

Respectful Student Rebels

by Godfrey T. Anderson*

Student unrest and campus turmoil did not originate with youthful activists of the past decade. Rioting, violence, and destruction had a way of recurring on American college and university campuses almost from their very beginnings. Harvard had barely opened its doors when students protested against the quality of food being served. Reverend Nathaniel Eaton, master at that time, put his wife in charge of feeding the students who complained in 1639 that she served "thin beer and hard crusts, hasting pudding containing goats' dung and mackerel with their guts in them." When this college was only thirty years old it went through a "butter rebellion" recorded by students in biblical fashion —

Behold! Bad and unwholesome butter is served unto us daily; now therefore let us depute Asa the Scribe, to go unto our Rulers and seek redress. Then arose Asa, the Scribe, and went unto Belcher, the Ruler and said Behold, our butter stinketh, and we cannot eat thereof; now give us we pray, butter that stinketh not. And Belcher the Ruler, said, trouble me not, but begone unto thine own place, but Asa obeyed him not.¹

Early in the nineteenth century "rotten cabbage riots" at Harvard were staged by students who had found too many maggots in their fare. Before many more years passed students were battling there for a greater voice in university affairs — the faculty expelled over half of one senior class shortly before its commencement. Near the middle of the century Harvard's president resigned, weary of "fighting wild beasts." In classes professors were pelted with chestnuts by students. The torch was applied to campus buildings. At one period every outhouse, shed, workshop, and wooden fence near the Yard was marked for destruction.

Harvard was not alone in this student torment of the time. Yale's faculty in 1830 banished half the sophomore class after a student rebellion. One distinguished science professor never ventured forth for a time without two loaded pistols. A dozen years later a tutor — trying to restrain a window-breaking student — was fatally stabbed by the culprit. Similar episodes took place at Princeton, Virginia, Georgia, and on many other campuses. Princeton experienced six serious student rebellions between 1800 and 1830. Even in the conservative East the violent and lawless spirit later associated with the Far West seemed to sweep through institutions of higher learning periodically. Lack of a recreational program or extracurricular activities of any kind probably contributed in some degree to regular outbreaks of violence in those early days.²

The violent and lawless character of many of these episodes makes more remarkable a student protest which came to a climax at Brown University in 1835. Francis Wayland — a precocious young man who served for twenty-eight years as president of Brown — possessed many talents, one of which was described in a campus publication as the ability to "snuff a candle with tobacco juice at a distance of five paces."³ It may have been however the encouragement he gave to creative and original thinking which sparked student activism in Providence in 1835.

At that time emphasis was given by the university to encouraging students to work for "honors," and these were distributed at commencement as "parts" to the seniors. Two years before their time for graduation, the class of 1835 felt that honors were an unworthy spur to achievement and a tawdry goal toward which to strive. As early as their sophomore year, this class set about to put an end to the practice

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1 Ernest Earnest, *Academic Procession, An Informal History of the American College, 1636-1953* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953) 20, 36.

2 Morris Bishop, "Lower Depths of Higher Education," *American Heritage* 21:1 (December 1969) 27.

3 Bishop, 58.

of singling out certain students for this special recognition at commencement time.

As their graduation drew near, this class — with the exception of only three members — sought to open the question for discussion with president and faculty, but were rebuffed. After expressing “filial respect for the honorable faculty,” their petition expressed the opinion that the current system of honors on that campus constituted an appeal to “the unworthy passions of the heart.” Politely but firmly they made it clear they would not be influenced in their studies by any consideration of college honors. They felt that stressing this motive of competition was deleterious to their moral character, and “to cultivate a spirit of competition, distinction, and rivalry, the effect must be pernicious.” They closed by spelling out their convictions in six resolutions, carrying the names of twenty-eight in the class, one of which was subsequently crossed out.

First — that in the prosecution of our studies we will not be influenced by a consideration of college honors.

Secondly — That we will use our respectful endeavors to persuade the honorable Authorities of B. U. to omit in our case the giving out of parts founded on a consideration of scholarship — but that, should we fail to persuade the honorable authorities, we will, respectfully refuse to accept those parts.

Thirdly — That we feel bound by the duty we owe to Him who gave us mind and by the duty we owe to ourselves, to our teachers, and the age in which we live, to make all possible efforts for high attainments in the studies pursued in this University. And that to this end we will stimulate, and encourage each other onward in the common pursuit.

