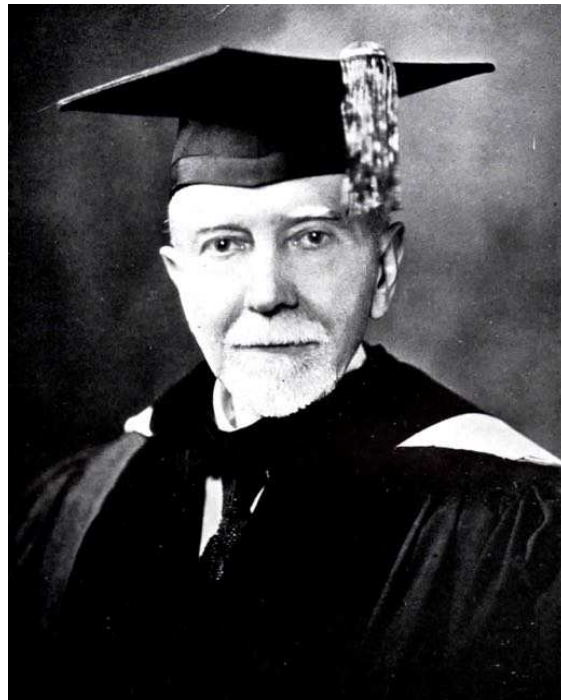


Reverend Aaron Gobble and New Berlin's Central Pennsylvania College

By
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The 1928 *Speculum*, Albright College's yearbook, contained a two-page tribute to Aaron Ezra Gobble (1856-1929). He was the son of Samuel and Sarah Gobble, and was born near Millheim, Centre County, Pennsylvania. He did not care to follow in his father's footsteps and go into farming. Instead he preferred books and carpentry; it was the former that led him into a career in education. Receiving degrees from Franklin and Marshall College, he began by teaching in the public schools of Centre County. He also attained a D.D. from Lebanon Valley College, and was then licensed to preach.



Dr. Aaron Gobble, late 1920s
From "The 1929 *Speculum*: Albright College yearbook"

No other person would make such a mark on higher education in New Berlin than Aaron Ezra Gobble. Gingrich states in *A History of Albright College*, "From the day of his arrival at New Berlin, July 31, 1879, to his death, April 17, 1929, he was actively connected with the work of the Evangelical Church in higher education. The

combination of his fine academic background and his self-sacrificing zeal put him in the front rank of those who built their lives into the history of Albright College.” At the age of 73 Gobble passed away, and had it not been for his death he would have been engaged in higher education for 50 years.



Central Pennsylvania College about 1900 Courtesy Albright College Archives

When Gobble came to New Berlin’s school, the Union Seminary, Rev. John W. Bentz, was the Principal. However, five months later, Rev. Bentz resigned to return to the ministry. Gobble then became the next Principal of Union Seminary and through his leadership, labor and tenacity guided the school from 1879 until 1887 until collegiate status was achieved. Union Seminary was then named Central Pennsylvania College with Aaron Gobble continuing as the principal.

Changes to the Seminary

Hope had been born many years earlier in 1859 for the seminary to become a college, but it took 28 years for it to become reality. Several significant events occurred during the first academic year 1887-1888, the formation of the Agazziz Society by

Professor Harry Conser. Its purpose was to study the natural sciences and its members took trips out into the fields around New Berlin to collect specimens. In addition a new college newspaper, the Central Pennsylvania Collegian, was published by the students. Also of note, expenses did not rise. The Class of 1887 had ten graduates.



Dr. Harry N. Conser at work in the science room. Courtesy Albright College Archives

Although 1887 was a milestone, enrollment kept declining and by 1891 there were only 82 students. Finances also dropped and the professors were not paid their salaries. Gobble himself was forced to operate a printing shop in New Berlin to supplement his salary. Another dark cloud loomed overhead due to a schism in the Evangelical Church. Both of the two groups claimed they represented the entire church. Students feared that the minority faction would seize the college property and they would be ousted.

The unrest in the Evangelical Church continued for three years. It was during this time President Gobble stated in his 1894 report to the trustees that the college needed to move to a better location. "New Berlin was too far from the railroad, and the building was obsolete and inadequate." The building was in poor condition and could not be competitive with nearby institutions. It was necessary for Central Pennsylvania College to have an endowment and "be supported by student fees". Gobble said, "It is hard to get professors for \$600 per year when some other places paid \$1200." Although

the collegiate department had been flourishing, the preparatory and commercial departments had diminished.

True to Gobble's expectations the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania ruled on October 1, 1894 in favor of the majority party. Congregations that had stood by the majority party were the legal owners of the church property. This was also true of educational institutions. Since Central Pennsylvania College had adhered to the minority party, it was necessary for the college property to be purchased back from the Evangelical Association. Gobble stated, "[S]econdary grade schools do a good work in their way, but we ought to have a few good, well-endowed and well-located COLLEGES, in my opinion, and concentrate upon them, and that will give us prestige, strength and progressive unity as a church."

Much to Gobble's delight the endowment fund had increased to about \$3500; however, it was still a small amount. This led him to appeal to the board of trustees to aim for an endowment of \$100,000, and to ask for financial support from several church conferences of the United Evangelical Church. However the matter laid stagnant for three years, and the endowment campaign was launched in 1898.

