

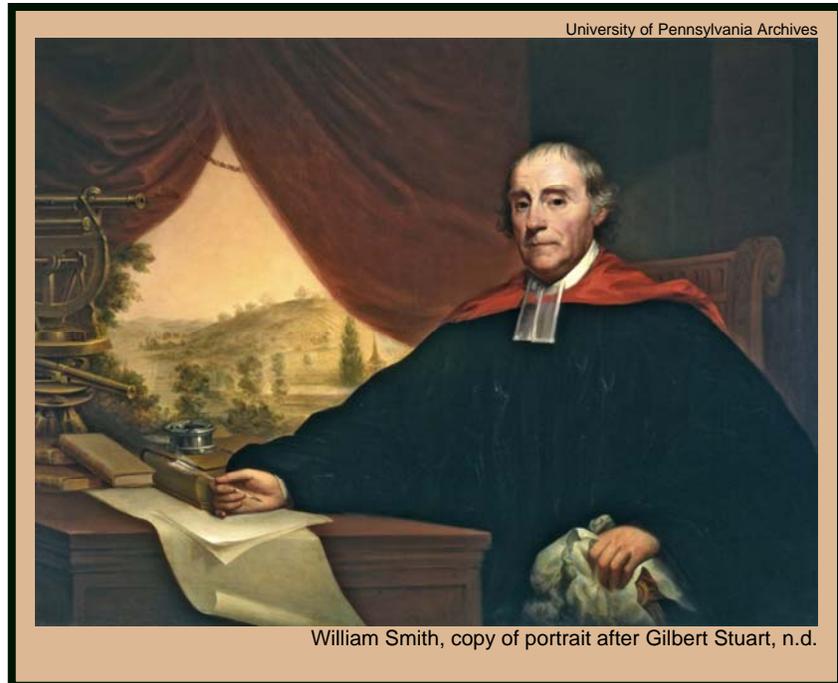


WILLIAM SMITH

Some Thoughts on Education, with Reasons for Erecting a College in this Province, and fixing the same at the City of New-York

1752__EXCERPTS

The small college that became Columbia University in New York City was founded after years of discord over its purpose, religious affiliation and its site (city or country). At base a dispute between the colony's Anglican and non-Anglican leaders, the issue was complicated by the usual suspects of money, influence, and ideology. Should the first college of the colony be an Anglican institution or unaffiliated? Should it be in New York City, or in a rural area to protect the moral character of its students? Into the fray dove William Smith, an Anglican newly arrived from Scotland, whose 1752 pamphlet *Some Thoughts on Education* forcefully argued the benefits of college education in cities rather than in rural settings. After reading the pamphlet, Benjamin Franklin invited Smith to visit the new College of Philadelphia which had opened in 1749 through Franklin's initiative (Smith later became provost of the college). In the end, the college of New York, King's College, opened in 1754 in New York City. Religiously diverse, it began with an Anglican president but with clergymen from five Protestant denominations on its board of governors. Its charter forbade the exclusion of "any person of any Religious Denomination whatever," although this was understood to mean "of any Protestant denomination."



If we look into the Story of the most renown'd States and Kingdoms, that have subsisted in the different Ages or the World, we will find that they were indebted for their Rife, Grandeur, and Happiness to the early Provision made by their first Founders, for the public Institution of Youth.

The great Sages and Legislators of Antiquity, were so sensible of this that they always made it their prime Care to plant Seminaries [schools] and regulate the Method of *Education*; and many of them even deign'd, in Person, to be the immediate Superintendants of the Manners of Youth, whom they justly reckoned the rising Hopes of their Country. . . .

Hence I have often wondered that this Province [colony] should have been near a whole Century in the Hands of a civilized and enlightened People, and yet, not one public Seminary of Learning planted in it, where the Taste and Manners of our Youth may be formed, where they may be taught (*quid Verum atque Decus*¹) the Knowledge and Practice of *Virtue*; and where, without being beholden to our Neighbours, the first and strongest Advances may be made towards the rendering them honest, virtuous, and social Creatures. We are the more inexcusable because, in this Infancy of our Province, we are not condemned to grope our Way in the Dark, as those Heathens were, but have the Experience of all Mankind for our Guide, and the Advantage of seeing by what Steps others have toil'd, slowly to the

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¹ *Verum atque Decus*: truth and rectitude [Latin].

