

SENDING CHILDREN TO WAR:  
AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE OF PENNSYLVANIA IN THE CIVIL WAR

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The Farmers' High School of Pennsylvania, organized in 1855 on two hundred acres under the shadow of Mount Nittany in Centre County. Carved from Centre Furnace lands donated by General James Irvin, the school changed its name to the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania following the passage of the Morrill land grant act in 1862 and is now Penn State University. Irvin and his partner Moses Thompson co-owned the second iron furnace built in the Juniata Region, in operation since 1792, and the gift of land plus \$10,000 influenced state legislators to locate the college in the geographic center of the commonwealth. Among the prominent local men interested in providing a college to educate farmers were soon-to-be governor Andrew Gregg Curtin and Hugh N. McAllister. The college was so remote that no town existed closer than the county seat, Bellefonte, ten miles north (and the site of the nearest railroad station) and Boalsburg, five miles east via trails and bridle paths. The Farmers' High School opened on February 19, 1859 with one main building and one barn.<sup>1</sup> A village, eventually named State College for the customary return address on students' letters, grew up around the college. Not until 1896 would State College incorporate as a full-fledged town.

Soon after Andrew Gregg Curtin was inaugurated as Pennsylvania governor on January 15, 1861 to President Abraham Lincoln called for seventy-five thousand men to join the Union army following the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter. Curtin responded

by offering the services of one hundred thousand men as Pennsylvania's share of the required number.<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania eventually contributed 362,284 soldiers to the war effort, surpassed only by New York.<sup>3</sup> Not everyone was one hundred percent behind the war effort. Political and religious opposition existed in nearly every county. At the beginning of the war, the *Democratic Watchman*, published in Bellefonte, favored an immediate end to the fighting. By 1863 other Democratic newspapers joined in denouncing the federal government.<sup>4</sup> A group of farmers attended a meeting in Bellefonte to protest the war and on their return south past the college began cheering for Jefferson Davis. Tellico Johnson recalled that "some of the students heard it, and yelling 'Come on, boys!' dashed towards the road. Soon a crowd of students followed, stopped the teams, dragged the men out, broke one man's jaw, and got a rope to hang one of them. One of the students had a pistol and it looked very serious for the farmers, but the pleading of their women and children, and the good sense of some of the leading students, prevented the hanging."<sup>5</sup>

Not all the students supported the northern cause. In October 1860 an apparent suicidal hanging turned out to be an effigy labeled "Abe Lincoln" suspended from a window in the college building.<sup>6</sup> At least two students from southern states returned home to serve the Confederacy. William Miller McAllister and Mordecai Lewis, who enlisted in the 2nd Virginia Infantry, were members of the class of 1863.<sup>7</sup>

Curtin postponed the deadline for volunteers on several occasions and the state often did not meet its quotas.<sup>8</sup> In addition to filling the federal army's ranks, the commonwealth maintained a militia to defend its southern border. In each of three years, 1862, 1863, and 1864, Governor Curtin called on the state militia to defend Pennsylvania.

The volunteer militia had to be organized for each occasion.<sup>9</sup> Initially Pennsylvanians dismissed rumors of an impending invasion and disregarded Curtin's calls for volunteers. Indifference changed to alarm when the Confederate army crossed the Mason-Dixon line in 1863 and the rush of volunteers severely taxed the state government's ability to feed or equip them.<sup>10</sup>

