

Whole Life Education: Oberlin College and the Lane Rebels

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A rebel is one who challenges established authority. It is no surprise then that the students of Lane Seminary in 1834, who helped establish a tradition of student activism in America, have been labeled as rebels by historians for many years. These defiant students withdrew from the seminary primarily over the lack of academic freedom, but also over the issue of equal rights for black students. The passion and fervor of these radical students, which caused them to challenge the status quo of their college, came from the influences of their leaders within the seminary. Their convictions about education, ministry, and the Christian duty of individuals toward African Americans, shaped the actions they took and led to the downfall of Lane Seminary. The students and faculty that left the seminary became a prime mover in the eventual success of Oberlin College, a liberal institution of higher learning willing to accept students regardless of color, fostering a culture of free thought and action.

Oberlin College was established as part of the Oberlin Colony founded by John Jay Shipherd. Shipherd started the colony with the aim of creating a utopian community centered on Christian learning.¹ In a letter explaining to his brother the logic behind beginning this new community, Shipherd wrote, "I propose that we form a colony for the promotion of like, or superior, intelligence and Christian simplicity".² Shipherd wanted a colony that would be a beacon of salvation into the Western wilderness in which it was

¹ James Oliver Horton "Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment" *The Journal of Negro Education* 54, No. 4 (Aug 1985): 477-499.

² Robert Samuel Fletcher, *The History of Oberlin College: From Its Foundation through the Civil War*. Vol. I & II (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 87.

located.³ If the colony was to be this beacon however, then it is only logical that the people living within it needed to be educated in order to better spread the gospel.

Originally education for the citizens of the colony was merely going to bring students to the level in which they would be prepared for college. Shipherd realized however there was a necessity of adding a collegiate course and eventually a theological department.⁴ The co-founder of Oberlin Community, Philo Penfield Stewart, was not as much of a proponent of these large education schemes as Shipherd was.⁵ In a letter to Stewart, Shipherd points out that it does no good to fit students for College, if there is no institution to which they could then be sent. In this same letter he mentions that the only school of higher education which would be in accord with what they wanted their students to learn, would be Lane Seminary. Lane Seminary however was already full, and would remain full without their students, making it not a good option in Shipherd's mind.⁶

Shipherd was able to convince his colleague of the necessity of a college as part of the Oberlin Colony and the Seminary was instituted in February of 1834.⁷ The object of the Oberlin Institute was the education of gospel ministers and pious schoolteachers. In order to fit them for these important callings, they would be furnished with academic, collegiate, and theological privileges. This would be accomplished by the system of education at the college which would aim to provide for the body and heart as well as the intellect; for it aimed at the best education of the whole man.⁸

³ Horton, 478.

⁴ Fletcher, 117.

⁵ Horton, 478.

⁶ Fletcher, 117-118.

⁷ Horton, 478

⁸ Fletcher, 119.

Shipherd's insistence on the creation of a college was not completely out of the ordinary for his time. The Oberlin Collegiate Institute was in all reality an experiment conceived and supported by the popular evangelical movement of the 1830's. Evangelicals, the most important being Charles Finney, were preaching a gospel of reform and sending people out on missions of personal and societal spiritual uplift.⁹ The life of Shipherd prior to the undertaking of the Oberlin Community was very influenced by the view points of Finney. Finney believed that there was no advantage in learning simply for the sake of learning. Instead as Shipherd articulated it, "Learning was only of service as the handmaid of religion and true religion was expressed in action-in doing good."¹⁰ Shipherd also believed that if a person was sanctified, then knowledge would be directly proportionate to the amount of good a person could do. In other words, the more knowledge someone possessed, the more good they could do.¹¹ These were the theories that dominated the beginnings of Oberlin College.

While the college seemed to be off to a strong start with lofty goals for the students and a solidly thought out mission statement, they ran into a problem not long after the conception of the school. Part of the plan of Shipherd for providing for the students and the school was to have one aspect of the program be that of manual labor. Students would benefit from this by the experience they gained as well as money for their education.¹² Students were also provided for monetarily through scholarship funds. Primarily these scholarships came through churches in New York State as well as New England.¹³ Unfortunately, many of the people who committed to providing scholarships

⁹ Horton, 478.

¹⁰Fletcher, 64.