Summit of GLORY and EMPIRE; and therefore cannot be ignorant that Foundations of this Kind are of the last Consequence to the Being and Well being of SOCIETY. . . .

What must an unconcern'd Spectator think (I speak it with Deference, and Nothing but a sincere Zeal for our Honor cou'd induce me to make the Reflection), I say, what must the impartial World think, to see one City among us arriv'd to such a Pitch of Luxury and Riches as often to have entertain'd a Set of dull, sorry, strolling COMEDIANS at the Expence of near a

Thousand Pounds yearly, and yet the whole Province have never thought them-selves in a Capacity to set apart One-half of that yearly Sum for the Enter-tainment of three or four Men of Learning and Virtue to initiate our Youth in the Sciences; and, as *Horace* happily expresses it, to teach them such Things as come home to Life, and which it is culpable and shameful not to know: namely, what renders them fittest for the Purposes of Society; what is the great End of their Being; where-in consists their chief Good and Happiness; and what Actions are most worthy of human Nature. . . .

As such Thoughts as these have often occur'd to me, it gives me Pleasure to understand that the Founding a College in this Province begins now to be seriously consider'd; and as this great Work seems chiefly retarded by the Difficulty of agreeing on a Proper Place for fixing [siting] it, I beg leave to submit my impartial Thoughts on this Head, to the Consideration of the Public.

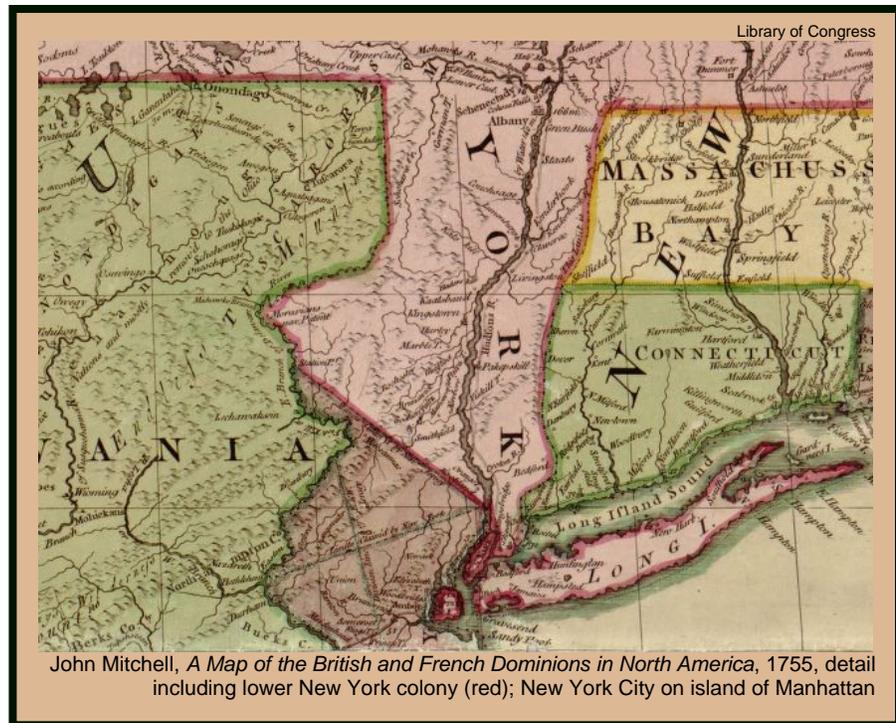
As to the Situation then, I can't help being surpris'd to hear it disputed; some retir'd Corner, either within or close by the City of *New-York*, being certainly the only proper Place in this Province for erecting a College.

There is (and I think can be) but the following Objection against this Situation, *viz.* [namely] That here [the city] the Morals of the Scholars will not be so safe as in the Country; and that there will be too many Amusements to divert them from their Studies.

