

OPENING DAY OF THE MARYLAND AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

SOWING THE SEEDS OF A MODERN METROPOLITAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

By

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Charles Benedict Calvert aimed to have an institution of learning that was second to none. He founded the Maryland Agricultural College on the novel principle of a close connection between agricultural research and education. In 1856, Calvert received a charter from the Maryland General Assembly to incorporate the Maryland Agricultural College. For three years he and his fellow Trustees worked feverously to establish the College.

On the first Wednesday in October 1859, Calvert took a major step toward fulfilling his dream. Atop a rural hill a few miles north of Bladensburg a joyous crowd had gathered to celebrate the beginning of his new enterprise. A reporter from Baltimore noted that “the day was very propitious, the surroundings pleasant, and the company gathered together exceedingly agreeable”¹.

October 5, 1859 was opening day for the Maryland Agricultural College, which would later grow to become the University of Maryland at College Park. Established as one of the first agricultural research colleges in America, it would grow to become one of the world’s major research universities.

Charles Calvert was a descendant of the 1st Lord Baltimore, who founded the Maryland Colony. He owned the nearby Riversdale Plantation, and had sold a part of it for the construction of the College. Being a progressive farmer, he believed in a scientific approach to agriculture, and was a founding member and president of the Maryland Agricultural Society.

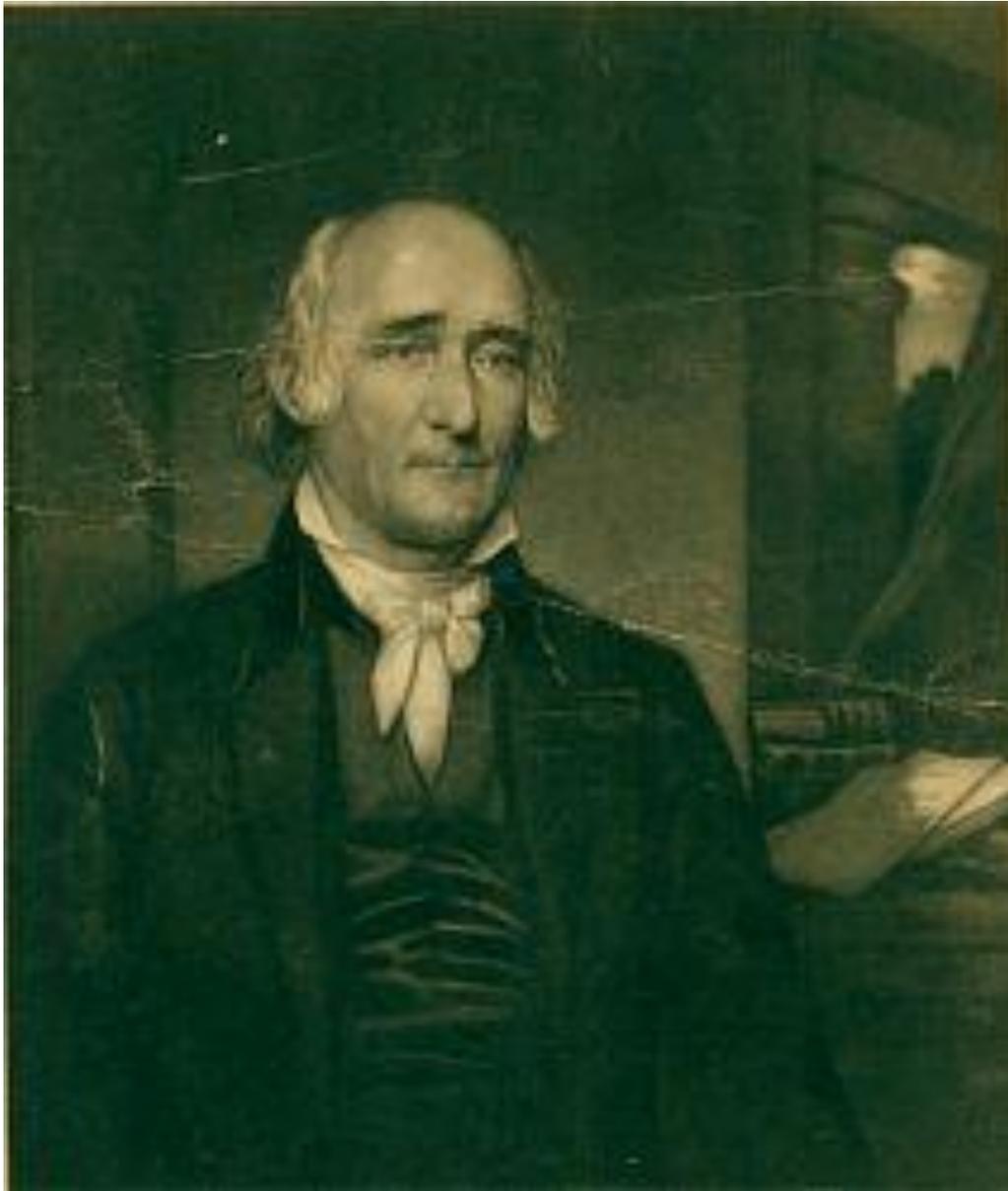
The description below of the events of opening day is drawn largely from reports published on October 6, 1959 in two Baltimore newspapers, *The Daily Baltimore Republican*¹ and *The Sun*².

