

“A Tradition of Distinction: Alfred University, 1836 – Present”

This address, dealing with the history of Alfred University, was delivered at a 1990 New York State meeting of the Newcomen Society of the United States, held in Rochester, when Edward G. Coll, Jr. was the guest of honor and speaker on October 25, 1990. [Statistics have been updated for the year 2000.]

Alfred University exists today, and will continue to exist in the future, because of the people who have loved and nurtured it through the decades of its growth.

It started with the pioneering spirit of the band of settlers who founded Alfred.

Think back to 1836, when the Select School, our forerunner, came into being.

Western New York was a wilderness, with pockets of settlement scattered across the countryside. Andrew Jackson was our country's president. There were only twenty-five states in the Union. The California Gold Rush was still a half a generation away, and the Civil War a quarter of the century in the future. Many early settlers had been born when America was still a British colony, and many remembered the turmoil of the War of 1812.

On the banks of the Kanakadea Creek—the sacred Seneca land “where the earth meets the sky”--- our predecessors' unwavering belief in higher education resulted in the creation of the Select School, soon to become Alfred Academy, and ultimately, Alfred University.

Ironically, historians tell us that it was a mistake on the part of the postal service that gave birth to Alfred University.

Amos West Coon, a leader of the area's Seventh Day Baptists, wanted to create a select school to educate teachers. He contacted Bethuel C. Church about starting such a school, and Church agreed, providing Coon could recruit twenty students willing to pay three dollars each.

Coon didn't meet his admission quota but the post office lost the letter to Church notifying him of the shortfall and, unaware, Church arrived in Alfred ready to teach.

It was an act of faith to start an institution of “higher education” in the days when an eighth-grade education was considered lofty; it was an act of daring to decide to admit women students on an equal basis with men. However, even before the Civil War began, more than 40 percent of Alfred's students were women. That early commitment to equality gives Alfred the cherished distinction of being the oldest coeducational institution in the state, and one of the oldest in the nation.

But equal opportunity didn't stop there. In the 1850s, a decade before the Emancipation Proclamation, Alfred University enrolled its first black student---from Haiti, where the Seventh Day Baptists had a mission. There were also two Native American Indians enrolled from the Allegany Indian Reservation in Cattaraugus County.

Such vision, such inspired leadership, allowed Alfred to flourish in its early days, led by such giants as William C. Kenyon, who headed the Alfred Select School and became the university's first president.

Born a farm boy and indentured at the age of five, Kenyon learned the machinist's trade in Rhode Island and New York City and earned enough to buy his freedom. Seeking funds to continue his education, Kenyon applied for a teaching job at Alfred. History says he walked to Alfred from Bath, nearly forty miles in mud and snow, because the stagecoach could not get through. What a fortunate journey that was for Alfred!

His can-do attitude led to a jump in enrollment from twenty-five to 455 in a decade and the construction of Alumni Hall—the oldest structure still standing on our campus today. The Brick, our venerable residence hall, was also built during Kenyon's term as president.

One student said of Kenyon, “He burned his candle at both ends, but he loved it, and what a light he made while he was doing it.”

Not only did he teach five days a week, but Kenyon was an ordained Seventh Day Baptist minister who preached at the church in Hartsville. Such ceaseless activity wore him out and he died in 1867 at the age of fifty-four.

Fortunately for Alfred, Kenyon's protégé, Jonathan Allen, was ready to step into the breach. Allen, once a student, returned to Alfred to teach in 1849. When a university charter for Alfred Academy was before the New York State Legislature in 1857, it was Allen who went to Albany to push for its approval.

When a typhoid epidemic hit campus in 1859, it was Allen who studied medical books so that he could nurse the students back to health.

When the Civil War broke out and every single man in the senior class joined the Union Army, it was Allen who joined them at the front as an observer.

Coeducation was taken for granted under Allen's presidency. While some institutions, prior to the Civil War, advocated "separate, but equal" programs because of women's "special educational needs," that was not the case at Alfred.

His wife, Abigail Allen, an Alfred University legend in her own right, delivered an address at the Women's Congress in New York City in 1873, in which she defined coeducation as "a common faculty, a common curriculum, a common examination." Alfred University, she affirmed, was a good example of a truly coeducational institution.

The Ladies Literary Society agreed. In 1858, a representative praised Alfred University as "the only collegiate institution in the United States that put women on an equal basis with men."

Allen also welcomed several freed slaves and several members of the Seneca Indian Nation to Alfred.

President Allen died in 1892, after a half century of service to our university. He was succeeded by Arthur E. Main, but Main's short tenure as president was marked by controversy and the university nearly foundered. The trustees, in desperation, turned to the young pastor of the Alfred Seventh Day Baptist Church: Boothe Colwell Davis.

