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SIMEON DE WITT, CLASS OF 1776

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THE name of Simeon DeWitt, Class of 1776, seldom is heard anymore on the campus of New Jersey's state university. His day was of another age, when indeed Rutgers was not even Rutgers but only the dream fulfillment of good Dutchmen; when the entire student body was smaller than a single recitation section is today. DeWitt in fact was the sole member of his graduating class. Among the few memorabilia of those years is DeWitt's full-length portrait which hangs prominently in Kirkpatrick Chapel—a quiet, almost sanctimonious, reminder of Rutgers' colonial beginnings.

Queen's College had hardly opened its doors under "The Sign of the Red Lion," a former tavern in the center of New Brunswick, when from the Hudson Valley came the young scholar DeWitt to study in the classical tradition. Dutchmen had founded the infant college, so it was natural, if not inevitable, for the son of a Dutchman to study there. But DeWitt qualified for admission on academic grounds as well. Before leaving his home in Ulster County, he had been tutored in Latin and Greek by the Reverend Dirck Romeyn, prominent pastor of two churches in the county and an early supporter of the new Dutch Reformed college in New Jersey. DeWitt passed the standard entrance requirements in lan-

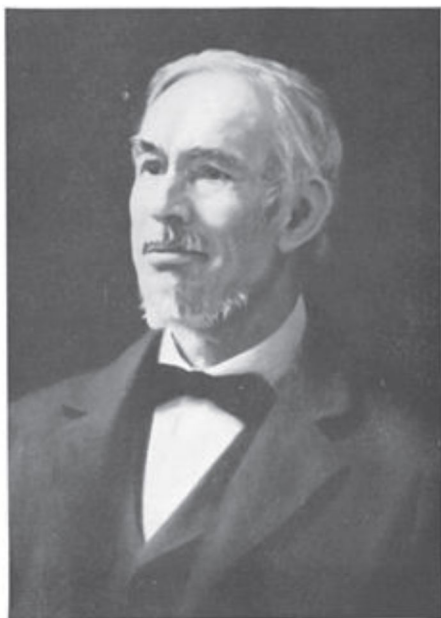
This special issue of the Journal, a contribution to the Rutgers Bicentennial celebration, honors several distinguished Rutgers alumni who were graduated between 1766 and 1900.



SIMEON DEWITT
1756-1834



WILLIAM A. NEWELL
1817-1901



GEORGE W. HILL
1838-1914

guages and began his formal pursuit of the natural and mental philosophies of mathematics and logic.¹

Only a year or so before he arrived on the banks of the Raritan the college had moved into its first permanent home, an old tavern at Neilson and Albany Streets, suitable enough both for classes and for living. The tutors, Frederick Frelinghuysen and John Taylor, resided there from time to time with their handful of students. They, too, were newcomers to Queen's, except for the fact that Frelinghuysen's grandfather had been the earliest advocate of the college. Almost by divine right, it would seem, the younger Frelinghuysen became the school's first tutor.

Frelinghuysen and Taylor had graduated from Princeton in 1770, the year before Queen's opened. Generally, DeWitt and the twenty or so other students learned their logic from Frelinghuysen and their mathematics from Taylor. In this way, the college, which later earned distinction in science, launched the life-long scientific career of at least one of its early graduates. The son of a physician, DeWitt inclined more to the elements of science than the ruminations of literature. However, he was a regular member of the Athenian Society, a literary coterie, and other polemical groups.

Camaraderie among the early Queensmen ran high. In a letter DeWitt wrote from New Brunswick just before the college closed when the students and their tutors joined the army, he said: "I am left quite disconsolate forsaken by all my pleasant companions. Mr. Taylor also is gone. He marched last Wednesday, and if it was not for the dear creatures in town I would become entirely melancholy." New Brunswick girls, then as now, provided a convenient, and necessary, diversion for the students at the local all-boys' college.

So much did such distractions please DeWitt, presumably in times of peace as well as war, that he devised a crude formula on the subject: "If ever I am inactive it is when I stand in an equipoise between two attractive bodies. But sometimes the interposition of a third decides the matter."²

¹ For any information on what DeWitt likely experienced at Queen's College, I have depended on William H. S. Demarest, *A History of Rutgers College, 1766-1924* (New Brunswick, 1924).

² Letters written in August, 1776, and, the second, from Morristown, May 8, 1780. *The John Bogart Letters, 1776-1782* (Rutgers College Publication, 2nd Series, 1914).

