

Early History of Vincennes University

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The legal basis for the organization of Vincennes University is the wise provision of the Ordinance of 1787 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."¹ This bit of practical educational philosophy made possible in time the whole state system of higher education in Indiana, which had its beginning with Vincennes University, and later its development in Indiana University, Purdue University and the Indiana State Teachers' Colleges.

The authors of this remarkable provision are among the greatest educational benefactors of our land. The great public school systems of all the states west of those on the Atlantic seaboard were foreshadowed in this Ordinance.² It was a kind of pledge by the United States Government "to provide, encourage forever and maintain" schools and the means of education in the Northwest Territory, of which Vincennes was then one of the leading posts, and out of which Indiana was later carved.

Events moved slowly in the educational affairs in the Northwest Territory for some years after 1787. Not until after the formation of Indiana Territory does there seem to have been any concerted movement toward educational development in the area embraced by the present state of Indiana. A convention was called at Vincennes on December 28, 1802, for the purpose of petitioning Congress for the desired changes in the territorial laws. Among the various requests made by this convention in a petition to Congress, is the following:³

The United States having pledged themselves in the Ordinance that schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged, and having in all the sales of land heretofore made, reserved considerable portions thereof for that purpose.

Your memorialists, herefore humbly pray that a law may be passed

¹ Theodore Calvin Pease, Ed., *Laws of the Northwest Territory 1788-1800* (Springfield, 1925). The Ordinance of 1787 is reproduced in full in this work. This paper was read before a general session of the Indiana History Conference at Indianapolis on Dec. 9, 1932.

² Elwood P. Cubberly, *Public Education in the United States* (Cambridge, 1919), p. 25.

³ Logan Esarey, Ed., *Harrison's Messages and Letters*, Vol. I (*Indiana Historical Collections*, Vol. VIII), p. 64.

making a grant of lands for the support of the Schools and Seminaries of learning in the several Settlements in the Illinois, the Settlement of Vincennes, and that of Clark's Grant, near the Rapids of the Ohio.

In response to this petition, Congress, on March 26, 1804, enacted a law which provided that the public lands north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi should be surveyed into townships six miles square; that three land offices should be established in Indiana Territory, one at Detroit, one at Vincennes, and one at Kaskaskia; and that one entire township in each of the three land districts should be located by the Secretary of the Treasury for the use of a seminary of learning.⁴

In October, 1806, Albert Gallatin, at the suggestion of John Badollet of Vincennes, selected the township to be set aside for the use of a seminary of learning which was to be established in the Vincennes district.⁵ The land selected is approximately that now occupied by Princeton, seat of justice for Gibson County, Indiana.

In compliance with the terms of the Act of March 26, 1804, the Territorial Legislature, in session at Vincennes, on November 29, 1806, passed an "Act to incorporate an University in Indiana Territory to be known as the Vincennes University, and to receive the township of land already set aside by Secretary Gallatin for that purpose." This Act provided that "The first meeting of trustees shall be held on the first Saturday in December next [1806] to elect officers and commence their operations to carry said law into effect."⁶

The charter of Vincennes University, as contained in the Act of November 29, 1806, is a most interesting document. The preamble sets out at length the reasons for establishing the University. The institution provided for was to be known by "the name and style of the Vincennes University" and was to have at the time of its organization, a board of twenty-three trustees who were to have complete control of all the affairs of the University, and who were "to have the powers

⁴ *Annals of Congress*, 8 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, pp. 1285-1293. The act is given in full.

⁵ Gallatin's letter appears in *Indiana Reports*, Vol. II, p. 294.

