A CULTURAL OASIS IN NORTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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At the close of a spring day, May 12, 1788, a party of ten weary men encamped beneath a wild cherry tree on the bank of French Creek near the mouth of the Cussewago. The next morning they built a cabin in the deserted cornfields of the Indians and began their spring planting. David Mead, a Revolutionary veteran and a huge man with a powerful voice, was their leader. Cornelius Van Horne and Christopher Snyder, from New Jersey; and John Watson, Thomas Martin, James F. Randolph, Thomas Grant, and Darius, John, and Joseph Mead, brothers of David, all from Northumberland County, were the members of the party.

"Mead's settlement," later known as Meadville, grew slowly. In the fall of the same year, David and John Mead brought their wives and families from Northumberland County; the following year, Darius Mead, Frederic Baum, and Robert Fitz Randolph came with their families, and Frederick Haymaker, William Gregg, Samuel Lord, and John Wentworth arrived. In 1791 hostile Indians ambushed Van Horne, Gregg, and Thomas Ray, a later settler, and carried them to Conneaut Lake. Ray was eventually taken to Detroit, where he was recognized by a friend whom he had known in Scotland, who ransomed him. Because of the defeats of General Harmar and General St. Clair in 1790 and 1791, the Indian menace became even greater and many of the settlers deserted their lands. David Mead built a blockhouse in anticipation

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1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on April 28, 1936. Dr. Ferguson is an associate professor of history in the University of Pittsburgh, and this article is a by-product of his study, as a research associate on the staff of the late Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, of early western Pennsylvania politics. Ed.
of Indian raids, but the activities of General Anthony Wayne allayed the settlers' fears, and in 1793 many of them returned to their claims. In February of that same year, Mead began selling lots in the pioneer town that he had laid out. The settlers were further reassured by the defeat of the Indians by General Wayne in 1794, and thereafter there was a small but steady influx of settlers. A more extensive survey of the town was made in 1795 to facilitate the sale of lots to the newcomers. Fifteen years later, in 1810, the population was only 300; in 1830 it was but 1,104; and in 1860, 3,702. These figures clearly indicate that for over a half century Meadville was only a small town situated on a segment of the American frontier. There certainly was nothing unusual in its size.

Nor was there anything unusual about the hardships that these early settlers encountered. They were in fear of Indian attacks for almost a decade after the first settlement was made. As late as 1794 James Dickson, returning from his farm up the creek, was attacked by three Indians at a point close to the present location of Allegheny College. They fired upon him from ambush—one of the bullets broke his arm, and another tore through his hat. He claimed that he had defied them and asked them to come out in the open but that the "rascals" had refused. After the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, the Indian menace was more mental and psychological than real.

The difficulties and hardships encountered in traveling, however, were real for a much longer period. Late in the year 1794, William Dick of Pittsburgh transported his family, which included his wife and two sons, George and John, to Meadville. John Dick, later elected four times to Congress, was then an infant of six months. His mother told him in after years that she had carried him in her arms throughout the journey, which was made by boat to Franklin and by horseback from Franklin to Meadville through underbrush so thick that several times she had

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4 William Reynolds, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 4; John Dick, "Recollections of an Early Settler," in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 11.
been in danger of being brushed from her horse. Dick relates that the following year his father started to Pittsburgh with four horses to fetch a supply of flour for the family. He expected to be absent eight or ten days but because of an unusually heavy fall of snow did not return for six weeks. During that time the family lived on frozen potatoes, venison, and bear meat.\(^5\)

But pioneer women did not shrink from hardships. In fact they seemed to become harder and sturdier under adversities. An episode in the life of Jennet Finney illustrates this ruggedness admirably. One William Gill had taken possession of and settled on a tract of land along French Creek in the fall of 1793 or 1794. He went to Pittsburgh, intending to return with his family and supplies, but because of a very severe winter deferred his return until the following spring. When he arrived at his cabin he found Jennet Finney standing in the door with a rifle in her hands, claiming the land, and threatening to shoot if he attempted to oust her. Gill withdrew, and Jennet Finney occupied the claim long enough to establish ownership. Shortly afterward she married General Mead, who was then a widower, and years later she became president of a women’s society in Meadville and took a prominent place in the social life of the community.\(^6\)