In another letter, written in 1778 after DeWitt himself had departed from Queen's for the army, he mulled over old times: "When I am revolving with myself, all our old transactions when we were together in the days of peace, and paint to my imagination the different characters of my agreeable associates, what transporting affections rise from the center of my soul."³

Meanwhile, the first graduating class, in 1774, had but one degree candidate in it, Matthew Light (Leydt). The next year six students are reported to have received their bachelor's degrees, including two of DeWitt's closest friends, David Annan and James Schureman. DeWitt was scheduled to graduate in 1776 at the regular autumn commencement, but Lord Cornwallis had other plans that involved him.

With the British in control of most of New York City by the middle of October, General William Howe ordered Cornwallis to cross the Hudson and drive General Washington through New Jersey beyond New Brunswick. Their scholarly spirits thus demoralized, the Queen's students scattered at the coming of the invaders. Of this, DeWitt's son wrote years later: "The irruption of the British troops broke up the college, and my father had but time to take his knapsack and musket and retreat to Hackensack. He lost his clothes and books which were in the college." The students were not completely unprepared, however, for their patriotic tutors had increasingly drilled them in warfare.⁴

Retreat is hardly the word for DeWitt's departure because he soon joined Washington's northern troops in Morristown. They had been sent from Albany, and for the Queen's student this meant he would be among familiar faces from his home state. Annan and Light were also with him, as was Dr. John Cochran, an old friend from New Brunswick who had helped establish a grammar school there before Queen's and who later became surgeon-general of the army.

"The black thick brewing Storm was Spent in Harmless Thunder," DeWitt wrote to a friend at Queen's of the defeat of Burgoyne

In all cases I have modernized the writing style to draw attention more to the content than to the way in which the letters were written.

³ Rochester, February 14, 1778. *Bogart Letters*.

⁴ Demarest's *History*, 104.

on October 17, 1777. "I wish my friend You could have been at Saratoga. When they Surrendered The most glorious Sight America ever beheld or perhaps ever shall was there to be Seen." By 1778, when this letter reached Queen's, the college had resumed classes a few miles from New Brunswick in Raritan.

A few months later, DeWitt received a letter from Taylor, his former tutor. Dated June 14, 1778, the message said: "I wrote to you the other day and desired you to prepare an English Oration for Commencement. I will inform you that the Faculty have met since and have conferred upon you the honor of speaking the Salutatory Oration which you know must be delivered in the Latin Language. We shall therefore expect a Latin and an English Oration from you on the 14th day of next September at N. Brunswick." Presumably the requirement was met, for DeWitt received his diploma, which is dated October 5, 1776.⁵ Twelve years later Queen's conferred on him the degree of master of arts.

Undaunted by his sudden but necessary withdrawal from Queen's on the eve of graduation, young DeWitt continued to study mathematics and surveying. He was tutored part of the time in Wawarsing, his hometown, by two uncles, George and James Clinton, the latter whose son, DeWitt, was governor of New York. The effort paid off, for in June, 1778, at the close of his term of service with the militia, he was appointed assistant geographer to the army. Two years later, upon the death of his superior, Robert Erskine, he was named chief geographer.

General Washington, however, pondered for awhile the qualifications of at least one other man for this vital military post. Upon hearing of this competition, in the person of John W. Watkins, DeWitt, then but 24 years old, wrote a personal letter to Washington applying formally for the job. He said he had not intended to submit an application, being willing to earn the job on his "observable abilities." But since others have also applied, he wrote: "Justice to myself demands an unreserved declaration of my sentiments on the subject." Congress approved his appointment in early December, 1780.⁶

⁵ Demarest's *History*, 128.

⁶ Washington mentions the two candidates for the job in a letter to Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne, November 22, 1780. This and DeWitt's appeal, dated November 23, are in the *Washington Papers*, Library of Congress.