They [opponents of a city college] admit that the Conversation of polish'd Citizens would be of great Advantage to their Sons; but, say they, in such a large Place there never fails to be worthless rakish Persons to debauch unwary Youth and lead them into what (to oblige delicate Ears) is call'd the polite Vices: And therefore,

If Knowledge of the World must taint Men's Moral ,— may our Sons ever live in Ignorance! . . .

First then, Nothing is easier than to prevent the Scholars from associating with any idle Persons that do not belong to their College [than] by proper Regulations, and laying the Plan of it, so as they all lodge within its Walls. It is seldom they show any Inclination to this, and everyone know that in the largest Cities, the Danger complain'd of never arises from this [associating with idle persons], but from Clubs or Associations among the Scholars themselves, which are always more extravagant in a pitiful Village than in a large and well governed City. . . .



John Mitchell, *A Map of the British and French Dominions in North America*, 1755, detail including lower New York colony (red); New York City on island of Manhattan

To say the Temptations are fewer in a Village than in a City, however, spacious, is saying no more to the Purpose than that a Man (in the Comparison may be allow'd) should rather quench his Thirst in a Brook than a River, when there is more than enough in either, for wherever there are Purchasers, there will be found Venders [Sellers] or Disposers.

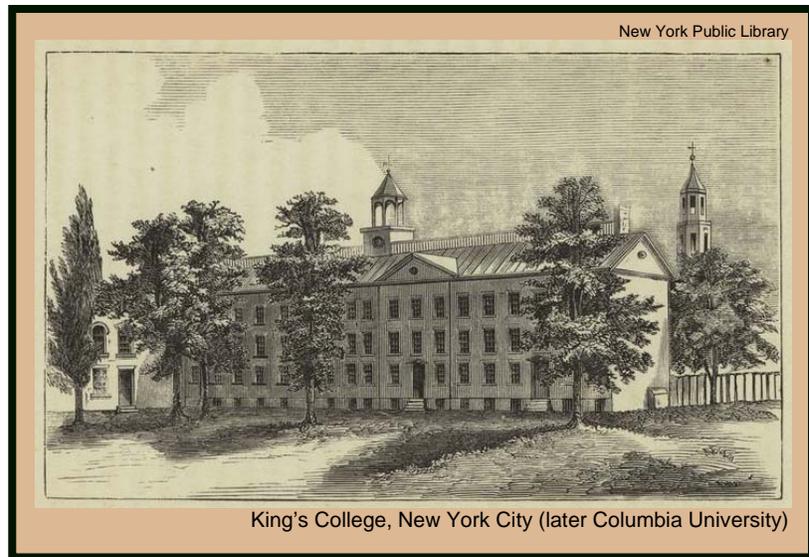
To say that in the distant Village there will be no Fellow-Rakes to lead them into Vice is also saying Nothing: For if we could suppose the Country Youth, when first admitted to the College, so entirely unpolluted, and of a Make so frigid and passionless, as never to think of Vice without being driven into it (which, as I observ'd above, is a very groundless Supposition), yet there will be the other Half of the Scholars from *New-York* to be their Masters in this, whom the Country Gentlemen cannot suppose so untainted as their own Sons, without destroying the Force of their own Objection; and whom surely they would not exclude from the public Benefit.

But above all, if we should allow that a Village is the best Situation [site] of a College (which few will allow), yet I deny that any Place where a College is fixt can continue long in the Nature of a Village, but must soon grow into a considerable Town; and thus without any of the Advantages of *New-York*, the fixing our College elsewhere, would, in a few Years, be attended with all the Inconveniences we meant to shun, besides struggling with innumerable Difficulties at first and risking the Success of the whole Scheme.

There is still less Force in the other Part of the Objection: that the Scholars will not apply so closely to their Studies at *New-York* as in a more retir'd Place. Is it not Emulation, or a Sense of Shame and Honor, that can alone render Youth industrious, especially such as are become capable of Reflection? And will not this Emulation always exert itself in Proportion to the Notions they entertain of those in whose Sight they act? Will it not be stronger in the City of *New-York* where the polished and learned Part of the Province are their Judges, and frequently visit them, than in any other Place where the People know nothing of the Matter? . . .