⁶ *Laws of Indiana Territory* (Revised by John Rice Jones and John Johnson, Vincennes, 1807), Ch. LXVII. There is an original copy of the "Jones Revision" of the Territorial Laws of 1806 and 1807, bound with deer thong, in the library at Indiana University. The act providing for Vincennes University was approved by Gov. W. H. Harrison on Nov. 29, 1806. The act was re-passed on Sept. 17, 1807.

and rights forever hereafter, a body politic and corporate; in fact and in name—and shall be persons in law.”⁷

No more distinguished body of men could have been found in Indiana Territory than those who made up the first board of trustees of Vincennes University. They were headed by William Henry Harrison, governor of Indiana Territory. His colleagues were John Gibson, Thomas Terry Davis, Henry Vanderburg, Waller Taylor, Benjamin Parke, Peter Jones, James Johnson, John Badollet, John Johnson, John Rice Jones, George Wallace, William Bullit, Elias McMamee, Henry Hurst, General Washington Johnston, Francis Vigo, Jacob Kuykendall, Samuel McKee, Nathaniel Ewing, George Leech, Luke Decker, and Samuel Gwathmey.⁸ Almost without exception these were men whose active lives have had a lasting influence upon the history of Indiana. Several of them were at sometime influential in matters of national importance.

Among the most important clauses of the charter of the University were these:

That the said trustees shall as speedily as may be, establish and erect an University within the limits of the Borough of Vincennes, and shall appoint . . . a president and not exceeding four professors for the instruction of youth in Latin, Greek, French, and English languages, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Logic, ancient and modern History, Rhetoric and the law of Nature and Nations.⁹

It was the duty of the trustees to erect, purchase or hire suitable buildings for the University; make rules for its government; establish plans of education to embrace the teaching of the languages, arts and sciences; make rules governing admission and conduct of students; select a president and such professors as in their judgment were qualified, and provide for their pay; to visit and observe the work done in the University; to make an annual report to the legislature, and “to do all lawful matters and things whatsoever necessary for the maintaining and supporting of the institution—and for the more extensive communication of useful knowledge.”¹⁰

They were also to make every effort to encourage the “aborigines” to send their children to the University where,

⁷ The Charter of Vincennes University is spread in full upon the *Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Vincennes University*, Book II, at the back, and is identical with the copy in the 1807 revision of the Territorial Laws.

⁸ See Charter of Vincennes University, Art. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Art. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Art. 8.

gratis, and at the expense of the University, they were to be taught humanity and brotherly love.¹¹ The trustees might, when they should think the funds sufficient, establish a "school for females"¹² and also a grammar school in which would be taught the "rudiments of the languages."¹³ The charter provided for a lottery by means of which it was hoped sufficient additional funds could be raised to establish and maintain a library and procure the necessary philosophical and experimental apparatus.¹⁴

The first session of the board of trustees of the University was held at the office of John Gibson on December 6, 1806, for the purpose of organizing and electing officers. William Henry Harrison was elected president of the board, James Johnson, treasurer, and General Washington Johnston, clerk. Five managers were chosen to put the lottery scheme into operation. Nothing more was done at this meeting.¹⁵

Thus Vincennes University dates its origin from December 6, 1806, ten years before Indiana became a state, when the only roads out of Vincennes were the "Vincennes Trace" from Louisville through Vincennes to Kaskaskia, and probably the "Red Banks Trace" to the south. Stage coach communication between Vincennes and Louisville was not established until 1821, or fifteen years after the University was projected.¹⁶

Late in December, 1806, at the instigation of William Henry Harrison, the board of trustees inaugurated the first attempt to establish a grammar school as a department of the University. Advertisements were authorized in the "public prints" of Ohio and Kentucky and in the *Pittsburg Gazette* for a teacher to take charge of the grammar school.¹⁷ John Moore of Frankfort, Kentucky, was the first to answer this advertisement. His letter of application was ordered to be filed by the clerk and no further mention can be found regarding the matter.¹⁸ This attempt to establish a grammar school was dropped by the board in the spring of 1807.¹⁹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Art. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, Art. 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Art. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Art. 15.

¹⁵ *Trustees' Records*, Dec. 6, 1806. The Trustees' Records of the board of trustees of Vincennes University are in the office of the President of Vincennes University. They are practically complete from Dec. 6, 1806 to the present time.

¹⁶ *Vincennes Western Sun and General Advertiser*, Apr. 7, 1821.

