

“A New-Born People May We Rise”

An Address Given at the Sesquicentennial Observance of the Second Founding
of the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee

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Good afternoon, and welcome – to faculty, staff, students, and especially families. Today we resume an observance rooted deep in Sewanee’s past. In 1904, George Fairbanks, one of the founders of the University, wrote, “The University has established the custom of making Sept. 18 a holiday or Founders Day in commemoration of the opening of the School ... in 1868. While at this writing only thirty-six years have elapsed since first opening in 1868, the writer was the only person present in the Chapel in 1904 who was present at the opening in 1868, so rapidly do new things become old and generations pass away.”

The University had been using the term “Foundation Day” for at least a decade before this note of Fairbanks. And though in more recent times “Founders’ Day,” celebrating the so-called “first founding” of the University, with the dedication of the cornerstone for the first University building in October 1860, has determined the date of our principal Advent Term Convocation, today we begin what I believe is an appropriate and perhaps overdue transition, away from the founding that failed, and toward the second founding, the founding that succeeded.

As today’s Convocation concludes, we will all sing a well-known hymn, the words of which remind us of human pride and weakness and also rebirth.

“...Till not a stone was left on stone,

And all a nation’s pride, o’erthrown,

Went down to dust ...”

God’s truth and man’s error very succinctly describes the founding of the University of the South. The first founders were men of God, leaders in the Church, and persuaded of both the timeliness and the appropriateness of their vision: a great Episcopal university, where “God may be glorified and the happiness of man be advanced,” a place founded to unify “the intellectual and spiritual nature of man.” Those very words were uttered by Bishop Leonidas Polk of

Louisiana, one of three founding bishops, at the dedication of the cornerstone of the first University building in October 1860.

Nothing like what these founders envisioned existed anywhere in the United States. There were many colleges of varying degrees of quality, but no university. Johns Hopkins, Stanford, Chicago, examples of the modern, private, comprehensive university, lay almost a generation in the future. The University of the South, chartered in 1858, was in this way ahead of its time. Its proposed curriculum was remarkably modern: the Classics, of course, along with the Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Rhetoric, Criticism, Elocution, and Composition; but also four European plus Oriental languages and literatures, History, Political Science, Fine Arts, Mines and Mining, Civil Engineering, Architecture, Commerce and Trade (“including History and Laws of Banking, Exchange, Insurance, Brokerage, and Bookkeeping”) and “Agriculture with Farm Attached.” Also planned were Schools of Law, Medicine, and Theology.

Such ambition would need every one of the 9,525 acres of land, including 5,000 acres from the Sewanee Mining Company, contributed to the University. It would also need funds. And to that end Polk and his fellow founding bishops, James Hervey Otey of Tennessee and Stephen Elliott of Georgia, went to work.

It must be acknowledged that a significant part of their appeal for funds emphasized the urgent need for such an institution in the South. It is equally true that many of those who pledged funds were wealthy planters and slaveholders. “The world is trying hard to persuade us that a slaveholding people cannot be a people of high moral and intellectual culture,” declared a fund-raising circular written by Polk and Elliott and printed in 1858. “[W]e have that division of classes which makes one a laboring and the other a dominant class – one a working and the other a thinking and governing class.”

The appeal bespoke urgency. “Take this pamphlet home with you,” it stated, and “read it in your domestic circle; ... summon before you the isolation in which the world is attempting to place you and your institutions; recall all you have ever said that breathed of love for the South, that savored of indignation against those that were warring against her; ... and determine ... whether you will ... come up like whole-hearted Southern and Christian men, and found a University for the South that shall be worthy....”

But defending slavery and advancing the case for Southern distinctiveness was not the sole thrust of the founders' appeal. That, too, must also be acknowledged. That same circular began by making a case for the need to "secure for the South a Literary center, a point at which mind may meet mind, and learning encounter learning, and the wise and the good and the cultivated may receive strength and polish and confidence, and whence shall go forth a tone that shall elevate the whole country."

Donors responded with cash and with pledges. Half a million dollars, an endowment half the size of Harvard's in 1860, was in the bank at the time of the cornerstone dedication. The founders anticipated an eventual endowment of as much as \$3 million.

But this founding failed – failed utterly. After four years of destructive civil war, everything was lost. Man's error, as old as Eden, had caused yet another world to fall. And the story might have ended there, and had the University been simply and entirely about nurturing and perpetuating a particular way of life, the stones would have remained in the dust.

Yet there had always been more to the vision, and a new generation would initiate a second founding on a quiet March day in 1866. Within a little more than two years, vision would become reality. And though the institution thus created would never match the grandiose plans of the first founders, it would endure and in time even prosper.

Peace at last came, and by the summer of 1865 the war had ended. Its toll was everywhere evident, and nowhere more so than on the Cumberland Plateau. Of the three founding Bishops, only Elliott survived (and he would die within another year). The funds raised to get the University started were all lost, and it was highly unlikely that pledges made before the war would ever be paid. The rail line from Cowan had been rendered useless. Those structures not entirely destroyed were severely damaged.

In short, there appeared no way that the University of the South would ever become a reality. No leadership; no funds; no buildings; and a ticking clock. For the gift of land by the Sewanee Mining Company in 1858 carried with it a clear condition: the University must open its doors within ten years, or the gift would be forfeited. That seemed an easy promise to make in 1858. It seemed impossible in 1865.

