



PHI KAPPA PSI
WINTER 1966

*Over the years the
history of Jefferson College has
been relatively obscure, and there has
been little proof of the conditions
that existed at the College
as William Henry Letterman and
Charles Page Thomas Moore knew it
when they founded Phi Kappa Psi
114 years ago.*

LIFE AT JEFFERSON COLLEGE IN 1850
*now gives us a student's view of
"Old Jeff. Coll."
Page 75 is of particular interest.*

Picture: Jefferson College about 1840.

MILLICENT BARTON REX

THE MCLEAN WHITE PAPERS

MY interest in this subject was first aroused by my coming into possession of a file of old letters written by a student who attended Jefferson College during the years 1849-1851. Reasonably interesting in themselves, these papers took on an added value when I found that information about all aspects of Jefferson College was markedly scarce, and that therefore these letters constituted what was in some ways an unique source of information about the College. Even if similar manuscripts still survive in family collections or in the files of institutions, the fact remains that whatever exists has not been published, and that not the merest mention of Jefferson College at any period of its history appears in all the back numbers of the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* and *Pennsylvania History* or in more than thirty years of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*,

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Life at Jefferson College in 1850

not to mention the lack of any entries on Jefferson in the State Historical Commission's *Pennsylvania Bibliography*. One reason information is so difficult to locate may be that when in 1865 the College was moved from Canonsburg to Washington, Pennsylvania, a good deal of dissatisfaction was felt in Canonsburg, and the resentment has apparently lingered on through the years, resulting in the hording in Canonsburg of any documents or records that may exist. Whatever the reason, the present Washington and Jefferson College does not possess any records of Jefferson's earlier period.

The county histories, it is true, have a few passing references, and occasionally quote some useful recollections. But for any kind of concentrated information about Jefferson College, so far as I have been able to discover, there are only two sources—one the old standard history of the College by Joseph Smith, published in 1850, and the other, an article in *Americana* more than seventy years later, by Maurice Wilson in 1932. Between these two accounts stand an intermittent series of yearly catalogues, and two or three stray volumes of reminiscences published in connection with various class reunions.

Until other materials are made available, then, the letters written by McLean White that are examined here are of unique historical interest in their revelations of life at Jefferson in the mid-nineteenth century. As letters, however, just in themselves, although often amusing, they are not particularly original or distinctive. Considerable space is devoted to the things that students always write home about. Communications from Oxford in the 1600's and from Orleans in the 1200's have exact parallels in McLean White's Jefferson correspondence of 1850. But, granted that White's letters are only the simple letters written by an ordinary student to an average family, they nevertheless contain many items of information of concern to the social historian of nineteenth century Pennsylvania. They mention, for example, prices for board, travel, clothing; means and routes of transportation; glimpses of the curriculum; data about health; to say nothing of samples of the ideas and interests that occupied the student mind of 1850, as well as many other items that contributed to a knowledge of western Pennsylvania in those times—items that have nothing to do with Jefferson College, and so will not concern us here.

THE WRITER OF THE LETTERS

But before we plunge into the letters themselves and the middle years of the century, two questions should be answered. One is, who was the writer of these letters and what was his background? And the other: What was this College, and what do we know of its history?

As to the first, our young man was the elder son of Dr. James White, a country doctor of Hartstown, Crawford County, Pa., then on the new Beaver and Erie Canal, today a tiny village half-way between Conneaut Lake and the newly created Pymatuning Lake that lies along the Ohio line. The White homestead in Hartstown is still standing, an object of interest included in the Western Pennsylvania Architectural Survey (1936) on account of the beauty of its proportions and the carved details of its woodwork. It was from this house that McLean set forth for Jefferson College in 1849; it was to this house that most of his letters were addressed, and here they were preserved for the first forty years of their existence.

McLean's name in its entirety was an imposing one—Daniel Henry Anderson McLean White—but he signed his letters simply "A. McLean White," and spoke of himself familiarly as "Mac." It was a tradition in his family for the children to be sent to Washington County to be educated, the girls to the Female Seminary at "Little Washington," the boys to Jefferson at Canonsburg. Mac's uncle, that Daniel Henry Anderson McLean for whom he was named, had been graduated only fifteen years before, and his august grandfather, the Rev. Daniel McLean Sr., pioneer preacher and patriarch of the Seceder Presbyterians for some fifty years in western Crawford County, had been in the first class that was graduated from the original Jefferson Academy in 1797.

