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03 An Early History of West Chester University

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An Early History of West Chester University

By Jim Jones

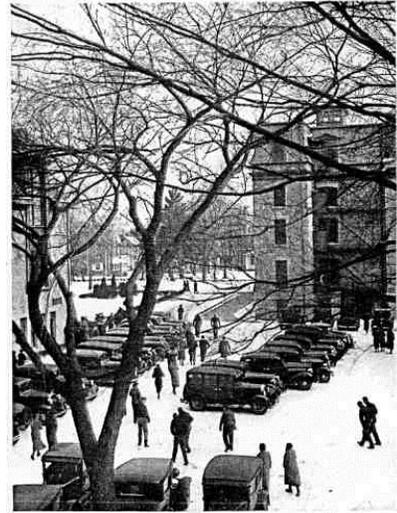
Dick Swain, the Director of the West Chester University Library, has a serious interest in local history, and that frequently brings him into contact with interesting things. One of them was a 1972 reprint of an 1870 history of the West Chester Academy, the ancestor of today's university.

The 1870 history was written by Joseph J. Lewis and placed in a hollowed-out cornerstone of "Old Main Hall," the school's first building. It remained there for a century while the school added to its original ten acres, constructed additional buildings, and grew from 600 to over 9,000 students. When Old Main was demolished in 1972, workers searched for the cornerstone without success. Later, it turned out that a worker had carried it off, thinking it might contain money, but when he discovered that all it contained was old papers, he arranged for its return to what was then known as West Chester State College.

The enclosed document was transcribed by Dorothy Lansing, M.D. and published as a 24-page pamphlet in 1972. It contains an introduction by Frank Helms, who was the head of the college library at the time, and includes a short biography of Joseph Lewis, a West Chester lawyer whose main claim to fame was his work on the autobiography of Abraham Lincoln published in West Chester (at 28 W. Market St. -- check out the historical marker). Lewis was also the president of the West Chester Railroad, helped to start the State Normal School in West Chester, and once owned the Spring Grove mansion in the southwest part of town.

The complete text of Lewis' history is available on this web site. His original spelling has been maintained, so be prepared to recognize "scite" as site, read "ameable" as amiable, and ignore missing punctuation marks and irregular capitalization. Using the minutes of the Academy's board plus his own recollections, Lewis described a number of events familiar to fans of West Chester history including the construction of the West Chester Academy Building on Gay Street across from St. Agnes R.C. Church, the appointment of Humphrey Marshall's son to the board, financial problems at the Academy, and the role played by the namesakes for a number of Borough streets including Charles Miner, Dr. William Darlington, and Anthony Bolmar.

Here's the context for Lewis' history. The concept of a "normal school" was derived from French institutions known as *écoles normales* which specialized in preparing teachers. Various Pennsylvanians saw a need for such a school, and as Lewis described, West Chester's first "normal school" was a private operation founded by Dr. Franklin Taylor, Dr. Elwood Harvey and Professor Fordyce A. Allen in 1852, which lasted until 1864. Meanwhile, in 1857, the state legislature passed "the Normal School Act" which divided the state into twelve districts and grouped the counties of Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Bucks into the "First District." The legislation provided no money with which to start a normal school, but it guaranteed teaching certificates to graduates as long as the school met certain physical requirements: a minimum of



**Parking behind Old Main Hall
circa 1936**

ten acres of ground, at least 300 students, and a hall large enough to accommodate 1000 people. It also had to have at least six professors plus enough tutors and assistants, and a "model school" (in which to practice teaching) that could accommodate 100 students.

The Civil War interrupted everything, but in 1869, a committee of prominent citizens met in March and organized a company to form a normal school in West Chester. A total of 74 investors bought \$50,000 in stock subscriptions and raised \$28,000 from the sale of the West Chester Academy property. With \$15,000 from the state and a loan of \$20,000, they raised a total of \$113,000 and bought ten acres (at \$1000/acre) on a small hill south of town, which ended at Union Street in those days. They paid local contractors Yarnall & Cooper about \$80,000 to construct what J. S. Futhey described as "a massive structure, constructed of the beautiful serpentine stone so abundant in this region" using a design by architect Addison Hutton (who also designed the four greenstone mansions on W. Virginia Ave" in the north end of the Borough). Lewis' "History" was read on September 13, 1870 at the ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone, and then sealed within the building until 1972.