

Jacob Stauffer Whitman,
First Union County School Superintendent
by
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Twenty years passed by from the birth of Union County until the Pennsylvania legislature enacted a law for public schools. Governor George Wolf persistently brought the bill to the floor from 1829 to 1833, when the “legislature [finally] responded, and fashioned a free, tax-supported, state-wide system of public education.” However, it could be accepted or rejected by local option. Governor Wolf signed the bill on April 1, 1834. Slowly the “aristocratic school law” was accepted in Union County, but it met opposition for several years due to taxation resistance and from those who feared losing their native German tongue. Schools had existed within the current geographic boundaries of Union County since the late 1700s, and under the public school law more public school buildings were constructed during the 1840s.

Two more decades went by after the school law was enacted before Union County deemed it prudent for the schools to have central supervision. “[B]eginning in 1854, [s]uperintendents were made responsible for the general supervision of the public schools. The position required leadership, tact and patience, dogged perseverance and unusual durability” (Snyder, 206). The man chosen for the position was Jacob Stauffer Whitman. At that time the territory comprising both Union and Snyder counties was a single county, Union, and Whitman “was charged with the supervision of 150 school districts” (Dunkelberger, 741).

Jacob Whitman was born to Jacob and Esther (Stauffer) Whitman, September 12, 1827, and spent his childhood on the family homestead near Boyertown, PA. “In his youth, he had a natural taste for the sciences,” and although his early education was meager, he valued the books he acquired. However, his uncle, the Hon. John Stauffer, an Associate Judge of Berks County, took a strong interest in Jacob’s education. His uncle facilitated his admittance into a private school in Boyertown. As Jacob’s progress impressed his uncle, Judge Stauffer made arrangements for his nephew to enroll at Marshall College, forerunner of Franklin & Marshall College. He entered the college in

1845, but did not graduate with his class, the Class of 1849. Due to ill health, he left the college in 1848; however, his credentials must have been impressive as he soon secured a position of leadership taking charge of the Mount Pleasant Seminary, Boyertown, PA (Biographical Dictionary, 631).



Jacob Stauffer Whitman
Image courtesy of the Pennsylvania State
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In 1851, he became the principal of the Berrysburg Academy in Dauphin County. From there he became the principal of the Freeburg Academy and served from October, 1853 until October, 1855. The academy opened on October 10, 1853. The town of Freeburg was located within Union County until the southern portion, including Freeburg, became Snyder County by an act of the Pennsylvania legislature on March 2, 1855 (Dunkelberger, 68, 738).

“The provision establishing county supervision of schools was the great feature of the law of 1854” (Wickersham, 508). As a result, Jacob Whitman was elected county superintendent for the schools of Union County, and served for one year, 1854-1855, but kept his position at the Academy. He had to deal with many challenges as superintendent. Some teachers failed to attend the teacher examinations he conducted.

Examinations were open to the public, and “were often unjustly criticized.” Parents in attendance at the examinations showed their indifference. Superintendent “visitations were unwelcome, their advice was unheeded, and even their presence was considered an offence.” Teachers complained about short periods of employment, low wages, and irregular attendance of students. In addition, there was a shortage of proper books, and schools were inadequately equipped (Wickersham, 513; Snyder, 206). Whitman resigned as superintendent on July 1, 1855, because he wanted to devote all of his time to the Freeburg Academy (Dunkelberger, 723).

Whitman’s plan to direct Freeburg Academy, however, was abruptly ended by an offer from Union Seminary in New Berlin. The Union Seminary Trustees’ Minutes, September 22, 1855, state that, “Mr. J. S. Whitman was appointed as a teacher of the Seminary at a salary of \$500 a year; if the committee thought it advisable.” He had suggested the amount of his salary. Whitman, a member of the first faculty, was a professor of Natural Science at Union Seminary for four years.



