



Denison Clontarf

1812-1880
Denison Clontarf was a prominent American politician and lawyer. He served as the 11th Governor of New York from 1854 to 1857. He was also a member of the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate.

DENISON OLMSTED.

DENISON OLMSTED, one of the earliest advocates of special institutions for the professional training of teachers in the United States, and for nearly fifty years a successful teacher, and promoter of education and science, was born in East Hartford, Connecticut, on the 18th of June, 1791. Having lost his father in very early life, his education devolved, from the first, on his surviving parent, who will long be remembered by those who knew her, for her native strength of mind, her soundness of judgment, and her uncommon piety and benevolence. He was early trained to those habits of order, diligence, and perseverance, for which he has been so much distinguished throughout life. About the age of thirteen, he was placed in a country store with a view to the mercantile profession; but he soon showed so strong a taste for science and literature, as to convince his associates that he was destined to higher employments. Even at this early period he became an earnest student of English literature, and made very considerable advances in the elementary mathematics. Nothing could satisfy such a mind but the highest advantages for education; and, with the reluctant consent of his guardian, he resolved, at the age of sixteen, to prepare himself for admission to Yale College. He accordingly commenced his studies in the year 1807; and, with a view to husbanding his limited means, he undertook the care of a public district school. He thus gained those practical views of teaching, and that acquaintance with the youthful mind in its early development, which have made him eminently qualified to prepare text-books in the simplest rudiments, as well as in the higher departments of science, and to take an active part in promoting the interests of general education in our country.

Mr. Olmsted entered Yale College in 1809, under the presidency of Dr. Dwight, then in the maturity of his powers and the height of his distinguished reputation. He at once took rank among the best scholars of his class—a class distinguished for the eminent men it produced—and graduated with the highest honors of the institution in the autumn of 1813, when he delivered an oration on the “Causes of Intellectual Greatness.” He immediately resumed his favorite employment of teaching; and for two years had the charge

of a select school in New London, Connecticut, where he was eminently successful both in discipline and instruction.

In 1815, he was chosen to the tutorship in Yale College—a laborious and responsible office, which he filled, with great acceptance to his pupils and the faculty, for two years, when he accepted the appointment of Professor of Chemistry in the University of North Carolina, remaining at Yale the following year, as a private pupil of Professor Silliman. There, associated with President Caldwell, Professor Elisha Mitchell, Prof. Ethan A. Andrews, and Professor William Hooper, he had the satisfaction of seeing the university take an elevated rank among the higher seminaries of the country. During his connection with the University of North Carolina, he commenced, under the auspices of the legislature, a geological survey of that state, which was the first attempt of the kind in this country.

In 1825, Professor Olmsted was called to the chair of mathematics and natural philosophy in Yale College, which had been filled with eminent success by his classmate, Professor Fisher, who perished in the Albion, on his outward voyage to Europe for scientific improvement, in 1822; and afterward by Professor Dutton. The duties of the two professorships were discharged by him until 1835, when he resigned the chair of mathematics to Professor Anthony D. Stanley, whose genius and attainments in these studies he had helped to foster and mature.

Professor Olmsted is the author of several text-books, originally prepared to meet the wants of his own college classes, but which have taken their place among the standard works of the country. His "*Natural Philosophy*" appeared in 1831, and was followed within a year by the "*School Philosophy*," adapted to academies and high schools; both have had, and still have, a wide circulation—the latter having passed through nearly one hundred editions. In 1839, he published "*Astronomy*" for college classes, which was followed by a compendium under the title of "*School Astronomy*." In 1842, appeared his "*Rudiments of Natural Philosophy and Astronomy*," adapted to pupils in elementary schools, both public and private. This little work has passed through fifty editions, and has been printed in raised letters for the use of institutions for the blind, having been selected by Dr. Howe for its clear, accurate, comprehensive presentation of the fundamental principles of the sciences of which it treats. His "*Letters on Astronomy*" was prepared as a reading-book for the School Library, commenced under the auspices of the Massachusetts Board of Education. It has been used extensively and as a text-book, especially in female seminaries. Professor Olmsted brings

to his preparation of text-books a full and familiar acquaintance with the subjects treated, and a practical knowledge of successful methods of teaching the same.

