

A Seminary in New Berlin

By

Sidney Dreese

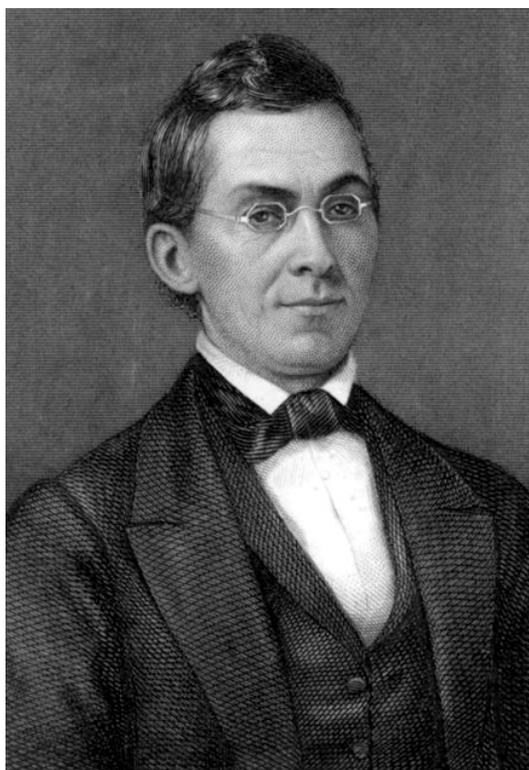
“We want the children to go forth prepared to labor with hand, head, and heart for God and man. We wish for our students to aim for a life of usefulness, and to be a credit to themselves and their friends.” – The officials of the Union Seminary expressed these expectations for the students in the seminary catalog. Accountability to both God and friends was important. Although the school was non-sectarian, it strongly adhered to Christian ideals. (It was established under the auspices of the Evangelical Association, founded by Jacob Albright, born in 1759; died in 1808). The Union Seminary got its name because it was located in Union County, and the school opened its doors on January 3, 1856. (It was located at the site of the New Berlin Elementary School. The seminary building had fallen into disrepair, and was razed.)



Depiction of the Union Seminary, New Berlin, 1856
Source: First annual catalog of Union Seminary, 1856

Rev. Wilhelm W. Orwig is credited as the founder of the school, ably assisted by two assistants, Rev. Charles Koch and Simon Wolf. Reverend Orwig was a forward thinker and he thought young women should be educated. In addition he pushed for the

establishment of Sunday schools, a missionary society, and was a key founder of a mission to Germany. Rev. Orwig was an itinerant minister in York, the Baltimore area and the Erie area. He was later elected a bishop of the church and served from 1859 until 1863. (The Evangelical Association merged with the United Evangelical Church to become the Evangelical Church in 1922. There were further mergers with the United Brethern Church and the United Methodist Church. A notable landmark is the Albright



Rev. Wilhelm W. Orwig, founder of Union Seminary
Source: Albright College Archives

Memorial Church, located at Kleinfeltersville, Pennsylvania, where Jacob Albright is buried.) and editor of the Evangelical Association's periodical, *Christliche Botschafter*, holding that position three times, 1836-1843, 1850-1855, 1863-1867, a prolific author including writing a volume of sermons, a catechism used over 25 years, and a history of the Evangelical Association. Upon leaving the Union Seminary in 1859 he moved to Cleveland where the Association's publishing house had moved, after having been located in New Berlin. Orwig was born in Orwigsburg, Schuylkill County, in 1810, and when a young boy came with his parents to Union County.

In 1854 Orwig suggested a school be established in New Berlin, a proposal received with much enthusiasm by the residents of New Berlin. At the time the Evangelical Association had two conferences: the West Pennsylvania Conference and the East Pennsylvania Conference with the Susquehanna River as the boundary between the two. Orwig and Koch presented the proposal for a seminary in New Berlin at conference sessions for each Conference. The West Pennsylvania Conference was immediately favorable. The East Pennsylvania Conference was hesitant at first, but later agreed with the proposal. The one who raised the most money was Simon Wolf, secretary of the board of trustees, and the building was completed in the fall of 1855.

The chapel held 350 persons and was nearly filled to capacity on opening day in the winter of 1856. It was the beginning of a 46-year presence of private education in



The Chapel

Source: Albright College Archives

New Berlin. Union Seminary existed from 1856 until 1887. The school was then renamed Central Pennsylvania College and existed until 1902.

The first faculty were Rev. Wilhelm Orwig, who served both as the principal of the school and professor of moral science and the German language, together with Rev. Francis Hendricks, professor of mental science and mathematics, Jacob Whitman, professor of natural sciences, Augustus Sassaman, professor of ancient languages and literature, and Francis Hoffman, professor of the English branches and bookkeeping.