OLD JEFFERSON COLLEGE

Mention of this first class takes us back to the early history and background of Jefferson College, a period in which Jeffersonians take great pride. For Jefferson was the first institution of higher learning to rise west of the Alleghenies and in its heyday was known throughout the length and breadth of the land. In view of this claim to priority, it seems rather surprising that the College is not more widely known today and that its complete history has never been written.

Its general development was as follows. Starting from a school founded about 1780 by the Rev. John McMillan, a pioneer Presbyterian clergyman in the Canonsburg area, it became a college under the name of Jefferson by state charter in 1802. It grew in size and influence as the country grew, until after a distinguished independent existence of more than sixty years, it moved from Canonsburg and merged with its sister college and bitter rival at "Little Washington," the two together since the Civil War being known as Washington and Jefferson, or "W. and J.," still carrying on after 144 years of service.

A good deal is known about the founding of this

college. As to its earliest stage, there is some controversy as to which school was the older, the Rev. Mr. McMillan's or another classical academy that was opened about the same time in Washington. It appears to be generally acknowledged that the Washington school was the first *chartered* academy, but no doubt exists that Jefferson was the first academy chartered as a *college*. Washington did not become a college until 1806, four years after Jefferson, and sixty years of rivalry followed until finally the often frustrated plans of union were crowned with success in 1865.

Some years before Jefferson became a college, the first school started on the McMillan farm had been transferred to the town of Canonsburg, but for many years the original log cabin in which the first classes had been taught continued to stand on its old site. At last in 1895 it was removed to the college grounds in Canonsburg, in order that it might better be preserved as an historical landmark. The Phi Gamma Delta fraternity, founded at Jefferson in 1848, and the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity, founded at Jefferson in 1852, have taken over responsibility for keeping the cabin in repair, and there it still stands, the original home of what may have been the first high school west of the mountains and what certainly was the first college.

The story of the second stage of its existence, when it was Canonsburg Academy, no longer Dr. McMillan's school, is of interest. An account by the first student to attend under the new regime, as given in Joseph Smith's old *History*, has been retold several times. A movement for an academy in Canonsburg was started by a group of citizens of the town and vicinity, including several local ministers. They called themselves the "Contributors to the Academy and Library." When Col. Canon, the founder of the town, donated a plot of land and offered to finance a building, the project became a certainty. The enthusiastic patrons decided not to wait for the completion of the building but to take up school the very next day, even if it had to be under the open sky. It was June and a goodly company of people assembled in the yard of an elementary school outside the town, while the two original pupils—some authors only mention one—gathered with their instructor and the interested clergymen in the corner of a worm fence under some sassafras bushes and prepared to read their Latin. Before they began, however, Dr. McMillan made a short speech, directing attention to the historic nature of the occasion, and called upon the other two clergymen for opening and closing prayers, before and after the first lesson. In a short time, the school had fifteen students. Thus the institution, that became Jefferson College eleven years later, came into existence as Canonsburg Academy in 1791.

How the name Jefferson came to be given to the College at the time of applying for its charter seems not to be known. Smith's *History* is the only source that attempts to wrestle with this problem, and Smith has nothing definite to offer, only a series of suggestions. He reminds us that the charter was issued by a

Democratic Legislature in the first years of the Jeffersonian era, that Jefferson was the idol of the West, and that Washington Countians, with the Federalist stand on the Whiskey Rebellion still fresh in their memories, were all the more likely to be ardent Jeffersonians, and that, moreover, William Findley, chief Jeffersonian of western Pennsylvania, was among the first trustees. Smith points out also that the name was not well looked upon by some of the more rigid Presbyterians because of Jefferson's unorthodox religious views.

Be this as it may, Jefferson was the name by which the College rose to power and influence. Between the time of its charter and the time when McLean White was writing his letters, the College grew and flourished. Col. Canon's first stone building became inadequate and new quarters were taken over in 1833. The new location occupied a prominent corner in Canonsburg's residential section where two buildings were erected which housed the College throughout the rest of its independent existence. The building farthest from the corner was known as Providence Hall and contained the class rooms, club rooms, and assembly hall or chapel. It is still standing, the home of the Canonsburg Historical Society, a reminder of the days of Jefferson's glory. The second building, vaguely referred to as a dormitory, appears in an old picture showing the College as it was in 1850, but this building long since vanished to make way for the present city high school.

