EXPLORATIONS

A Creation of My Own

Michigan’s founding president fights a demagogue in pursuit of a new kind of university.
It was 1852. The University of Michigan needed a leader, a true president, or it might fall apart for good.

This was its second chance and probably its last. The first try had fizzled out in Detroit years ago, when Michigan was just a backwoods territory. When Michigan joined the Union as a state in 1837, it was decided to try again, this time in Ann Arbor. But so far this was a university in name only—a few bare buildings on 40 acres of farmland, no one in charge, professors fighting, students rebelling. Someone had to put the place in shape.

A man in New York was recommended, a philosopher and clergyman, Henry Philip Tappan. He had studied in Europe. He was known to have important ideas about education. Inquiries were made, and he was asked to take the job.

Well, Tappan said, he had no interest in presiding over a training school for ministers and schoolteachers, the mission of most American colleges of the day. His idea was larger.

“In our country we have no universities,” Tappan wrote. “A University is literally a Cyclopaedia where…in libraries, cabinets, apparatus, and professors, provision is made for carrying forward all scientific investigation; where study may be extended without limit, where the mind may be cultivated according to its wants…

“Universities may, indeed, make learned men; but their best commendation is given when…they inspire men…to make themselves both learned and wise, and thus ready to put their hand to every great and good work, whether of science, of religion, or of the state.”

In the 1850s, only one nation in the world had universities like that—Prussia, the biggest and strongest of the German principalities.

But Prussia was an authoritarian monarchy. Could a democratic republic build such a university?

Tappan believed it could and should, but only if the public supported it. Professors not only would spread existing knowledge by teaching. By deep study and research, they also would make new knowledge. They would train advanced students to push knowledge onward, generation after generation. And the purpose of all of it would be to serve the broadest public good.

No one knew where the free pursuit of knowledge would lead. That was the adventure of it.

But was that what Michigan wanted?
CHAPTER 2

A Promising Start

Yes, Tappan was told, come west—build the school you have in mind here.

So he came, and of course he brought his wife: Julia Livingston Tappan.

“Livingston?” people asked. Those Livingstons?

Most Michiganders had been born in the East. They knew the Livingstons were one of the oldest and wealthiest families in New York state. And yes, Mrs. Tappan was one of those Livingstons. So when she said she and her husband were “missionaries to the West,” as if their job were to civilize the wild frontier, people frowned.

Nonetheless, Tappan pressed ahead with his work, and if his wife offended some, his plans inspired others.

First the University must have more books, he urged, and collections of plants and animals and minerals to study, and the best scientific instruments.

A prominent and wealthy lawyer from Detroit, Henry Nelson Walker, asked how he could help.

Talk to your friends in the city, Tappan told Walker. Ask them to give money for a world-class astronomical observatory. A great telescope on the western frontier would send a signal of Michigan’s serious intentions.

There was also a purely practical purpose, as Walker well knew. He represented railroads, so he knew that observatories could give the precisely accurate measurements of time that railroads needed.

Walker gave $4,000 of his own, and he helped Tappan raise $11,000 more from other Detroiterians. Tappan promised to name the new observatory in their honor.

It was a highly promising start.

But President Tappan’s remarks about Prussian universities—and perhaps Mrs. Tappan’s remarks about the uncivilized West—had attracted the jaundiced eye of Wilbur Fisk Storey, the new owner and editor of the Detroit Free Press.

He was a bad man to have against you.
Storey had grown up angry. He quit school in Vermont at the age of 12—nothing unusual in the 1800s—and became a printer’s apprentice. At 17 he took his trade west, where he became a newspaperman. But like most newspapermen of the day, he was really a printer just looking for ways to make money. Out of the back of his print shop he also sold drugs—the legal kind—and he cheated to get a big government printing contract from the state government in Lansing.

He started a paper in Jackson, the Patriot. Then, soon after Henry Tappan arrived in Michigan, Storey took over the Free Press in Detroit. He said it would be “radically Democratic,” a voice for the common-man tradition of Andrew Jackson.

He pumped up circulation with headlines like these:

*How to Get Rid of a Faithless Wife*
*Death in the Bridal Bed*
*Saved by His Wife’s Corpse*

Storey’s own wife divorced him. An enemy editor said he frequented “dens of debauchery.” A Free Press reporter said Storey “could say meaner things in fewer words than any person I ever saw.” And in an era when newspapering was a blood sport, Storey made his name as the meanest public brawler in Michigan.