But further, the Knowledge of *Languages*, *Philosophy* and *Mathematicks* is but a small Part of the Education of such as are design'd to be useful in Society — Those ought to know Men and the World. For this Reason, our European Countrymen, tho' educated in the most refin'd Cities, travel into foreign Countries; but as our Youth can have no Opportunity of traveling, we should make up that Loss to them as well as we can by sending them a few Years to the politest Part of our Province. Now such is the State of our Affairs that the Generality [majority] of them must be Farmers of their own Estates and therefore can allot but a small Part of their Time to the Purposes of Education, which ought to be well husbanded [fostered] by fixing the College in a Place where, at one and the same Time, they can learn the *Belles Lettres* [fine arts], Breeding [refined and moral behavior], and some Knowledge of Men and Things.

And thus, that Frugality and Industry, so necessary in the Infancy of States, pleads strongly for fixing the College at *New-York*, since the Circumstances of our Country Youth will not admit of their spending any Part of their Time (after their Collegiate Education is finish'd) in visiting polite Cities, in order to shake off that awkward Bluntness which they must contract if immur'd at Schools and Colleges apart from the Sight of Men for the first Twenty Years of their Life. And if they could afford the Expence



and Time necessary to this, then indeed would they run a hundred Times more Danger of Corruption, when living at large as their own Masters, than when under the Tuition [watch/care] of others. — Besides, such as have not acquir'd the Air of the Gentleman when young find it too late when grown up. . . .

. . . What a sorry Figure is a young Man like to make thus educated, in a sour Retreat from the World, when he obtains the Honor of a Seat in our Assembly, or is nominated a Judge in any of our Counties? How thoroughly ignorant must he be of the Heart of Man, and how incapable to trace Villainy thro' its various Mazes in order to reach Truth? Of what avail will his Learning be but to render him so much the more a narrow-foul'd and conceited Pedant? And what his boasted Innocence, but to make him so much the more an ignorant Dupe. —

. . .

. . . At *New-York* our Youth will, at least, obtain as much Knowledge of the World, as will, in ordinary Occurrences, enable them to understand their own and Country's Interest without any Danger of being misled or duped by designing² Men: And if they should run into some more of the Extravagancies of Youth here or elsewhere (which I flatly deny,) yet wou'd it have no bad Effect upon them when they return to the Scenes of still [rural] Life and a laborious Industry in the Country: —

*Pater ipse colendi
Haud facilem esse Viam voluit, primusque per Artem
Movit Agros, acuens Curis mortalia Corda. —Virg.³*

All I shall add is to beg my Countrymen to consider well the Whole of what I here submit to them before they pronounce upon any Part of it. I have no Aim but to see my Country [colony] polish'd, flourishing and happy, which depends not a little upon this very Matter in Question. It is very possible I may be wrong in some of my Opinions, but, if I did not firmly believe them right, I should not have dared to publish them in an Affair of so general Importance. And therefore, where I am wrong, I hope to be forgiven with the same Candor, with which unask'd, I have endeavour'd to set this Matter in its true Light. — . . .

. . . I beg still to be indulg'd in summing up all I have said with a few Reflections more on this Head; which, for various Reasons, I have thrown into the following,

COPY OF VERSES ADDRESS'D TO *The GENTLEMEN of the House of Representatives.*

Ad Reipublicae formandas & stabiliendas Vires, & ad sanandos Populos, omnis pertinet Oratio. — Cic.⁴

And does the Glory and the Bliss of States
Down thro' their whole Existence so much hang
On planning dearly Laws for tutoring Youth?
Is this the *Legistator's* noblest Task,
The very Soul and Basis of his Work?

Oh! then, ye *Patriots!* Whom this Infant-State
Selects to guard its *Liberties*, and plan
Its rising Grandeur, think how much the Fate
Of late *Posterity* depends on You; —
That on this long-neglected Work depends

No less, perhaps, than whether our *New-World*
(When by the sad *Vicissitude* of Things
The *Old* has sunk back to its pristine Sloth
And *Barbarism*) shall be the last Retreat
Of *Arts*, imperial *Liberty* and *Truth*;

. . .