During these years of Jefferson's success, it drew students from widespread areas, from Baton Rouge to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, from New York State

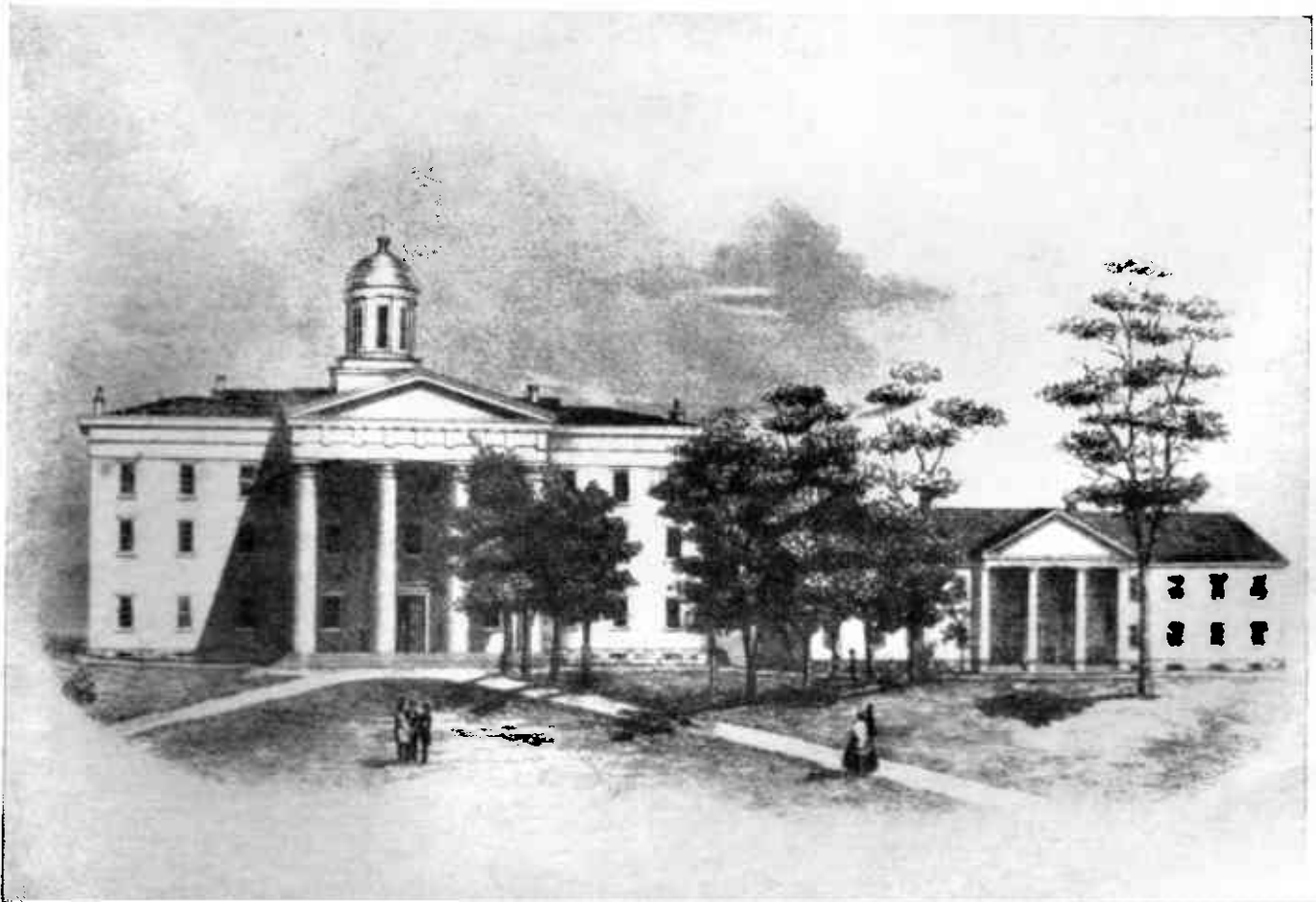
and Canada to Missouri. Of course, Pennsylvanians were always in preponderance, but the South was surprisingly well represented. Now and again the lists even contained a native of Ireland or Scotland, and as the years went on and the missionary field opened, home addresses from India occasionally appeared. Jefferson sent out a notable list of graduates: governors, college presidents, lawyers, doctors, editors, and of course ministers galore. Stephen Foster, the composer, was a temporary student, and among Jefferson's alumni are to be found William Passavant, founder of hospitals and orphanages and of Thiel College; Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg, the educator; Henry C. McCook, expert on ants and spiders; and Henry Wallace, father of Henry C. Wallace, cabinet member under President Harding, and grandfather of the present Henry A. Wallace. When young Mac White attended, the college was at the height of its renown. With almost as many students as Harvard and Princeton, it was growing rapidly.

