

Historical Sketch

THE IDEA OF BOWDOIN COLLEGE originated in the years following the American Revolution among a group of men who wished to see established in the District of Maine the sort of civil institution that would guarantee republican virtue and social stability. In the biblical language of the day, they wished “to make the desert bloom.”

After six years of arguments over the site, a college was chartered on June 24, 1794, by the General Court in Boston, for Maine was until 1820 a part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The college was to be built in the small town of Brunswick, as the result of a geographic compromise between strong Portland interests and legislators from the Kennebec Valley and points farther east. It was named for Governor James Bowdoin II, an amateur scientist and hero of the Revolution, well remembered for his role in putting down Shays’ Rebellion. Established by Huguenot merchants, the Bowdoin family fortune was based not only on banking and shipping but on extensive landholdings in Maine. The new college was endowed by the late governor’s son, James Bowdoin III, who was a diplomat, agriculturalist, and art collector, and by the Commonwealth, which supported higher education with grants of land and money, a practice established in the seventeenth century for Harvard and repeated in 1793 for Williams College. Bowdoin’s bicameral Governing Boards, changed in 1996 to a single Board of Trustees, were based on the Harvard model.

Original funding for the College was to come from the sale of tracts of undeveloped lands donated for the purpose by townships and the Commonwealth. Sale of the wilderness lands took longer than expected, however, and Bowdoin College did not open until September 2, 1802. Its first building, Massachusetts Hall, stood on a slight hill overlooking the town. To the south were the road to the landing at Maquoit Bay and blueberry fields stretching toward the Harpswells. To the north was the “Twelve-Rod Road” (Maine Street) leading to the lumber mills and shipyards near the falls of the Androscoggin. To the east the campus was sheltered by a grove of “whispering” white pines, which were to become a symbol of the College. The inauguration of the first president, the Reverend Joseph McKeen, took place in a clearing in that grove. McKeen, a liberal Congregationalist and staunch Federalist, reminded the “friends of piety and learning” in the District that “literary institutions are founded and endowed for the common good, and not the private advantage of those who resort to them for education.” The next day, classes began with eight students in attendance.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, the Bowdoin curriculum was essentially an eighteenth-century one: a great deal of Latin, Greek, mathematics, rhetoric, Scottish Common Sense moral philosophy, and Baconian science, modestly liberalized by the addition of modern languages, English literature, international law, and a little history. Its teaching methods were similarly traditional: the daily recitation and the scientific demonstration. The antebellum College also had several unusual strengths. Thanks to bequests by James Bowdoin III, the College had one of the best libraries in New England and probably the first public collection of old master paintings and drawings in the nation. A lively undergraduate culture centered on two literary-debating societies, the Peucinian (whose name comes from the Greek word for “pine”) and the Athenaeum, both of which had excellent circulating libraries. And there were memorable teachers, notably the internationally known mineralogist Parker Cleaveland, the psychologist (or “mental philosopher,” in the language of his day) Thomas Upham, and the young linguist and translator Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1825).

Finances were a problem, however, especially following the crash of 1837. The College also became involved in various political and religious controversies buffeting the state.

Identified with the anti-separationist party, the College faced a hostile Democratic legislature after statehood in 1820 and for financial reasons had to agree to more public control of its governance. For the most part Congregationalists, the College authorities found themselves attacked by liberal Unitarians on the one side and by evangelical “dissenters” on the other (notably by the Baptists, the largest denomination in the new state). The question of whether Bowdoin was public or private was finally settled in 1833 by Justice Joseph Story in *Allen v. McKeen*, which applied the *Dartmouth College* case to declare Bowdoin a private corporation beyond the reach of the Legislature. The more difficult matter of religion was settled by the “Declaration” of 1846, which stopped short of officially adopting a denominational tie but promised that Bowdoin would remain Congregational for all practical purposes. One immediate result was a flood of donations, which allowed completion of Richard Upjohn’s Romanesque Revival chapel, a landmark in American ecclesiastical architecture. An ambitious new medical school had been established at Bowdoin by the state in 1820—and was to supply Maine with country doctors until it closed in 1921—but plans in the 1850s to add a law school never found sufficient backing, and Bowdoin did not evolve into the small university that many of its supporters had envisioned.