One more incident will serve to illustrate the almost bizarre side of pioneer life in Meadville. On November 1, 1822, the town prepared itself for the execution of an “unhappy criminal” by the name of David Lamphier. He had been convicted of killing a man upon evidence that would now warrant a verdict of manslaughter at most. The hour of the execution was set for two o’clock in the afternoon. A scaffold had been erected about a mile from the jail on a hill overlooking French Creek. The people gathered in front of the jail early in the morning, and at twelve o’clock a guard composed of the Meadville Light Artillery under the command of a Captain Blossom and the county militia under the command of Captain Gibson paraded and formed in front of the jail. Shortly

\(^5\) Dick, in *Daily Tribune-Republican* (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 9-11.

afterward, Lamphier, "clothed in his shroud with a rope around his neck and a great cloak over his shoulder," was led out. With the Reverend Timothy Alden and a second divine named Jackson comforting him, he took his place in the line of march. The procession was led by the sheriff, followed by the coroner, the gentlemen of the bar, and the officers of the county on horseback. Next came two wagons, one carrying the coffin, the second to be used in transporting the unfortunate criminal in case he collapsed. Behind the trudging victim came the citizenry in a semi-holiday, semi-reverent mood. The procession stopped once about midway of the journey while Lamphier drank some wine to bolster up his courage and enliven his feet which were beginning to drag. At one o'clock, a host of some four thousand people gathered around the "engine of death"; Lamphier was seated upon the platform, and the noose was made ready for the hanging. Standing on another corner of the platform, the kindly, compassionate Timothy Alden, founder of Allegheny College, then preached the "unhappy victim's funeral." For some fifty minutes Lamphier sat there while Alden "glanced at the wicked course which he had pursued" and pointed out that crime did not pay. Ten minutes before two o'clock Jackson began a prayer, which lasted for six minutes. Lamphier inquired as to how much time yet remained and then asked Alden to pray for the remaining four minutes. A few seconds before the trap was sprung Alden stepped off the scaffold. 7 William Reynolds, a boy of ten, lay in the loft of his father's stable a few yards away and watched the spectacle through a crack.

The above illustrations are sufficient to indicate that Meadville was a pioneer town. The incidents related were usual ones in such a region; but against this background there can be drawn a picture of cultural development that is almost incredible and certainly rare in American history. Many of the earliest settlers were men of fine social background in their native homes in England, Ireland, Germany, or Holland or along the Atlantic seaboard in America, especially in New England. They brought an atmosphere of culture with them and attempted to recreate and retain it in their adopted home.

7 Crawford Weekly Messenger (Meadville), November 5, 1822.
The Holland Land Company and the Pennsylvania Population Company, both of which held land in northwestern Pennsylvania, were responsible for sending some of the ablest men into Crawford County. Thomas and Alexander Foster, brothers, were the first agents of the Holland Land Company in Meadville; they held the office jointly from 1796 to 1799 and afterward practiced law in Meadville until about 1805. Roger Alden, a Harvard graduate and a gay young blade, performed the duties of the office from 1799 to 1804 but was unable to keep his accounts straight and was dismissed. He remained in Meadville for a quarter of a century, was a prominent social leader, and in 1817 was made a member of the American Antiquarian Society. Harm Jan Huidekoper supplanted Major Alden in the company's office at Meadville and served as agent until 1836, when he bought out the holdings of the company in Crawford County. He had been graduated from a European university and had mingled with Philadelphia's best society for a year or two before his arrival in Meadville. The company had selected promising men to represent it, and those men tried to improve the social conditions on the frontier.

A greater number of men, however, who were destined to leave their marks on the little town came there on their own initiative. John Reynolds, whose father had brought him to Crawford County from England by way of New York and Pittsburgh in 1797, had acquired a good education from a tutor in England. He married Jane Ellicott, daughter of Andrew Ellicott, surveyor general of Pennsylvania, and opened a land office in Meadville. To his office came a son of Governor Thomas Mifflin of Pennsylvania carrying letters that had been written to Mifflin by many prominent men, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Elbridge Gerry. Young Mifflin departed from Meadville after a year's service but left the letters, which are there today, unpub-