Calvert had assembled many luminaries for the lavish ceremonies, including: **Joseph Henry**, the celebrated scientist and founding Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who was the keynote speaker; **Jacob Thompson**, U.S. Secretary of the Interior; **James Moore Wayne**, Associate Justice of U.S. Supreme Court; **Thomas Kirkpatrick**, Inspector of Agricultural Schools in Ireland; **William Pinkney**, Episcopal Bishop of Washington, DC, **William W. Corcoran**, the Washington banker and philanthropist, after whom the Corcoran Gallery of Art is named.

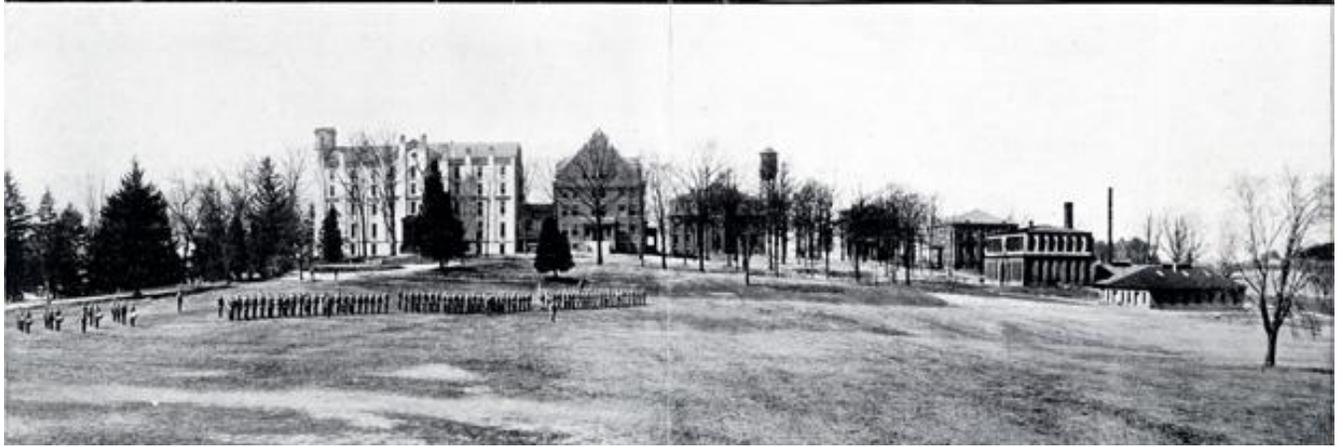
Conspicuously absent was **Benjamin Hallowell**, a renowned educator, who had been chosen as President of the College. One reporter noted that *“he has not as yet been notified of his election to the position, though it is confidently expected that he will accept.”*¹



Charles Benedict Calvert, founder (Library of Congress)



Benjamin Hallowell, first president (University of Maryland Archives)



Maryland Agricultural College Buildings and grounds (University of Maryland Archives)

The Facilities and Grounds

“From the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad the college building is approached by a pleasant road, running partly through rich meadow land. As the structure is neared it winds round an easy acclivity and terminates at a neatly laid off garden, which though at present is in a rough, unfinished state, bids fair to be one of the chief ornaments of the premises in time.”¹

The main building which was the location of the opening ceremonies was approximately where LeFrak Hall stands today.