For a college that never had an antebellum class of more than sixty graduates, Bowdoin produced a notable roster of pre-Civil War alumni. The most enduring fame seems that of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1825), who set his first novel, *Fanshawe*, at a college very like Bowdoin. Even better known in his day was his classmate Longfellow, who after Tennyson was the most beloved poet in the English-speaking world and whose “*Morituri Salutamus*,” written for his fiftieth reunion in 1875, is perhaps the finest tribute any poet ever paid to his alma mater. Other writers of note included the satirist Seba Smith (1818), whose “Jack Downing” sketches more or less invented a genre, and Jacob Abbott (1820), author of the many “Rollo” books. But it was in public affairs that Bowdoin graduates took the most laurels: among them, Franklin Pierce (1824), fourteenth president of the United States; William Pitt Fessenden (1823), abolitionist, U.S. senator, cabinet member, and courageous opponent of Andrew Johnson’s impeachment; John A. Andrew (1837), Civil War governor of Massachusetts; Oliver Otis Howard (1850), Civil War general, educator, and head of the Freedmen’s Bureau; Melville Fuller (1853), chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; and Thomas Brackett Reed (1860), the most powerful Speaker in the history of the U.S. House of Representatives. John Brown Russwurm (1826), editor and African colonizationist, was Bowdoin’s first African American graduate and the third African American to graduate from any U.S. college.

The old quip that “the Civil War began and ended in Brunswick, Maine,” has some truth to it. While living here in 1850–51, when Calvin Stowe (1824) was teaching theology, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, some of it in her husband’s study in Appleton Hall. Joshua L. Chamberlain (1852), having left his Bowdoin teaching post in 1862 to lead the 20th Maine, was chosen to receive the Confederate surrender at Appomattox three years later.

The postwar period was a troubled one for Bowdoin. The Maine economy had begun a century-long slump, making it difficult to raise funds or attract students. The new, practical curriculum and lower cost of the University of Maine threatened to undermine Bowdoin admissions. As president, Chamberlain tried to innovate—a short-lived engineering school, a student militia to provide physical training, less classical language and more science, even a hint of coeducation—but the forces of inertia on the Boards were too great, and a student “rebellion” against the military drill in 1874 suggested that it would take more than even a Civil War hero to change the College.

But change did arrive in 1885, in the form of William DeWitt Hyde, a brisk young man who preached an idealistic philosophy, a sort of muscular Christianity, and who had a Teddy Roosevelt-like enthusiasm for life. By the College's centennial in 1894, Hyde had rejuvenated the faculty, turned the "yard" into a quad (notably by the addition of McKim, Mead and White's Walker Art Building), and discovered how to persuade alumni to give money. Where Bowdoin had once prepared young men for the public forum, Hyde's college taught them what they needed to succeed in the new world of the business corporation. Much of this socialization took place in well-appointed fraternity houses; Bowdoin had had "secret societies" as far back as the 1840s, but it was not until the 1890s that they took over much of the responsibility for the residential life of the College. In the world of large research universities, Hyde—a prolific writer in national journals—proved that there was still a place for the small, pastoral New England college.

Kenneth C. M. Sills, casting himself as the caretaker of Hyde's vision, shepherded the College through two World Wars and the Great Depression. Among his major accomplishments were bringing the athletic program into the fold of the College and out of the direct control of alumni, gradually making Bowdoin more of a national institution, and cementing the fierce loyalty of a generation of graduates. His successor, James S. Coles, played the role of modernizer: new life was given the sciences, professional standards for faculty were redefined, and the innovative "Senior Center" program was put in operation in the new high-rise dorm later named Coles Tower. Coles was succeeded in 1967 by Acting President and Professor of Government Athern P. Daggett, a member of the Class of 1925.

In 1969, Roger Howell Jr. '58 was inaugurated at the age of thirty-three. The youngest college president in the country, and a highly respected scholar in the field of seventeenth-century British history, Howell ushered in an era of rapid change. The turmoil of the Vietnam era was reflected in the student strike of 1970 and in early debate about the fraternity system. The decision in 1970 to make standardized tests optional for purposes of admission, the arrival of coeducation in 1971, an eventual increase in the size of the College to 1,400 students, and a concerted effort to recruit students in the arts and students of color, all significantly altered the composition of the student body and began an impetus for curricular change that continued through the 1980s under the leadership of President A. LeRoy Greason.