Then whether we survive (if *Time* survives,)
Or whether this our *State* shall meanly fall,
Before it reaches its full *Maturity*,
Depends entirely on our Conduct now.
Our kindly *MOTHER* envies not our Bliss,

² Designing, i.e., plotting, self-serving, manipulative.

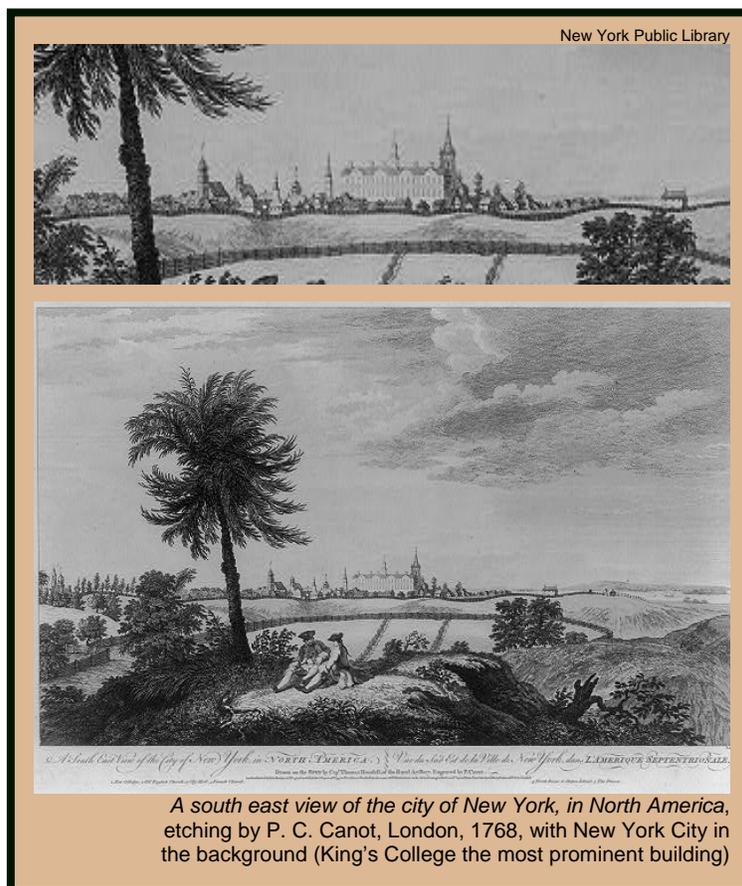
³ Virgil, *Georgics* I: "The Father himself [i.e. Jupiter] willed not that the art of husbandry [farming/cultivating the soil] should be easy, and was the first to upturn the ground, plow the land, by art, thus rousing the mind to exertion by anxious care and solicitude." Providence [God] has put care and labor in our way, as blessings too easily enjoyed are soon neglected, if not despised. *A New Dictionary of Quotations from the Greek, Latin and Modern Languages* (Philadelphia, 1869).

⁴ Cicero, *Laws* I: "Our whole discourse is intended to promote the firm foundation of states, the strengthening of cities, and the curing of the ills of the peoples."

But in our Glory and Prosperity,
 Her truest Honor, Strength and Safety finds.
 Sure, then, it much imports US to exalt
 Our drooping GENIUS, and rear up a Race
 Of *Manners* polish'd, mild and just in *Peace*;
 But nobly daring and untam'd in *War*;

...
 This we can only do by prudent Laws
 T'inform young *Minds*, and mold the ductile Heart
 To worthiest Thoughts of GOD and social Deeds.
 For *Education* the great Fountain is
 From whence Life's Stream, must clear or turbid flow.

O then! No more delay this noble Work,
 Nor let its Glory fall to others' Share!
 'Tis yours but to begin; then all that claim
 The *Patriot's* godlike Name will ardent join:
 So shall its blissful Influence roll down
 Your Names thro' Ages in a Tide of Praise;
 So shall the Land for ever date its dawn
 Of Happiness from noble CLINTON'S⁵ Day!



⁵ George Clinton, colonial governor of New York, 1743-1753.