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“A National Sin”: Samuel Simon Schmucker, Founder of Gettysburg College, on the Peculiar Institution

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“A National Sin”: Samuel Simon Schmucker, Founder of Gettysburg College, on the Peculiar Institution

Abstract

Many music and art students at Gettysburg College would recognize the name Schmucker as their building, or affectionately their ‘home,’ on campus. Alumni might even remember Schmucker Hall as their library. However, if asked who founded Gettysburg College, most students and alumni would probably not know his name. Fortunately, our campus is celebrating Founders Day this week to remember those, including our founder Samuel Simon Schmucker, who helped make our college #Gettysburggreat. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Samuel Simon Schmucker, Slavery, Abolition, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“A National Sin”: Samuel Simon Schmucker, Founder of Gettysburg College, on the Peculiar Institution

April 6, 2016

By Meg Sutter '16

Many music and art students at Gettysburg College would recognize the name Schmucker as their building, or affectionately their ‘home,’ on campus. Alumni might even remember Schmucker Hall as their library. However, if asked who founded Gettysburg College, most students and alumni would probably not know his name. Fortunately, our campus is celebrating Founders Day this week to remember those, including our founder Samuel Simon Schmucker, who helped make our college #Gettysburggreat.

Samuel Simon Schmucker was born in 1799 in Hagerstown, Maryland to German immigrants. His father, John George Schmucker, was a pastor in Hagerstown before moving to York where he continued his ministry. Samuel Simon Schmucker attended the York County Academy before going to the University of Pennsylvania and then the theological seminary at Princeton. In 1820 he was granted membership in the Lutheran Synod and, by the next year, was ordained as a minister by the Maryland and Virginia Synod. As part of the Synod he was elected to a committee in charge of planning a Lutheran theological seminary. Gettysburg was chosen as the location for the seminary, perhaps because there was a large population of German Lutherans in the Gettysburg area and in Adams County. Classes opened at the Lutheran Theological Seminary on September 5, 1826, but after a year, Dr. Schmucker came to the conclusion that many of his students were not prepared in the manner they should be to continue theological studies. He devised creating a preparatory school to solve the problem. On June 25, 1827, the Classical Preparatory School opened and shared the same building as the Seminary. Due to financial problems, Dr. Schmucker bought the property in 1829 and changed the name of the Classical School to the Gettysburg Gymnasium. As both schools grew, there became a need for the Gettysburg Gymnasium to once again reestablish itself. Dr. Schmucker drafted and proposed a bill to make the Gettysburg Gymnasium into a college “for the education of youth in the learned languages, the arts, sciences, and useful literature.” On November 7, 1832, Pennsylvania College was “opened for the reception of Students.”



Gettysburg Gymnasium at Washington and Carlisle Streets, ca. 1882. Photograph courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections.

If many current students are not aware of the college's origins, they are familiar with the college's role in the Civil War. Still, it might come as an interesting surprise to learn that Schmucker was a strong opponent of slavery throughout his life. He first publicly spoke out against the peculiar institution at a Synod meeting in 1824. Theologians and religious leaders were split on their opinions of slavery. Not all supported it, but not all opposed it, either. While extremists on either end existed, Schmucker was a moderate. He lived for six years in Virginia where he became an opponent of slavery, but later in 1825 he became a slaveholder himself through his second marriage to Mary Catherine Steenbergen. He was forbidden to grant manumission to his slaves and thus treated them kindly, more as servants, and provided a religious and elementary education for them. When he moved to Pennsylvania in 1826, he took some of his slaves with him to be free. In his 1834 publication *Popular Theology*, he wrote:

"Himself a native of a slave state, and for many years resident among slaves, the writer is convinced that those who advocate entire, immediate abolition, do not understand the subject.

This great work has its difficulties. But it is feasible. . . . The work, in justice to the master, and in mercy to the slave, must be gradual; but its commencement ought to be delayed no longer.”

