

THE *St. Cloud*  
Normal School's  
building in 1874

# *The ROOTS of* Higher Education in Minnesota

OLIVER C. CARMICHAEL

I AM SENSIBLE OF the high honor you have done me in inviting me to deliver this address at the one-hundred-and-fifth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, though at the moment I confess to great trepidation as I undertake the task assigned me. While I do not know by what right I should speak to you on the "Roots of Higher Education in Minnesota"—for many of you know so much more about it

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DR. CARMICHAEL served for seven years as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching before assuming the presidency of the University of Alabama in 1953. This address was presented on May 11, 1954, before the luncheon session of the society's annual meeting at the Curtis Hotel, Minneapolis. Eighteen Minnesota colleges and universities were represented in the audience.

than I—I am nevertheless grateful to you for giving me the opportunity and the occasion for exploring what seems to me to be one of the richest backgrounds of higher education provided by any of the forty-eight states. The fascinating material which reached me from the several institutions has engaged my attention far into the nights of many days that were filled with heavy administrative duties. But it has provided relaxation and a degree of excitement, since it has given me a new sense of the variety and richness of the sources of motivation and inspiration which gave rise to the American system of higher education and which still undergird it.

Obviously, I cannot do justice to the subject in the few minutes allotted me. Each institution deserves special mention, since

it seems to me that each has certain unique features worthy of your attention, but if I should take the time to particularize I should have no time left for generalization, for sketching the larger picture which has evolved in the course of my preparation for this occasion. So, if I seem to slight the institution which you represent, please forgive me, remembering that it is not lack of appreciation of its unique virtues, but lack of time to single out institutions and at the same time to deal adequately with the broad subject assigned me.

For the sake of clarity and brevity, I should like to treat the subject under three headings: institutions with a religious background, the teachers colleges, and the state university. While the taproot of all three is the same — faith in education as a means of social progress — this branches out early into three powerful roots from which the present system of higher education in the state sprang and by which it is currently sustained. The common denominator of all three is a belief in a particular kind of program traditionally called *liberal* education and now sometimes referred to as *general* education. At least for the purposes of this paper I shall deal with the twenty-three institutions that have this common base with varying degrees of emphasis upon the humanistic-social-scientific studies as the foundation for the more abundant life or for specialized vocational, technical, or professional training.

**RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS.** Of the twenty-three institutions included in this study, sixteen have, or have had, affiliations with religious bodies. In most instances the motivation of the founders was Christian idealism. Numerous branches of the Christian faith are represented in the founding groups: Lutheran, Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, and several Catholic orders. Thus the roots of higher education in this state reach back not only into New England, Pennsylvania, and other Eastern communities whence Min-

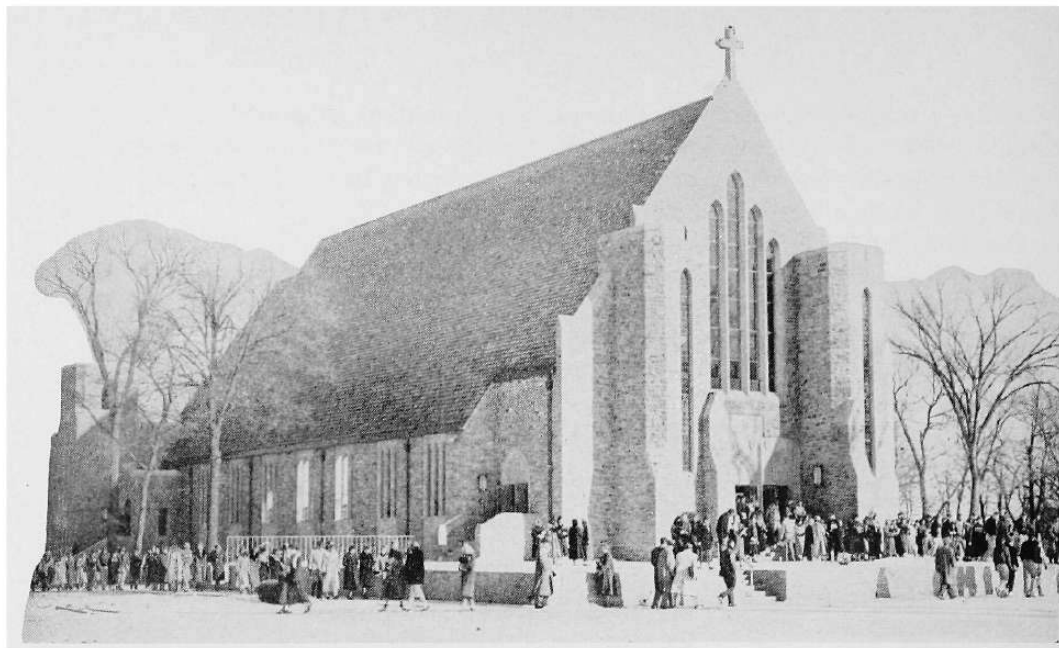
nesota settlers migrated, but also into Europe and Great Britain, where the various religious denominations had their beginnings.