8 William Reynolds, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 3.
9 Dick, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 12.
lished, unused, and almost unseen.\(^{13}\) Patrick Farrelly, who was born in Ireland in 1770, arrived in Meadville in 1802. He was a classical scholar, a brilliant lawyer, and a man of culture and was elected to Congress three times and to membership in the American Antiquarian Society.\(^ {13}\) The Reverend Robert Johnson, supposedly a descendant of Oliver Cromwell, was trained at the Canonsburg Academy; the Lutheran minister Charles William Colson had been a tutor in noble families before his experiences and imprisonment during the French Revolution;\(^ {14}\) Dr. Joseph Kennedy, a Revolutionary surgeon and the first husband of Jane Ellicott, exercised a refining influence upon those whom he touched;\(^ {15}\) but the greatest cultural leader in early Meadville was Timothy Alden, a distant relative of Roger Alden and supposedly descended from John Alden. He was graduated from Harvard and had preached and taught in academies for many years before he migrated to Meadville in 1815.\(^ {16}\) Samuel Lord, who donated the land for Allegheny College; Samuel Torbett, the merchant; and Thomas Atkinson, the founder of the first newspaper, the *Crawford Weekly Messenger*, were other leaders of the period.\(^ {17}\)

In addition to these residents of Meadville many men who visited the town on business errands left their traces. When Crawford County was established along with some seven other counties in 1800, the organizing act stipulated that the courts of the new counties would be held at Meadville provided that Crawford County would raise four thousand dollars for an academy. As a result of that arrangement, the more prominent

\(^{12}\) The letters are among the correspondence of Henry Baldwin in the Reynolds Collection, now in the possession of Mr. John Reynolds of Meadville.

\(^{13}\) William Reynolds, *Fifty Years of the Bench and Bar of Crawford County*, 17, 18 (n.p., 1904).

\(^{14}\) Richard Craighead, "Early Churches: Organization of the First Churches of the County," in *Daily Tribune-Republican* (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 67, 68; *Weekly Tribune-Republican* (Meadville), September 7, 1907.


\(^{17}\) Hayes, in *Daily Tribune-Republican* (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 34; William Reynolds, in *Daily Tribune-Republican* (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 3.
lawyers of western Pennsylvania spent considerable time in Meadville attending the sessions of the county courts. Alexander Addison presided as judge for a short time before his impeachment; Henry Baldwin, who became interested in Meadville and had a residence there as well as in Pittsburgh in the early part of the century, married Sarah Ellicott, thus becoming a brother-in-law of John Reynolds. In 1841, Baldwin, then a judge of the United States Supreme Court, built a fine home in Meadville, which still stands and houses most of the material used in the preparation of this article. John Audubon, the great naturalist and painter, spent a summer there and left many portraits of local people in payment for his board. These people could not forget the ways of the old world or their former life in New England. They wanted schools, social life, and religion for their children. They were unable to purchase and import culture as they did their clothing. Consequently, they generated it among themselves. The first school was opened by Jennet Finney in 1795 in a log house on what is now North Market Street. Mead later converted the blockhouse into a school, took Miss Finney for his wife, and in 1798 employed an Irishman named Kelley to teach the children of the settlement. Thereafter, Meadville was never without an elementary school. Private schools were kept by ladies who procured as many pupils as possible; occasionally two or three men employed a teacher for their children; and some tutors were brought in by individual families. Even singing schools were established to improve the "vocal powers" of the young and often of the old as well. There were no public grade schools, however, and it is not to be supposed that all children received the benefit of an education.

The academy was established as required by the act of 1800 that fixed the sessions of the various county courts at Meadville. It was typical of its

18 William Reynolds, Fifty Years of the Bench and Bar, 3, 4, 6, 13, 14.
19 "A Reminiscence," in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 53.
20 William Reynolds, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 2.
times in emphasizing the classics, and its courses seem to have been available to pupils of various ages. Many people, however, objected to the emphasis placed on the ancient languages and sponsored a movement for a separate academy, which was formally incorporated in 1807 and continued to 1860.²²

