A CAMPUS GROWS

Seeds of Discontent

U-M's rivalry with Michigan State grew out of a battle - intellectual as well as political - over the future of the state's economy. In the end, all students were the winners.
The establishment of Michigan’s agricultural college was bitter fruit for the University of Michigan.

Before the first spade of dirt was turned for a new school in East Lansing in 1855, seeds of animosity had taken root in Ann Arbor. The University of Michigan, already flourishing with students, professors and facilities, was determined to be the state’s agriculture school. Any other plans, any other schools, were without merit.

“It is better to have one great institution than half a dozen abortions,” proclaimed U-M’s first president. “One institution must be located somewhere because we cannot locate everywhere; let us not split it into little pieces which shall have no strength and value anywhere.”

A new school built anywhere in the state other than Ann Arbor, added a prominent Michigan professor, “cannot be more than a fifth-rate affair.”

It was a headiness that would fuel heated rhetoric and an animated rivalry that continues today between the University of Michigan and the school that would ultimately prevail as the ag school, Michigan State University.
For the young state of Michigan to prosper, it needed educated citizens. That included farmers, in the view of some, because farming was the coin of the realm. Educated men who farmed, went the argument, would help elevate the standard of living statewide.

One need only look to Ireland, where blight had savaged the potato crop and decimated the population, to appreciate knowing the science of soil, the nature of pests, and the chemistry of crops.

Michigan needed an agriculture school, in the mind of state leaders, and it should be a branch of the young university in Ann Arbor. Bela Hubbard, a prominent Detroiter heavily involved with the Michigan State Agricultural Society, sounded the clarion call in 1850.

“The day has forever gone by when an enlightened liberal education was deemed useless for a farmer. Agriculture has risen into a science, as well as a laborious art; a science, too, the most comprehensive of all others, and which demands not alone strong hands and bodily labor, but active, vigorous, cultivated intellect,” he wrote for the Agricultural Society in lobbying the Michigan Legislature.

Not only should this college teach the science and practice of farming. Literature and the arts were important, because they helped “polish the mind and manners, refine the taste, and add greater luster and dignity to life.”
Henry Tappan had no doubts: Of course his university would teach agriculture.

The science of chemistry, he believed, was the parent of agriculture. And the University of Michigan was destined to be a national academy of science.

“Our aim is to make the University one of the first in our country,” proclaimed U-M’s first president, “and, if we can second to none in the world; and therefore there is no branch of knowledge that we can lawfully omit.”

As Michigan’s first president, Tappan had a grand vision of a world-class university that excelled in science. Within two months of arriving in Ann Arbor in the fall of 1852, he informed the Michigan State Agricultural Society—the leading voice for the state’s farmers—that U-M was creating the necessary courses in chemistry, meteorology and geology, as well as the anatomy and physiology of animals and vegetables.

“O say, farmers of Michigan, that our great desire is to make the University useful to you and we are determined to do it. We will educate all your sons who wish to be educated for the different professions,” Tappan said. “We will educate those who wish to take a particular course to fit them for a particular business. We will educate those who wish to become strictly literary and scientific men.

“And beyond all this, we have established and will carry on an Agricultural Department for those who intend to devote themselves particularly to Agriculture.”

There was also legal basis for U-M’s stance. The Michigan Constitution of 1835, and again in 1850, gave the Legislature responsibility for promoting “intellectual, scientific and agricultural improvement” in the state. The Legislature, in turn, established the university and charged it with providing instruction in “practical farming and agriculture.”

By the spring of 1853, the university’s regents had put up the money to pay for the courses, as well as advertise for students. Agriculture periodicals were purchased for the library and chemicals for the laboratory. A part-time lecturer was recruited to teach—for free.

At the time, seven buildings defined the U-M campus, including academic halls with new medical and chemical laboratories.

In September 1853, before members of the Agricultural Society at their annual fair, Tappan told farmers that Michigan stood ready to teach their sons. A department of agriculture would be a pillar in what would become “a temple of knowledge.” And he scoffed at the notion of any other school in the state trying to build the same.