“The College building is of brick, painted a drab color, one hundred and twenty feet in length, fifty-four feet in width, five stories high, with kitchen, dining room, pantry, wash room, &c., in the basement, together with eight lecture and class rooms on the principal floor, and dormitories in the upper stories sufficient for the comfortable accommodation of two hundred students, and is so constructed as to insure the most perfect ventilation, and to afford every facility for heating all parts of it by hot water or heated air.”¹

The facilities were excellent for the time, giving *“evidence of a determination on the part of the Board of Managers to spare no pains nor stop at no difficulties in making the College as it will be, and as it ought to be, an honor and ornament to the State.”*¹ The students and faculty would experience luxuries found in few homes of the time: piped hot water, iron bath tubs, and gas-fired central heating and lighting. The gas was manufactured on-site from coal using an innovative apparatus supplied by the “Maryland Portable Gas Company.” A similar apparatus was later installed in President Lincoln’s summer house at the Old Soldier’s Home. Fresh water was pumped up the hill from Paint Branch Creek near Baltimore Avenue, likely near the current main entrance at Campus Drive.

Not surprisingly, the thirty or so students were delighted with their new school: *“They all seemed to be exceedingly well pleased with their quarters, and appeared to enjoy the prospect of becoming farmers exceedingly.”*¹

As it is still today, the cost of education was an issue in 1859. A reporter noted that *“were the price of scholarship lower we might expect to see the institution speedily filled up”*² to its capacity of 200. Driven by lack of an adequate endowment or state appropriation, the 1859 annual tuition, room and board was \$250 – a considerable sum, which was beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest Marylanders.

The Faculty

Calvert and the Trustees aimed to have an institution that put agricultural education on a scientific basis, and to have agricultural research play an important role in the College. In 1858, Calvert noted: *“We expect to teach everything that is taught in the best Universities and in addition to those branches we shall require every student to learn Scientific and practical agriculture and mechanics..... in truth every thing that will make the student a practical and scientific man.....We desire to have an Institution superior to any other”*³.

To that end, the Faculty was *“composed of some of the most learned and scientific gentlemen in the State.”*¹ The leading light among them was the still-unaware Benjamin Hallowell who was a proponent of scientific agriculture, and in addition to being President was to be appointed as Professor of Moral and Mental Philosophy, History

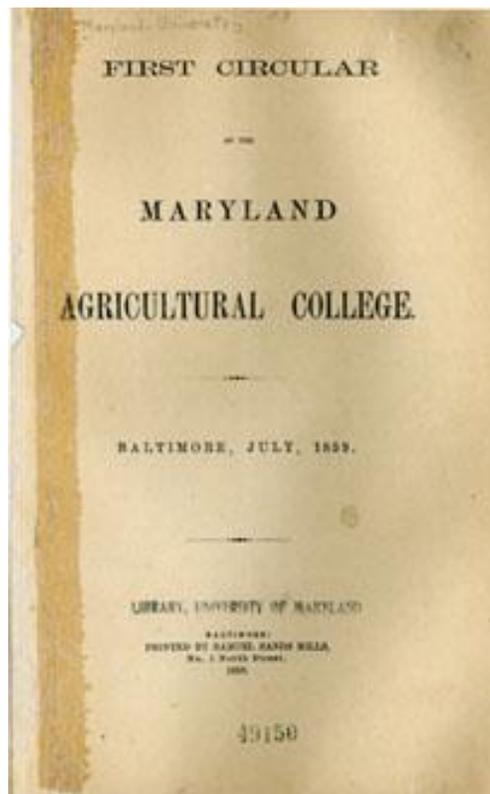
and English Literature. According to the 1859 First Circular, there were three other faculty members. It would seem that they were somewhat more interdisciplinary than is typical of their modern counterparts:

George C. Schaeffer, A.M., M.D., Professor of the Science of Agriculture, including chemistry and its application to the arts, geology and mineralogy;

H. D. Gough, A.B., Professor of the Exact Sciences, including mathematics, pure and mixed; surveying, mensuration, engineering and construction, mechanics and astronomy; and

Battista Lorino, L.L.D., Professor of Ancient and Modern Languages, including Latin, Greek, French, German, Spanish and Italian.

There were two other faculty positions that remained to be filled, that of Physiology, Comparative Anatomy and Veterinary Surgery, and that of Botany, Entomology and Ornithology.