Examining the old catalogues of the two decades before White came to Jefferson, we get some idea of the College during these years of growth. When these catalogues are checked against McLean White's letters, a clearer picture emerges. The letters and the catalogues mutually confirm and expand each other. Together they make up the basic stuff out of which this report on Jefferson College in 1850 is constructed.

MAC'S ENTRANCE INTO COLLEGE LIFE

It was in the spring of 1849 that, as Mac put it in one of his letters, "the spire of Old Jeff. Coll. first ap-

Washington College in 1850. Jefferson College merged with its rival institution in 1865 and the two continue today as Washington and Jefferson College, Washington, Pa.



peared to my eye as I came in sight of Canonsburgh." This year is likely also to be the date of the first of the papers in Mac's collection. It is a rather curious document, a list of rules to be followed by the young student away from home for the first time, apparently written the night before his departure by his uncle, the Rev. D. H. A. McLean, while Mac and his chum, Austin, were asleep. It was a logical move on Uncle Anderson's part, for, in the first place, he was a minister and thereby predisposed to impart advice, and, secondly, Mac was his namesake, his eldest nephew, about to start off on the same educational career that the uncle had left only some fifteen years before. Solemnity is given to the document by the Rev. Mr. McLean's endorsement: "Not to be opened until you are on your way. And then when alone."

As might be expected at that period, three of the nine rules concern religious practices: daily prayers, public family prayers, Bible reading, and the like. The rule for Sunday observance ran as follows: "Be in your place at Church and avoid all running about on Sabbath. Keep your room at other hours on that day—and receive no visitors. Running to other places of worship will not be tolerated." (This refers to a strict taboo of the Associate Presbyterians against what was known as "occasional hearing" of other churches' services.)

As might be expected, the other rules have to do with diligence in study and with care in establishing social contacts. Of the latter, Uncle Anderson wrote, "Avoid idlers, profane swearers, scoffers and all irreligious and careless students. Seek the prudent, studious, moral, religious class." And then, rather more keenly, "Remember, a student that wishes to excel and be esteemed must patiently *build* himself a reputation. Avoid making too many acquaintances, and yet seek the friendship of some of the best *citizens* of the place as well as students." Of study, he wrote, "Reject novels, and whilst reading history, etc., read also some religious works. Let all your leisure time be spent in *reading good works*." And, "Always be prepared to recite . . . and to perform your part in Lit. Society. Remember that good recitations at first will produce so favorable an impression as will not soon be forgotten." Also, "You cannot learn every thing in a day, but by doing what you do study thoroughly . . . you can soon accomplish a good deal."

On the whole, it was sound advice, and, so far as can be determined, McLean White profited by it. At any rate, in two years, he himself was laying down the law for the benefit of his younger brother, descanting on religion and morality and the ways of mankind in society in far loftier tones than Uncle Anderson's.

THE CURRICULUM AT JEFFERSON COLLEGE

Admission requirements for Jefferson were strict, and those who came unprepared had to spend some time in the preparatory department until they were able to qualify for admission. McLean must have gone well fortified—Uncle Anderson would have seen to that. In fact, Mac appears to have entered with ad-

vanced standing. But students who entered Jefferson as freshmen at that time were to have read Caesar, Sallust, and Virgil in Latin, the "usual portions"—whatever those were—of the Greek Testament, and the Greek Reader or Greek *Minora*, besides having had a "competent English education," that is, arithmetic, geography, English grammar, and the "elements of History." As to Latin, these standards for entrance are not so very different from modern requirements, except that Cicero is missing from Jefferson's list. One really notable difference, however, is the insistence upon Greek as a prerequisite at Jefferson, and also the absence in those days of any mention of modern languages or algebra among the requirements. Indeed, in 1835 algebra was entirely a collegiate subject; it was not until 1853 that incoming students were expected to be acquainted with it as far as quadratics.