Image courtesy of Albright College Archives

The first catalog of the seminary, 1856, states, “The Seminary is furnished with an excellent set of Chemical and Philosophical Apparatus, Maps, Globes. &c., so as to render the instruction more practical. Field rambles, for which this section of country is particularly favorable, are made in the study of Botany, while the classes in Surveying have frequent practical outdoor exercises.” One can easily imagine Whitman taking

students on rambles around New Berlin down to Penns Creek, up to the mountain, and into nearby fields.

It was Whitman who began a museum at the seminary. The first specific reference to a museum comes from the 1860-1861 catalog: “A Museum is connected with the Institution, to which constant additions are making, thus [affording] students an opportunity of gaining much useful and interesting information.” He probably went on many rambles by himself to collect specimens for the museum, and for students to study.



The Science Room and the Museum at Union Seminary
Image courtesy of Albright College Archives

In 1859 he left Union County for the Farmer’s High School, forerunner of the Pennsylvania State University. Like the Union Seminary, he was part of the original faculty. He primarily taught botany, and also taught horticulture, geology, physiology, zoology, and veterinary science. Also, reminiscent of the Seminary, he was “fond of taking students on botanical expeditions in the neighboring mountains and valleys” (Dunaway, 24, 274).

He was the only professor to live on campus, and his cottage was located at the rear of the college, where he had planted a beautiful garden. The Penn State Alumni Quarterly, October 1916, notes that no one had good water except for Whitman so the

students went to his well. Students did not call him professor, but rather, “Jakey.” Henry Harvey, one of Whitman’s students, penned these words in 1865.

Next comes to my mind, Professor Whitman, whose long & graceful locks hung in rich profusion from the sides of his head, the absence of which from the place where the wool ought to grow, he vainly struggled to conceal by dragging a lock from the proximity of each ear. He was a good-natured Dutchman from New Berlin in Union Co., with his wisdom every new student was impressed, not to say startled, on his first introduction to botany, by being told that thenceforth the familiar must be known only as “*Leontodontaraxicumdeusleouis*” ... a bit of information the learned professor imparted with an extra twist of the queue on the top of his head, which we innocent boys imagined was for the purpose of tightening the band around the top of his head to keep the vast store of knowledge it contained from escaping.

Immediately upon the death of President Evan Pugh, April 29, 1864, Whitman served as acting president, and then vice-president of the institution, which had by then been re-named the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania. (That name was used until 1874 when it became Pennsylvania State College. “University” did not appear in the name until 1953.) He continued as vice-president along with his teaching responsibilities until he resigned in 1866. Leaving Pennsylvania, he moved to Kansas, where he lived for the rest of his life. “Wanting to see and know something more of the great West, he resigned this lucrative position to accept the professorship of natural science at Baker University.” At Baker he taught botany, physiology, and geology from 1867 to 1870. He also had the distinction of planning and making a beautiful botanical garden at the university. He was also then the principal of the schools of Lyndon, Kansas (Biographical Dictionary, 631).

At the State Agricultural College, Manhattan, Kansas, which later became Kansas State University, 1873-1876, he was the Chair of elementary and agricultural chemistry, entomology, botany, and natural philosophy. During the summer of 1874, the Board of Trustees gave Whitman permission to collect geological, entomological and botanical specimens. During the years, 1879-1880, he was the superintendent of schools for Osage County, Kansas. For the last two decades of his life, he operated a drug store,

Whitman Drug Store, in Lyndon, Kansas. He died on August 12, 1894 and is buried in the Lyndon Cemetery.

Much of Jacob Whitman's life was devoted to learning and teaching. Through most of his 66 years he was involved with public schools or higher education as a teacher and an administrator. His quest for knowledge never waned, and he wanted his students to explore and understand nature. He received honorary degrees, A.M. and M.D., from the University of Pennsylvania, and the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia, which became known as Thomas Jefferson University. This learned man knew the outdoors was an excellent classroom. He was driven by a curiosity about the natural world, a curiosity that grew from his boyhood and continued throughout his adult life.

Sources

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