Nor were the girls neglected. At least two "female seminaries" were founded before 1852. The first probably existed from about 1825 to 1845. Documents are not available to indicate the exact year of its founding, but the treasurers' records for the years 1839 to 1841 show that it was in good financial condition at that time. The second seminary, an exceedingly progressive school for girls, was established in 1852. For a tuition fee of seven dollars and fifty cents per term pupils might select a course of study from twenty-six different subjects, which included among others composition, modern history, physical geography, chemistry, botany, zoology, astronomy, physiology, bookkeeping, algebra, and trigonometry. Students who elected to study a language, whether Latin, Greek, Italian, French, German, or Swedish, were charged an additional fee. A course of twenty lessons on the piano was offered for eight dollars; a similar number of lessons in drawing could be had for four dollars; and a like number in oil painting was listed at eight dollars. Such a school for girls was very rare at the middle of the nineteenth century.²³

In 1815 a Sunday school association was formed. Its stated purpose was to encourage the reading of the Bible, and prizes were offered for memorizing verses. A Bible was granted to each individual who committed five thousand verses. There is no record of the number of Bibles granted, but at least 433 such prizes were won. More significant still, the association maintained a library known as the "Library of the Sunday School Association," which contained many rare and valuable books.²⁴

²² Sturdevant, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 39.
²⁴ Many volumes from this library and the certificate for prize no. 433 are in the possession of Mr. John Reynolds of Meadville.
The educational triumph was Allegheny College. Dr. Timothy Alden was the prime mover in that venture, and with the heart of a lion he began his efforts towards organization when the population of Meadville included only 666 people. A meeting of citizens was held on June 20, 1815, to consider the project. Roger Alden was called to the chair, and John Reynolds was chosen secretary. Timothy Alden addressed the meeting so forcibly that the members resolved to undertake the founding of the college. A committee was chosen to apply for a charter and to open a subscription book. Dr. Alden was sent east to obtain gifts. The following March he wrote the committee that he had collected $461 in money, $1,642.30 in books, and $2,000 in land. An additional amount of $5,685 was subscribed in Meadville. Timothy Alden was named president of the institution. The first commencement ceremony was held in 1820, and the following addresses were delivered: Hebrew oration, by T. J. Fox Alden; Greek oration, A. M. White; Latin oration, R. W. Alden; German oration, David Derickson; address on war, J. W. Farrelly; and the "Fall of Caesar", David M. Farrelly. The second generation was being educated.25

Another institution, a Unitarian Theological School, was founded in 1844 under the leadership of the Reverend Frederic Huidekoper, son of Harm Jan Huidekoper. It was known as the Meadville Theological School, and it held its first session in the law office of Alfred Huidekoper with five students in attendance. This institution had an unusually able instructional staff and a fine library, but it never achieved a great enrollment. Later it was taken over by the Union Theological School in Chicago. There is a great possibility that many documents valuable for the study of western Pennsylvania history are in the library of this school.26

Schools and educational institutions constituted only a part of the cultural program in Meadville, however. Libraries were established by private individuals and by organizations. A library association was formed in 1812, which, with some changes, has existed to the present time. Books could be obtained weekly and apparently were available under

25 Hayes, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 33, 34.
26 George L. Cary, "The Meadville Theological School," in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 36.
some conditions to people who were not members of the association.²⁷ The library of the Sunday School Association has already been mentioned; but the library of the first female seminary deserves attention. It contained the following books on etiquette, religion, history, and fiction: The Castle of Falkenburg or the Dove (New York, 1846); The Percy Anecdotes, Original and Select; and The North-American and West-Indian Gazettier, Containing an Authentic Description of the Colonies and Islands in that Part of the Globe, Showing Their Situation Climate Soil and Produce (London, 1777).²⁸ A perusal of one individual library has revealed a collection of hundreds of rare books, many of which were carried to America in early days by the original immigrants to Meadville.²⁹

These men who communed with the ancient masters did not content themselves with reading, however; they also found an opportunity to write. Thomas Atkinson established a printing press in 1805 and began the publication of a weekly newspaper, the Crawford Weekly Messenger, which he continued to 1831. It was the most significant newspaper between Pittsburgh and Cleveland and for sprightliness, information, and journalistic excellence was easily the equal of the Pittsburgh Gazette for those years. It contained original contributions from practically all the prominent men in the little town. They discussed agriculture, the tariff, transportation, the constitution, and earthquakes in language that was stately and dignified at a time when many seaboard journals were merely reprinting this type of material from English newspapers. Fortunately, every issue of the Crawford Weekly Messenger printed between 1805 and 1831 is available to the research student. During the War of 1812, when the editor was with the militia at Erie, a few issues were not printed.³⁰