¹⁷ *Trustees' Records*, Dec. 15, 1806.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, April 6, 1807.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, June 9, 1807.

Under the leadership of Benjamin Parke, in July and August of 1807, an effort was made to establish a school in which would be taught "the English language, rudiments of the Latin language, French, History, geography and mathematics."²⁰ Mr. Parke reported that the cost of such a school would be about \$640 per year, with an additional cost of \$350 per year for the teaching of French. Four subscription papers were prepared and circulated throughout the town and country for "scholars" at a tuition rate of "\$16 per year for English, Latin, history, geography, and mathematics and a just portion of the fuel, not to exceed one cord per scholar, and \$10 per year for French." Little success was had in obtaining "scholars." In fact, only five signed up for work.²¹

The matter of establishing a school was revived by the board early in 1811. Arrangements were completed by which a school, which was then being conducted by the Rev. Samuel T. Scott, founder of the Presbyterian Church in Vincennes, should be taken under the control of the board of trustees of Vincennes University.²²

On Monday, May 11, 1811, the Rev. Samuel T. Scott opened the first school ever held under the authority of the board of trustees of the University. This was a grammar school only, but arrangements were made which permitted students of Latin and Greek to be taught in a separate room from the common English "scholars." Tuition at the rate of \$18 per year was charged for each "scholar" for instruction in English grammar, Latin, Greek, geography and mathematics, payable quarterly in advance. The Rev. Mr. Scott received for his services only the money collected from tuition charges. His school was housed in the University building, then but partially completed.²³

This grammar school of Vincennes University was continued under the direction of the Rev. Scott, though never well supported, until his resignation in the summer of 1815.²⁴ In November of the same year, Jesse Olds was employed by the board to conduct the grammar school. Just what kind of school Mr. Olds taught is not clear. In the Records of the Trustees

²⁰ *Ibid.*, July 18, 1807.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Aug. 7, 1807.

²² *Ibid.*, May 2, 1811.

²³ *Ibid.*, May 2, 1811 and Aug. 9, 1811.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 3, 1815.

it is sometimes called a "Latin School."²⁵ By April, 1816, Olds was in full charge of the school with the pretentious title of "Professor in Vincennes University."²⁶ For some reason not known, the "Professor" severed his connection with the University in 1816, and the Rev. Scott again took charge²⁷ until his resignation in the spring of 1818.²⁸ A certain Mr. Bennett conducted an English school in the University building during a part of 1818.²⁹ The Rev. Jean Jean was in charge of the University for some time during the summer of 1818, but just how long, or what kind of school he conducted can not be determined with accuracy.³⁰ Apparently, there is no further record of any school at Vincennes University until 1823.

An effort to revive the University was made by the trustees late in 1823. The Rev. Henry Moore Shaw, an Episcopal clergyman, was elected President of "the Institution," the first man to be so designated by the trustees. He was given complete control of the building and was authorized to open a school in it. As president of the college he was personally to conduct the education of youth under the superintendence of the board of trustees.³¹ President Shaw opened his school in December, 1823,³² and continued to teach in the University until after it became the Knox County Seminary in 1824. All the schools carried on under the authority of the trustees of Vincennes University before 1824 were of grammar school status or under. No work of collegiate rank was given in the University until long after this date.

It was in February 1807, that the board of trustees of Vincennes University purchased a building site of Henry Vanderburg for \$200.³³ Immediately after the purchase of this site, the board of trustees began preparations to erect a college building. Contracts for some materials were made early in 1807, and plans were drawn for the new building.³⁴ By January, 1808, the contract was let for the building which was

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Nov. 18, 1815.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, April 1, 1816.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Dec. 24, 1816.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, April 6, 1818.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1818.

³⁰ *Vincennes Western Sun and General Advertiser*, Aug. 1, 1818.

³¹ *Trustees' Records*, Monday, October [?], 1823.

³² *Vincennes Western Sun and Advertiser*, Dec. 20, 1823.