Professor Olmsted deserves honorable mention in the history of popular education in the United States, for his early and continued advocacy and labors in behalf of improvement in elementary schools. In an oration delivered at the commencement exercises of Yale College, in 1816, on taking his degree of Master of Arts, he took for his subject, "*The State of Education in Connecticut.*" In this address he pointed out "the ignorance and incompetency of schoolmasters" as the primary cause of the low condition of the common schools, and appealed to public and private liberality to establish and support institutions of a higher grade, where a better class of teachers might be trained for the lower schools. To meet a great evil by a special remedy, and at the same time advance the condition of popular education generally, he had already projected the plan of "*An Academy for Schoolmasters.*" We have before us a communication of his, in which he specifies the steps by which he was led to his conception of such a seminary.

"My course as a teacher began with a small district school, when I was seventeen years of age, and while fitting for college. I had there a full opportunity to become acquainted with the state of education as it then existed in our village schools. On leaving college, in 1813, I resumed the profession of teacher (which I have followed ever since,) by taking charge of Union School, at New London. This was a select school, supported by a few of the first families of the place, who desired to obtain for their sons a superior training for business or for college, according to their destination in life. It had been continued for several generations, and had enjoyed the instruction of a series of eminent teachers, among whom were the celebrated Nathan Hale, Hon. Jacob B. Gurley, Ebenezer Learned, Esq., Doctor Jonathan Knight, of the medical department in Yale College, and Prof. Ebenezer Kellogg, of Williams College. The proprietors, desiring to have their sons educated exclusively in that school, after leaving the rudimentary female schools, introduced them at the early age of eight or nine years, and kept them there until they went to business or to college. The number was limited to thirty, but the variety of age, and the different professions in life for which they were destined, occasioned an unusual range of studies. Some were in the spelling book; some in English grammar and geography; some in the languages, from Latin grammar to Virgil's *Georgics* and *Xenophon's Anabasis*; and some in different branches of mathematics, from simple arithmetic to algebra, surveying, and navigation. It required the most exact order and method to complete the round of recitations in half a day, and secure, for the whole school, half an hour for penmanship at the close of the forenoon, and half an hour for reading at the close of the afternoon.

I had here full opportunity of comparing the effect of different courses of study upon lads of similar age, and soon discovered a marked difference, in intelligence and capacity, between those who were studying the languages and mathematics preparatory to entering college, and devoted only a small portion of every day to the common rudiments, as English grammar, geography, reading, writing, and spelling, and those who spent all their time in those elementary studies. I was surprised to find that the former excelled the latter even in a knowledge of these very studies; they read better, spelt better, wrote better, and were better versed in grammar and geography. One inference I drew from this observation was, that an extended course of studies, proceeding far beyond the simple rudiments of

an English education, is not inconsistent with acquiring a good knowledge of those rudiments, but is highly favorable to it; since, on account of the superior capacity developed by the higher branches of study, the rudiments may be better learned in less time; and a second inference was, that nothing was wanted in order to raise all our common schools to a far higher level, so as to embrace the elements of English literature, of the natural sciences, and of the mathematics, but competent teachers and the necessary books.

I was hence led to the idea of a 'Seminary for Schoolmasters,' to be established at the expense of the state; where the instruction, at least, should be gratuitous. It was to be under the direction of a principal and an assistant; the principal to be a man of liberal education, of a high order of talent, and an experienced and successful teacher. The assistant was to be well versed in the English branches of education, at least. The course of study was to occupy from one to two years, and candidates were to be admitted only after an approved examination. The pupils were to study and recite whatever they were themselves afterward to teach, partly for the purpose of acquiring a more perfect knowledge of those subjects, and partly of learning from the methods adopted by the principal the best modes of teaching. It was supposed that only a small portion of time would be required to be spent upon the simple rudiments, but that the greater part might be devoted to English grammar and geography, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and such works as Blair's Rhetoric; studies adapted to improve the taste, and make correct and accomplished writers. Ample instructions also were to be given by the principal on the organization and government of a school.