Davis' earthy vision carried Alfred forward into the twentieth century.

The community was and is richly endowed with a unique red clay, and one of the prominent industries at the time was the making of the terra cotta tiles featured on so many of our buildings.

At the urging of the heads of the Celadon Terra Cotta and Alfred Clay companies, manufacturers of the terra cotta tiles, and with the assistance of John Merrill, Davis persuaded the New York State legislature to create the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 1900. The enabling legislature was signed by Teddy Roosevelt, then the governor of New York.

It was a brave and inspired move.

At the time, American ceramic art was an oxymoron; painting on china was the epitome. Yet Davis and the College of Ceramics' first director, Charles Fergus Binns, dared to combine art with technology, to explore the chemistry and the properties of ceramic materials, not just what form they may take or what function they may serve. As one writer explained it, Binns "joined chemistry to art and created the studio potter."

In his letter to Binns, offering him the job, Davis wrote, "I feel that this school has a great future, and that as its director, you have a unique opportunity to place the school, and with it, yourself at the very head of the ceramic art in America."

Those were prophetic words.

The foresight of Davis and Binns nearly a century ago created what today is still the premier ceramics college in the world, not just the nation.

As important as his teaching was, Binns left another legacy: his writing. As a contemporary said of Binns, "I know that he has reached more people with his writings than any other ceramist that ever lived because he made ceramic work understandable to people who cannot attend college."

Not content to rest with the founding of the College of Ceramics, President Davis also persuaded the legislature in 1908 to locate the New York State School of Agriculture on the Alfred University campus; the legislature allocated \$75,000 for three buildings, a farm, livestock and machinery.

In 1941, that school was awarded junior college status and renamed the New York State Agricultural and Technical College at Alfred. As America moved into the post-World War II years, enrollment in that college grew to the point where its students could no longer be accommodated on the Alfred University campus. The state decided in 1948 to create a separate institution, a separate campus, across the street from us, where it remains, fondly known as “Ag-Tech.”

But Davis was not done with his innovations. In 1914, he started the summer school to give advanced training to teachers during their summer recess. Alfred continues that role of educating teachers even today.

When war broke out in Europe, it at first seemed “a tragic but remote event” to Alfredians. But as America moved closer and closer to entering the fighting, patriotism bloomed on the campus.

Gone were gym classes, replaced by military drills. When classes started in the fall of 1917, enrollment was down 17 percent, and the freshman class of forty had but fifteen men. By 1918, the Student Army Training Corps was established on campus to train officers, engineers, doctors and other specialists for the armed services. Enlistees were given uniforms and equipment, but no pay.

The boys had barely settled on campus, using The Brick as their barracks, when an epidemic of Spanish influenza struck about fifty of them. President Davis recruited nurses to come to campus to care for the sick. Two corps members, two women students and two faculty members succumbed to the flu.

The first Alfred casualty of World War I was Robert Garwood, class of 1914 and co-founder of the *Fiat Lux* newspaper. The second to fall was Burr D. Straight. Just months before his death, Straight wrote to President Davis, expressing grief that the struggles of his parents to bring him to “trained manhood might come to naught.” In all, Alfred lost eight collegians in that war.

The decade of the twenties, after the “Great War” and before the “Great Depression,” appeared an idyllic time on the Alfred campus. Many long-standing traditions---the fights over the Black Knight, “Orientation Days” to initiate new students, dunkings in “Prexy’s Pool,” and the infamous “Moving Up Days,” which led one stranger to proclaim, “Deliver me from a college town”---all started during that era.

Another tradition, the St. Pat’s Festival, began in 1933, allegedly when an engineer student received a cryptic telegram, “Expect to be in Alfred in the near future,” and signed “S.P.”

“S.P.,” of course, was none other than St. Patrick, the patron saint of engineers, and thus started the tradition which persisted for more than fifty years. The annual event, enjoyed by both the university and the town, featured a Main Street parade and the crowning of the queen of the Festival.

Davis’ presidency came to an end in 1933, after nearly forty years. The trustees, searching for someone to continue what they saw as the “golden age” of Alfred under Davis, settled on Paul Emerson Titsworth, a 1904 graduate of Alfred University. He had been president at Washington College in Maryland, where he was considered a “vibrant little bundle of energy.” Titsworth settled into Alfred in the summer of 1933, but the institution was thrown into turmoil with his death less than six months later.

John Nelson Norwood, then the dean of Alfred University, stepped in at the request of the trustees to become acting president. Six months later, in June 1934, he was made Alfred’s seventh president.