Augustus Sassaman
 Professor of Ancient Languages
 And Literature
 Photo courtesy of Albright College
 Archives



Jacob Whitman
 Professor of Natural Sciences
 Photo courtesy of Penn State
 University Archives

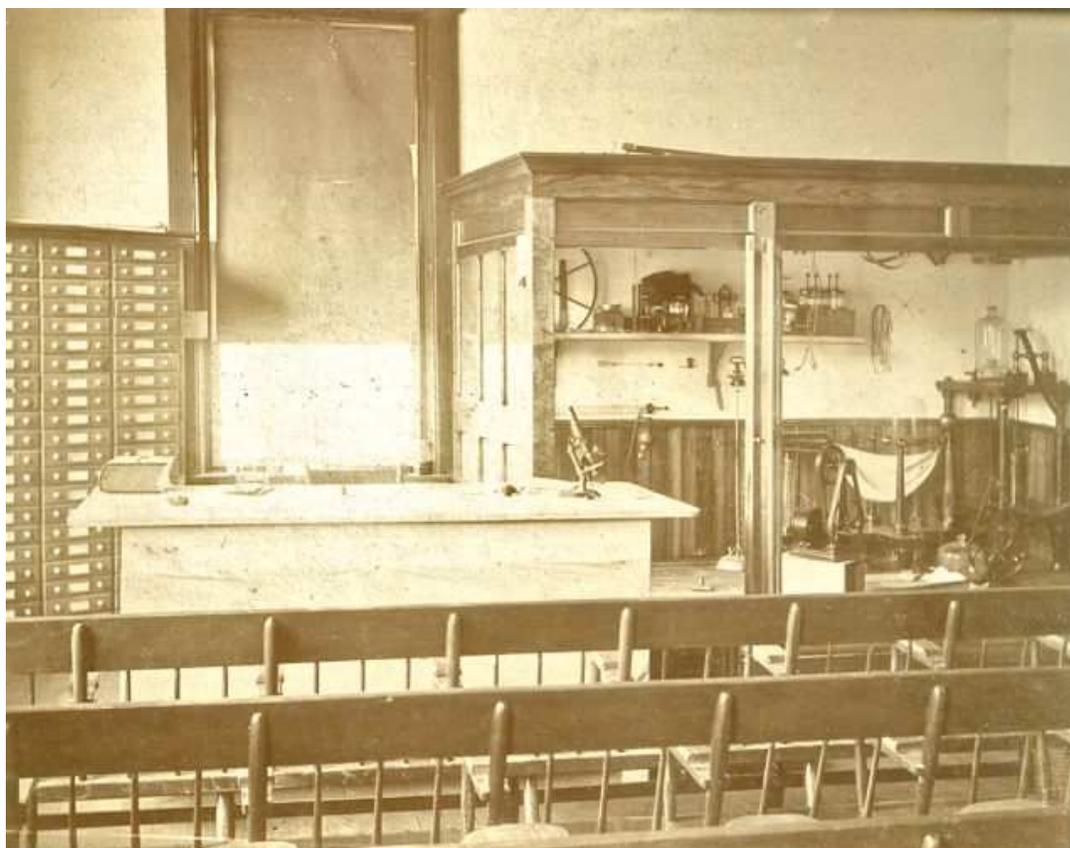
The school had both a primary school and a secondary school. The majority of the younger children were from New Berlin, and those attending the higher grades came largely from Union, Snyder and Northumberland counties. Others, though, came from such states as Maryland, New York, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and California. Applicants to the school were to be of good moral character and were expected to observe all rules and regulations. Before attending the school, tuition was required to be paid in advance.

Traveling a distance to New Berlin was a difficult journey as there was no railroad serving New Berlin; students coming from far away went to Lewisburg, Northumberland or Lewistown by train. From there the trek would continue by stage coach to New Berlin. It was not until 1883 that the railroad came into Winfield, yet there would still be an eight-mile ride on the stage coach.

Some of the boys lived in private homes in New Berlin. Also, two or three of them could room together at the seminary and form a “boarding club” where a woman in a

private home would prepare meals for them. Girls boarded at the school and were under the watchful eye of the preceptress.

Students attended classes from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. with 90 minutes for lunch beginning at noon. Students also were expected to attend chapel ten minutes before classes and ten minutes after classes for personal devotions, i.e., reading the



Science Room, Union Seminary

Source: Albright College Archives

Bible and prayer. This practice continued until 1896 after which only morning chapel was observed. They were also expected to attend public worship on Sundays at one of the churches in New Berlin.

At the outset there were no formal courses of study and only the girls, after three years of work (equivalent to high-school studies), could earn a diploma. Barth states in *Discovery and Promise*, “By charter, Union Seminary was allowed at its beginning to graduate young women only.” The boys’ preparation was

geared to college preparation where they could earn a degree. Their academic work - equal to college prep studies - was rigorous and they were expected to go to college. Girls took courses on the 3Rs and could choose from two of four languages: German, French, Latin or Greek. They could also choose from several sciences, such as botany, astronomy, geology, or chemistry. The sexes never mixed except in the classroom.