In 1861 the Farmers' High School of Pennsylvania consisted of five instructors, including the president, and 119 students.<sup>11</sup> Fifty-two percent of the total membership of the agricultural college's five classes, from 1861 to 1865 inclusive, enlisted in the army.<sup>12</sup> A total of 192 officers and men from the classes of 1861-1872 and four faculty members served in the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> When the call for volunteers came, the students responded. Some returned to their home counties and enlisted in the Union Army, many to see combat on the Virginia and Tennessee battlefields; others joined local militias to defend the state. College president Evan Pugh assembled the student in the chapel and addressed them with all the skill and adroitness he could muster. He urged the students to keep out of the war until they passed their twentieth birthday for the sake of their mothers.<sup>14</sup> As early as April 23, 1861, Pugh wrote to trustee Hugh N. McAllister about the war and that the faculty "shall soon put all our boys under military training so that if called upon to act in other companies (ours not to exist out of the school) they will not be ignorant of drill as too many of those are who have been sent off already."<sup>15</sup> The students formed a drill company, purchased a flag and drum, had the resident carpenter craft wooden muskets from an old Harpers Ferry pattern, and drilled on campus grounds not covered by trees or piles of stones. Although Dr. Pugh served as captain of the company, first lieutenant Milton Scott Lytle drilled the company, as "the Doctor had no inclination

towards military matters. It was, however, a valuable experience, not only to myself, but to others who went into the service during the first year of the war.”<sup>16</sup> By June, fifteen students had gone to war and another six who could not graduate enlisted in October. The first class graduated twelve students in the fall of 1861 and Pugh believed he could keep the school open despite news that the New York agricultural college planned to stop before the next session for lack of students. He commented that “We are hard pushed but intend to live through the storm of war.”<sup>17</sup>

The agricultural college students who remained in Centre County in 1862 quickly organized a militia company and put Tellico Johnson, class of ‘65, in command. He later wrote, “They marched off to war, with the same light-hearted and care-free manner that they had exhibited when going forth to perform their daily tasks on the farm, as ready to serve their country as they had been to wrestle with one another, as willing to die for a cause as they had been to give another fellow a ‘boost’ when he needed it.”<sup>18</sup>

Not every student who tried to enlist succeeded. Several of the underage would-be soldiers--including Joseph B. Bredin, James H. Dysart, Neville B. Dilworth, and James Gudykunst--ran off to enlist but were intercepted by relatives. Other unfortunates like Jacob Enslen Beam lasted a week as a drummer boy before his irate father marched him home. Of those who actually enlisted, William Leslie Robinson served as quartermaster in the 22nd U.S. Colored Regiment and James Edgar Engle received the Congressional Medal of Honor for distinguished service at the Battle of Bermuda Hundred, Virginia, May 13, 1864. Five students died for their country.<sup>19</sup>

Pugh and the other professors were unsuccessful in persuading students to remain. Gradually, one after another quietly left for their homes to enlist in the Union Army

throughout 1861, 1862, and 1863, as student after student succeeded in gaining the reluctant consent of his parents.<sup>20</sup> Some of the young men were refused, for physical reasons, or because of being under the age limit; some enlisted under different names, to escape the watchful eyes of parents and guardians; some were caught and brought back to college; others were in emergency companies as unenlisted men, rendering service especially when Lee's army made its most northerly advance into Pennsylvania."<sup>21</sup>

Frederick Watts, an influential member of the Board of Trustees, expressed concern for the war's impact on the school. In an August 27, 1862 letter to Dr. Pugh he feared "the drafting business will have a most disturbing influence upon our College....I do not want that my son Fred should go into the war--I have already contributed two sons and I will not give the third unless it can not be avoided or the necessity be greater than it is at present."<sup>22</sup> Watts hoped that Pugh could influence Hugh N. McAllister to keep the recruiters out of the school. D. W. Herstine, guardian of Alfred Montrose Stoner, complained to Pugh in an October 14, 1862 letter that Stoner "came home from your school several weeks back stating that his own class as well as the first class had left the school for the purpose of getting the consent of their parents and guardians to their enlisting in the army and thus he could not stay alone." Herstine requested confirmation that the story was true.<sup>23</sup> Also in 1862, John Dowling inquired about the whereabouts of his son, "I cannot imagine where he has gone to. I have not heard anything of him and he has no relations at Lancaster, I think it is probable that he has enlisted in the army, very likely at Harrisburg...It is very singular about his leaving and I wish you would write me some further particulars about which passed between you and him..."<sup>24</sup>