On the subject of the curriculum, McLean White's letters provide very little information, though we can be sure he was a diligent student. The junior year, he reported in the fall of 1849, was considered the hardest; and when still a junior in the following February, he wrote, "Our class now are pressed by study. We are attending to our last and hardest mathematical work." (From the catalogue, I gather that this subject was analytical geometry followed by calculus.) "We are studying Chemistry which, too, is very hard. The work in use is unlike small school works. There are about 700 pages in it, and it enters into the philosophical and theoretical discussion of it." (The work was Kane's, according to the catalogue. One would like to know how this, one of the most dynamic of our modern sciences, was treated in 1850.) Mac continues: "We are reciting Greek" (Demosthenes, says the catalogue, followed by the *Iliad*), "and in addition to these we have to prepare for Society every three weeks, a performance which occupies considerable time. In fact, no one can attend to all these things and do them right."

He goes on to say that while they go to bed at 10, they sometimes stay up until 12 and rise at half-past five, having breakfast at six and classes from 8:30 until noon. The afternoons were apparently free for study and doubtless much needed. Indeed, after looking over the curriculum in the catalogue, one comes to the conclusion that Jefferson students of the first half of the nineteenth century received a very sound and rather stiff education. And moreover, the catalogue assured its readers that the curriculum was an actuality, not merely a plan on paper: "Our course is actually accomplished and though it may be impossible to teach the idle, the dull, or the imperfectly prepared student, as we could wish, yet the advantages . . . are . . . furnished to every student" to make as much of as he can.

Glancing through the catalogues throughout the thirties and forties, you can observe the gradually stiffening quality of the requirements. At first even arithmetic and English grammar were included in the freshman course (1835), probably because of the number of students inadequately prepared, while in the



The McMillan log cabin school, which opened in 1778, still stands near Canonsburg, Pa. It is maintained jointly by the Phi Gamma Delta and Phi Kappa Psi fraternities.

sophomore year they were still taking geography, algebra, and geometry. But ultimately these subjects became mere prerequisites for entrance.

Another curious change occurred between 1839 and 1846 in the content of the junior course. In the earlier period it was almost wholly scientific: geometry, trigonometry, surveying and navigation, chemistry, mineralogy and geology, and physiology. The only literary subject of the year was composition. It is possible that this excessive emphasis on science had its origin in the College's association with Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. The latter institution took its rise in 1826 as a sort of daughter college under the older Jefferson's protection, and the two institutions shared a common chemistry professor and board of trustees. Although this affiliation came to an end in 1838, the scientific influence may have outlasted the legal association.

By Mac's time this influence had somewhat waned. Throughout the entire course, more literary studies were introduced. The juniors read Demosthenes, Horace, Cicero, and the *Iliad*; the seniors, Tacitus, the *Iliad*, Juvenal, and Longinus, with sprinklings of political economy, moral philosophy, rhetoric, and logic, along the way. This reversal of policy runs counter to our usual idea that the older education was classical; the newer, scientific.

As for modern languages and Hebrew, these could always be obtained, but at extra cost, since they were not part of the regular course. One of the catalogue's comments on languages is rather interesting: "The French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian languages will be taught (by the professor of Hebrew) . . . according to the most approved mode of pronunciation," with opportunity to converse. This

sounds very promising, but one wonders what the results were, especially as to conversation, with all languages taught by the same professor.

Those of us in the Junto will naturally wonder what part history played in this education. Not a large part, it must be admitted. The "elements of History" were part of the entrance requirements, and now and again a stray course in "General History" or "Chronology and General History" appears. In 1845 one day a week was given to English grammar, declamation, composition, *or* general history. And even the senior course, called "History and Classical Literature by Lectures," does not suggest that history was taken very seriously. Apparently not until 1850 was a member of the faculty definitely listed as a professor of history, and even then he was only a "Lecturer in Roman History," an appendage to his status as professor of Latin. In 1839, 1845, and 1853, history was mentioned on the faculty lists, but always in combination with other subjects, such as geography and astronomy, or languages and *belles lettres*. Jefferson, of course, was not peculiar in this regard, for everywhere in the older education history tended to be treated only incidentally in the course of teaching languages, literature, philosophy, or public speaking.

THE LITERARY SOCIETIES

At Jefferson an important adjunct to the regular course of studies, recognized as such by the catalogues, by Uncle Anderson, and by McLean himself, was the the two literary societies. One was called the Philo; the other, the Franklin. Mac belonged to the latter. His certificate of membership is written in Latin, and headed with a motto, "Learning, Friendship, and Virtue"—*Scientia, Amicitia, et Virtus*—and a picture

arising above the groves of Plato's Academy. It is signed by a long list of members. Most of these students I have been able to identify in the College catalogues, and even a passing glance will show that, like the total membership of the College, considerable diversity in geography is represented (19 from Pennsylvania, 6 from Ohio, 1 from Virginia, 1 from Illinois). A copy of the Franklin Society's catalogue for 1850 is in the New York Public Library, and interestingly enough McLean White was one of its editors, for his name is printed at the head of the committee listed on the back of the title page.

