CHAPTER XIV

THE GUARANTEE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In the autumn of 1834 the Oberlin Collegiate Institute was tottering, optimistic official pronouncements to the contrary notwithstanding. Old debts were unpaid and few funds were forthcoming for the additional buildings and other necessary equipment. The school had no president and no sufficient teaching staff. In October the Honorable Henry Brown, founder of Brownhelm, resigned as president of the Board of Trustees; he had been the most prominent local man identified with Oberlin.

To take his place Rev. John Keep, now of Cleveland, was appointed, and presided over a meeting on January 1, 1835. Keep, as we have seen, had preached for many years at Blandford, Massachusetts, and, after that, at Homer, New York. While at Homer he had come under the influence of Finney. Besides being a new-measures man he was also an earnest advocate of "female education" and of total abstinence, and a friend of the colored race. Like John Jay Shipshard, he heard the "Macedonian Cry" and went from New York to the Connecticut Western Reserve to help pour onto the "moral putrefaction" of the West the "savory influence of the gospel." In 1833 he left Homer to become pastor of the Stone (now the First) Presbyterian Church in Cleveland, and two years later organized a church in "Ohio City" (the west end of Cleveland) which later became the First Congregational Church of Cleveland, West Side. While still at Blandford, Rev. Mr. Keep had founded a free school for colored people; he had always been an active supporter of the American Colonization Society and had refused an appointment as agent for that organization in 1833. By 1834, however, when he entered the work at Oberlin, he had accepted immediate emanci-
and there good fortune came to seek him. After years of more or less unavailing efforts Shipherd saw the great opportunity open up before him. "I believe God has here put my hand on the end of a chain," he wrote to Eliphalet Redington, "linking men & money to our dear Seminary in such a manner as will fill our hearts with gratitude & gladness when it is fully developed." The "glorious good fellows" who had seceded from Lane were very favorable to the idea of coming to Oberlin if Mahan could be secured as President. Morgan as a member of the faculty and Finney to teach theology. The Tappans were clearly more or less definitely committed to financing them wherever they went. Thus might Oberlin secure a whole theological department: students and two teachers, besides a president and much-needed financial backing! Shipherd wrote: "God has kindly opened a door to our infant seminary, wide & effectual, thro' which I sanguinely hope, it will send forth a multitude of well qualified laborers into the plenteous harvest of our Lord."

In the same letter Shipherd asked that Mahan be appointed President of the Oberlin Institute and John Morgan a professor. Shipherd described Mahan as "a revival minister of the millennial stamp" recommended by Finney, himself. He believed him well qualified for the position, "a critical scholar . . . in intellectual & moral philosophy—a department . . . commonly assigned to the President," and "a man of inflexible Christian principles who follows the strait line of rectitude while great & good men waver. Mahan would fit in well in the Oberlin Colony, he declared, "His interest in our Institution is intense & he would be willing to toil & sacrifice in its behalf to any extent so would his estimable wife." "In the midst of a city's temptations they have maintained Christian economy & simplicity in their style of living"—in conformity with the principle of the Oberlin Covenant. But most important of all considerations, the Lane Rebels insisted on his appointment and that of John Morgan, "a man of sterling integrity & unwavering in his maintenance of high moral principle."

Mahan, Morgan and the "Rebels" demanded that as a condition of their coming to Oberlin entire freedom of speech on all
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reform issues be guaranteed and that Negroes should be admitted to the Institute along with whites. Before starting east Shipherd had written to Nathan Fletcher:

"I desire you at the first meeting of the Trustees to secure the passage of the following resolution, viz. 'Resolved, That students shall be received into this Institution irrespective of color.'

"This should be passed because it is right principle; & God will bless us in doing right. Also because, doing right we gain the confidence of benevolent & able men who probably will furnish us some thousands. Moreover, Bros. Mahan & Morgan will not accept our invitations unless this principle rule. Indeed if our Board would violate right, so as to reject youth of talent & piety, because they are black, I should have no heart to labor for the upholding of our Seminary, believing that the curse of God would come upon us as it has upon Lane Seminary, for its unchristian abuse of the poor Slave."8