Museum, Union Seminary

Source: Albright College Archives

The girls had fewer activities than the boys. The latter could play baseball or football on the school's athletic field. For intellectual development outside of the classroom, the seminary had two literary societies, both of which were emphatically "no girls allowed" clubs. The Excelsior Literary Society was formed in 1856 and the Neocosmian Literary Society in 1858. The seminary also had a teachers' association. The purpose of these organizations was to improve public speaking and composition. A

frequent activity was holding debates. Both of the literary societies had their own libraries, and the seminary had a library consisting of some books and newspapers. The first graduates, Class of 1859, were: Louisa Aurand, Lizzie German, Kate Swineford and sisters, Annie and Mary Lotz.

With an increased demand for teachers for both the primary and secondary grades the seminary in 1857 added a course for a "Normal Class" which prepared teachers. In time other courses were added to the curriculum: classical, scientific, English, and collegiate.

The Seminary continued to attract students, but enrollment dropped and finances were not robust, relying solely on tuition payments. In contrast to Bucknell University and Susquehanna University, both of which had larger student bodies and more diverse sources of income, the Union Seminary was on fragile financial ground and the school struggled to stay open. During the first two years of the War Between the States the seminary was able to continue; however, the trustees decided to close the doors in 1863 until the war ended. On August 18, 1865 the seminary began operating again.

The war had its effect on the seminary, going deeper into debt and the state's charter had been suspended. As noted in Barth's *Discovery and Promise*, "The most pressing problem was to secure a charter for the school....Union Seminary had been operating without official state certification from the time it was reopened after its suspension during the last two years of the Civil War." Unfortunately, restoring the institution's charter would not be realized until 1880, and there were two others issued in 1883 and 1887. Legal technicalities were always the obstacle for charters.

Better days were ahead, though, with Rev. Martin Carothers and his leadership as president of the seminary's board of trustees. Carothers was determined not to allow Union Seminary to die. Shortly after the war he established (after conference approval) the Education Society of the Central Pennsylvania Conference. The Society then took absolute control of the seminary and through the work of an all-new board of trustees they sold stock at \$25 per share. Through this action sufficient money was raised and all debts were paid. For the school year 1872-1873 there were 94 boys and 13 girls enrolled. The cost was \$44 which included tuition, room and board.



Martin Carothers, President of Board of Trustees, 1865-1893
 Source: Annual catalog of Central Pennsylvania College, 1897-1898

The nation endured a depression in 1876. Enrollment at the Seminary decreased and the church conferences would not commit to financial support towards an endowment. By 1879 there were only 18 students; these were discouraging times for both students and faculty. At the end of the school year, June, 1879, *The Evangelical Messenger* could only report, "Union Seminary is still alive."

During the thirty-one years of the existence of the school as Union Seminary, the school had many ups and downs with financial stability being its chief problem. Enrollment fluctuated, no regular curriculum was in place, faculty came and went, and it had nine presidents. A dark shadow hovered over both the Union Seminary and the small town. Confidence on having a first-rate school had diminished.

Dr. Aaron Gobble came to New Berlin in 1879 and became the principal of the school. His leadership gave the seminary a shot in the arm. One of the first things he did was to institute a two-year theological course by which graduates would be recognized by the Central Pennsylvania Conference with a license to preach. The seminary had been equivalent to an elementary school and high school, but Gobble wanted the school to have collegiate status and be competitive with nearby Bucknell University and Susquehanna University. With much effort by Dr. Gobble, on June 19, 1887, the Court of Common Pleas of Union County finally issued a charter and the

school was named the Central Pennsylvania College. Change was exciting! A new periodical produced by the two literary societies, the *Central Pennsylvania Collegian*, observed in November 1887, “a new order of things” in New Berlin. “It may, therefore, be accepted as the opening of a new epoch in the institution’s history.” In the same issue, Gobble was described as being public spirited, “throws his whole soul into a project,” being genial, gentle, hard-working late into the night, and “is a model college president.” His leadership took the college into the 20th century.

The Central Pennsylvania College remained on the same site as the Union Seminary and stayed there until 1902. The college then merged with Albright College which was located in Myerstown, Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, and closed the New Berlin campus, ending forty-six years in Union County. After Central Pennsylvania College left New Berlin a second Union Seminary existed in New Berlin on the same site from 1904 until 1911. The school had no ties to the Evangelical Church, and it was nondenominational.

Suggested Further Reading

Barth, Eugene Howard, and F. Wilbur Gingrich
1989 *Discovery and Promise: A History of Albright College, 1856-1981*. Reading, Pa: Albright College.

Deans, Thomas R.
1963 *The Story of a County, 1813-1963*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Focht Print. Co.

Snyder, Charles McCool
1976 *Union County, Pennsylvania: a Bicentennial History*. Lewisburg, Pa: Colonial Print. House.