Both the Philo and the Franklin Societies were copied after similar societies at Princeton. They met weekly, and the members were required to present a translation or an original essay or speech. In the early days, they had spelling contests; in later times, more attention was given to debating. The proceedings were at first secret, but Smith's *History* gives a list of topics debated or presented, which range all the way from the abolition of slavery to "Kissing" and "The Pleasure of Having a Clean Pocket Handkerchief." McLean in his letters mentioned the society only in a passing way, but among his papers are several little essays on "Will Power," "Variety, the Spice of Life," and "Fanatic Faith." The latter essay seems to have been especially bound as if for an occasion, and one wonders if it was some special offering to the society, or possibly even a crowning work of some kind, such as a speech at "Contest" or commencement.

"Contest" was the second greatest event of the college year. Representatives of the two societies presented speeches in competition, and such partisanship prevailed throughout the whole town that impartial judges had to be sought from outside, generally from Pittsburgh, to satisfy the demands of fair play. This custom of "Contest" was first instituted at Jefferson and later spread throughout colleges everywhere, apparently taking the place of the excitement over athletics that exists today. There was, of course, nothing in the way of official sports at Jefferson in Mac's time, and for a long time afterward.

These societies were not only excellent training schools of rhetoric and information, but they appear to have undertaken also a certain amount of student government. Fines were levied, not only for misbehavior at meetings, but for general misconduct, such as profanity, intoxication, and "acting disorderly in the streets of Canonsburg." They also early acquired libraries—in 1832 Franklin claimed to have 676 volumes—and the catalogues speak of the societies having "Halls commodiously and handsomely furnished," which presumably were on the top floor of Providence Hall, the main building.

Another society to which Mac White belonged appears to have been less influential in the life of the college. At any rate I have been able to find little about it, except a brief notice in the catalogue of 1872 which shows at least that it survived the union of the two colleges, but I have not been able to discover how early it started. Mac's certificate of mem-

bership in the *Societas de Inquirendo* shows a Hebrew motto and a—to me—unidentifiable tower, and a pronouncement in Latin declaring A. McLean White "ardent in the cause of truth, learned and worthy of confidence." The catalogue says that it is a religious society carried on and organized by the students, "for the consideration of the claims of mankind upon them as educated men," and goes on to say that "it is obvious that such conferences must be highly advantageous to their best interests as accountable beings." I hope this is obvious to you; it certainly is not to me.

Nineteenth century educational institutions were, of course, imbued with a distinctly religious purpose, and Jefferson was no exception. Its founding was the work of the religious communities of Canonsburg and the surrounding countryside, and from the beginning a large proportion—the catalogue of 1872 gives figures approximating fifty per cent—of its graduates became clergymen. Yet it is interesting to note that from its inception, the College was nonsectarian, and never was under the administration of any one denomination, like its sister college at Washington. The three clergymen. Yet it is interesting to note that from its Presbyterians of one kind or another, it is true, but probably because they did differ one from another in various matters of practice and belief, they with their congregations were forced for the sake of ensuring a higher education for the community to merge their differences and establish an institution that was perhaps freer from dogma and more tolerant in its essence than many of the colleges of the period. This attitude is possibly reflected in the rather singular lack of reference to religion in the earlier catalogues. Indeed, it is only toward the mid-century and after, when orthodoxy may have begun to weaken, that assurances in regard to religious training and practice became more insistent and expansive in the catalogues.

Religion had, however, always been present in the College in a special form in the persons of the faculty, who were almost entirely clergymen, usually of the Presbyterian or Associate Presbyterian Churches. There were only three faculty members when the College received its charter in 1802; by young White's time there were nine. Unfortunately for our purposes, Mac had little to say about them, although he mentioned a few by name. None seems to have captured his imagination or sufficiently impressed him to quote their sayings and ideas—an omission all the more remarkable considering the opportunities for mutual acquaintance that must have existed in so small a world as Jefferson was in 1850.

LIVING CONDITIONS AT JEFFERSON IN 1850

In leaving the academic side of the College and turning to the subject of living conditions and social life, we first consider the topic of housing. Originally there were no regular dormitories, although at various times the College made attempts to provide means whereby self-helping students could live as economically as possible. For a time an experiment was tried