[The 1859 First Circular of the College \(University of Maryland Archives\)](#)

The Opening Exercises

“At 12 o’clock the friends and patrons of the College, numbering some three hundred ladies and gentlemen, were summoned to the principal lecture room, and after being seated, Mr. Calvert announced the Rev. Dr. Pinkney, of Washington, who opened the exercises with an appropriate prayer, in which he asked the blessing of the Almighty upon the Institution, its Professors, its pupils, and its purposes.”¹

Given Calvert’s goals for the College, Joseph Henry was an obvious choice for the keynote speaker. Henry was the most distinguished American scientist of his day, and as Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, he lived nearby in Washington. It appears, however, that Henry was hesitant to accept the offer to speak, *“but upon repeated solicitation he had finally consented.”*¹ He noted he had not prepared a formal speech and that *“his audience was consequently to expect nothing but a few general rambling remarks.”*¹ He gave a lengthy and convoluted speech, on various matters both scientific and educational, and he praised the promised union of science and agriculture that would occur at the College.

Dr. Thomas Kirkpatrick, who had traveled all the way from Ireland, was an expert in practical agricultural science and education. Kirkpatrick’s theme fit perfectly into the planned education and research program for the College. He told the audience how the modern scientific approach to agriculture and agricultural education had been successful in helping Ireland recover from the disastrous potato famine of a decade earlier.

Jacob Thompson, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, had agreed to attend the event on condition that he not be asked to make a speech. Calvert, however, called on him to speak anyway, and Secretary Thompson gave a rambling speech on what he thought was proper for the young men of the College to learn. It is clear from remarks he made near the end of his speech that he was very much of the old-school in his thinking, and far from the modernist approach advocated by other speakers. The reporter from The Daily Baltimore Republican paraphrased Thompson’s remarks:

“The speaker, as a Southern man, thought the calling of a planter was the highest on God’s earth. If he has slaves he must influence

them by example. The slaves on a plantation have no will but "master's." The master must therefore be a good man, else his slaves will be bad. What a potent influence owners wielded in the destinies of their slaves! How great was his influence for virtue or vice!"¹

Epilogue

Within fourteen months, with the war clouds gathering, Jacob Thompson sided with the Confederacy and resigned as Secretary of the Interior.

One of the attending dignitaries, Supreme Court Associate Justice James Wayne, had concurred in the infamous pro-slavery Dred Scott v. Sandford decision of 1857. Yet, unlike other southern justices, Wayne remained on the court throughout the Civil War, and was denounced in the South as a traitor to the Confederacy.

Charles Benedict Calvert embodied the conflict that divided both Maryland and the Nation. He was elected to Congress in 1860 as a member of the Constitution Union Party, a short-lived party that advocated policies that were both pro-Union yet tolerant of slavery. Calvert and the Trustees had chosen as President of the College Benjamin Hallowell, a Quaker and abolitionist, who agreed to serve on condition that the College not use slave labor; a condition that Calvert and the Trustees accepted⁴.

President Hallowell, evidently, was not happy in his new position. He claimed the students gave him a headache, and he resigned after one month of service as President⁴. In December, 1859, Hallowell visited Joseph Henry and confided in him that the trustees of the college had "*commenced before they were ready, and that they had very crude ideas as to what was proper to be done.*"⁵ Henry expressed a desire to help the College establish a proper curriculum; however, there is no evidence that he ever acted on this in any meaningful way.

By the fall of 1860, of the original faculty members only the language teacher Battista Lorino remained. Four new faculty members had been hired, and John M. Colby, a local school principal had been appointed President.

In spite of Calvert's lofty goals for the College, it was still not clear to others whether its purpose was to train the students to be simply good farmers or to be

scientifically educated citizens. The concept of the type of institution that Calvert planned was novel in America; therefore, it is not surprising that the connection between practical education and scientific research was not appreciated by all. The idea of a research university in America would not begin to mature until the opening of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore nearly seventeen years later.

Calvert passed away in May 1864. His little college on the rural hill struggled on, and began its ascent to its place as model of the modern metropolitan research university.

References

1. The Daily Baltimore Republican, October 6, 1859
2. The Sun, Baltimore, October 6, 1859
3. Letter from Charles Benedict Calvert to J.C. Nicholson, a Baltimore businessman. September 29, 1858, University of Maryland Archives.
4. "The University of Maryland at College Park, A History," by George H. Callcott, Nobel House, 2005
5. Letter from Joseph Henry to Alexander Dallas Basche, December 22, 1859, in The Papers of Joseph Henry, Vol. 10, Marc Rotherberg, editor, page 130, Science History Publications, 2004
6. A general history of slavery in relation to the College can be found in "Knowing Our History: African American Slavery and the University of Maryland, by the Students of HIST 429, May 2009
7. An earlier version of this article can be found at:
<http://www.newsdesk.umd.edu/sociss/print.cfm?articleID=1984>