In the pages of the Free Press, his favorite targets were African Americans, abolitionists, and rival editors, one of whom he called “a living, moving gangrene in the eyes of the community – a stench to the nostrils of decency.”

That was Storey’s normal style, and it sold papers. As one observer put it, “He commanded the admiration of an unthinking public which enjoyed his savage diatribes as they would have enjoyed a dog-fight.”

He hadn’t been in Detroit long when he spotted a perfect target.

Storey said the new university president in Ann Arbor—this New York snob who had married into the Livingston clan—was speaking far too admiringly of Europe. When Tappan praised the universities of Prussia, Storey pointed out that Americans had rebelled against one monarchy and had no intention of imitating another.

“Michigan is not Prussia,” Storey wrote, “and Ann Arbor is not Berlin.”

When Tappan gave his title as “chancellor” of the University—a word used in the state’s own constitution—Storey said “chancellor” was an aristocratic European title—“unwarrantable, ridiculous, and contemptible.”

Smaller Democratic papers across the state picked up the scent.

Tappan was “an aristocrat of the most exclusive school,” said the Kalamazoo Gazette.

“The people want a practical, economical, self-sustaining institution,” wrote the Centreville Chronicle, “and if Mr. Tappan is not satisfied with that, the sooner he leaves ‘these diggins’, the better.”

“When all the imitations of English aristocracy, German mysticism, Prussian imperiousness, and Parisian nonsensities,” wrote the Lansing Journal, “he is altogether the most un-Americanized—the most completely foreignized specimen of an abnormal Yankee, we have ever seen.”

When Wilbur Storey learned that President Tappan had hired an actual Prussian to run the new observatory, he sharpened his blade for a vicious new thrust.
All this time, the new Detroit Observatory had been rising on a hill northeast of the campus, where the horizon was clear in every direction.

Inside, starting at 15 feet below the ground, workers built a massive tower—a “pier”—to hold the main telescope. The pier started 15 feet below the ground and rose to 30 feet above it.

All the way around that central pier, the workers left an inch of empty space between the pier and the building, so that no vibration in the building would disturb the astronomer’s view.

On the ground floor they installed a solid slab for a second, smaller instrument called a meridian circle telescope. It would be used to calculate the exact time by tracking the passage of stars overhead. The time would then be sent by telegraph to Detroit and points east and west.

Tappan traveled by train to New York, where he commissioned the great telescope maker Henry Fitz to make a refracting telescope, the third largest in the world, to explore the heavens. Tappan then crossed the Atlantic to Europe, where, in Berlin, he bargained with Pistor and Martins, the world’s leading maker of optical instruments, for a meridian circle telescope to measure astronomical time.

At the Royal Observatory in Berlin, Tappan met a young astronomer of 32 with “exceedingly lustrous dark eyes.” The young man’s English was halting, but he remarked to Tappan that whoever was chosen to use the new Pistor and Martins telescope would be lucky indeed.

Tappan learned that the man was one of the most promising astronomers in the world, and he remembered the name—Franz Brünnow.

Back in the U.S., Tappan offered the astronomer’s post to one American, then another. Neither wanted to move so far west.

Then Tappan thought of Brünnow in Berlin.

He had no qualms about naming a European to Michigan’s faculty.

“The republic of letters overleaps national boundaries,” he would write, and “the Observatory we were founding was one of the highest rank in the perfection of its instruments, and required a master-hand to manage it. To place over it a man like Brünnow would make its success certain, would give reputation to our young University, and would be the surest means of raising up native astronomers.”

Brünnow accepted Tappan’s offer. (He was the first Michigan professor to hold a Ph.D.) He went to work with the new telescopes, and before long, Ann Arborites were seeing the young scientist in the company of the Tappans’ daughter, Rebecca, known to everyone in town as Barbie. A love affair was beginning.

But in Detroit, Wilbur Storey was ready to make his new attack.
Tappan’s Retort

Storey told readers of the Free Press that events in Ann Arbor had now gone far beyond “Prussianizing free Americans.” The post of University astronomer had been given to a man “with whom…” ‘Chancellor’ Tappan slept while contracting…for an astronomical clock…” Now, Storey snickered, the two would be able “to once more sleep in the same bed.”