As geographer to the army, DeWitt was responsible mainly for "perfecting maps," an important strategic assignment because most prewar cartography, which favored large area mapping, was inadequate for military purposes. His expertise, for example, led him to survey and map Washington's route in 1781, from central New Jersey to Yorktown and the end of hostilities. The order came from Washington the end of August, instructing DeWitt to map the road from New Brunswick to Princeton, then on to Philadelphia and Wilmington. On October 17, exactly four years after he had participated in the defeat of Burgoyne at Saratoga, DeWitt saw the war virtually come to an end at Yorktown. Furthermore, since it was Cornwallis who routed the Queen's students out of New Brunswick five years earlier, DeWitt must have taken added delight in contributing to the final defeat of the British commander.⁷

Only two months before, tired and disgusted with the "destructive hand of war," DeWitt proclaimed: "What a jubilee would it create if the war should once come to a period. I think we are pretty well prepared to taste the sweets of peace and I hope the policy of England will direct him whose conduct is a burlesque on the title of most gracious majesty to adopt measures for accomplishing that desirable object." In this letter, written to John Bogart, the caretaker tutor of Queen's, DeWitt philosophically advised: "It is not worth our while to be much concerned in what condition we spend this life, which is comparatively but a moment, provided we are in a capacity to be as useful in our day and generation as our talent admit."⁸

With peace won and the disbandment of the army in prospect, DeWitt appealed to Washington and Congress for publication of the topographical materials he had accumulated. Washington supported the proposal, but the government procrastinated on spending money it claimed was needed for more pressing matters, despite the fact that DeWitt offered to share in the expense. In June, 1783, he had received Washington's permission to go to Philadelphia to prepare publication "of the maps of the seat of war." However, by November, with still no prospect of Congress changing its attitude, DeWitt requested his discharge in order to accept the civilian post of sur-

⁷ Washington's instructions for the map to Yorktown are discussed in Austin Scott, *Blazing the Way to Final Victory* (New Brunswick, 1920).

⁸ Dobb's Ferry, August 1, 1781. *Bogart Letters*.

veyor-general of New York state. Eventually he deposited his and Erskine's maps, amounting to about 200 items, with the New York Historical Society.⁹

Among his first assignments as surveyor-general was the laying out of bounty lands for allotment to soldiers. Between the Mohawk Valley and the western end of the state was the lake region, a large portion of which was designated bounty property for the soldiers of the Revolution. In time he mapped out more than twenty-five townships in the territory of Onandaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Cortland and parts of Oswego, Wayne, Schuyler and Tompkins counties.

Another major part of being surveyor-general was winning the confidence of the Indians, whose land had been confiscated for public development. His patient diplomacy apparently worked, for the many accounts of his expeditions into the western part of the state fail to disclose any strong opposition. Firm and business-like in his dealings with the Indian nations, DeWitt sometimes had to overcome, in his words, "the result of former investigations of malicious whitemen."¹⁰

Of nearly immediate importance also were the confusing boundaries between New York and Pennsylvania and New York and Massachusetts. In the spring of 1785, New York pressed Pennsylvania for a final determination of the boundary between the two states. By early May, DeWitt and General James Clinton, his favorite uncle, had been appointed commissioners from their state for the job, but it was not until the following April that they could get together with the two Pennsylvania commissioners, David Rittenhouse and Andrew Ellicott.

Their meeting took place in Philadelphia, where DeWitt and Clinton were investigated "incognito" at their lodgings by Ellicott, who reported the general "a thoughtful old gentleman" and DeWitt a young man of capacity. Apparently these impressions held, for the expedition got underway in June, and by mid-July the group had pitched camp near the Susquehanna River. Indians, whom DeWitt

⁹ Detailed correspondence on the publishing venture is in the *Washington Papers*, Library of Congress, and *Papers of the Continental Congress*, National Archives.

¹⁰ Letter to Moses DeWitt, a deputy surveyor, October 31, 1793. *Moses DeWitt Papers, 1781-1796*, Syracuse University Library. Repositories in Albany, particularly the archives of the Department of Public Works, contain numerous documents related to the business of the surveyor-general's office.

undoubtedly had befriended on earlier excursions, acted as guides and hunters.