¹¹ Ibid., 58.

¹² Ibid., 139.

¹³Horton, 478

were not paying them, and only a few new subscriptions were being obtained. At the same time, Shipherd continued to have dreams of expansion, especially in the area of the theological program.¹⁴ Providentially Shipherd was not the only individual who had dreams for this type of education, and events elsewhere in the state of Ohio were taking place to allow for Oberlin to continue as a college in a way Shipherd himself could not have dreamed up.

1829 was the year that marked the beginning of Lane Seminary in the vicinity of Cincinnati, Ohio. Beginning with only a small number of students and one professor, Lane Seminary was barely a dot on the map. This changed in 1832 when after much discussion and debate Lyman Beecher, a clergyman who subscribed to the New School of thought theology within the Presbyterian Church was appointed President of the Seminary. This appointment which was definitely not supported by everyone from the denomination, assured that the school would be following the revivalist tendencies of the New School of thought.¹⁵

Beecher left no doubt of his intention to shape the seminary with revivalist notions immediately upon his appointment. He made this especially clear in his opening address. According to Beecher, the seminary would be training ministers who would be inspired with zeal, enlarged by comprehensive views, blessed with a discriminating intellect,... With a clear mind and full heart, able to look saint and sinner in the face with an eye that speaks, and a hand that energizes, and a heart that overflows, and words that burn.¹⁶

¹⁴ Fletcher, 140-141.

¹⁵C. Walker Gollar, "The Role of Midwestern Christian Higher Education in the Abolition of Slavery" *The Cresset: A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs* (Valparaiso University Press, Easter 2007): 1-19

¹⁶ Gollar, 6.

Students were not expected to simply learn but to use that learning in a practical way, interacting with both saints and sinners. There was to be no separation between preparing for the ministry and using that preparation to be immediately involved in saving the world.

It should come as little surprise, after reading the goals Beecher had for the seminary, that students interested in using ministry to reach and save the world were attracted to Lane Seminary. Primary among these students was Theodore Weld, a thirty-year old graduate from the anti-slavery Oneida Institute in New York. Confiding to Arthur Tappan, a wealthy merchant who avidly supported anti-slavery work, Weld makes it clear that he intended to introduce anti-slavery sentiments at Lane, as well as see to it that the whole subject was thoroughly discussed.¹⁷ Tappan was especially interested in the work of Weld in regards to anti-slavery because the two had just worked together in 1831 to establish the Anti-Slavery Society. Weld was also deeply influenced in life by two notable evangelical ministers, Charles G. Finney and Charles Stuart. The zeal that Weld had for anti-slavery was a result of his contact with Stuart, but his piety was a result of Finney's influence.¹⁸ Piety combined with anti-slavery zeal and close ties with the Aurther and his brother Lewis Tappan made Weld a powerful force at Lane Seminary.

Weld used his strong influence first to impress upon his fellow students the importance of fighting slavery through immediate abolition. Dr. Beecher noticed the influence that Weld had over the students and writes about it in his autobiography. Dr. Beecher describes Weld's control in this way. "In the estimation of the class, he [Weld] was president. He took lead of the whole institution and they thought he was a god."¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Fletcher, 151.

¹⁹ Fletcher, 151.

Perhaps it was this god-like status that enabled Weld to convince twenty other classmates from Oneida to enroll in the seminary. These students, along with Weld were responsible for proposing a public forum at the school in order to discuss immediate abolition for slaves as opposed to colonization and gradual manumission.²⁰

Claiming that the forum was a fair debate would be untrue, but it seems clear that Weld did not intend for it to be a debate. Weld anticipated it to be only a discussion promoting the idea that slaves should be set free immediately. This discussion lasted for 18 days during February of 1834, and appears to be the event that sparked students on their road to rebelling against the trustees of Lane Seminary. The forum was well attended not only by students, but faculty as well. President Beecher also attended and was impressed with the arguments presented. There was no one amongst the attendees who spoke against immediate emancipation, especially after the riveting testimony of James Bradley. Bradley told the story of how he had been kidnapped from Africa at the age of two, and brought to the United States to be a slave. Over approximately ten years, Bradley worked to earn enough money to buy his freedom, which had originally been stolen from him. He was now finally able to enroll as a student at Lane Seminary after this tragic journey.²¹

Immediately after the compelling story of Bradley, Weld suggested that the attendees take a vote for or against immediate emancipation for slaves. The vote was unanimously in favor of freeing slaves at once. Weld did not stop here and simply let the vote to speak for itself, but went on to declare that they had just determined that slavery was a sin against God. A few students who previously planned on speaking in favor of

²⁰ Gollar, 7.

