciting $45,000, the trustees stated "we believe that the school is now permanently established." Four years later a new Divinity Hall was erected on a valuable piece of property overlooking the town and the French Creek Valley, the property donated to the school by Frederic Huidekoper. The catalogue for 1854 boasted a library of 10,200 volumes, although a year later the student body enrollment had fallen to 15. 31 The problem of student recruitment was acute. Attracting students from Western states who were willing to carry the message of religious liberalism into the wilderness rather than seeking the security of a New England pulpit remained an insoluble issue.

At Meadville the Unitarians realized their dream of establishing one of the earliest theological schools west of the Alleghenies, but the dream of a Unitarianized West was not fulfilled. Some progress was made in establishing Unitarian congregations and nurturing liberal religion. Graduates of the Meadville school contributed to this movement. Certainly in the course of his twelve-year presidency

29 Christie, Makers of the Meadville Theological School, 70.
30 Charles H. Lyttle, Freedom Moves West (Boston, 1907), 66.
31 Meadville Theological School, Catalogue (Meadville, 1854, 1855).
at Meadville Rufus Stebbins must have despaired more than once that from the vast expanses of territory his school was designed to serve not more young men of Unitarian persuasion sought the services it offered. His distinguished presidency had founded the school, brought it to new and spacious quarters, acquired a solid library, and assembled a small but excellent faculty. But the anticipated wave of religious liberalism never crested, and the host of young men to be prepared to lead the vanguard never appeared.

Unitarianism was not destined to taste the fruit of success nearly so much as the Methodists and the Baptists, both of whom were much less particular about the refinements of theological education. Perhaps Stebbins miscalculated the spirit of the age; a transplanted Harvard was not what was necessary to make religion a going concern in the West. While Frederic Huidekoper at Meadville was lecturing with impeccable scholarship on every detail of the first three centuries of Christianity, Peter Cartwright and his fellow Methodist circuit riders were taming the wilderness, schooled only by the necessities of the frontier.

Nevertheless, there is something remarkably attractive about this frontier experiment in classical theological education. The men who participated in it devoted their energies to it unsparingly. The rigor with which they designed and carried out the curriculum rest on a foundation of freedom in which "no doctrinal test shall ever be made a condition of enjoying the opportunities of instruction in the School, except a belief in the divine origin of Christianity."32 The devotion to the ideal of a learned clergy made the formative years of The Meadville Theological School a unique enterprise in American religion.

32From The Meadville Theological School Charter, 1846.