Much to Shipherd's apparent surprise the recommendation aroused a storm of opposition in Oberlin. The slavery question had played no considerable part in the thoughts of the colonists and students of this pious settlement. Suddenly confronted with the suggestion that they receive black men into their idealistic haven, their innate race consciousness seized control of their minds and the whole community was panic-stricken. Two years later one of their number wrote of the situation: "A General panic & dispair seized the Officers, Students & Colonists—P. P. Stewart the Organ of Opposition at once proclaimed Bro. Shipherd Mad! crazy &c &c & that the School was changed into a Negro School. Its founders would be disappointed and hundreds of negroes would be flooding the School. Despondency brooded with able distrust &er almost every Soul, because the Christian patrons made it a condition in their donations that Coloured people should stand equal in the privileges of the Institution—many students said they would leave &c. Stewart said he would not stay."9 On the last day of December a paper was circulated among the students in an effort to obtain an accurate gauge of

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8] J. S. to N. P. Fletcher, Dec. 15, 1854 (Fres. Off., File 1). This was not the first time that the question had been raised at Oberlin, however. In a letter to Shipherd, dated Oct. 14, 1831, John M. Steedling of Cleveland made his contribution of $500.00 to Oberlin, dependent on students being admitted "irrespective of color."—O. C. Life, Misc. MSS.

The Guaranty of Academic Freedom

their opinion. It read: "We, Students of the O. C. Institute hereby certify our view as to the practicability of admitting persons of color, to this Institution under existing circumstances." On the left-hand side was a column marked "In favor"; on the right a column marked "Against." The number of names "against" was 32; the number "in favor" 26. Mary Lyon's nephew and Mary Ann Adams, later Principal of the Female Department, were among those who voted in the negative. Only six young ladies voted for the admission of Negroes and fifteen voted against it; the young men, on the other hand, favored it by a vote of twenty to seventeen.

The trustees were to meet on the first day of January. The feeling was so intense that it was deemed desirable not to meet in the colony. Notices were therefore sent out on the 29th of December announcing that the meeting would be held in Elyria. At the last moment an effort was made by a number of Oberlinites to bring the trustees back to the colony by addressing a petition to them:

"Whereas there has been and is now among the Colonists & Students of the O. C. Institute a great excitement in their mind in consequence of a resolution of Bro. J. J. Shipperd to be laid before the board—respecting the admission of people of color into the Institute and also of the board meeting at Elyria.

"Now your petitioners feeling a deep interest in the O. C. Institute and feeling that every measure possible should be taken to quell the alarm, that there shall not be a root of bitterness spring up to cause a division of interest or feeling (for an house divided against itself can not stand). Thereupon your petitioners respectfully request that your Hon body will meet at Oberlin that your deliberation may be heard and known on the great and important question in contemplation. We feel for our Black brethren. We feel to want your counsels and instructions—we want to know what is duty—and God assisting us we will lay aside every prejudice and do as we shall be led to believe God would have us to do."

The petition was signed by 32 (male) colonists and students. Original in O. C. Lib. Misc. MSS.

**Note:** John Keep to N. P. Fletcher and E. Redington, Dec. 29, 1851 (Treas. Off., File A).

"Petition to Trustees Re Colored Students" in Misc. Archives.
but it was ineffective, the trustees holding their important meeting at Elyria as intended. There, in a meeting characterized by one member of the Board as full of "rancour & malevolence," Mahan and Morgan were unanimously elected, but the motion to admit Negroes was tabled. "Whereas," runs the statement in the minutes, "information has been received from Revd. John J. Shiphead, expressing a wish that students may be received into the Institution irrespective of color—therefore Resolved That the Board do not feel prepared till they have other and more definite information on the subject to give a pledge respecting the course they will pursue in regard to the education of the people of Color: wishing that this institution should be on the same ground in respect to the admission of students with other similar institutions of our land."

In the meantime, without waiting for an answer to his proposals from the trustees at Oberlin, Shiphead had started cast with Mahan to secure financial aid, the support and adhesion of Charles G. Finney, and his acceptance of the theological professorship. Shiphead had, since at least the early spring of 1834, been considering applying for funds to the Tappans. Now was a most favorable opportunity. En route up the Ohio he wrote to his brother from Gallipolis where he had landed for the Sabbath:

"I hope to be New York next Saturday night or Monday night at farthest. . . . Br. Mahan Pastor of the 6th Ch. in Cincinnati is with me as an Assistant Agent for our dear Institute, and it is highly essential that we should be in New York. . . .