A class of sixty pupils, sent out from the seminary every year, would in ten years furnish to the village schools a body of able teachers, who would raise the standard of education in the common schools to a level with that of the 'academies,' which were scattered here and there over the state, being designed to afford to the few who could bear the expense, opportunities for learning those higher branches of an English education, which were not attempted at the common schools. Few of the whole number of children, however, enjoyed these superior advantages; but the greater part finished their education at the village schools, with nothing more than reading, spelling, writing, and a little arithmetic. Not even grammar and geography were at that time taught in the common schools.

There was one very encouraging feature in my plan. No sooner would this superior order of schoolmasters commence their labors, than the schools themselves would begin to furnish teachers of a higher order. The schoolmasters previously employed, were for the most part such as had received all their education at the common schools, and could only perpetuate the meager system of beggarly elements which they had learned; but it was obvious that schools, trained in a more extended course of studies, would produce teachers of a corresponding character. Therefore, if we could once start the machine, it would go on by its own momentum.

At the commencement at Yale College, in 1816, when I took my master's degree, I brought the outlines of this plan before the audience, in an oration on the 'State of Education in Connecticut.' I was then a tutor in the college, and zealously engaged in instructing a class; but I did not lose sight of this favorite idea of an 'Academy for Schoolmasters.' I also laid out a scheme for an extended course of newspaper essays, which would fully bring the subject before the public, and took every opportunity to present the plan to individuals of eminence, who were likely to feel interested in the improvement of our common schools, or who had influence in the public councils. Should the proposed essays have the desired effect of arousing public attention to the importance of the plan, I next intended to endeavor to have it brought before the legislature, with the view of securing means for carrying it into immediate execution.

At that moment I unexpectedly received the appointment of Professor of Chemistry in the University of North Carolina. The question was submitted to my friends, whether I should accept the invitation, or remain here and endeavor to carry out my plan for the establishment of a 'Seminary for Schoolmasters.' The slender prospect of interesting the community in the scheme, and the extreme backwardness of our legislature to appropriate funds for the promotion of education, in any other manner than that to which the school fund was exclusively devoted, led me to yield, though very reluctantly, to the advice of my friends, and

accept the appointment from abroad. I had less occasion to regret this decision, since the idea of normal schools was shortly afterward conceived by the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, James G. Carter, Esq., Governor Dewitt Clinton, and others, and brought before the public by them under circumstances so much more favorable than I could have commanded, had I remained to prosecute my favorite enterprise."

As a member of the Board of Commissioners of Common Schools for Connecticut in 1840, Prof. Olmsted, in drafting the annual Report of the Board to the Legislature, thus returns to the subject which first arrested his attention twenty-five years before.

Wherever normal schools have been established and ably sustained, the experiment has uniformly resulted in supplying teachers of a superior order. As in every other art whose principles are reduced to rule, and matured into a system, the learner is not limited to the slow and scanty results of his single, unaided experience, but is at once enriched with the accumulated treasures of all who have labored in the same mine before him. Without such an opportunity, he may be compared to the medical practitioner, who commences his labors without the knowledge of any settled principles of his art, but expects to acquire his knowledge of his profession in the course of his practice. If it is plain that the physician needs, at the commencement of his career, that knowledge of the healing art which contains the embodied experience of those who have gone before him, and carried his profession to the highest degree of excellence, no less does the instructor of a school need the wisdom of his predecessors to guide him, at his first setting out; nor can he any better afford to wait for the slow returns of his own experience. Indeed, there is, in the case of the young teacher, a peculiar need of this wisdom in advance, since the employment is not usually a business for life, but only of a few years at furthest,—a period in itself too short to gain much of the wisdom of experience, and terminated almost as soon as such wisdom begins to be acquired.