DeWitt and the other commissioners became acquainted with a few members of the little Onandaga Indians' community at Chenango, not far from their camp site. On one early occasion, as recorded by Rittenhouse, they befriended two Indian girls, with whom they exchanged provisions and who eventually returned daily for tea and to play cards and checkers with the white men. DeWitt, it is not surprising to learn, made a drawing of one of the girls. The job completed, the four commissioners returned to their homes, and the following summer DeWitt again accompanied Rittenhouse on settling the boundary between New York and Massachusetts.¹¹

Also during the busy year of 1786, DeWitt was commissioned by the legislature to draw up a definitive map of the state, a project that took until 1802 to finish. A few years later, he was appointed a member of the streets and roads commission of New York City, specifically to help develop "a satisfactory plan" in an undeveloped section north of City Hall Park. For DeWitt's numerous public services, particularly his use of rectangles in laying out lands, he was honored posthumously at a Rutgers convocation in 1870. The speaker, Associate Supreme Court Justice Joseph P. Bradley, a member of the Class of 1836, pointed out that DeWitt's method was adopted by the federal government in the western domain "in place of the irregular lines made by earlier divisions in following streams, hills and other natural objects."¹²

But professional recognition of his accomplishments as a scientist began as early as 1790 when he was elected to membership in the prestigious American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin. He helped organize in New York in 1791 the Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Arts and Manufactures. He also belonged to the Society of Cincinnati. With these organizations DeWitt shared many of his ideas and mechanical devices; for example, he created a meteorological chart for exhibiting a comparative view of the climate of North America. Another experiment led to a table of variations of the magnetic needle. He read many

¹¹ Brooke Hindle, *David Rittenhouse* (Princeton, 1964), 261, 279-280, 281-282.

¹² Charles Maar, "Albanian Almost Unknown, A Founder of State and Nation," *The Knickerbocker Press*, August 20, 1916.

scholarly papers, of which *The Elements of Prospective* was later published as a book.

Washington thought of DeWitt as “a man of profound knowledge of mathematics and sufficient skill in astronomy,” and in 1796 the former military leader offered him the position of surveyor-general to the United States. The appointment got as far as senate ratification, but DeWitt, who found more than enough work in New York, “reluctantly declined.”

For all his apparent urbanity, DeWitt never got far from the practical applications of science. His many letters reveal a deep concern for new varieties of potatoes and other crops and the breeding of sheep. One time, in a presidential address to the Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Arts and Manufactures, he advocated the idea of rotation of crops. As early as 1799 he proposed a state-supported agricultural college, and in 1819 he addressed a pamphlet to the New York legislature on “Considerations on the Necessity of Establishing an Agricultural College,” thereby becoming an early visionary in setting the stage for the land grant program of which his alma mater eventually became a part.

He urged the establishment of a school to teach farming, “a vocation that needed both systematic study and practice for its proper development.” Thomas Jefferson, upon receiving a copy of the pamphlet, wrote DeWitt: “I have always thought that professorship of agriculture should make a part of the establishment in our Universities, thro’ which it’s principle, and in some degree it’s process, might be taught.” He added that he believed the proposition to be new.¹³

As surveyor-general, DeWitt helped chart the course of the Erie Canal, and at one time served on its board of commissioners. He was a member of the board of regents of Columbia College, known as King’s at the time he was a student at Queen’s. In 1817 he was named Vice Chancellor of the University of the State of New York and Chancellor in 1829. Finally, perhaps all that remains to be said of DeWitt’s long and busy career is that for several decades after his death he was held responsible for the classical names of several townships laid out under his direction.

¹³ January 24, 1819. *Jefferson Papers*, Library of Congress. DeWitt appears to have solicited this endorsement.

Apparently provoked by the general ridicule of DeWitt's good reputation, a series of debates among historians and would-be historians in the early 1900's ended fortunately in absolution for the former surveyor-general. It is enough to cite only Victor H. Paltsits, then state historian, who reviewed the land office records of 1790 and concluded: "DeWitt was not a member of the land board. If he made any suggestion as to the nomenclature of the towns, it is not on the record, and it seems to me to be in disagreement with the record."¹⁴

Simeon DeWitt died in Ithaca, the town he founded, on December 3, 1834, within a few weeks of his 79th birthday. His eldest son, Richard Varick DeWitt, left this personal judgment of his father:

. . . a tall, large man, five feet eleven and a half inches high, with a noble, serious face, resembling in some respects that of General Washington, of grave but cheerful conversation, dignified deportment, affable to all, with that real polish of manner required by the society of the first gentlemen of the time in civil and military life, with whom his official position brought him in constant contact. He was a scholar, having taken the first position and borne the highest honors of his college, a mathematician of no mean acquirements and a philosopher in the widest sense of the word, either in physical or moral science, and to crown all a true and devout Christian.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Magazine of History*, 1911. Also Alexander C. Flick, ed., *History of the State of New York* (New York, 1933), X, 317.

¹⁵ Maar's newspaper article.