"Br. Mahan has expressed his readiness to accept & a confidence that br. Morgan will also accept. Some twenty theological students who have left Lane Sem. on account of its gag laws; among whom is br. T. D. Weld, say that if brs. Mahan and Morgan join the Faculty of our Institute, they shall join the pupils. Doct. Beecher has said that these men did right in leaving the Seminary, & called them a company of 'Glorious good fellows' &c—Moreover bros. Finney, Arthur Tappan & others in New York have offered some thousands for the establishment of a Seminary where these young men & others can enjoy the liberty of free discussion; & these brethren say that they will advise the N. Y. brethren to turn all in at Oberlin & engage their energies for its upbuilding. Thus dear br. I trust God has put my hand on a golden chain which I shall be able to link to Oberlin & thro' it bind many souls in holy allegiance to our Blessed King.

"We hope br. Finney will become Prof. of Theology at Oberlin. Lane Seminary I regret to say is down, & Doct. Beecher with it. Oh why did he confer with flesh & blood? Why not dare to do what he acknowledged to be right? He has evidently been guilty of duplicity, & his sun which I hoped would enlighten this valley & set serenely in the West, will I fear go down in a cloud. 'Cease ye from men!'"

Certainly the conjunction of circumstances was remarkable and it is not surprising that minds of Oberlin accustomed to look for providences should have deemed it providential.

The 'Rebs' in Camminsville were ready. Stanton wrote to Weld early in January: "As to Oberlin—Study—next summer &c. We have had no formal expression of opinion since your letter arrived, but we like the plan well. Brother Finney must go to O. It is the very kind of contact we need. So good, and rare too, in its moral characteristics. Our time expires here first of April. Ought we to go to O. then? We must spend the remainder of our course together somewhere! Will it be possible for you to be with us next year? Even 6 months of your contact would be invaluable to us. With Finney, Mahan & Morgan!!" James Thome, of Kentucky, concurred: "I hope the Oberlin enterprise will carry. It suits my wishes, for I believe it will suit my wants." William Allan, another Southerner, likewise approved: "This Oberlin plan, however, has opened up a new train. If you & Finney should go there I would try if possible to go with the rest. That, with me, will be putting on the capstone—I shall have passed the rubicon if I should go to an institution where abolition is concentrated—at the head of which is that aristrocratic Finney."

Stanton and Whipple wrote a joint letter to Finney a few days later expressing their deep interest "in the cause of theological education at the West." They saw the region in a desperate
from his strenuous duties in New York City, so that the new invitation from the West came at an opportune moment. His trip to the Mediterranean had definitely not improved his health. His friends feared that continuous preaching in the city in the future would surely kill him. The Tappans had suggested that the inspired invalid might go to Cumminsville and complete the preparation of the Lane Rebels for the ministry; they would bear all the expense. But Finney had decided against this proposal early in November. Then, in mid-January, Shiphard and Mahan arrived in New York with their invitation to Oberlin, and the letter from Stanton and Whipple, representing the Rebels, came to support them.

The interplay of forces between the Tappans, Leavitt, William Green, Dimond, Shiphard and Mahan around Finney cannot be reconstructed at this late hour. But the decision was made promptly, thanks evidently partly to the conjunction of circumstances and partly to the persuasive powers of Shiphard, who saw that the supreme moment of opportunity for his beloved Oberlin had arrived, and of the Tappans, who were deeply interested in the education of the Rebels. The result was beyond anything that the first founders of Oberlin had dared dream of. Arthur Tappan subscribed $10,000; and his associates, Lewis Tappan, Dimond, Green and others, agreed to pay eight professors six hundred dollars annually—all on condition that Finney be appointed Professor of Theology. Finney in turn agreed to accept the appointment on the condition that the trustees allow him to spend three or four months each winter preaching in New York and agree to “commit the internal management of the institute entirely to the Faculty, inclusive of the reception of students.”