²¹ Ibid., 7.

colonization ended up declining to speak. Only one student dared to come to the podium in support of it. He was not listened to, but did cast the sole vote in favor of colonization at the end of all the discussions.²²

These powerful discussions may have had even more effect than Weld had planned on, and certainly had more effect than the board of trustees was ready to accept. The students began doing exactly what Beecher claimed to want them to do with their learning. One student, with the blessing of President Beecher immediately left the seminary and opened a school for African Americans in the city. Most of the pro-abolition students formed an anti-slavery society. They assisted in black schools, handed out pro-abolitionist information, and a few students even began aiding runaway slaves. One student boarded with a black family, interacting almost exclusively with the colored community.²³ In a more daring act, students took a colored woman to church and seated her beside one of the most prominent of white ladies in the city.²⁴

Weld may have had a great deal of influence within the seminary walls, but his actions along with those of his fellow students opened the door for a great deal of criticism. Perhaps the greatest criticism to the students came in the form of a scathing newspaper article written by James Hall in the *Western Monthly Magazine*. Hall questioned the propriety of a seminary that would allow the students to discuss questions such as slavery. He claims that slavery is too difficult an issue for young men at a seminary to grapple with and that they should stop dreaming themselves into “full grown patriots”. Hall also went on to say that open discussion of such issues only served to

²² Gollar, 7.

²³ Ibid., 7.

²⁴ Lawrence Thomas Lesick, *The Lane Rebels: Evangelicalism and Anti-Slavery in Antebellum America*, (Metuchen, N.J.: 1980), 92.

distract the attention of the pupil from his main purpose which was the simple acquisition of knowledge.

Weld, perhaps exhibiting some of his Finney inspired piety and Stuart inspired zeal went and asked Hall to correct misrepresentations in the article. Hall promptly refused, and Weld responded by telling him that such virulence was not becoming for a Christian. Weld also responded in public by publishing a letter directed to Hall in the *Cincinnati Journal*. In this letter Weld asks,

Should not students investigate and discuss the sin of slavery? Shall those who are soon to be ambassadors for Christ—commissioned to cry aloud—to show the people their transgressions—shall they refuse to think, and feel, and speak, when that accursed thing exalts itself above all that is called God—and wags its impious head, and shakes its blood-red hands at heaven? Why, I ask, should not students examine into the subject of slavery? Is it not the business of theological seminaries to educate the heart as well as the head? To mellow the sympathies, and deepen the emotions, as well as to provide the means of knowledge? If not then give Lucifer a professorship. He is a prodigy of intellect, and an encyclopedia of learning.²⁵

This well expounded defense of academic freedom on behalf of the students seems to resound with themes that President Beecher himself would have supported. After all the students were putting their learning to good use, and applying their knowledge to reach saint and sinner.

Either the saints or sinners that President Beecher had in mind were white only, or he was simply trying to avoid trouble, but after the newspaper letters were published

²⁵ Lesick, 91-92

Beecher realized that he needed to do something to control his students a bit. His solution was to mildly suggest that students not have further close contact with African Americans in order to avoid trouble and criticism. This came at the close of the school term when Beecher headed to the East Coast for a fundraising trip.²⁶ Prior to leaving on this trip however Beecher held a social gathering at his house and seemed to feel afterwards that things were well under control in regards to the upset over anti-slavery issues. He even expressed regret over the fact that James Bradley chose not to attend, and said that he had no problem with the “commixture” of the races. Beecher believed that the Seminary’s affairs were well in order other than the inconvenience encountered when students had failed to heed advice from the board about their discussions on slavery and their insistence on treating African Americans as equals.²⁷ Beecher was however sadly mistaken both about the extent of student activities, and the attitude of the Board of Trustees towards the students.

