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Ghosts on the Green

By
Samuel Crowl

All who have spent time on the Ohio University campus understand that it is a special place defined by its landscape and legacy. The College Green is the heart of Ohio University. Each time I walk up the brick path from Court street and confront those three handsome buildings (Cutler flanked by Wilson and McGuffey) presiding over the Green in their forthright Colonial simplicity, I am reminded once again how significantly connected Ohio University is with the early history of the nation.

Some of the nation's most revered figures (Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin) leave ghostly traces on the Green through Manasseh Cutler's crucial role in assuring the passage of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The ordinance, drafted in the same summer as the United States Constitution, was the landmark legislation that opened the Ohio Territory up for settlement and contained the provision for a Land Grant system of funding schools and universities. Let me walk you back in time from the center of the Green in the early twenty-first century to the summer of 1787 in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. The American spirit that came to define the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution also shaped the creation of the oldest university west of the Allegheny Mountains.

The men who fought in General Washington's Revolutionary army were paid with bonds, with promissory notes, indicating that when and if the new government became solvent they would be paid for their fine service in fighting and winning the war. Several years passed and those veterans began to see that there was little likelihood that those bonds could be redeemed for cash in their lifetimes. But another idea soon emerged, and in 1784 Thomas Jefferson introduced an ordinance into Congress that would have allowed for the peaceful expansion of the country westward and would have allowed those veterans to turn in their bonds for land in the new territories. Unfortunately, Jefferson's legislation got bottled up in several Congressional committees and died.

Three years later, a revised version of that Bill was introduced into Congress as The Northwest Ordinance of 1787. And once again it became a victim of legislative infighting. The veterans in the Boston area were concerned because in principle they supported the idea of being able to exchange bonds for land but they couldn't do so without legislation authorizing such a deal and the bill as drafted lacked several key provisions that were essential to their participation in the proposed plan. So they gathered together at the Bunch of Grapes Tavern in Boston and turned to one of their leaders, Manasseh Cutler, for help.

Cutler, much like Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Monroe, was a remarkable example of the American Enlightenment. He had been educated at Yale College where he studied Divinity. He served as a chaplain in Washington's army and had a parish in the little town of Ipswich, Massachusetts. He was also a lawyer as he had read for the Bar and passed the Bar exam and he was also a famous botanist who published the first thorough description of New England horticulture under the Linnean method of plant classification. Later in his career he served two terms as a Congressman from Massachusetts during Jefferson's Presidency; Cutler was one of those multi-talented Americans who came of age just as the country was being founded and in need of intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership.

Cutler's fellow veterans charged him with the responsibility of going to New York City (the nation's first capitol) and lobbying Congress to get the ordinance amended and then passed and to get the Ohio Company established. Cutler journeyed to New York on horseback and went to work. He testified in early July before several Congressional committees considering the legislation.

Cutler's first task was to get the ordinance amended so that it contained two key provisions deemed necessary by the Boston veterans. The first was that the land had to be free. There had to be a strong anti-slavery article in the ordinance. Cutler challenged Congress by testifying: "Exclude slavery forever and we will buy your lands and help you pay your debts. Allow it to enter and not a penny will we invest."

The second condition was that the land had to have a future. The pioneers had to have some means of educating their children. To do so, Cutler proposed a radical idea. In the vast tracks of land to be opened for western expansion certain townships would be set aside to be held in common and the rents and revenues from leasing those lands out would provide the settlers with an income stream that would allow them to establish schools and eventually found universities. The language inserted in the ordinance to accomplish this objective, presumably by Cutler himself, reinforced the necessary connection between an educated citizenry and a democratic form of government. That language, inscribed on the entrance to the College Green across from the old Baker Center, maintains that "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

Cutler was successful in getting the ordinance amended and then passed in July of 1787. When asked by his New York hosts what he would like to do by way of celebration, Cutler remarked, that if it could be arranged, he would like to journey to Philadelphia to meet Benjamin Franklin, the man that he described as "the wonder of Europe as well as the glory of America." Cutler's hosts made the arrangements and soon Cutler was visiting Franklin in the garden of his Philadelphia home on a summer afternoon after the day's work at the Constitutional Convention had concluded. Cutler was dazzled by Franklin but not in the manner he had expected. He thought he was going to meet the equivalent of a European monarch, but instead he discovered the figure Franklin had spent his life inventing: the quintessential American. In appearance Franklin was "a short, fat, old man, in a plain Quaker dress, bald pate, and short white locks, sitting without his hat under a tree," while in countenance Cutler discovered that everything about Franklin was "perfectly easy...and diffused an unrestrained freedom and happiness." Franklin had, Cutler continues in his diary account of his visit to

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Philadelphia, “an incessant vein of humor, accompanied by an uncommon vivacity, which seems as natural and involuntary as his breathing.” Cutler was impressed to discover such intellectual vivacity in a man of eighty-four.

Cutler returned to Massachusetts in August where he set about creating the first map and prospectus for the Ohio Company. In enumerating the many attractions of the new lands open for settlement in the Ohio Territory, high on Cutler’s list (at #3) was a plan for the creation of a university, to be known as the American Western University. Cutler, in fact, outlined a university far closer to the Ohio University of the twenty-first century than the Yale College of the mid-eighteenth century he had attended. A Yale education in the mid-eighteenth century, like that of the nation’s oldest private colleges, was dominated by a study of Latin and Greek and the basic subjects of the quadrivium and trivium: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Cutler imagined a much more modern university where the “liberal education of youth in the arts and sciences” will be coupled with “useful knowledge” that will be provided by the wilderness itself, creating “the opportunity of opening a new and unexplored region for the range of natural history, botany, and medical science.” Cutler envisioned a university founded on a “liberal plan” but one in which the professors would be active in their “researches and employments.” Cutler saw that a university education would be “essential to the security of a free constitution, important to morals and religion, and promote peace, order, and the happiness of society.”

Cutler was a product of the age of Enlightenment and he had the foresight to see that education would be as crucial to the life of the individual citizen in a democracy as it would be to the development of the nation as it expanded westward. Ohio University is the product of Cutler’s visionary spirit. That spirit, which also animated the early history of the United States, is reflected literally and symbolically in those three venerable buildings on the College Green. For me they reflect America’s historical commitment to public higher education and they are haunted by the ghosts of Washington and Jefferson and Franklin and Cutler.