“An agricultural department belongs to the University. We already have the apparatus the books and the Professor for this course of instruction. Why then begin an entirely new institution?”

CHAPTER 3
Planting the Idea
Teaching agriculture at Michigan would be the purview of the Rev. Charles Fox, an Episcopalian rector-turned-professor.

Fox was a British immigrant who arrived in New York at 18. Six years later he was in Michigan, leading the Episcopal church in Jackson. He moved to Grosse Ile, just south of Detroit, and turned to farming in addition to leading a new congregation.

He was a co-founder of the journal, Farmer’s Companion and Horticultural Gazette, which debuted the same month that Henry Tappan announced U-M’s intentions of teaching agriculture.

By early 1854, Fox was completing a textbook on the practice and science of agriculture and teaching at U-M. He moved to Ann Arbor, temporarily, to present his courses. He drew no salary, and dipped into his own pocket to buy teaching materials from Europe. He did it all, he wrote, for pure personal satisfaction. He loved the land, and had 400 acres himself to farm.

When U-M’s regents hired him permanently in June 1854, Charles Fox became the first professor of agriculture in the state. At the same meeting, regents appointed the inaugural director of the university’s new observatory; the facility was a point of pride for Tappan as Michigan’s first physical testament to the critical mission of teaching science.

It was welcome news for Fox; earlier in the month, his Grosse Ile farmhouse burned to the ground, forcing him to move his wife and four children to Detroit.

His joy was short-lived. Within a month of his U-M appointment, Fox watched as his oldest son fought a losing battle with cholera. Two days later, exhausted emotionally and physically, Charles Fox himself died, a victim of the same excruciating disease that killed his firstborn. He was 38.

“Cut down in the full vigor of life, and in the midst of an honorable career which would have placed him among the most useful benefactors of the state, we are sure that his loss will be deeply felt throughout the peninsular state, as well as in other states where he was known,” lamented the journal Michigan Farmer. “The cause of agriculture and of education in Michigan has suffered no greater loss …”

In Ann Arbor, the stunned regents called Fox’s death “painful.”

“We know not where to look to fill the place which his untimely death has vacated.”

CHAPTER 4

Professor Fox
The premature death of Charles Fox dealt a mortal blow to U-M’s plans. But it would take years for leaders in Ann Arbor and elsewhere in Michigan to accept that another state college could, and would, dominate the teaching of agriculture.

The State Agricultural Society had repeatedly asked the Legislature to establish an agriculture school. In early 1854, its leaders had spent a day touring U-M’s classrooms and labs, and sat in on a lecture by Professor Fox. The next day, they traveled to Ypsilanti; the fledgling Michigan State Normal School also wanted to be considered for teaching agriculture.

What agriculture leaders wrestled with was whether the pedagogy of agriculture should be one aspect of an established university or, instead, a school’s overall mission.

By the close of 1854, after several years of posturing, lobbying and arguing, the Michigan State Agricultural Society was unequivocal: any ag school in Michigan must be its own separate institution, with an experimental farm for both research and practice.

“To teach thoroughly the science and practice of agriculture must be the main object of the institution, for our agricultural interest is paramount to all other interests in the state; therefore these teaching must not be made secondary or subservient to any other object,” said J.C. Holmes, an officer of the Agricultural Society who would lead the charge for a free-standing ag school.

In Ann Arbor, Professor Alexander Winchell could only shake his head. It made absolutely no sense, he argued, for the state of Michigan to establish yet another college. “I cannot believe the best thing has been done.”

Those pushing for a separate school were both jealous and afraid of the University of Michigan, said Winchell, who taught geology, zoology and botany. A new college, in need of faculty, equipment and buildings, would be a tremendous waste of money—dollars better spent on the already-established university in Ann Arbor.

“The erection and furnishing of a chemical laboratory is necessarily expensive, and if not made so at the Agricultural College it cannot be more than a fifth-rate affair,” he wrote.