While Pugh struggled to keep the students at the college, he considered enlisting. To his friend Smithy, he wrote on April 16, 1862 that “Prof. Wilson and myself have been helping to raise a military company at Boalsburg. He is elected captain and will go if called upon. I would have gone if I could have left. Walker, Buner, Stoner, and Rich have gone.”<sup>25</sup> “I would leave my quakerism at home till we could give those traitor scoundrels such a thundering thrashing as no people ever got before.”<sup>26</sup> Several Quaker students--among them William Weaver Potts, Samuel Newbold Jessup, and Passmore Williamson Hoopes--served in the Union army. Potts recalled that nearly half of his regiment, recruited in Chester and Delaware counties, were Quakers. The Quakers rationalized their participation by asking them to say they were sorry that they felt called upon by the consciences to transgress the discipline of the meeting rather than asking them to say they were sorry for what they had done.<sup>27</sup>

Pugh maintained an interest in and contact with his departed students, visiting them at the army camp in Harrisburg, and they corresponded with him from the battlefield. Some wanted him to send them college catalogs to keep in touch with school life, others promised to send overdue tuition payments. Thomas P. Walker, complaining of incompetent and drunk officers, asked Pugh to use his influence with the governor to get an appointment as adjutant.<sup>28</sup> By November 1862 Walker had been appointed sergeant major and was serving with Harry Reigart Breneman in the 159th Pennsylvania Volunteers (14th Cavalry) near Hagerstown, Maryland. Walker asked Pugh to write on his behalf for an appointment as lieutenant in the 159th.<sup>29</sup> Breneman reported that George Rapeleye Wetmore, class of 1861, was “first lieutenant of Capt. Miles’s company, and considered an excellent officer.”<sup>30</sup> Milton Scott Lytle saw Wetmore in 1863 and

wrote that “he has lost none of his peculiarities.”<sup>31</sup> Levis Miller, Jr. wrote to Pugh that “I left home very much against the wishes of my parents. They would not give their consent to my going into the navy.” He succeeded in enlisting in Rush’s Lancers cavalry, was taken prisoner at Beaver Dam, Virginia, and died in a Confederate prison. Miller also informed Pugh that another student, Harris Graffen, was in the same company. An apparent misunderstanding between Graffen and a superior officer found him listed as a deserter; House bill 659 dismissed the desertion charges and granted him an honorable discharge.<sup>32</sup>

When General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia began their march north to invade Pennsylvania in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln called for another 100,000 men--50,000 from the commonwealth--a call re-echoed by Governor Curtin. Within days students, without obtaining or indeed asking the consent of parents or faculty, immediately enlisted. Some went home to join companies forming there; the thirty-one remaining on campus joined the Boalsburg company.<sup>33</sup>

As war fever infected the teenage students at the college, Pugh sent letters to all parents whose boys left with the militia. He wrote to McAllister that “We are going on as usual though with very diminished numbers. I feel annoyed that I did not more preemptorily strive to hush up the wild and foolish excitement that took away so many students and yet gave so few efficient soldiers to the army and these without consent of parents.”<sup>34</sup> Worried parents expressed their concerns to Pugh. J. M. Hannah wrote from Salem, New Jersey, on June 26, 1863 thanking Pugh for preventing his son Percival Arabin Hannah (class of ‘64), aged sixteen, “from being led away with the rest, and rashly engaging in an undertaking for which he is entirely too young. There are, I flatter

myself, enough able bodied men in the free states for their protection without exposing our children to the perils and demoralizing influences of the Army and the battlefield.”<sup>35</sup>

Arabin had described “the excitement which has prevailed at the College, and the loss [Pugh had] sustained in consequence of it.”<sup>36</sup> The students, eager to go to war, deserted their studies and enlisted in the Union Army.