Norwood, as the author of *Fiat Lux: The Story of Alfred University*, describes his tenure as “some dozen years of depression, distresses and wartime worries.”

“Depression ruled the rest of the decade of the 1930s and a bit more,” Norwood wrote. While the academic programs made “commendable progress,” he said, “it is the president and the business office who sweat over the monetary matters.”

Those precarious finances were not the only threat to the university. As Norwood said---in terms that most private university officials would recognize today---“Administrative eyes had been noting some ominous signs of the times. Competition was edging Alfred’s way in the form of public junior colleges, degree-granting state normal schools, and technical institutes. The declining birthrate, the rush for quick vocational courses and the dimming ideal of a liberal education were lost on Alfred’s leadership.”

In response to those pressures, the department of business and secretarial science was created in 1939. Eventually, it would evolve into the full-fledged College of Business and Administration.

Another response to the country’s economic depression was creation of Emergence College Centers to offer advanced training to workers. At one point, Alfred was involved in six such centers in Western New York, but only Jamestown and Dunkirk remained after federal funds were discontinued. While Dunkirk closed soon after, the Jamestown Center continued, officially identifying itself as the Alfred University Extension.

From that start evolved, with Alfred University’s assistance, the present Jamestown Community College.

The country—and Alfred University—were recovering from the Great Depression when the world was plunged into war. As the war accelerated, academic programs were disrupted, students were restless and the university faced resulting financial troubles. Those problems were eased when the United States Army decided to create a specialized training unit at Alfred, bringing in more than 700 people. The university marched ahead to a cadence beat until April 1944, when the unit was disbanded.

The war years over, President Norwood and his staff had to find ways to make the transition to a civilian campus. Through the efforts of Professor H. O. Burdick, the Cadet Nurse Corps training program became the department of nursing. Students spent a year on campus and two years in affiliated hospitals for their clinical training.

President Norwood noted that “just seventeen days after Japan asked terms of surrender,” he surrendered his presidency, or rather, the trustees permitted him to surrender it. They had earlier denied his request to retire.

In September 1945, Norwood officially turned over the university presidency—and the postwar problems—to J. Edward Walters.

Among the most pressing of the problems was finding housing for the veterans returning to school under the GI bill. Guided by Walters, thirty-five trailers and three barrack-like structures, housing 850 students, appeared on campus. The white-painted cluster was officially named “Saxon Heights,” but unofficially, “Diaper Hill.”

After Walters resigned in 1948, the presidency passed to Miles Ellis Drake, a 1925 graduate, who led the university in an era of what former President Norwood called “renewed expansion.” The board of trustees once described Drake as “architect of the twentieth century Alfred University.”

Drake himself listed as his accomplishments the building of an outstanding faculty and the growth in the university’s stature and prestige. To start with, he redefined the word “development” as more than mere fund raising, and stressed that it must be a matter of importance not only to trustees and administrators, but to the faculty, alumni, students and friends.

Drake was spectacularly successful in his development efforts; under his leadership, Binns-Merrill was constructed, as were Barresi, Cannon and Kruson residence halls. Herrick Memorial Library was built and Carnegie, originally a library, was remodeled into administrative offices. Myers Hall, the Rogers Campus Center, Ade Hall, Tefft and Reimer Halls, the Crandall Health

Center and the music building, adjacent to Howell Hall, also were built during the Drake era. The Science Center, started during his eighteen-year tenure, was completed in 1968.

But Drake was more than a bricks-and mortar president; during his presidency, enrollment more than doubled, reaching the more than 2,000 students Alfred has today. To match that growth, the size of the faculty nearly doubled, from seventy-five when he started to 141 when he retired in 1968.

And then came the sixties.

Thomas Rasmussen, a political science professor at our university, wrote that the 1960s and 1970s “produced great changes in institutions, as well as in values, on college campuses and in society at large. Winds of change bring fresh air, but they also produce great storms,” he said.

And that’s a fairly accurate assessment of what happened at Alfred University during Leland Miles’ administration from 1968 to 1974.

Miles tried to bring calm to a time of great turmoil while also convincing students that an Alfred University education was an investment, far better choice than attending lower-priced state institutions.

One solution, Miles thought, was to offer students a greater voice in what happened on campus and in the classroom. Among his lasting innovations is the Track II program, one which allows students to design their own majors. The liberation of student rules can also be traced to Miles’ administration.

Miles left Alfred University for the presidency at the University of Bridgeport in 1974, but his legacy includes a stronger commitment to excellence in teaching, and administrative support for the academic mission.