Unless the Oberlin trustees decidedly revised their stand on the question of the admission of Negro students the whole structure must collapse. Finney wrote to the Rebels: “We do not wish the Trustees to hold out an Abolition or an Anti-abolition flag but let the subject alone for the faculty to manage.” Writing to Finney, John Morgan denounced the trustees’ resolution: “I do
not see how consistent abolitionists can give either their money
or personal labours & influence to Oberlin till the trustees are
'prepared' to rescind this enactment & do justice to their coloured
brethren whether other institutions do so or not. . . . I am sure
that Weld & the leaders from Lane will not think of going to
Oberlin while this resolution stands. Even Lane Seminary did
not assume this odious attitude." The Lane Rebels took the
same stand. One of them wrote to Weld: " . . . Saw a notice of the
request of Shipherd that Trustees should pass Res. to admit into
Col without respect of Colour. The board Res. not [to] act upon
it without further information, declaring it to be their intention
to have their Institution stand on the same ground as other literary
institutions in the land.—This is not enough in these times,
do write to New York & tell Mahan & Morgan not to accept
without having that thing settled." Everything depended on a
change of front by the trustees.

Shipherd wrote two elaborate epistles to Oberlin in a despera-
tate effort to bring about a change in the feeling of the commu-
nity and the trustees on the question of the admission of colored
students and to secure the acceptance of Finney's condition. One
letter, written in New York and dated January 27, 1835, was
addressed to the Church; the other, written the week before
and including a full statement of the situation at New York, was
addressed to the trustees of the Institute.

Shipherd expressed deep disappointment at the trustees' pre-
vious decision—"surprising & grievous to my soul." "I did not
desire you to hang out an abolition flag," he continued, "or fill
up with filthy stupid negroes; but I did desire that you should
say you would not reject promising youth who desire to prepare
for usefulness because God had given them a darker hue than
others." It was generally agreed, he pointed out, that emancipat-
ed Negroes ought to be educated in order to prepare them
for the proper exercise of their freedom. He reminded the
trustees that other institutions had admitted Negroes to full privi-

lege: Western Reserve College, Princeton and even Lane Sem-
inary. Students who were so pharisaical as to object to associa-
tion with Negroes would not be forced into their company, and the
danger of "amalgamation" (intermarriage between white and
colored students) he declared to be wholly illusory. Besides,
Shipherd held that the admission of students irrespective of
color was eternally right and he would insist upon it for that
reason despite any considerations of "worldly expediency."

But, after all, the admission of Negroes was not the crux of the
matter. "The difficulties [at Lane]," he recognized, "did not grow
out of the reception of colored students," "but out of the Trust-
es' interference with the Students' right of free discussion, &
those matters which belong to the Faculty to manage." In order
to forestall any possible future unwarranted interferences by
the Oberlin trustees in the internal affairs of the Oberlin Insti-
tute Shipherd insisted on the acceptance of Finney's condition.
He threatened to resign if the trustees would not guarantee
"that the Faculty shall control the internal affairs of the insti-
tute & decide upon the reception of students."

To consider this ultimatum, a special meeting of the trustees
was called to meet at Shipherd's house in Oberlin on Febru-
ary 9. This was another hectic session, "riotous, turbulent &
filled with detraction [and] slander." Nine members of the
Board, including Keep, the newly appointed president, gathered
at the appointed place early in the evening; Shipherd's letter
was read and "after some discussion and remarks, prayer was
offered & the Board adjourned" to meet the next morning. Na-
than P. Fletcher, an ardent abolitionist, and three other members
favored the adoption of the measure sponsored by Shipherd and
Finney; Philo P. Stewart, also supported by three of the trustees,
opposed. John Keep, ardent Finneyite and friend of Weld and,
as we have seen, an abolitionist, cast the deciding vote for the
proposition. The resolution passed is almost in Finney's own

21 Keep to Stewart, Pease and Fletcher, Jan. 29, 1835 (Tran. Off. File A), and
N. P. Fletcher, Critical Letters, No. 3.
22 John Keep to Finney, Mar. 10, 1835 (Finney MSS). "The division in the
Board," wrote Keep, "is occasioned by the alleged impropriety of permitting
blacks to be in the same school with the whites. But the prime object of the
movement (as I think) is I suppose in train in a better manner for the ministry,
holding yourselves ready to receive applicants irrespective of color—not as you
are reported, to congregate such a mass of negroes at Oberlin as to darken the
whole atmosphere."

George Wiiipplle et al. in Weld, Jan. 3, 1835 (Weld MSS), Barnes and Diamond
(Ep. Bi. 1, 193) have a slightly different reading.
41 J. S. to N. P. Fletcher, Church Clerk, Jan. 27, 1835 (O. C. 1st, Misc. MSS).
This letter is quoted in part by Borchard (Op. Cit.) and Leonard (Op. Cit.). It
is historically less significant and less detailed than the letter to the trustees.