During the Greason presidency, the College undertook to reform the curriculum, expand the arts program, encourage environmental study, diversify the faculty, and make the College more fully coeducational. By 1990, Bowdoin was nationally regarded as a small, highly selective liberal arts college with an enviable location in coastal Maine and a strong teaching faculty willing to give close personal attention to undergraduates. The College continued to prove that it could innovate—for example, through pace-setting programs to use computers to teach classics and calculus, through access to live foreign television to teach languages, through student-constructed independent study projects and "years abroad," and through the microscale organic chemistry curriculum.

President Robert H. Edwards came to Bowdoin in 1990. He reorganized the College administration, strengthened budgetary planning and controls, and developed processes for the discussion and resolution of key issues. In 1993–94, he presided over the College's celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of its founding. A capital campaign, concluded in 1998, brought in \$135 million in additional endowment for faculty positions and scholarships, and funds for an ambitious building program that has included the transformation of the former Hyde Cage into the David Saul Smith Union; construction or renovation of facilities for the sciences, including a new interdisciplinary science center, Druckenmiller Hall, renovation of Cleveland Hall and Searles Hall, and construction of terrestrial and marine laboratories at

the College's new Coastal Studies Center on Orr's Island; expanded facilities for the arts in and adjacent to Memorial Hall; and restoration of and improvements to the Chapel. Two new residence halls, Stowe and Howard halls, were completed in 1996, and another, Chamberlain Hall, opened in the fall of 1999. In addition, expanded dining facilities in Wentworth Hall were completed in 2000 and the hall was renamed Thorne Hall.

In 1996–97, the Board of Trustees established a Commission on Residential Life to review all aspects of residential life. The commission recommended, and the trustees unanimously approved, a new conception of residential life for Bowdoin based on a model of broad House membership that includes all students. The new system also replaced the system of residential fraternities, which were phased out in May 2000. During the Edwards presidency, the enrollment of the College was expanded from 1,385 to approximately 1,600 students, and the College's endowment grew from \$175 million to approximately \$500 million. In addition, the student-faculty ratio was reduced from 11:1 to 10:1.

Bowdoin's two hundredth academic year began with the inauguration of Barry Mills '72 as the fourteenth president of the College. During his tenure as president, Mills has underscored the primacy of Bowdoin's academic program and has worked with the faculty to redefine a liberal arts education for the twenty-first century. Together with former Dean for Academic Affairs Craig McEwen, Mills led the first major curriculum reform at Bowdoin since the early 1980s. The College has also successfully recommitted itself to the goal of expanding ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic diversity among students and employees. Mills has worked to increase national visibility for Bowdoin and also initiated a comprehensive campus master planning study to guide future development on the campus. Mills has also worked to strengthen and increase support for the arts at the College, completing a major expansion and renovation of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art and a conversion of the Curtis Pool building into the Studzinski Recital Hall and 280-seat Kanbar Auditorium. Student residential life has also been improved through the construction of new residence halls and the renovation of existing residential facilities; the new Watson Arena; and the new Peter Buck Center for Health and Fitness. Mills successfully led "The Bowdoin Campaign," a five-year fundraising effort that concluded in June 2009. The campaign, which exceeded its goal of \$250 million, has enhanced Bowdoin's academic program by adding faculty and by focusing resources on the faculty/student experience, faculty scholarship, and the intellectual life of the College. Mills has made improved access to Bowdoin a priority of his administration by devoting nearly one-third of the funds raised to student financial aid. In January 2008, he announced that Bowdoin would replace student loans with grants for all students beginning in September 2008. Mills has also emphasized sustainability efforts at the College through the construction of "green" facilities and other conservation and sustainability efforts.

PRESIDENTS OF BOWDOIN COLLEGE

Joseph McKeen	1802–1807	Kenneth C. M. Sills	1918–1952
Jesse Appleton	1807–1819	James S. Coles	1952–1967
William Allen	1820–1839	Roger Howell Jr.	1969–1978
Leonard Woods Jr.	1839–1866	Willard F. Enteman	1978–1980
Samuel Harris	1867–1871	A. LeRoy Greason	1981–1990
Joshua L. Chamberlain	1871–1883	Robert H. Edwards	1990–2001
William DeWitt Hyde	1885–1917	Barry Mills	2001–