

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY AND THE NORTHUMBERLAND ACADEMY

By John L. Moore

The college that Dr. Joseph Priestley wanted to establish in Pennsylvania never materialized. Writing from Northumberland in 1795, Priestley said that “soon ... I expect to be employed in the instruction of youth, as a college is to be established in this place, and I am appointed the principal.” He was corresponding with an English botanist, Dr. William Withering, a friend from his Birmingham days.

“The next spring we begin to build, but our funds will be small,” Priestley told Withering in an Oct. 27 letter. “I wish we had a proper person for teaching natural history, including botany. Almost everything else I can, pro tempore, in some measure, teach myself. When our common hall is erected, I shall also make use of it as a chapel, for such is the bigotry of the people in this part of the country, that though in every other respect my reception has been very flattering, their pulpits are all shut to me.”

Joseph and Mary Priestley left England in April 1794 and visited New York and Philadelphia before making the five-day overland trip from Philadelphia to Northumberland. Joseph was a hale and hearty 61. Even though Mary was nine years younger, her health was problematic.

Priestley’s letters to Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia reveal that he had been thinking about “founding a college” in the United States before he left England. “My library and (scientific) apparatus might be of great use to it,” he wrote.

The letters also show that the two had been exploring the possibility of Priestley’s becoming a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, which with Rush was affiliated.

On Oct. 28, 1794, Priestley informed Rush: “I have ... purchased ground on which to build a house ... A less(er) house would have served for my family, but I must have room for my library and apparatus.”

On Nov. 11, 1794, Priestley again wrote to Rush, this time regarding Rush’s firm offer of “the professorship of chemistry ... I now inform you that I must decline it. On the receipt of your obliging letter, I was determined to accept of it, and in my own mind had made every arrangement for that purpose. But when I began to consider the difficulty and irksomeness of a journey to Philadelphia at this time of the year, and especially the obligation I should be under of spending four months of every year from home, my wife in the house by herself, my heart failed me.”

Priestley said that he intended “to continue where I am, waiting for the opportunity of being of use to the college which I hope will be established here.”

Although Priestley developed a curriculum, and a number of financial backers came forward, the college never materialized. As Joseph Priestley Jr. explained after his father’s death, “In consequence of the failure of some of the principal contributors, the scheme fell through at that time, and little more was done during my father’s lifetime than to raise the shell of a convenient building.”

Northumberland Academy, which was constructed at the south end of Second Street in 1803, functioned as a private boarding school rather than a college. Herbert C. Bell’s “History of Northumberland County” described it as “the first school of advanced grade in this part of the state.” It occupied a two-story brick building at the corner of West Way (present-day Penn Street) and Second Street. Although Dr. Priestley was credited as a founder, its first principal was the Rev. William Christie, a Unitarian clergyman. Both building and school were gone by 1891, the year Bell’s history was published.

Primary Source:

The Scientific Correspondence of Joseph Priestley

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