23 Shipherd to Trustees, Jan. 19, 1835 (Misc. Archives).
words and settled the matter satisfactorily for him, for Shipherd, for the Lane Rebels and for the Tappans. It required a later misinformed and unsympathetic generation to discover that the trustees’ action was “staggering and inconsequent.” There is nothing ambiguous about it: it is straightforward and clear:

“Resolved That the question in respect to the admission of students into this Seminary be in all cases left to the decision of the Faculty & to them be committed also the internal management of its concerns, provided always that they be held amenable to the Board & not liable to censure or interruption from the Board so long as their measures shall not infringe upon the laws or general principles of the Institution.”

Mahan, Finney, Morgan, etc., were to be the faculty. With this faculty controlling the “admission of students” and “internal management” there was no danger that Negroes would be excluded nor that the repressive measures enacted at Lane could ever be forced upon Oberlin. Freedom of students and faculty from trustee meddling in “internal affairs” was thus a basic principle in the new Oberlin.

Important as was the decision to admit Negroes, in view of the great contribution which Oberlin was to make toward the education of the colored race, it was at the time of secondary significance. Oberlin was not the first college to admit Negroes. As we have seen, Shipherd, himself, cited a number of examples of Negroes who had attended other schools and colleges. The chief concern of the Lane Rebels, of Morgan, of Mahan, of Finney was not that Negroes should be admitted, but that there should be freedom of discussion of the anti-slavery question and other social and moral problems.

15F. M., Feb. 10, 1835, Leonard, Fisk, Fairchild, and Barnes were mistaken in their conclusion of the resolution which gives Negroes access to Oberlin. The resolution referred to by them (§ 4 and 5 in the minutes) are merely a supplementary expression of sentiment on the question of Negro education. See Leonard, 144-145. Fairchild, S. J. Barnes, 180. Prof. Finney was a formal acceptant of the position after his arrival at Oberlin in which he restated the conditions: that he have yearly leave of absence to preach in New York or elsewhere, that sufficient funds be secured to “put the institution beyond the pressure of pecuniary embarrassments,” and that the Trustees give the internal control of the school into the hands of the Faculty.

16John B. Ruswara, a Negro, graduated from Bowdoin in 1837 (W. W. Brewer, “John B. Ruswara” in the Journal of Negro History, XIX, 412-422 [Oct., 1924]. Edward Mitchell, a graduate of Dartmouth in 1838, is said to have been colored (Oberlin Evangelist, Oct. 8, 1850). A Negro is said to have entered Western Reserve College in 1839 (Carroll Butler, A History of Western Reserve College . . . [Cleveland, 1890], 43).

CHAPTER XV

BOOM TIMES AT OBERLIN

Aside from the money promised by the friends of the slave and the supporters of Finney in New York, Oberlin’s wealth in the thirteenth of this world was small. John C. Keep stated the situation clearly in a letter to Finney:

“Now then as to funds, Brother, we (trustees) have none except the land & buildings etc. at Oberlin, say from 20 to 35 thousand. We have not the money to build or support teachers. . . . The Board of Trustees cannot go on in this matter, only to act as the legal organ & do what N. Y. friends propose, in the present stage of the business. Now the whole enterprise is in the hands of these N. Y. men, with Bt. S., Mahan, & yourself. Hold on to it well & see that it do not fail.”

Arthur Tappan had promised to give $10,000 and, later on, to lend $10,000 more for buildings and other immediate needs. A Professorship Association was formed, a sort of living endowment, a group of the New York City brethren (William Green, Jr.; I. M. Dimond, Lewis Tappan and others) agreeing to pay the salaries ($600 per year) of eight professors. The association was to be given continuity by the appointment of a new member whenever any one of the old members died. No wonder Shipherd was disturbed when this association threatened to go on the rocks when it was yet hardly out of port. Lewis Tappan, it seems, doubted Finney’s attachment to anti-slavery principles and threatened to withhold his subscription to the association. Shipherd called the subscribers together and, after a long evening of discussion, it was determined “to hold on in the name of the Lord” and stand “fast whatever gales may blow.” The Founder wrote to Keep: “This meeting has shown us our foundation and greatly strengthened it.” Arthur Tappan was the financial rock