Jonathan Albert Seidel (class of ‘66) was among the students who, with mathematics professor Thomas Rakestraw Baker, enlisted in Captain John Boal’s Company at Boalsburg in June and were discharged on August 8 at Harrisburg. He did not resume his studies, unlike many of his classmates. Seidel’s father John wrote to Dr. Pugh from Lebanon, Pennsylvania, on June 29, 1863, holding him responsible for Jonathan’s enlistment. “I write to say that Mrs. Seidel is quite dissatisfied with you for letting Albert go to the army when he was put in your care. She thinks you ought to have done as they did at West Chester, write home to the parents for their consent. She said she was told by persons that you or others connected with the College urged the boys to go. Boys of 16 years are not quite capable [of] judging for themselves on what they ought to do in such serious matters, and instead of being urged to go they ought to have been urged to consult their parents. I am disposed to be a little more charitable in blaming you. I suppose you and the boys were all carried away by excitement. I do however blame you pretty hard for not writing to us as you did to Mr. Stichter, and let us know what regiment he is in, etc., so that if anything serious should happen [to] him we might get to hear it, and know where to find him, etc. If you know please let us know, and be good enough to take good care of his baggage.”<sup>37</sup>



Tellico Johnson enlisted as a private in 1863 at the age of sixteen and served from June 17 until August 8 under John Boal, a young man not connected with the college. Johnson recalled that they “walked to Bellefonte and took [the] train to Johnstown, where we were quartered for a day or two. We were armed with old Harpers Ferry smooth bore muskets, converted from flintlock to capguns, and firing a ball and three buckshot....After receiving our arms and ammunition we marched south through Stoystown to Berlin, where we were given quarters in the school house. We remained at this post on picket, for some time and marched as far south as Myersdale, near the Maryland line. Some time in July, we marched back to Johnstown, and thence by train to Huntingdon, where we were given uniforms, blankets and other equipment and assigned to Lt. Col. Robert Litzinger’s Battallion, as Co. “D.” We remained here for some time, in camp, and then were hurried by train, in open coal cars, to Hopewell, a coal region south of Huntingdon, where there were riots among the miners. We camped there for some time and when matters quieted down, were sent to Harrisburg, where a great army was in camp, and soon after, on August 8, 1863, were discharged.”<sup>38</sup>

Company D, guarding the borders of the state in Somerset and Bedford counties, was assigned to defend the “Shades of Death,” a forbidding valley in Huntingdon County. The soldiers constructed a barricade of boulders across the southern end of the Shades to impede the movement of the Confederate cavalry. Within two days of completion of the barricade, about eight mounted Confederates approached the Shades. Johnson ordered the drummer and fifer to sound the assembly and the college soldiers, with only their heads visible, marched in figure eights and circles to trick the enemy into believing the

barricade was too strongly defended to hazard an attack. The strategy worked and the cavalry turned east toward Gettysburg.<sup>39</sup>

During the summer of 1863 Pugh was thrown from his carriage and suffered injuries from which he never fully recovered; he died on April 29, 1864.<sup>40</sup> His death left Professor Whitman, the vice president, in charge, and to add to his troubles, the government called for volunteers to repel a Confederate invasion. Between July 8 and 10, 1864 twenty-four students went to Bellefonte and offered their services to the government.<sup>41</sup> Frederick Watts, in the Board of Trustees report to the legislature in 1864, noted that “in consequence of the enlistment of the members of the first class [Class of 1864] in the military service for a hundred days, their studies were interrupted to such an extent as to prevent their graduation in regular course. It is probable that several of these patriotic young men will return next session [1865] and complete their course of study preparatory to graduation this year [December 1865].”<sup>42</sup>

When this larger body of students volunteered in 1864, they selected Tellico Johnson again as their leader. This group, with Johnson as first lieutenant, traveled to Altoona and joined Captain Jacob Szink’s Indiana County volunteers. When organized as a battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, Szink was promoted to Major and Johnson to Captain of Co. “G.” The company went to Hagerstown, Maryland, Chambersburg, Scranton, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, until they mustered out on November 10, 1864. Johnson returned to the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania to resume his studies in 1865.