His assessment of an agriculture college was brutal: provide it as many people and resources as possible, and it will still be mediocre.

“The learning, ability and experience of the professors employed in the Agricultural College for the purpose of giving instruction in general science will be likely to be inferior to the learning, ability and experience found at the University,” Winchell said.

He begged the Legislature to rethink its decision; wait a few years and agricultural education would blossom at U-M. “Let us remember the evils of delay are only of two years continuance,” he warned, “while the evils of an unfortunate location will be enduring.”

CHAPTER 5

“An Unfortunate Location”
It was for naught.

J.C. Holmes spent weeks in Lansing, persuading legislators to establish a college and farm. His efforts paid off with a successful bill that in 1855 created the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan. Holmes’ Agricultural Society was given the responsibility of selecting a location, which legislators said must be within 10 miles of Lansing.

On the morning of May 13, 1857, a crowd gathered three miles east of the Capitol. Gov. Kinsley S. Bingham, who had signed the law establishing an agricultural college, was there for its groundbreaking. The 677-acre site was uneven, both swampy and brimming with stumps. Joining the governor were members of the state Board of Education, politicians, farmers and the college’s first president, Joseph R. Williams.

“Men will brand it as an experiment. They will demand results before they are willing to afford aid or sympathy,” Williams said. “The charge that an enterprise is an experiment has no terror for me.”

Michigan Agricultural College would take time, Williams cautioned. We must build and furnish a library, a museum of farm implements, a chemistry lab and most important, he said, a farm.

“Friends and enemies will demand too much, and that too early. The acorn we bury today will not branch into a majestic oak tomorrow,” Williams said. “The orchard we plan this year will not afford a harvest of fruit the next. The institution itself, like the seeds, the plants, the trees, the breeds, the very implements which come under its ordeals, requires patience, wisdom, time, for trial and development.”

Williams was prophetic. Whether supporters of the University of Michigan or foes of the Agricultural College, the naysayers were waiting. Legislators tried, and failed, to hand over the college to U-M. Detroit newspapers called the ag college a failure.

In Ann Arbor, Tappan urged the Board of Regents to fill the agriculture professorship that stood empty, still, eight years after the death of Charles Fox. This faculty member, he said, would “develop a course of agricultural instruction unsurpassed by any university in the land.”

By then, the Agricultural College had produced two classes of graduates.

Still, the regents tried. In 1863, they vowed to establish an Agriculture Department—if the citizens of Ann Arbor would provide $5,000 and land for a farm. There were no takers. A similar offer was proposed for the citizens of Ypsilanti, but the motion never made it off the board table.

Michigan Agricultural College was staying put in East Lansing.
The University of Michigan could take comfort in one small but critical victory.

After four years as president, Joseph Williams was forced out at the first leader of the Michigan Agricultural College. Williams had favored a four-year curriculum that, while emphasizing agriculture, also included the liberal arts. With Williams gone, however, the state superintendent of education had different plans. He envisioned a two-year technical degree, eliminating all courses in the humanities. Students would learn farming and only farming.

The faculty balked, as did students, who demanded a “good general education.” The strongest voice belonged to President Pro Tem Lewis R. Fiske, a chemistry professor who argued, “There is probably not one young man that has come here for the sole purpose of studying the science of agriculture.”

The East Lansing school, he said, should be “a place where science and practice shall be beautifully combined. …The only way then to teach agriculture here is to teach literature, also.”

The students and faculty prevailed. Michigan Agricultural College remained a four-year institution, and went on to become the nation’s pioneer land-grant university—a new model that transformed American higher education. Credit for saving the Agricultural College from a far different course, effectively that of a technical school, routinely goes to its leader Fiske.

A champion of the liberal arts education, Fiske was a two-time graduate of the University of Michigan.

— Kim Clarke

This article was drawn chiefly from Transactions of the Michigan State Agricultural Society; Farmer’s Companion and Horticultural Gazette; History of the Michigan Agricultural College, by William James Beal; Michigan Agricultural College, by Keith R. Widder.

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