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A JEFFERSON LETTER

BY R. P. McCORMICK

THE following account of an interesting unpublished letter of Thomas Jefferson among the American History manuscripts in the possession of the Library is written by a Rutgers graduate of the class of 1938. Mr. McCormick, who is now an Instructor in History at Rutgers, is preparing a doctoral dissertation, under the direction of Professor Roy Nichols of the University of Pennsylvania, on New Jersey politics during the Confederation.

THE intimate concern of Thomas Jefferson with the affairs of his beloved University of Virginia, whose founding he ranked along with the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom as the outstanding achievement of his long career, is revealed in a letter which was recently discovered among the miscellaneous manuscripts in the Library. The one-page document is not found in any collection of the great statesman's published works but gives every evidence of being in Jefferson's own, plain handwriting.¹

Written on New Year's Day, 1819, at Monticello, the letter was evidently in response to an inquiry from James Oldham, a carpenter and builder with whom Jefferson had been acquainted for many

¹ The letter was written on a single side of a folded piece of stationery bearing the watermark of D. Ames, a paper manufacturer of Springfield, Massachusetts. Joel Munsell, *A Chronology of Paper and Paper Making* (4th ed., Albany, 1870), p. 101. The address on the outside is to Captain James Oldham, Staunton; the postmark is Charlot [tesville?], January 3.

Dear Sir

Monticello Jan. 1. 19.

I am really sorry for your disappointment in your Western enterprise, altho' I did think at the time that a proficient in architecture was not likely to find as much employment in the new as old settled part of the state. should the legislature adopt however the Central college for their University there will be for years to come as much work to be done as all the good workmen we can get can do; and we mean to employ none but the best, as our houses altho small are to be perfect models of chaste architecture and good taste. ^{but} I have nothing to do with the employment of the workmen. The Proctor of the institution will advertise for undertakers ~~in~~ in every branch of building to give in the terms on which they will do their work, finding themselves every thing, and how much they will undertake to complete in the season. we expect to have about half a dozen houses, with a long line of dormitories done the ensuing season. These houses are generally about 35. feet front and from 25. to 40 in depth, finished inside & out in the present style of regular architecture, and each undertaker may engage for 1. 2. 3 cts as he pleases. in the house joinery we shall make the Philadelphia printed books of prices the standard of reference, and each undertaker will have to say whether he will work at those prices, or how much below or above them. we are assured we shall have offers from Philadelphia to work considerably below them. The advertisement in the public papers (the Enquirer) from the Proctor will inform you when, how, and to whom to apply. I shall be very glad to see you employed on it, & tender you my best wishes and respects.

J. Jefferson

years, regarding prospects for employment.² At the time there was pending before the Virginia legislature a bill for the establishment of a state university at Charlottesville on the site of Central College, an institution in which Jefferson had been interested since its inception in 1816 as an outgrowth of Albemarle Academy. Considerable opposition to the proposed location was voiced in the General Assembly by representatives from other sections of the state, and not until January 25, 1819, did the act gain final approval.³ Central College ceased to exist on March 29, 1819, when the Board of Visitors of the new university was organized with Jefferson as its Rector.

Architectural plans for the school had already been worked out in detail by the versatile and competent Jefferson, and some structures had in fact been finished late in 1818. Building activity was resumed during the summer of 1819 and was carried forward rapidly. "Pavillions," which contained living quarters for a professor as well as a lecture room, were connected by a line of small dormitories, each of which accommodated one or two students. Several "hotels" and the imposing Rotunda completed the unusual academic village.

Construction progressed under the direction of the Proctor, Arthur S. Brockenbrough, although the venerable Rector, now in his seventy-seventh year, rode over from Monticello on horseback almost every other day to inspect the work and offer advice. James Oldham was employed on the project, not as an "undertaker" but as a carpenter.⁴ The main elements were nearing completion in 1826. Then, in the year of his death, the founder could look with pride on what Dr. Fiske Kimball has judged to be "the most magnificent architectural creation of its day on this side of the Atlantic."⁵

The letter follows:

² Oldham corresponded with Jefferson about architectural matters frequently after 1804. *Bulletin of the Bureau of Rolls and Library of the Department of State*, No. 6, July, 1894 and No. 8, November, 1894 (Washington, D.C., 1894 and 1895).

³ The best account of the early years of the University of Virginia is found in P. A. Bruce, *History of the University of Virginia* (vol. I, New York, 1920).

⁴ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 252. Oldham was credited with responsibility for the woodwork in the pavilion at the northern end of the West Lawn. In 1823 he charged Proctor Brockenbrough with misconduct and instituted suit against the University. A. E. Bergh, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (vol. XIX, Washington, D.C., 1907), p. 421.

⁵ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

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[signed]

Th: Jefferson