At the close of the war, many of the students returned to complete their studies and graduate one or two years after their classes. The last war veterans graduated in

1872.<sup>43</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> John Blair Linn, *History of Centre and Clinton Counties, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1883), p. 97.
- <sup>2</sup> Linn, p. 105.
- <sup>3</sup> Wayne Smith, "Pennsylvania and the American Civil War: Recent Trends and Interpretations," *Pennsylvania History* 51 (July 1984): 215.
- <sup>4</sup> Arnold M. Shankman, *The Pennsylvania Antiwar Movement, 1861-1865* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), pp. 75 and 109.
- <sup>5</sup> Tellico Johnson, "Reminiscences: Penn State College in 1863-1864-1865," University Archives, The Pennsylvania State University.
- <sup>6</sup> Milton S. Lytle letter to Karl B. Lohmann, 8 November 1910, Lytle biographical file, University Archives, Penn State.
- <sup>7</sup> *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, April 1916, pp. 156-57.
- <sup>8</sup> Smith, "Pennsylvania and the American Civil War," p. 222.
- <sup>9</sup> *Special Message of Gov. A. G. Curtin, Transmitted to the Legislature of Pennsylvania, August 9, 1864*, p. 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Smith, "Pennsylvania and the American Civil War," p. 220.
- <sup>11</sup> *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, April 1916, p. 140.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- <sup>14</sup> John I. Thompson, Jr., "Extracts from an Address for the Semi-Centennial of the College, 1905," in Erwin W. Runkle, "The Pennsylvania State College, 1853-1932, Interpretation and Record," [State College, Pa.: n.p., 1933?], pp. 426-27.
- <sup>15</sup> Evan Pugh letter to Hugh N. McAllister, 23 April 1861, Evan Pugh Papers, University Archives, Penn State.
- <sup>16</sup> Thompson, "Extracts from an Address," pp. 427-28; Lytle letter to Lohmann, 8 November 1910.
- <sup>17</sup> Evan Pugh letters to Samuel W. Johnson, 8 June and 17 October 1861, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>18</sup> *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, April 1916, p. 141.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1916, pp. 142-44, 150-51.
- <sup>20</sup> Thompson, "Extracts from an Address," p. 427.
- <sup>21</sup> *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, April 1916, p. 141.
- <sup>22</sup> Frederick Watts letter to Dr. Pugh, 27 August 1862, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>23</sup> D. W. Herstine letter to Dr. Pugh, 14 October 1862, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>24</sup> John Dowling, Jr., letter to Mr. Evan Pugh, 9 July 1862, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>25</sup> Evan Pugh letter to My Dear Smithy, 16 April 1862, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>26</sup> Evan Pugh letter to Samuel W. Johnson, 8 June 1861, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>27</sup> *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, April 1916, pp. 155-56.
- <sup>28</sup> T. P. Walker letter to Dr. Pugh, 10 January 1862, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>29</sup> T. P. Walker letter to Dr. E. Pugh, 8 April 1863, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>30</sup> H. R. Breneman letter to Dr. E. Pugh, 29 November 1862, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>31</sup> Milton S. Lytle letter to Dr. Evan Pugh, 16 August 1863, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>32</sup> Levis Miller, Jr. letter to Evan Pugh, 2 February 1862, Evan Pugh Papers; *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, April 1916, pp. 151-53.
- <sup>33</sup> Thompson, "Extracts from an Address," p. 428.
- <sup>34</sup> Evan Pugh letter to Hugh N. McAllister, 27 June 1863, Evan Pugh Papers.
- <sup>35</sup> J.M. Hannah letter, 26 June 1863, University Archives, Penn State.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> John B. Seidel letter, 29 June 1863, University Archives, Penn State.
- <sup>38</sup> Johnson, "Reminiscences;" Philip Wilbur Wion, "Centre County in the Civil War," (Pennsylvania State College, masters thesis, 1938), p. 61.
- <sup>39</sup> Judd Minick, "A Remnant of Civil War History (Never Before Recorded)," Minick biographical file, University Archives, Penn State; Wion, p. 61.

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<sup>40</sup> Linn, p. 141.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, "Reminiscences."

<sup>42</sup> *Report of the Board of Trustees of the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania*, 1865, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, April 1916, p. 139.