History and Purpose

The principal author of the brief history of Lehigh University that follows, Dr. W. Ross Yates, held the bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees from the University of Oregon. He received the doctor of philosophy degree from Yale University and studied in France on a Fulbright Scholarship. He joined the Lehigh staff in 1955 and served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1963 to 1972. Dr. Yates passed away in 2017.

When the sound of the last cannon of the Civil War died away, statesmen, educators, and industrial pioneers marshalled the victorious forces of the North and turned their attention to education. They wanted to increase the number of trained scientists, engineers, and other skilled individuals so they could transform the vast natural resources of the country into a strong and independent national economy.

Asa Packer was one of those industrial pioneers. He built the Lehigh Valley Railroad and controlled a coal mining empire in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania. He knew that a strong national economy depended on more than technical skills. It needed, above all, people broadly educated in the liberal arts and sciences — people who could combine practical skills with informed judgments and strong moral self-discipline. He kept this in mind when founding and endowing Lehigh University.

The site that Packer chose for his university was a railroad junction across the Lehigh River from Bethlehem, a community founded in 1741 by Moravian missionaries. William Bacon Stevens, Episcopal bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania and the first president of the university's board of trustees, described the origin of the university as follows:

"In the fall of 1864 an interview was requested of me by the Hon. Asa Packer, of Mauch Chunk (now Jim Thorpe), Pa. He came to my house in Philadelphia, and said that he had long contemplated doing something for the benefit of his State, and especially of the Lehigh Valley. From that valley he said he had derived much of the wealth which God had given to him, and to the best interests of that valley he wished to devote a portion of it in the founding of some educational institution, for the intellectual and moral improvement of the young men of that region.

"After conversing with him a little while, and drawing out his large and liberal views, I asked him how much money he proposed to set aside for this institution, when he quietly answered that he deigned to give $500,000. At the time of this interview no one in this country, it is believed, had offered in a single sum such an endowment. It was the noblest offering which an American had ever laid on the altar of learning, and more than equaled many royal donations which have carried down the names of kings as patrons of European universities.

"Filled with profound emotions at the mention of such a gift for such an object, I asked the noble donor what specific plans he had dreamed in his own mind in reference to it. His reply was, 'I am not much acquainted with these matters, but you are, and I want you if you will to devise a plan which I can put into effective operation.' I told him that I would make the attempt. I did so. I drew up the outline sketch of such an institution as I thought would give the largest results for the means used, and submitted it in a few weeks to his inspection.

"He examined it with the practical judgment and business habits with which he deals with all great questions, and adopted the scheme as the basis of his future university.

"The first meeting of the Board of Trustees, selected by Judge Packer, met at the Sun Hotel in Bethlehem, July 27, 1865, and began to organize the work before them."

The trustees followed several principles in setting up the university. One was that of combining scientific and classical education, as they considered both to be practical. The principle carried forward an ideal of the great 17th century Moravian educator John Amos Comenius. A motto taken from the works of Francis Bacon was used to summarize this principle, namely, *Homo minister et interpres naturae* — man, the servant and interpreter of nature, to use a free translation. That motto lives on at Lehigh, being an element in the university seal.

The trustees chose as first president a man whose education and habits expressed this principle, Henry Coppee. They established five schools, including a school of general literature in addition to four scientific schools: civil engineering, mechanical engineering, mining and metallurgy, and analytical chemistry.

Another principle upon which the trustees insisted was that of keeping the size of the student body proportionate to the abilities of the faculty to teach them well. The university would admit only as many freshmen each year as it could be assured of providing with the highest quality of education. In the 19th century the total enrollment never exceeded several hundred students.

The trustees also insisted that Lehigh was to be nondenominational and would have an admission policy based on merit. Competitive examinations were held for applicants for admission. From 1871 to 1891 no tuition was charged, but the national financial crisis at the turn of the century decimated the value of the Lehigh Valley Railroad stock that Packer had given to Lehigh, which was the principal source of income. Tuition was reinstated in 1892.

At first the student body was entirely male. The contemporary ideological climate would permit nothing else. But in the fall of 1918, women were admitted to graduate programs for the first time. In 1971, Lehigh opened its undergraduate programs to them as well.

From the first, the students were serious-minded. In 1924, Catherine Drinker Bowen, daughter of President Henry Drinker and later a famous biographer, published a brief history of Lehigh University, in which she commented:

"Ask any college professor which brand of boy he would prefer to teach, the cigarette brand or the flannel shirt variety. Right here we offer ten to one the flannel shirts...Lehigh still holds to the emblem of the flannel shirt—long may it wave! Engineers come to college to work. A writer in the *Syracuse Post* in 1895 spoke truthfully when he said, 'From the first, Lehigh's characteristic has been her earnestness. It is the boast of her graduates, the inspiration of her students. Men go there to learn to take a useful part in the economy of life.'"

The university community was constantly infused with new faculty and students determined to renew and rework the original principles in the light of changing times. The students' ambition and zeal bore fruit; as alumni they carried the university's educational goals into the work of nation-building. And, having received, they gave to perpetuate Lehigh's work of service.

Today, Lehigh University still adheres to Asa Packer's goal of a liberal and scientific education for practical service. Faculty and students work to maintain high quality in instructional programs. Generous support from individuals, foundations, industry, and government help Lehigh to retain a high quality of education and faculty while keeping tuition as low as possible.