³³ *Knox County Deed Record, A* (Index), Vanderburg to Trustees of Vincennes University.

³⁴ *Trustees' Records*, April 6, 1807.

begun in the spring of 1808.³⁵ Some rooms were ready for use by August, 1811,³⁶ but the entire building was not finished till 1820.³⁷

In the meantime, as already stated, parts of the building had been used for school purposes by the Rev. Scott, Mr. Olds, Mr. Bennett, and the Rev. Jean Jean. The total cost of this building was approximately \$5,000. It contained a "cellar" and first and second floors. The first floor contained an "eating room," a "lecture and exhibition room," and two smaller rooms. The second floor had in all nine rooms of various sizes.³⁸ This building was owned by the University until 1839 when it was purchased by the Catholic College of Vincennes.³⁹ It was subsequently razed and the present St. Rose Academy building erected on the ground upon which it formerly stood.

From Vincennes and its environs in 1806, and for some years later, a college could expect little or no financial support from tuition. At a tuition charge of \$18 per year per student, little money could be collected. Furthermore, very little revenue could be raised from the sale or lease of the lands in the seminary township. One of the most pressing and difficult problems of the young University was that of securing sufficient funds for maintenance, operation and expansion. To this problem the trustees early turned their attention.

The board first attempted to raise money through the lottery scheme authorized in the fifteenth section of the University Charter. The proposed scheme adopted by the board provided for the sale of eight thousand lottery tickets from which the University was to realize a net profit of \$20,000. The tickets were printed and offered for sale in Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and by Benjamin Parke, Territorial Delegate, in Washington.⁴⁰ The tickets did not sell "even when offered on credit," and the board, after trying the scheme for a year, recalled all tickets and abandoned the attempt to raise money by a lottery.⁴¹ Their experiment left them indebted to the extent of \$84.75, which was the cost of their effort to raise

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 9, 1808.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 1811.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, June 21, 1820. On this date, the board of trustees made provisions for paying the contractors for all the work done on the building up to that time and to release them from further responsibility to the board.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Aug. 30, 1811.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 22, 1839.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Sept. 12, 1807.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 16, 1807.

funds for an educational purpose through conducting a lottery.

As a means of raising money for the University, the sale of Gibson County lands was of little immediate value. Under the terms of the Charter, only four thousand acres could be sold for immediate use. These were sold for less than enough to pay for the erection of the building,⁴² while lands leased were let on terms that brought in almost no returns to the University.⁴³ A petition to Congress in 1817, praying permission to sell the remainder of the lands at not less than \$10 per acre, was refused upon the grounds that it was inexpedient for the University to sell more than the four thousand acres at that time.⁴⁴

Thus matters rested until January, 1820, when the General Assembly of Indiana, in session at Corydon, appropriated the Gibson County lands then remaining unsold, to the use of the State.⁴⁵ They were subsequently given to the State Seminary at Bloomington. This act took from Vincennes University all its lands and left it with no means of support except tuition which was at that time almost, if not entirely, non-existent. With meager income, a small faculty, few students and little community support, Vincennes University was in a fair way to die in the prolonged period of birth.

The last recorded meeting of the board of trustees of Vincennes University for the period covered by this paper (1806-1824) was held on April 24, 1824. No business was transacted, and adjournment was taken until the first Tuesday of the following June.⁴⁶ This June meeting, so far as the records show, was never held.

In the meantime, the General Assembly, in an effort to save the University, passed an act by which the University could become the Knox County Seminary, and, as such, receive the County seminary funds. Vincennes University, under the terms of this Act, became the Knox County Seminary in 1824 and the first period of its history came to an end.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Various dates Dec. 15, 1806 to Jan. 7, 1817.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Nov. 15, 1817.

⁴⁴ *American State Papers, Public Lands*, Vol. III (No. 267), p. 266.

⁴⁵ *Laws of Indiana*, 4th Session 1820 (Jeffersonville, 1820), p. 160.

⁴⁶ *Trustees' Records*, April 24, 1824.