



The Oberlin Boys and Girls from Richville

By Bryan Thompson

I came across an obituary from 1900 of Willis Hendricks that reported, “He was one of a dozen boys from Richville who attended Oberlin College in 1875.” This sparked my historical curiosity. Had 12 boys from the little village of Richville really attended Oberlin that year? Who were they and why Oberlin College?

The reason so many young people from Richville attended Oberlin College in the mid nineteenth century lies totally at the feet of Rev Gorham Cross and the Rev. Charles Finney. Cross was Richville’s Congregational minister for almost forty years and his lifetime friend, Rev. Charles Finney was President of Oberlin. Research into these men showed the development of the friendship and their relationship to the college.

Charles Finney is considered the first professional evangelist and the father of modern evangelicalism. He moved with his parents to Henderson in Jefferson county early in the 19th century. In 1820 he went to study law in Adams, NY. While studying there he experienced a religious conversion and decided to become a minister instead of a lawyer. He began preaching around Jefferson and western St. Lawrence County.

In 1823 Finney preached at a log schoolhouse in the town of Philadelphia. Gorham Cross attended these sermons which were his first experience with religion. Gorham Cross was born in New Hampshire and moved with his parents to Philadelphia in Jefferson County in 1818. He studied at the Gouverneur Wesleyan Seminary in 1829 and apprenticed at law with Judge Dodge at Gouverneur in 1830. In 1831 Cross married Sophia Murdock of Rensselaer Falls. Soon after he felt the call and like Finney left the practice of law to pursue the ministry. The two soon struck up a lifetime friendship around their common calling. Some of their correspondences are preserved to this day in the New York Historical Society Archives.

Finney's calling was on the national stage and he was soon preaching throughout the burnt over district. (The burnt over district is the region from Jefferson County West along the shore of Lake Ontario to and including Rochester. There were so many revivals in this region at that time that it was said to be burnt over with religious zeal.) Finney also preached in New York City.

In 1835 Arthur Tappan gave a generous gift to the fledgling Oberlin College to start a theological school. Oberlin College was founded in 1833 and opened its theological studies in 1835. It became the first college in the United States to admit black students and 1837 it admitted its first class of women. Today it is the oldest coeducational college in the United States.

On the recommendation of the abolitionist Theodore Weld, Tappan requested that Oberlin hire Charles Finney to organize the new department. The college built Finney a house on the Oberlin campus and Finney took up residence there. Finney became president of the college in 1851 and served in that capacity until 1866. He died at Oberlin in 1875.

Finney kept up regular correspondence with Rev. Gorham Cross throughout his lifetime. Rev. Cross came to Richville to preach in 1839 and served the Congregational church there for almost forty years. He died at his Depot St. home in Richville in 1895. It is not surprising then that Rev. Cross would encourage the youth of his church to attend his friend's college in Oberlin. What is surprising is the large number who did. Between 1833 and 1908 twenty-six students from Richville matriculated at Oberlin college.

In comparison most other communities in St. Lawrence county had one or two students enroll in 75 years. The two exceptions were Rensselaer Falls that sent three members of the Murdock family to Oberlin. (These three children were nieces and nephews of Rev. Cross.) The second exception was Hammond that sent four boys to Oberlin.

The 1850's were an exciting time to attend Oberlin College. Charles Finney as president encourage an open dialogue on social reform. The racially integrated campus was a hot bed of abolitionist activity and an active stop on the underground railroad as well as a welcoming platform for woman's suffrage.

The first student to attend Oberlin from Richville was as girl, Rhoda Chapin Allen, who attended from 1852 to 1855. She was the daughter of Marshall Allen a deacon in the Richville Congregational Church. In 1854 Reverend Cross sent his eldest daughter, Amelia Sarah Cross to Oberlin. All of Rev. Cross's children would eventually attend Oberlin. In 1855 Emma Etta Cross and Judson Newell Cross matriculated. Another Richville girl, Julia E. Stacy, also began attendance in 1855. Lucy Ann Cross followed in 1857. Roselle Theodore Cross in 1859, Gorham P. Cross in 1869, Chauncy P. Gardner in 1870 and Fred John Wiser, Hiram E. Walker and George Barney Walker in 1871.

By the time the "dozen boys" from Richville attended Oberlin College in 1875 there was a strong twenty-year tradition of young men and women from the village attending the institution. 1875 was the year the Rev. Charles Finney died which may have had some bearing on their attendance. Attending that year were the Hendricks twins, Webster Lynde Hendricks and Willis Phelps Hendricks, Andrew Witherup, Arthur Hill Griffith, William Owens Jones, Thomas R.

Jones, Frank Emerson Smith, Jesse Edward Eddy, and Henry Orlando Gardner. George Barney Walker continued his studies, begun in 1871 so in 1875 he could count as one of the dozen “boys”. In addition to the above, Frank Beaman of Antwerp attended Oberlin that year. He would eventually marry Ruth Walker and settle in Richville as the local pharmacist. This leaves us one short of the reputed dozen ‘boys from Richville’ in 1875.

Following the large group of 1875, the number of students from Richville at Oberlin dwindled. Those who followed were: Thomas Jones 1875-1885, Margaret Jones 1884-1887, Mary Esther Chandler (1898), William G Reynolds (1907).

Of the twenty-six young people from Richville who attended Oberlin College only five returned to live in Richville. The remainder scattered across the United States. Oberlin’s alumni listing tells us nothing about the careers or life time achievements of the female alumni.

Of the men, three became lawyers, three became ministers, three became bankers or book keepers, two became real estate developers, three became merchants, two became farmers and one was a mayor of two different cities in North Dakota and Minnesota.

[As De Kalb town historian, I can’t close without mentioning that two additional students from Old De Kalb also attended Oberlin College John Seeley Stacy (1852-53) and Milton Thompson (1854-56) For a total from the town of 28 students.]