Prior to this a meeting was held in New Berlin in 1896 to discuss the raising of an endowment fund and the consolidation of all college interests in the east. Committee members consisted of representatives from the Ohio, Pittsburgh, Central Pennsylvania and East Pennsylvania Conferences. Aaron Gobble was elected head of the committee. One year prior the Albright Collegiate Institute was established by the United Evangelical Church in Myerstown, Lebanon County. President Gobble was not in favor of consolidating with the collegiate institute, and was much more in favor of having a new building erected in New Berlin.

The buildings of Central Pennsylvania College were both in poor condition and inadequate; students were turned away because of a shortage of accommodations; enrollment had fluctuated over time; finances were insufficient; professors were not paid in full and several left for better paying positions. Gingrich noted in *A History of Albright College*, President Gobble "complained about the heavy burden of work that he and the faculty bore. He had six hours daily of class work and the discipline of refractory students." -- All portraying a discouraging picture.

There were few bright spots for Gobble. Although in 1895 the State Legislature passed an act that all academic institutions could not grant degrees unless the institution had a minimum of \$100,000, in property and investments, the college continued to grant degrees, although the State Department of Education did not recognize them. Gobble continued to work hard for changes in the legislation. In fact he



Rev. Gobble and the faculty about 1900. He is seated in the first row, second from the left
 Courtesy Albright College Archives

received help from his friend, Senator Benjamin Focht, and other influential people. Finally in 1901 the legislature gave Central Pennsylvania College the right to grant degrees. Now all diplomas that had been granted since 1895 were once again valid. Gobble was also gratified that graduates of the college could enter into graduate studies without taking examinations by Harvard University, Columbia University and Johns Hopkins University. And, indeed, some alumni did attain masters' degrees from these universities.

Closing the Campus

Much to Aaron Gobble's dismay, the end of Central Pennsylvania College in New Berlin was drawing near. Albright Collegiate Institute had been re-chartered as Albright

College in 1898, and in 1902 Central Pennsylvania College merged with Albright College in Myerstown. Gobble had been elected as professor of Latin.

The last term of Central Pennsylvania College began on March 31, 1902, with 95 students enrolled. The attitude of some of the students was that the good work they had been doing was futile. The last report of the faculty stated: "The attendance during the past year has been good, very good considering the adverse circumstances." In addition, some of the students expressed an interest in continuing their studies at Albright College, and a few did graduate from Albright a few years later. Also, some of the faculty chose not to stay for the last term and found other employment, therefore, the work load increased for the others. Some professors continued on and were soon elected to positions at Albright College and stayed until the 1920s.

Activities for commencement week began on June 20th and ended on June 26th. Various organizations of Central Pennsylvania College held farewell programs and services, and were largely attended. Some were turned away since the chapel was filled to capacity. President Gobble preached the last Baccalaureate sermon on Sunday morning in the United Evangelical Church. "The crowning event of commencement week was the graduating exercises on Thursday morning, June 26. A multitude of people assembled in the college chapel in the morning to witness the last commencement exercises of Central Pennsylvania College." In the evening President and Mrs. Gobble held a reception in their home for the graduating class. The last graduates, Class of 1902, were as follows and each gave an oration during the exercises.

- Clair Graybill – "Uncrowned Kings"
- Charles Harner – "The True Riches"
- William Peffley – Valedictory: "Unus Homo, Nullus Homo"
- Raymond Walker – Salutatory: "The Serenity of Life"
- Rollin Wilson – "The New Man"

What the students of 1928 could not know was that Aaron Gobble would die the next year. Their tribute to him stated, "Truly, the good that Dr. Gobble has done and is doing shall live after him, and shall be an ever-present tribute to him to the long period of active service which he has served in the college of his making." Upon his death the

headline of the *Albright Bulletin*, April 26, 1929, read, “Esteemed Patriarch Of College Faculty And Educational Leader Of Evangelical Church Succumbs Suddenly To Heart Attack Laboring Steadfastly Until The End.”



The student body, 1902. The five graduates are seated in the front row on the far left, each wearing hats. Courtesy Albright College Archives

Aaron Ezra Gobble had devoted eight years to the Union Seminary, followed by fifteen years to Central Pennsylvania College, and the remainder of his life to Albright College. During the dark days in New Berlin he worked hard to keep the college running and maintained an optimistic attitude. He felt that the students at New Berlin had received a quality education.

Aaron Gobble’s shining light was his perseverance and dedication to the college. He stayed at the helm in contrast to previous presidents. Eight had preceded him, and had only stayed for a short time. Problems were forcing the college to go out of existence. Student enrollment went as low as 75 and reached a high of 113 through the years. Not only was the building in poor condition, it also lacked sufficient accommodations for students to room and board. The small rural location did not provide cultural activities like a city would have, and the railroad was a distance away.

The college also suffered from poor finances. All of these led to the consolidation and merger with Albright College.

Suggested Further Reading

Ellis, Franklin, and Austin N. Hungerford. *History of That Part of the Susquehanna and Juniata Valleys: Embraced in the Counties of Mifflin, Juniata, Perry, Union and Snyder, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: Everts, Peck & Richards, 1886.

Gingrich, F. Wilbur, and Eugene Howard Barth. *A History of Albright College, 1856-1956*. Reading, Pa: Albright College, 1956.

The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography. New York: J.T. White, 1892.

Note: the article that follows is centered on an illustrious graduate of Central Pennsylvania College, Raymond Chester Walker. – ed.