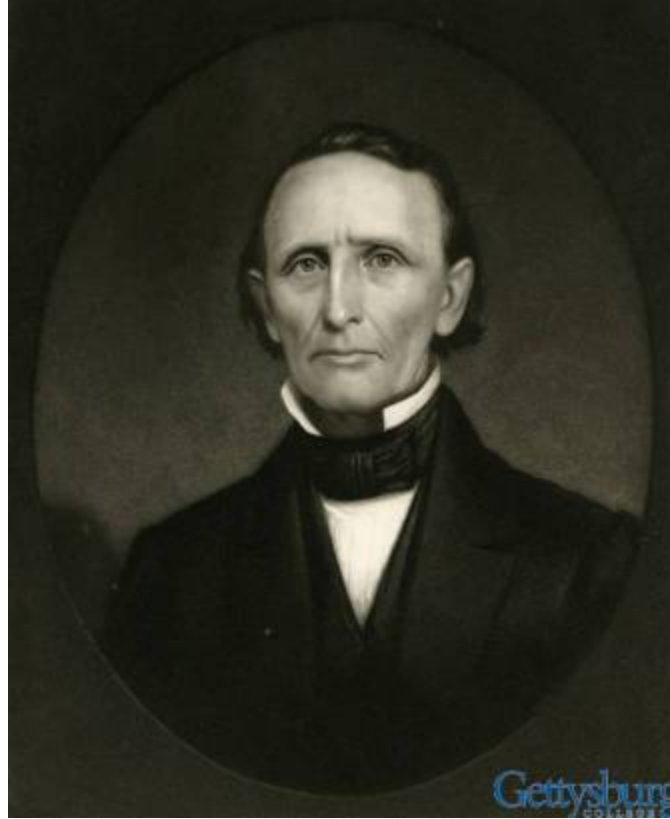
He continued, that no matter who is guilty for bringing slavery to America first, both North and South should work to see its abolition.

In *The Christian Pulpit*, Schmucker vehemently attacked slavery, calling it a national sin. He exclaimed:

“As a patriot and a Christian, I feel bound to bear my testimony against the unjust laws relating to our despised and often oppressed colored population. . . . some of the laws on this subject are direct violations of the laws of God. . . . Until we have used our utmost efforts to purify our own statute book . . . we must stand guilty at the bar of heaven of participation in this sin.”

While Schmucker knew the process needed to be gradual, he was uncertain how to solve the slavery question. He was originally an advocate of sending slaves back to Africa, having joined the American Colonization Society. However, he also believed it was not the only way to abolish slavery. Throughout his career Schmucker continued to encourage antislavery views. As soon as he founded the Gettysburg Theological Seminary, he encouraged students to form the Society of Inquiry on Missions. The society’s goal was “the uplifting of the colored population in the United States.” Yet Schmucker remained moderate in his views, always advocating for gradual change, thus withdrawing from the Colonization Society when its actions became too extreme for his ideals.

During the war, Schmucker’s antislavery and abolitionist sentiments were well known throughout the South because his textbook on theology was widely circulated, and especially because many of his students at the Seminary were from the South. Dr. George Diehl reported that many soldiers in Lee’s army wanted to arrest Schmucker. Diehl himself had heard this from these soldiers during their invasion of Maryland and sent word to Schmucker who fled just in time before the Confederates invaded Gettysburg. His house was occupied for all three days of the battle and his belongings ransacked, not to mention the three cannonballs that went right through his house.



Samuel Simon Schmucker, founder of Gettysburg College, 1862. Photograph courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections.

Schmucker was devoted to achieving his goals of founding a Lutheran seminary and a college. He financially supported the formation of a liberal arts college, buying up the property when money became tight. He also took risks in proclaiming and publishing his antislavery views. This Founders Day, take a moment to recognize the great work Schmucker and other key figures did to found Gettysburg College. #DoGreatWork

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