Storey’s poisonous attack backfired. President Tappan’s allies across the state were outraged. They rejected Storey’s libel, praised the president’s plans for the University, and defended him as a champion of democratic education.

“The Prussian system thus far has worked most admirably,” a supporter wrote to Storey, “and the course of our institution is onward and upward. Look at these matters candidly, Mr. Editor… He who attacks one whom the people love and respect—one to whom they are grateful—will sooner or later incur the popular displeasure and anathema.”

People asked Tappan if he would challenge Storey to a duel. The president replied that as far as he knew, duels were fought only between gentlemen, and he knew of no gentlemen among his detractors in the newspapers. (He did permit himself a reference to the “bullfrogs of the press.” As a Presbyterian minister, perhaps he did not know—or perhaps he did—that during that time in the Midwest, the slang term “bullfrog” was “a word to bring a blush to the cheek of innocence.”)

Tappan told the legislature he had used the term “chancellor” with no Prussian connotation. He confessed that when criticized, he had stuck to “chancellor” out of sheer Dutch obstinacy. But he would happily drop it, he said, if the legislators would give him the tools to make the University great.

Wilbur Storey, apparently brought up short by Tappan’s defenders, eased off on the University and went off in search of new scandals.

In Ann Arbor, Franz Brünnow studied the heavens by night and courted Barbie Tappan by day. In 1857, three years after his arrival in Ann Arbor, the two were married, much to the approval of the bride’s father. “Two beings never seemed happier,” he remarked.
CHAPTER 6

Seeds of Rancor

But Wilbur Storey had planted seeds of rancor against Tappan that sprouted and spread. By the early 1860s, the president was under fire from churchmen, legislators, and a new slate of Regents.

In 1863, he was forced out of the presidency. He and his wife left the U.S. to settle in Switzerland. The Brünnows soon followed.

But in Ann Arbor, a brilliant student of Brünnow’s, James Craig Watson, assumed the astronomer’s post and built on Brünnow’s foundation. Watson took on new students, and it was soon generally understood that the University of Michigan was the finest training ground for astronomers in the United States.

Tappan was gone. But his ideas had taken root.

CHAPTER 7

“The Largest Figure of a Man”

Wilbur Storey left Detroit in 1861 to take over the Chicago Times. In that city he soon became a leader of the “Copperheads”—northern sympathizers with the Confederacy. Storey darkly warned President Lincoln of a Copperhead “fire in the rear” if troops were sent to the South, and he attacked Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. He survived the Civil War, padded his fortune, and died rich and despised.

In Ann Arbor, James Burrill Angell, appointed president of the University in 1871, took on the work of making Henry Tappan’s vision of the University come fully to life. He would serve until 1909. In that time, departments of literature, science and the arts would multiply. Graduate programs and professional schools would train hundreds, then thousands.

The Detroit Observatory had been the first building on the campus devoted to research. Now it was followed by libraries, laboratories, and museums.

People began to see the observatory as the nucleus of what Tappan had envisioned—a new kind of American university, dedicated to the cultivation of every field of knowledge.

If he had lost the battle for his own presidency, he had, in the end, won the war for his grand design.

“Tappan was the largest figure of a man that ever appeared on the Michigan campus,” Angell wrote, “and he was stung to death by gnats.”

In 1875, as the University gained broad recognition as a leader in education, the Regents officially expressed their regret over Tappan’s ouster and offered their “full recognition of the great work done by him in organizing and constructing this institution of learning upon the basis from which its present prosperity has grown.”

He was invited to Ann Arbor for commencement exercises. He declined. He never returned to the United States, and he died in 1881.
For decades the University grew up around the Observatory—the medical campus to the north, the central campus to the south and southeast. Larger telescopes were acquired to study realms of the universe only imagined by the generation of Franz Brünnow. The observatory grew old, fell into neglect, and was abandoned to use for storage.

In the late 1990s, the old building was repaired, refurbished, and reopened as a University museum.

And the telescopes that Henry Tappan had commissioned 150 years earlier were pointed at the sky again.

– James Tobin