The employment of FEMALE TEACHERS to a much greater extent than has hitherto been done, deserves much consideration from the friends of this cause. Heaven has plainly appointed females as the natural instructors of young children, and endowed them with those qualities of mind and disposition which pre-eminently fit them for such a task. Endued with a greater measure of the gentleness so winning and grateful to the feelings of a child, and of the patient forbearance so essential to those who are inculcating the first rudiments of knowledge, their action on the mind and disposition of the child is peculiarly auspicious. Nor, indeed, is the sphere of woman confined to training the minds of pupils in the mere elementary branches; when her own mind is disciplined, and exalted by cultivation, and enriched with knowledge, she exhibits powers of communicating instruction, and indeed all the attributes requisite for teaching and governing a school, no wise inferior to those of the other sex. Experiments, as far as they have gone, encourage the belief that well-educated females may bear a far more extensive and important part in the instruction and government of our common schools than they have hitherto done; that here is to be found the means, so desirable, of a division of labor in schools, when the numbers are too great for one preceptor. A signal relief to the preceptor himself, and no less advantage to the pupils, will result from a separation of the school into two departments, the younger pupils being committed to a female assistant, while older pupils enjoy almost the sole attention of the principal. But if females are to bear so important and extensive a part in the instruction of common schools, provision must also be made for their training in normal schools; and, in the disposition of any funds appropriated to the education of teachers, females, destined for this profession, ought to come in for their due proportion.

In the opinion of the Board, we can not make an adequate provision for the supply of the requisite number of teachers, who shall be at once capable of teaching, in the best manner, all that the pupils of our common schools are capable of learning, and of conducting the order and government of their institutions, according to the most approved methods, without the establishment of NORMAL SCHOOLS, devoted exclusively to the education of teachers, in the principles and practice of

their profession, and guided by men eminent for their talents and practical wisdom. But if it is thought that we are not prepared to erect and sustain Seminaries of this independent and elevated description, the Board would suggest the expediency of commencing the work of educating teachers on a limited scale, by connecting a department for this purpose, with some of the existing academies in different sections of the State. A small amount of funds, judiciously expended in the modes indicated by the Secretary in his Report, would, in the opinion of the Board, accomplish a great, immediate good in improving the qualifications of our common school teachers.

Professor Olmsted has been one of the few teachers in our higher seminaries of learning, who have assisted, from the start, by their presence and co-operation the efforts of the friends of common schools and popular education. His sympathies have been with those who have labored for the improvement of the schools of his native state prior to 1826, down to the present time. In 1838, he delivered a lecture before the American Institute of Instruction on the *School System of Connecticut*, in which, after an interval of nearly a quarter of a century, he points again to the absence of an institution for the education of teachers as the great defect in the school system of the state. In 1845, before the same association, he drew the *Ideal of a Perfect Teacher*. Thorough, accurate, and comprehensive knowledge,—high religious character, deep enthusiastic love of his work and faith in its results, a strong and clear intellect, a lively imagination, good taste and good manners constitute the indispensable elements of a teacher of the people. He has responded cheerfully to the call of the Superintendent of Common Schools to address Teachers' Institutes and Teachers' Associations, and has repeatedly lectured in the Hall of the House of Representatives, during the session of the Legislature, when any action was to be had in either branch concerning common schools. He has availed himself at all times of the lyceum and the popular lecture, as well as of the daily press, to apply the principles of science to the explanation of extraordinary phenomena of meteorology and astronomy, as well as to the advancement of domestic comfort and popular improvement generally. In an Essay read before the American Association for the Advancement of Education, at New York in 1855, he showed, in a felicitous manner, that the whole drift and tendency of science in its inventions and institutions is democratic.

His more elaborate scientific papers have appeared in the "*American Journal of Science*," the "*Transactions of the American Association for the Advancement of Science*," and the "*Smithsonian Contributions*." He has also been a frequent contributor to the "*Christian Spectator*," and the "*New Englander*."