It would be highly intriguing, if time permitted, to search out the influences of Martin Luther, John Wesley, John Calvin, St. Benedict of Nursia, and others on the spirit, outlook, and idealism of the colleges and universities of Minnesota. Let us examine an institution or two in each of the categories listed by extracting from their literature passages that seem to hark back to leaders of earlier centuries to illustrate how fascinating a thorough study of background influences might be.

The restless energy and spiritual insight of Martin Luther comes to mind as one reads such passages as the following: "Moral and spiritual impulses, principles, and ideals — these are the values that make an institution truly great. Behind St. Olaf is the story of men and women who were not satisfied to settle down upon the prairies and grow soft with indulgent living. They were men and women who refused to yield their people to ignorance and careless ease. And America has become infinitely richer because of their indefatigable zeal."

Listen to another statement: "The educational purposes of Augsburg College and Theological Seminary spring from the conviction that Christianity is the fundamental force for good in human life. All the aims of the College as well as those of the Seminary are bound together by this principle." These statements are reminiscent of the confessions and the creeds out of the sixteenth-century Reformation. They reflect also the outlook, the spirit, and the convictions of the sturdy Norwegian pioneers who settled in Minnesota and the Northwest.

Macalester College, one of the strong Presbyterian colleges in the country, reminds us of the idealism of Calvin and Knox in its emphasis upon sound learning and Christian living and in the record of its graduates for full-time Christian service. One out of every ten graduates, since



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BOE Memorial Chapel, St. Olaf College, Northfield

it became a collegiate institution in 1885, has entered the Christian ministry.

Hamline, chartered as a university by the territorial legislature and supported by a gift of twenty-five thousand dollars from Bishop Leonidas L. Hamline, was established in 1854. The pioneering spirit and optimism of early Methodism are reflected in its being denominated a university and in the faith, courage, and purpose which characterized its founders, who have been described as follows: "There was in their attitude a pronounced element of consecration. Through the years those who have guided Hamline's destiny have been men of like spirit. Beyond the attention they gave to immediate demands was the vision of future achievement."

Several colleges in Minnesota trace their spiritual ancestry to St. Benedict of Nursia, who lived and taught in Italy in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Rule of St. Benedict has been a source of instruction and inspiration in three of Minnesota's colleges. Thus one might say the origins of higher education in Minnesota reach back to the dissolution of the Roman Empire, when the Teutons from the North overran it and took possession.

These few samples of the antiquity and variety of the religious influences that have helped to shape the spirit and outlook of American institutions of higher learning impress upon one the extraordinary complexity of the forces which have played upon our educational system. But another influence more powerful perhaps than any other in the early history of American education remains yet to be mentioned. It is that of the *studium generale* in English universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge, the forerunner of the American liberal arts college. While many continental universities began as faculties of medicine, or law, or theology, or a combination of these three and others, British universities stressed more particularly the general studies. It was after this model that Harvard, William and Mary, and Yale were fashioned. The liberal arts tradition is not usually thought of as being motivated by religious ideals, and yet in the British prototypes a strong flavor of spiritual concern is characteristic. In earlier centuries, unbelievers were denied admission to the colleges of Oxford.

The program of Harvard and Yale left its mark on all colleges that feature liberal

arts instruction. It is particularly in evidence at Carleton College, which boasts not only a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, but also a chapter of Sigma Xi. This latter is a distinction rarely attained by liberal arts colleges. Macalester, Hamline, Concordia, St. Olaf, St. John's, and St. Thomas likewise show marked traces of the influence of the early American ideal of higher education which derived from the British. It should be remembered, however, that all the other institutions within the purview of this discussion, including the state-supported institutions, have felt the impact of the older ideal in the undergraduate curriculum and in instruction.

Incidentally, I believe the future of the liberal arts college is brighter than it has been since the turn of the century. The past fifty years have seen the expansion of technical education and specialized programs. The next half century will see a renaissance of interest in basic, liberal education. That trend seems to me clearly to be beginning. The vast educational ferment in the country points in that direction.

**THE TEACHERS COLLEGES.** Let us turn now from the church-related colleges to a consideration of the state-supported institutions, dealing first with the teachers colleges. Here we have a different background and pattern, a new motivation and purpose. In order to understand the rise of teacher training institutions — normal schools and colleges — it is necessary to bear in mind what was happening on the lower educational levels.

The year 1837, when Horace Mann forsook his law office and took future generations as his clients, is usually considered the beginning of our system of public education. Mann served as secretary of the first board of education in Massachusetts for twelve years, from 1837 to 1848. During the period he aroused an interest in public education which persists to this day. As a part of his program he advocated teachers' institutes and normal schools,

since he recognized that the effectiveness of the schools depended upon a supply of qualified teachers.

The spirit of Horace Mann is epitomized in his last statement to the students of Antioch College, where he was president at the time of his death in 1859. He said: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." By this spirit, his zeal, enthusiasm, and vision, Mann had stirred up the entire country on the question of the education of youth and had actually launched the movement that provided for free or low-cost education at public expense, from the kindergarten through the university.