And for those to whom this University represented simply a means of glorifying and perpetuating a civilization based on slavery, there could be no sense of purpose, no reason to revive a vision forever lost. In the summer of 1865 there were no slaves, no Confederates – and no University. The first founding had failed. Not a stone was left on stone. And, as the hymn continues, “all a [Confederate] nation’s pride, o’erthrown, went down to dust.” Could there be a second founding? If so, it would need a new vision – or perhaps, simply, what remained of the old vision.

The old vision could persuade, even compel, if it meant more than simply slavery – which it did, and which it would. The words of the first founders expressed that vision eloquently: to “secure to the South an institution of the very highest grade, and raise up a body of scholars of whom no country need be ashamed,” Elliott and Polk had written in 1859. Otey had been more articulate still, in his remarks made at Lookout Mountain in 1857: to erect “an institution on the most enlarged and liberal scale [and] to engage in its services the best talents, the most erudite learning, and the greatest skill and experience which ample compensation and the hope of usefulness can command to make its departments commensurate with the wants and improvements of the age in every field of philosophic research, of scientific investigation and of discovery in the arts.”

But where, or from whom, would the idea of a university be revived? In September 1865 the Diocese of Tennessee, which, it should be noted, had never withdrawn from the national church and never joined the Confederate church, held a convention in Nashville to elect a bishop to succeed Otey. The clergy and lay leaders gathered there resolved “that a standing committee to consist of five members, of whom the bishop of the diocese shall be the permanent chairman, be appointed ... to consult with the executive committee of the University of the South, and ... [establish] a theological training school on the domain” and “that said committee shall have full power to act for the diocese of Tennessee ... and be authorized to ... present this subject to other dioceses ... and to solicit funds for the immediate erection of buildings ... and salaries of at least two professors.”

The newly elected bishop was the Rev. Charles Todd Quintard, who had drafted the Convention resolutions. The second founding had begun.

The challenges were many, but new leadership met those challenges. Of course many of those leaders had performed service to the Confederacy. That is hardly a profound insight. Where else might leaders of the post-Civil War South have come from? Nor is it a profound insight to note that they were shaped by the experience of war. But their primary purpose was not to memorialize the Confederacy; these second founders hadn't time for that, though of course, when seeking support, they would make whatever appeal might encourage philanthropy.

Or, as the hymn puts it:

“From old unfaith our souls release

To seek the kingdom of thy peace

Our pride is dust, our vaunt is stilled”

And so, yes, Bishop Quintard, a Connecticut native trained as a physician, had been ordained as a priest and served, as a chaplain, in the Confederate army. And yes, though a man of genuine faith and compassion, he had owned slaves. Like every human being who has ever walked this earth, he was imperfect, a sinner.

But the past could not be altered, recovered, or preserved. It could, however, be built upon and learned from. And so Bishop Quintard, George Fairbanks, and others went to work – raising funds, collecting books, building buildings, recruiting students – to create not the University of the Old South or the University of the Confederate South – those universities had never existed – but rather something new, which looked forward, and is captured in a painting that now hangs in the Sewanee Inn, commemorating that return to the Mountain in March 1866 and the commitment to give the University life. This painting depicts a scene that actually did take place and individuals who were actually present, and in it all but the most cynical can see also the presence of hope and what the long arc of the universe would bring to this place called the Domain – clergy and lay, young and old, male and female, black and white. All this would of course take time – too much time for those seeking to accelerate the coming of a future they claimed to see clearly, not enough time for those clinging to a past that would always have some elements of enduring value. But it came, and has come, and will continue to come, and this University will draw, from the lessons of the history it has witnessed and experienced and

learned, a measure of confidence and courage and hope commensurate with those who opened these doors to our first nine students 150 years ago this week.

On Sunday we will dedicate a monument, a simple yet strikingly powerful edifice that proclaims our re-commitment to the words of Psalm 133, words that have been the University's motto from the time its Constitution and Ordinances were first composed in the 1850s:

Ecce Quam Bonum reads the Latin. "Behold how good." Behold how good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity.

Perhaps all of us present for that historic moment, as well as this, will recommit ourselves as well to that profound declaration and, with the humility that comes from an awareness and acknowledgment of our own shortcomings, strive to sustain here, and carry beyond the gates, that spirit.

The Greeks believed that History was "philosophy teaching by example." The story of the second founding of the University might remind all who read it of the confidence, courage, faith, and unwavering hope of those founders. The citizens of Athens took an oath: to transmit their city to posterity not less beautiful but more beautiful than it was when they received it. The second founders of the University of the South would understand that oath. A never-failing succession of benefactors – those who do good – has regularly and faithfully renewed it ever since.

In just a moment we will sing another well-known hymn. With it we will pray for a "conscience quick to feel," for forgiveness of the "sins of heedless word and deed" and of "lives bereft of purpose high." And we will ask that, like "those fierce fires which burned and tried" our country more than 150 years ago, our inmost spirits may be purified, ill consumed, shame purged, so that, like those second founders whose deeds we commemorate today, "a new-born people may we rise, more pure, more true, more nobly wise."