The absence of President Beecher gave the Board of Trustees an opportunity to chastise the students. Cincinnati was a southern town, with an economy dependent in many ways on the slave trade, the Trustees were afraid of how anti-slavery sentiment would affect the attitude of the town against the school. Some of the trustees also had livelihoods wrapped up in the business of slavery. The board decided to order that the students’ anti-slavery society be abolished, outlawed further discussion of slavery both in public and private, and fired the leading professor of the seminary, John Morgan who openly supported the students. The trustees all agreed to the new stipulations for students with the exception of Asa Mahan who also supported the students.²⁸

²⁶ Gollar, 8.

²⁷ Lesick, 95.

²⁸ Gollar, 8.

The beginning of a new school year fell on the same day that Beecher returned from his travels and it was also the moment the Board chose to announce the new regulations placed on students. They had decided amongst other things to restrict the movements of students in the hopes that they could control the ability of students to assist in the black communities located around Cincinnati. At the close of the day 75 students opted to withdraw from the seminary rather than subject themselves to the new regulations. This was three fourths of the seminary, and would prove to be a blow that Beecher could not overcome in efforts to keep the seminary alive.²⁹ About a year later Beecher took an opportunity to make a public address in which he chastised students for challenging authority and becoming rebels. He claimed at this point to change his earlier stated views about education, saying instead that education should be preparation for public action, not the commencement of it.³⁰

Some students returned home or went to other schools. The majority of students followed their leader Weld and headed to Cumminsville, a small town a few miles away. Here they attempted to teach themselves while working on a document titled, *A Statement of the Reasons Which Induced the Students of Lane Seminary, to Dissolve Their Connection with that Institution*. They made it clear in this document that they left the school over the issue of freedom of discussion, not over slavery itself.³¹ It was right at this time that John Jay Shipherd began to be in dire need for funds to keep his Oberlin College alive and functioning.

Shipherd who was a regular subscriber to the *New York Evangelist* and the *Ohio Observer*, likely heard about the Lane Rebels through these two mediums. It is also

²⁹ Lesick, 130.

³⁰ Ibid., 141.

³¹ Gollar, 9.

possible that he was simply alerted by word of mouth, or through the Western Reserve Anti-slavery society. Regardless of how the news reached him, Shipherd headed off on a fundraising trip in the fall of 1834 and went straight to Cincinnati to meet with the rebels. Shipherd saw the opportunity to add numbers to his college as well as gain extra monetary support that was desperately needed. He was hospitably received in Cincinnati by the Mahan's and given the chance to meet with the rebels. Everyone, including the Tappan's and their money seemed to be on board with the idea of attending and supporting Oberlin College.³²

Naturally however the attendance of the Rebels and the money of the Tappan's stemmed on a few conditions. The conditions of the rebels were that they would be given academic freedom of discussion, as well as the ability and right to actively use their knowledge in practical ways. They also stipulated that Asa Mahan be named President of the College, and that John Morgan their old professor from Lane Seminary should become a member of the faculty. Further, they insisted that Charles Finney be offered a professorship if he was so inclined to take it. Together, the Rebels, John Morgan, and Asa Mahan all demanded that students be accepted into the school regardless of the color of their skin. Shipherd did not seem to think that any of this would be a problem with the Board of Trustees.³³

Shipherd confidently wrote to the Board just before heading to his next destination, explaining what he considered good news, and informed the board about the stipulations set forth by the Rebels and followers. Shipherd was clearly on board with the Rebels and their demand for the acceptance of black students. In his letter to the Board

³² Fletcher, 168.

³³ Fletcher, 169.

he says that if they do not see fit to accept black students, he will no longer have a heart to labor for the up-building of the seminary, believing that the curse of God would come upon it as it has upon Lane Seminary for the unchristian abuse of the poor slave.³⁴

Shockingly enough to Shipherd, the Board of Trustees as well as the community at large was adamantly opposed to the demands of the rebels. They had existed for years without having to deal with the slavery question that was plaguing the rest of their nation. Upon being confronted with the suggestion that they receive colored people into their safe haven, the people responded by panicking. They were sure that the school would then be changed into a Negro school and the community would be flooded with people of the other race. The current students even wrote and signed a petition stating that they were opposed to the admission of persons of color into the institution.³⁵ The board voted unanimously to elect Mahan and Morgan, but tabled the motion to admit students regardless of race.³⁶

