

— hidden — HISTORY

In the summer of 1867, Tryon Edwards, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Hagerstown, Maryland, traveled to meet with colleague James W. Wightman of the Presbyterian Church of Greencastle, Pennsylvania. Edwards asked Wightman to help found a women's seminary in Chambersburg.

Wightman refused on the grounds that so-called female seminaries were meant to teach women manners and deportment, not to challenge them academically. "I do not believe in the *female* education of women," he said, suggesting they create a first-class college for women, comparable to those for young men.

Together, Wightman and Edwards envisioned such a place. It would be academically rigorous; its student code would be based on honor and self-discipline; and it would be Christian but non-sectarian. Above all, it would promote the intellectual and spiritual growth of its students.

On April 15, 1868, the regional Presbytery asked its committee on education, chaired by Edwards, to devise a plan for establishing a women's college. The plan, presented in June, called for the selection of a board of trustees, purchase of a suitable property, recruitment of students and, of course, a fundraising campaign.

The greatest challenge quickly proved to be procuring the necessary funds. The board of trustees, composed of prominent local men, sought subscriptions from towns in Franklin County. As an incentive, they offered to locate the college in the town that gave most generously. With a pledge of \$23,000—including \$10,000 from Sarah Wilson—Chambersburg got the nod.

The board set its sights on Norland, the estate of Col. Alexander K. McClure. McClure was a national figure in Republican politics and had been a fierce abolitionist and supporter of President Abraham Lincoln. Like much of Chambersburg, his home had been burned to the ground during a Confederate occupation of the city. By 1868, the estate included the rebuilt house (now Norland Hall), outhouses and a 52-acre farm. The price tag was \$45,000—well beyond the means of the fledgling school.

Edwards and the board turned again to Sarah Wilson. One of 10 children born to a prosperous farming family, Wilson had inherited substantial wealth on the deaths of her father and brothers. She agreed to give an additional \$20,000 for the purchase of Norland, providing that the college be given her family name.

With the McClure estate in hand and a good deal of its land sold to fund remodeling of the existing buildings (much of the land was later reacquired), the College received its charter from the Pennsylvania Legislature on March 24, 1869, less than two years after Wightman and Edwards met to conceive the idea. It was a remarkable accomplishment, and the men who had led the effort stayed to see it come to fruition. Edwards was named president and Wightman vice president of the new school.

Wilson College opened its doors to 75 students and eight faculty members on Oct. 12, 1870.

For more information on the College's founders and its history, visit the Hankey Center's C. Elizabeth Boyd '33 Archives.

**THE
FOUNDING
OF WILSON
COLLEGE**

— Leigh Rupinski