The mid-1970s, when M. Richard Rose became president, was as difficult a time as Alfred ever faced. The Arab oil embargo had sent energy prices up, and the national economy into a recession. The university’s applicant pool was shrinking, and inflation was damaging private institutions.

Rose struck out on a bold new path—one Alfred still proudly walks today.

Rather than downgrading admissions standards and academic programs, Rose insisted Alfred could—and would—compete with the nation’s best. He said, “Alfred University has a proud heritage, one not built on size. I don’t believe the future of our institution rests in numbers of students, but rather on quality.”

Which brings us to today.

If former President Norwood were to write, today, the sequel to *Fiat Lux*, what would he say about the last twenty years at Alfred University?

Being an academic person, President Norwood would surely talk about the progress made in the academic programs at our university. President Norwood would certainly comment on the remarkable growth of SAT scores at the university, which rose from an average of 990 in 1980 to a number well in excess of 1100 in 2000.

He would certainly comment on the 1990 freshman class, which included twenty-two National Merit Finalists, ranking Alfred University third in the state behind such distinguished scholarly giants as Cornell and Columbia. We continue to have a strong number on campus today.

He would be pleased to note Alfred’s ranking in the various evaluation journals and our jump from “competitive” in 1980 to “very competitive” in 1984, and, hopefully, to “very competitive plus” in the next rating issue of Barron’s. Norwood would probably wonder if any other institution in the nation had jumped two rankings in the period of a decade and we would satisfy his curiosity by telling him simply, “None that we know of.”

President Norwood would be genuinely impressed by the number of valedictorians and salutatorians who annually make up our freshman class. He would offer congratulations to the growing numbers in our honors program and the distinction each year’s graduates bring to their alma mater by their admission to our nation’s leading graduate and professional schools.

Norwood would also be moved to wonderment at the research activity in the decade of the eighties at Alfred University. Research was virtually non-existent on our campus in 1980, and today has grown to nearly \$8 million a year, a figure we expect to see grow in the next several years. He would be mightily impressed by the number of research institutes which now call Alfred their home, and the corporate support of these specialized institutes.

He would share our pride in being selected as one of ten centers throughout the state to be designated as a Center for Advanced Technology and funded with \$1 million each year from the state for research programs. He would surely be impressed to note that more than 80 percent of our faculty have their terminal degrees, and that our professors still teach in classrooms and develop friendships with students that lasts a lifetime.

President Norwood would also enjoy seeing the university reach out to assist its broader community with the creation of the Ceramic Corridor, a high-tech incubator project designed to take advantage of the emerging ceramics industry and to create new jobs for our graduates and our neighbors. And he would be delighted to note that Corning Incorporated and the State of New York were our venture partners in this unique industrial development program which ranks as the only one in the United States concentrating on one single aspect of technology—high-tech ceramics—and that it is the only major industrial development project centered in a rural area in this country.

And President Norwood would surely be flattered that for the 12th straight year, Alfred University is once again ranked among the top 15 Northern Colleges and Universities in terms of quality education and research, according to *US News and World Report*.

While we have accomplished much during the eighties, I remain firmly convinced that Alfred's greatest days are still ahead. Just as an architect is not responsible for actually building a structure, a university president has no claim to all of the glory of his institution. Many names are included in any glory roll. Alfred is no exception. Names like John McMahon, S. Gene Odle, John Foxen, Katherine Nelson, Mel Bernstein and Fred Gertz surely must be engraved on our honor roll. People such as Rick Ott, Chris Grontkowski, Kathleen Collins, Jim McCauley, Peter Fackler, Don King, Bill Stepp and June Field are making their own niches in what will one day be the history of Alfred University.

Trustees also comprise our honor roll. They are the people who have done so much for their legitimate or adopted alma mater. This is the governing board that has constantly supported our quest for quality and our often-times adventurous strategies so that we can continue to fulfill the dream of a rendezvous with greatness which our founders and predecessors had for this distinguished institution.

In pursuing this dream, we will never seek to be all things to all people, but we will never cease to be all things to our people. That is our legacy, that is our challenge and that will be our future. As our momentum takes us forward, there will be an occasional pothole that will jar us, a barrier that will hinder us and an occasional misreading of a social or economic road sign that may temporarily detour us. But the motion of Alfred University will always be forward. We will leave to future historians the interpretation of what is behind us. Marching in place always struck me as a silly practice during my army stint, but marching in place today strikes me both as foolhardy and hazardous. Our goal is progress, not complacency. Our standards are high quality, and never mediocrity. Our ambitions are noble, and deserving of the truly distinguished university we represent and love.

With your continuing help, we will fulfill this prophecy of a rendezvous with greatness.

The End