Fourthly — That as the object of Education is to make men useful to themselves and others, so in our judgment, this is the proper motive to urge upon students as an incentive to effort.

Fifthly — we acknowledge with unmingled gratitude to Him who has thus far preserved us in peace and in health, the peaceful progress we have been able to make in our studies; and pledge to each other that henceforth, we will seek to cultivate friendship,

One of two respectful rebels receiving their degrees three years late, Joshua Bicknell Chapin remained in Providence to follow a varied professional and business career, including appointment as commissioner of the state's public schools and editor, Rhode Island Schoolmaster.



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to establish character, and promote peace.

Sixth — Resolved that the sentiments contained in the foregoing resolutions shall be binding on none of the Class but those who subscribe their names to them, and that they now be requested to subscribe to them.

Despite this courteous and carefully worded petition, the adamant president denied the request of the class to petition the faculty on this subject. So things went along quietly until September, date for commencement at that time. The Board of Fellows met to confirm the list of seniors to receive degrees and — to the embarrassment of the president — there were only three to present. Notwithstanding his discomfiture, Wayland gave a clear, unprejudiced statement of the resolution the class had drawn up earlier and of their request to petition the faculty, which had

been denied "for the reason that the Faculty believed the subject beyond their jurisdiction." Accepting the situation, the board made the graceful gesture of awarding to the President his perquisite of four dollars for each senior who would have graduated but chose to withdraw from this honor. Thus he received eighty-four dollars for twenty-one seniors who transferred to a "partial course," forfeiting their rights to be considered candidates for degrees.⁴

The records do not tell us what efforts by parents and friends were put forth to get these twenty-one conscientious seniors to change their minds. A crowd of the usual size came out for commencement, and the press wrote up the proceedings, mentioning only casually that twenty-one of the class had "forfeited their degrees." Two days later a correspondent of the *Providence Journal* — presumably one of the non-graduating seniors — sent in an unsigned letter lamenting that no explanation had been given at commencement by the faculty regarding the twenty-one. "This lack led to some very wild inferences," and to clear up matters he asked the paper to publish what was essentially a repetition of the resolutions which the class had adopted earlier. He stressed two motives of these absentee seniors. The first was "the hope that such sacrifice of personal interest might in some way contribute to the alteration or modification of the offensive system, namely the distribution of parts and competition in study." The second motive was a desire to avoid disobedience to rightfully constituted authority. Rebellion was something they would "eschew and abhor." The letter ended with an assertion of faith in the university and love for its professors, "with whom connexion is now rather unpleasantly dissolved."

Over the next few years thirteen of the twenty-one received their degrees, but the finale to this unique episode was written forty years later in 1875. At that time the Board of Fellows voted to include in future editions of the university catalogue of graduates the names of those who had not previously accepted graduation. So closed, just a century ago, an unusual chapter in the history of graduating classes at Brown.

On the basis of performance in later years these respectful student rebels became accomplished and

Charles Coffin Jewett accepted his degree in 1838. He became librarian of Brown, later assistant secretary and librarian of the Smithsonian Institution.



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worthy citizens. One served in Chile as president of the Chamber of Deputies, minister of interior and foreign affairs, and senator in that distant country. He and a classmate — Episcopal bishop of Colorado — received honorary degrees from Brown soon after the mid-century. Another became librarian of Brown and later assistant secretary and librarian of the Smithsonian Institution. One — a surgeon in the United States Army during the Civil War — retired with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. Another — an associate justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court — became a trustee of Brown. One was teacher, minister, hymnwriter and author; another a pioneer missionary to China; and yet another a president of what is now Bucknell University. So most, if not all, rendered important and distinguished service in later years.⁵

In the light of so many violent uprisings through the years, this gentle student revolution at Brown in 1835 must be considered anomalous — these rebels acted peacefully for conscience' sake. Whether we endorse their action or not, we can admire their courage and tenacity in standing for what they firmly believed to be right. May their tribe increase.

4 Papers relating to the refusal of all but three of the class of 1835 to receive degrees because of the method of distribution of parts at Commencement, Providence,

1833-1836 — letters to the president by the class, resolutions of the class, president's report, copy of corporation records. MS., Brown University archives.

5 *Providence Sunday Journal* June 16, 1935, sec. 6.

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