²⁸ These volumes are in the Reynolds Collection. The records of the Crawford County Sabbath School Union, which were transcribed from the original minutes by Timothy Alden in 1830, are also in this collection.
²⁹ Many rare volumes and early editions of books written and published in Europe are contained in the library of Mr. John Reynolds.
³⁰ The complete files of this newspaper are in the possession of the Meadville Library, Art, and Historical Association.
More remarkable still was the publication of the *Alleghany Magazine or Repository of Useful Knowledge*, a monthly journal edited by Timothy Alden. He asserted that it was published for the “friends of morality, religion, literature and science” in the region drained by the Allegheny River and its tributaries. Thomas Atkinson printed the magazine, which was sold at the price of two dollars per year. Apparently twelve issues appeared from July, 1816, to June, 1817. They contained explanations of sermons; essays on Meadville, on Crawford County, on smut in wheat, and on volcanic eruptions; an address to young ladies; and notes upon the founding of Allegheny College. Very few copies of this priceless little gem are known to be in existence, and one of these is in the Allegheny College Library.

The people of Meadville further promoted their cultural and social life by means of associations and clubs. The Association for the Improvement of Commerce and Agriculture was formed in 1807—an organization somewhat similar to a chamber of commerce. In 1816 the women formed a Female Cent Society, in which each individual contributed one cent as dues. Its ostensible purpose was to purchase Bibles and foster reading, but it was also a noble excuse for social gatherings. Its officers were: Jennet Mead, president; Miss Sara Mead, secretary; Elinor Johnston, treasurer; Catherine Torbett, auditor; and Elizabeth Alden, director. Their husbands were members of the library association and the chamber of commerce, trustees of the college, officers of the Bank of the Northwest, established in 1813, and politicians. Most of them, incidentally, were conservative in politics.

This more favored cultural group enjoyed a happy social life. Both women and men observed the current fashion in dress and manners. Let a lady in lavender and old lace describe her wedding and honeymoon as she fondly recalls the event seventy years later:

I was married [in 1815] when I was sixteen to Conner Clark, one of the first merchants in the town. Our bridal trip was taken to Franklin on horseback, my wardrobe being carried in saddle bags and that of my husband in a valise.

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31 William Reynolds, in *Daily Tribune-Republican* (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 3.
strapped to the saddle. My traveling dress was a riding habit of plum colored broadcloth, with a square crowned hat of the same color; and my wedding dress was white silk, made in a style that is fashionable now, I hear, for evening dresses . . . My bridesmaid, Miss Eliza Alden, wore a thin, white muslin, made as mine was. . . . After the wedding ceremony, which was performed by the Rev. Timothy Alden, the company all sat down to a hot supper, served on a long table.33

Dancing was indulged in generally by these people. Formal invitations were sent. "The Company of Mr. & Mrs Lord are respectfully requested to a dance tomorrow evening at Mr Gibsons—Thursday morning 7 Decr 1809.—T. R. Kennedy Daniel Bemus Mgrs."34 Mrs. Jane Bemus says, "We had frequent dancing parties at the hotels, which were attended by old and young, fathers, mothers and children. The gentlemen who didn’t care to dance played whist, but almost everybody danced. . . . Major Alden, who was at one time one of General Washington’s aides, often presided at the supper, although he did not participate in the dance.35

Even a short survey of the social and intellectual activities of the people of this small pioneer town reveals their eagerness to create a cultural environment for themselves and their children. Men, busy in commerce, industry, or the professions, found time to develop schools, to establish and to use libraries, and to organize intellectual clubs and societies. Likewise, their wives sponsored social clubs, improved their minds through the medium of reading circles, and gave attention to the fashions in dress and social behavior. The people of early Meadville, in their pursuit of culture, not only made their own lives happier, but at the same time founded a community whose leadership and gentility have been felt for a century and a half in northwestern Pennsylvania.

33 Bemus, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 55.
34 This invitation, written on a card resembling an ordinary playing card, the queen of spades, is in the Reynolds Collection.
35 Bemus, in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), May 12, 1888, p. 55.