Thus, under the influence of this movement and under the pressure of need to provide more teachers for the expanding public schools, the legislature of Minnesota, in July, 1858, passed the bill establishing the normal-school system for the state. The legislators were doubtless motivated also by the vision of a unique system of public education that would provide for the educational needs of youth from seven to twenty-one years — one of the boldest social experiments ever undertaken by any people.

The result of the passage of that act and subsequent legislation was the establishment over a period of years of the five state teachers colleges, located at Bemidji, Mankato, Moorhead, St. Cloud, and Winona, that serve the state today.

The history of these institutions is a story of struggle, disappointment, anxiety, and, in many of their efforts, temporary defeat. In this, the Minnesota colleges are not unlike those in other states. But the experience of Winona, Mankato, and St. Cloud in 1874, the only ones established up to that time, is perhaps not duplicated elsewhere. A bill was introduced providing for the closing of these schools and the sale of the property. This effort was thwarted by Senator H. C. Burbank, who in a speech of February, 1875, pointed out the unfeasibility of selling the property and "then pro-





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OLD Main, Macalester College, St. Paul

ceeded to demonstrate the value of normal schools to the state as a whole." While the speech defeated the bill, the legislature of 1875 refused to make an appropriation for maintaining these schools. Thus they had to exist for two years on a small standing appropriation, in one case at least, less than five thousand dollars. Despite this setback, the schools continued to operate. As late as November, 1888, the president of St. Cloud "in a private letter," wrote of the bitter fight waged on normal schools and high schools in the state legislature.

Despite such trials and tribulations, these institutions have gradually grown in popularity, in service, and in support from decade to decade. Even with an impressive enrollment today, they are far from able to meet the expanding demands occasioned by the high birth rate of the past twelve years. Despite present and future struggles to meet the mounting needs, I have

no doubt that Minnesota will rise to the occasion, for the issues at stake are overwhelmingly significant—no less than the education, welfare, and effectiveness of the oncoming generation upon which the future progress of the state must depend.

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA.** One of the extraordinary facts of American history is the consuming interest of the people in education. Less than twenty years after the landing of the "Mayflower," the colonists founded their first college. The same concern which was manifested by the first settlers has characterized their successors and descendants century after century. Indeed, America's faith in education seems to have waxed stronger with each succeeding generation, until it strikes me as truly the marvel of the twentieth century. The history of Minnesota is a splendid illustration.

Even before Minnesota was admitted as a state, the territorial legislature had established the University of Minnesota. Its roots were nourished by the characteristic American faith in the magic of education without which it would have surely perished, so great were the buffetings of misfortune in its early history. For a time it did actually go into eclipse, but it appeared again on a new site, the present one, only to find new afflictions—financial difficulties, resulting from a nation-wide depression, Indian uprisings, and finally, three years after the territory became a state, the distraction of civil war.

The fact that this weak and struggling infant survived its afflictions and misfortunes is abundantly attested by the magnificent university of today. Nurtured by Minnesotans' faith in education and guided by some of America's outstanding educational statesmen, the University of Minnesota has achieved a position of high distinction in the roster of American universities. Though junior in age to many of the state universities, it has few peers among institutions of its type in the country.

Building on its early foundations, the University of Minnesota added the institute of agriculture and mechanic arts, made possible by the Agricultural College Land Grant Act of 1862. Minnesota quickly capitalized on this revolutionary innovation in higher education, adopting not only the program for which it provided, but also embodying the genius of the new idea into the spirit and program of the university as a whole. Today it is exemplified particularly in the Center for Continuation Study, which stands as a great monument to the leadership of one of your distinguished presidents, Lotus D. Coffman.

Then, when the conception of the modern university came into vogue, after the founding of Johns Hopkins with its great emphasis upon research, graduate work, and professional education, Minnesota was alert to the possibilities and rapidly forged to the front as a leading exponent of the new program. Thus your state university, with roots in the ancient liberal arts tradition with which it began, has been nurtured also by the newer roots which are represented by the land-grant colleges and by the conception of the modern university. Three germinal movements in American higher education in the last half of the nineteenth century were the land grant college act, the adoption of the elective system, and the conception of the modern university. The University of Minnesota exploited the fruits of all three.

MANY STATES have backgrounds in higher education somewhat similar to those of Minnesota just sketched, though few if any have such varied and rich resources. But Minnesota has one great asset that seems to me almost without parallel—a historical society more than a century old which has through the years sought to serve higher education in manifold ways. Its influence has been strategic not only through providing rich resources for historical research, but indirectly through its encouragement of historical interests and perspective in all the institutions of higher learning. It would be difficult to estimate the importance of this agency in the educational history of Minnesota.

In thinking of the value of historical perspective, I am reminded of a paragraph from Robert E. Lee's message to the people of the South after Appomattox. He said: "The march of providence is so slow and our desires so impatient, the work of progress so vast and our means of aiding it so feeble, the life of society is so long and that of the individual so brief, that we are likely to see the ebb of the advancing tide and thus become discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope."

I congratulate Minnesota on the rich background of its colleges and universities and particularly on the wonderful institution which is celebrating its one-hundred-and-fifth birthday today—the Minnesota Historical Society.

UNIVERSITY of  
Minnesota  
entrance gate,  
1904





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