IN 1823, when James Carnahan became President of The College of New Jersey,—not to be called Princeton University until 1896,—it would have seemed a strangely small Princeton, to those who know it today. It had just seventy students, reduced from a recent one hundred twenty. Princeton had about reached its "Nadir" under his predecessor, Ashbel Green. This was the period of "secularization" in the colleges along the eastern seaboard. There were many problems of transition to be met and Princeton was slow to meet them. There were rebellions and serious rioting among the students,—discipline and dismissals from the administration. The decline in numbers had become constant and could not be stemmed quickly. It was partly accounted for by the founding of colleges in the south but this "could not explain why at the opening of the academic year, coach after coach rolled through Princeton laden with youths from Virginia, South Carolina or Georgia, on their way to Yale or Harvard." The University of Virginia had opened with attractive breadth and leniency.

Ashbel Green had been called to the presidency in 1812, to reform the College of New Jersey and to withstand the modern tendency towards secularization. He had been launched auspiciously on his lifework, as Baccalaureate speaker of the class of 1783, with the awe-inspiring privilege of praising General Washington, present in the audience, as the Continental Congress was meeting in Nassau Hall. Green was a good man and a revered minister but he tried to hold the college to the customs of the great days of John Witherspoon and failed to meet the challenge of his own decade. After ten years in office he resigned on a technicality connected with the

*Helen Turnbull Waite Coleman, contributor of the above article, is the author of *Banners in the Wilderness*, a history of the early years of Washington and Jefferson College.—Ed.


Ibid., p. 178.

3 Ibid., p. 65.
professorship of his son, Jacob Green. His resignation was accepted by the trustees, apparently without regret.4

By 1823, Princeton was smaller than the less widely known Jefferson College at Canonsburg in western Pennsylvania, which had attained the number of one hundred students in little over twenty years, and had not proceeded along the same lines of secularization as the eastern colleges had followed. A conservative, religious school, founded by Presbyterians, it had never been under Church control and therefore it had no such authority as Princeton, from which to revolt. Situated on the frontier, in more primitive conditions, it had developed from sheer need of education and from the love of learning which some of the pioneers had carried with them into the wilderness of the Ohio valley. To that college, Jefferson at Canonsburg, Ashbel Green sent his son, Ashbel, Junior, from his home in Philadelphia, in 1824; and this son became President of another Jefferson College in Mississippi, and then of Pass Christian Military Academy, Confederate States of America; he died, “a teacher,” in New Orleans.5

In the course of history another son, Dr. Jacob Green, whose professorship at Princeton had been a partial cause of the father’s resignation, went to teach chemistry at Jefferson College, Canonsburg, for ten summers.6 Thus, by strange routes, America travelled west,—and sometimes south.

By 1823 the Revolution was over, and even the War of 1812; and the “great revival” of 1800 had gone into history. Princeton, which had been the “cradle of liberty” and the “school of statesmen”7, was now in need of a president who would be more patient and more tolerant of other people’s ideas. Strangely enough, it received him from the West, trained in the very school which had developed into Jefferson College: the “Academy and Library Company,” of Canonsburg.

James Carnahan did not arrive in the far western part of Pennsylvania until he was five years old; but at least he was born west of the Susquehanna River, in Cumberland County; where, if we were crossing the state today, we would begin to feel the lift of

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4 Ibid., p. 172.
5 Historical Catalogue of Washington and Jefferson College, 1902.
7 Wertenbaker, Princeton, Titles of Chapters II and III.
the mountains, and the road would begin to roll out, past Carlisle, to Somerset, Laurel Hill and Pittsburgh,—or what was then the real "West." He was of Scotch-Irish descent, his grandparents having come to America from North Ireland at about the time the Stuarts were making their last attempt, but one, to regain the British throne, and when England was settling into the Church of England,—and when the Church of England would soon need John Wesley to stir it up.

Thus Carnahan was of the complete Presbyterian type, and a farm boy "of the West"; one who early carried the pioneer family responsibility; for his father, a few years after their removal to a farm in Westmoreland County, about twenty miles north of Pittsburgh,—(therefore some thirty-five miles north of Canonsburg),—was killed in attempting to cross the Allegheny River, when James was only thirteen.8 The mother and young son were thus left to make their way. This is the epitome of the American story: the laborious, stark, often tragic struggle of the pioneers against the elements of nature; but a beginning made somehow; and then, for the second generation, farm work and school.