Shipherd, who was unaware of the developments at Oberlin in his absence, left in good faith with Mahan to recruit Finney to accept a professorship at the college. Finney was currently residing and preaching in New York, but was suffering from ill health. The Tappans had previously offered to finance him if he would go to Cumminsville and teach the Rebels. Finney had turned down the offer at the time, but for several reasons decided to accept the offer of a professorship at Oberlin College this time. He was first of all greatly impressed with the Rebels, highly influenced by the Tappans, and impressed with the persistence of Shipherd. It was also hoped that a change of location would improve his health. Apparently Finney may have still been hesitant about this offer. He accepted

³⁴ Ibid, 170.

³⁵ Ibid, 170-171.

³⁶ Fletcher, 172.

only on the condition that he be allowed to spend three to four months each winter preaching in New York. Shiphherd of course did not care, and as soon as Finney accepted the professorship, Arthur Tappan gave \$10,000 to the college and eight of his associates agreed to pay \$600 annually to the other professors.³⁷

Unfortunately for Shiphherd and all the others involved, the news soon reached him that the Oberlin Trustees were not willing to vote yes on admitting students to the college irrespective of color. The Tappans, Finney, Morgan, and the Rebels were each upset about this. Morgan denounced the trustees' decision by saying he did not think that consistent abolitionists such as himself and the Lane Rebels could give either their money or personal labor to Oberlin until the trustees rescind this enactment and do justice to their colored brethren. Morgan points out that even Lane Seminary did not have such an "odious attitude" towards black students. Finney was equally upset about the issue, but had a different solution to the problem. He suggested that it was not the place of the trustees to make this decision; instead he wanted it to be the decision of the faculty.³⁸

Shiphherd agreed with Finney and promptly wrote a letter to the trustees. First he expressed his "deep disappointment" at their previous decision. He says, "I did not desire you to hang out an abolition flag, or fill up with filthy stupid negroes; but I did desire that you should say you would not reject promising youth who desire to prepare for usefulness because God had given them a darker hue than others". Secondly he insists that the trustees accept Finney's proposal of having the faculty control all the internal affairs of the institution, and decide upon the admission of students. Furthermore, if the

³⁷ Ibid., 174-175

³⁸ Fletcher., 176-177.

trustees did not agree to this, Shipherd himself would resign, no students would be gained, and no money secured. The college would be forced to close.³⁹

Perhaps it was pressure from Shipherd, or the fact that enough of the trustees were abolitionists as well as friends of Finney, but either way the resolution to allow the faculty to be in control of internal affairs of the college and decide upon student admission was passed. Shipherd, Mahan, Morgan, Finney, the Tappans, and the Rebels were naturally thrilled that all their numerous demands and conditions had been met. Having these men as part of the faculty, it was doubtless that students who applied would indeed be admitted regardless the color of their skin.⁴⁰ The first colored student to be given this honor was James Bradely who joined his rebel classmates at Oberlin in the fall of 1835.⁴¹

Although the decision to educate African Americans at Oberlin has been applauded by abolitionists and historians throughout the years, it is important to note a few things and not miss the bigger issue. First of all, Oberlin was not the first college to accept black students. One of Shipherd's arguments to the trustees was that other colleges such as Western Reserve College, Princeton, and Lane Seminary had taken this step prior to Oberlin College.⁴² Secondly there are few records of which students were admitted to Oberlin after this decision was made. There is little to no proof that any colored students other than James Bradley were accepted into and or graduated from the program.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., 177.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁴¹ Cally L Waite, *Permission to Remain Among Us; Education for African Americans in Oberlin, Ohio, 1880-1914*. (Westport, Connecticut: Preager, 2002), 15.

⁴² Fletcher, 178.

⁴³ Waite, 16.

Oberlin College and the Board of Trustees should be applauded however for their commitment to education that can be immediately put into practice as well as for their groundbreaking decisions regarding faculty and student freedom of discussion. The Lane Rebels also deserve recognition for their stand on equal rights and abolition, but more so for their understanding of whole life education and their willingness to fight for it. Finally men such as the Tappans, Asa Mahan, John Morgan, and Charles Finney played a crucial role in lending their support to the battle for academic freedom by using their influence in positive ways for the greater good of ministry and abolition.

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