We do not know how he managed to study at home, or to what school he first went; none is mentioned in the contemporary accounts of Canonsburg, which at that moment of history (1793) brooked no rival; this school had been whirled away on its great adventure and was heading for fame and collegiate status. Here was the local shrine to which western farm boys came eagerly, "to commence the study of Latin, in the Academy at Canonsburg." It has a grand sound, even now; that was the key to learning. And Canonsburg had it to give. Carnahan arrived only two years after the dedication of a school which,9 in 1791, could scarcely be said to exist, but whose name within two years had spread throughout the West. On the tenth of August, 1793, at eighteen, wide-eyed no doubt, and free for the great world at last, he took the key from the hand of an early tutor, James Mountain,10 who soon came to greater reputation in

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10 Smith, History, pp. 36-38. See also: Starrett, Agnes Lynch, Through One Hundred and Fifty Years,—The University of Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press,
Pittsburgh, and who was later described by Carnahan as "the most perfect classical scholar he had ever met." Here he entered upon his own lifelong scholastic adventure.

He was apparently slated for the East almost from the beginning. One wonders how soon Princeton became his goal. John McMillan, called "The Apostle of Presbyterianism in the West," was the guiding spirit among the founders of Canonsburg Academy and of Jefferson College, into which it grew (now a part of Washington and Jefferson College at Washington, Pa.); he had sent other boys to older schools of learning; among the most recent, John Watson, who was to become the first President of Jefferson College in 1802, to Princeton. There is a letter extant, from Watson at Princeton to McMillan, suggesting that Carnahan "had means" to come to Princeton. Watson was to come back west, and die in the first year of his presidency. Other students of the pioneer schools of McMillan and his colleagues, Thaddeus Dod and Joseph Smith (all Princeton men), came back and pushed farther west. A number of them founded new colleges; Jacob Lindley, who made the journey with Carnahan in 1798 to complete their undergraduate work at Princeton, founded the University of Ohio at Athens. Carnahan went east and stayed. His reason could not have been health, although he was not rugged and through his long life he had sometimes, for months at a time, to stop speaking, or to stop work altogether, or else hunt for a warmer climate, as in travelling from New York State to Washington, D. C. Surely the low land of New Jersey, where he found his longest and most successful field, although like a cultivated greensward, was not more salubrious than the highlands where he had left his home—evidently not his heart.

At all events he was imitating Princeton at Canonsburg Academy in 1797, when, as a student-tutor, he founded the "Franklin

11 Carnahan, Letter.
12 Guthrie, Dwight R., John McMillan, the Apostle of Presbyterianism in the West. (Title).
13 Smith, History, p. 39, ff.
14 (Dod.), Minutes of Washington Academy. Papers in College Historical Collections, Washington and Jefferson. (Smith), Smith, History.
16 Smith, History, p. 39. See also Minutes of Canonsburg Academy.
Literary Society,"17 soon after the establishment of its rival, "Philo," led by John Watson, both clubs being copied in toto, from the "Whig" and "Ciosophic" societies at Princeton,—which neither young man had ever seen.

Carnahan lived in various homes at Canonsburg during the period of the "Whiskey Rebellion";18 he professed his faith at twenty in McMillan's church, studied mathematics with "Master Millar," a mainstay of the school; he himself taught the classics during his last year there; and then he seems to have had all that Canonsburg could give him and was ready to go. We may be very sure of one thing: when he left his old preceptor, those two congenial friends, he twenty-three, McMillan forty-two, each one not knowing whether he would ever see the other's face again, will not have wept, like the elders on the shore at Ephesus bidding farewell to the Apostle Paul. One wonders in what expressive Scottish silence they may have parted. At any rate, they were still writing to each other almost thirty-five years later, the year of McMillan's death. It was in 1832 that McMillan wrote his often-quoted letter to Carnahan, reviewing the work of the "first set" and the "second set" of ministers in the West. I suppose they never came to using first names. "Father McMillan," Carnahan wrote in 1826, "for I know no other name than that by which he is usually called in the West of Pennsylvania, has aided in education more men than any other individual in the United States."19

Each went his separate way. Carnahan and Lindley were two of the ten graduates at Princeton in 1800. Carnahan took "first honors." He did come back to the West for a year of theology with McMillan and after that,—by 1801,—he was set for the eastern seaboard to teach and to preach there for fifty-eight years more, unless perhaps for a brief period at "Bethel" Church. He was first recalled to Princeton as a tutor; was married there; and ordained there by the Presbytery of New Brunswick; was headmaster of the Academy at Princeton in 1813; was founder and headmaster of a classical school at Georgetown, D. C., from 1814 to 1823.20

And then, for thirty-one years, he was President of Princeton. When he resigned after thirty years, they kept him for one more,

17Smith, History, p. 40, & ff.
18Carnahan: A Western Insurrection.
19Carnahan, Letter.
20Macdonald, Funeral Discourse.
while deciding on a successor; when finally they let him retire, at age seventy-nine, they made him a member of the Board of Trustees. He was vice president of the Board of Trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary, now separate from the College, from 1840 to 1843; and president of that board from 1843 until his death in 1859.\footnote{21}

One constructive step had been taken during Ashbel Green's administration: the separation of the Theological Seminary from the College; but the adjustment was yet to be made; and the decline in scholarship and loyalty could not be stemmed all at once. After six years of hard work, Carnahan was almost compelled to close the College of New Jersey. But the students had welcomed him when he came, and after a few outbreaks of comparatively minor rebellion, they began to subside. After his first suspension of students he admitted that he had been unjust and determined that he would never again suspend a student without affording him the opportunity to be heard. The boys recognized his authority from the beginning in the nickname by which they always spoke of him, "Boss" Carnahan.\footnote{22}

At Commencement time in 1826, the Alumni Association was organized,—nearly always a step towards harmony. This development came largely from the older graduates of the period when Princeton had been "the cradle of liberty." James Madison, from the class of 1771, was elected its president. The faculty was enlarged and improved.\footnote{23}

Carnahan was a tall, commanding figure, but was in fact reserved, dignified, quiet, even shy. He was never a great executive but he had the very qualities that were needed most: the grace and the wisdom to accept suggestions from others who had known the situation longer. He had at first Professor Lindley who had been acting-president; and throughout his entire term he had a remarkable assistant in John Maclean, who was an originator and who eventually succeeded him as President. They worked together. After the six lean years, they knew they were embarked on a constructive period,—and took heart.\footnote{24}

During Carnahan's thirty-one years at Princeton, he graduated

\footnotesize\begin{itemize}
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dence with President John Mackay, of Princeton Theological Seminary, through Dr. R. C. Hutchison, former President of Washington and Jefferson.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 181 & ff.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 179 and 182.
\end{itemize}
1,715 students; whereas his predecessors, in the entire past history of the college (sixty-five years, more than double the time),—had graduated only 1,680. By the end of his term he had completed the building of the East and West Colleges, a new refectory and a new chapel, and the halls of the two Literary Societies; one can imagine his remembrance of the schoolboy teaching days in which he and Watson had founded their imitation societies at Canonsburg. And three new faculty homes had been built, or purchased. "He planted the trees on the campus and from his own nursery transplanted those noble ones at the entrance to the Church."25

Carnahan welcomed Lafayette26 when he visited Princeton in 1824 and presented to him the honorary diploma of Doctor of Laws, signed by John Witherspoon, which had been awarded to him, in absentia, in 1790. Other famous men visited the College in this period, President Andrew Jackson, in 1833, and also Henry Clay.27 In 1836 Carnahan preached the funeral sermon for Aaron Burr, bravely speaking on the evils of duelling.28 In 1840 the sessions were changed, doing away with the old holidays of April and October, which had suited the early years when nearly every home was a farm, inaugurating the June Commencement and the long summer holiday. At the hundredth anniversary of the college, which was not celebrated until a year late, in 1847, he received the first toast, after Alma Mater: "The Venerable President."29 His degree of Doctor of Divinity was given him by Hamilton College and his LL.D. by Princeton on the day that he resigned as President.

He died at eighty-four, after a characteristic expression of surprise as to "where he could have contracted a disease"30 (the Scotch-Irish again); also with true piety and in the faith. He was buried in the old Princeton cemetery, beside the first Jonathan Edwards and the senior Aaron Burr. There are three beautiful portraits of him at Princeton, in youth, manhood, and old age,—of interest to visitors from the East, and from the West.

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25 Macdonald, Funeral Discourse. See also:
McDonald, Wm. K., (Carnahan's son-in-law), Letter.
27 Ibid., p. 248.
28 Ibid., p. 248.
29 Ibid., p. 231.
30 Macdonald, Funeral Discourse.
And now, has the reader wondered what became of Carnahan's mother, and the home in the West, when he left at eighteen for Canonsburg, and the East? After five years of widowhood, just at the time of her son's leaving for school, she had married the Reverend Jacob Jennings, M.D., a veteran surgeon of the Revolution, a descendant of the Pilgrims. As with Thaddeus Dod, another founder of a pioneer school (the Washington, of Washington and Jefferson College)—his family had come from New England via New Jersey. At Dunlap's Creek he also had become "a man of the West" and had already four sons: Ebenezer Jennings, who brought vaccine for smallpox to the West, whose tombstone tells us he died at the age of 32, "esteemed as a physician, as a legislator, and as a Christian"; Obadiah Jennings, who became both a lawyer and a Presbyterian minister, a trustee of Washington College; Jonathan, who was to be the first governor of Indiana; Samuel, who became a Methodist minister and a physician, one of the founders of the Washington Medical College in Baltimore.11 It was from two of these Jennings step-brothers,—doubtless Ebenezer and Obadiah, already in the new Academy at Canonsburg,—that the urging came for young James Carnahan (and how gladly),—to join them there, "to study for a profession, and to begin the Latin grammar." Such was the background of Carnahan's youth. He made a long journey, and a happy one.

11 Minutes, Washington College.

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