

A Look Back At Looking Ahead

An Address to the Nathan B. Derrow Society

Case Western Reserve University

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As I go about researching, writing, and teaching the history of the University, I'm often asked a series of questions. Let me offer some answers in advance:

- Yes, I'm still pointing toward a publication date in 2007.
- No, I can't give you a sense of how far along I am because I'm not writing the text in chronological order.
- No, I don't have a title for the book yet, though I think I've thought of about 30 possible titles.
- But yes, some themes have emerged.

One of those themes is central to what I'd like to discuss here: Two institutions, Western Reserve and Case, each created, supported, and guided almost entirely by regional leaders, with missions that accommodated the changing needs of society, grew to national stature, ultimately joining together as one institution. In other words, achieving national and international impact arose from developing and supporting and nurturing the capacity – intellectual, moral, and financial – to address the major issues facing society.

Today I want to share short vignettes of three early donors, two of whom made what we would today call “planned gifts,” whose generosity literally made possible this capacity to engage with major issues and opportunities.

Rev. Nathan B. Derrow

The life of Nathan B. Derrow, whom we consider the first person to have made an estate gift to the University and in whose name we are meeting today, was closely linked with America's westward expansion. Born in Connecticut in 1770, just three days before the birth of Beethoven, he was energetic, personable, and decisive. In his late 30s, after having served as pastor of a Congregational church in Homer, New York, he came to the Western Reserve as a representative of the Connecticut Missionary Society. In 1809 he started a church in Aurora that was organized under

the “Plan of Union,” an agreement between Presbyterians and Congregationalists that allowed churches in the western regions of the country – this area was part of the Northwest Territory, after all – to select pastors of either denomination. Today the congregation is known simply as the Church in Aurora.

As a missionary, Derrow provided leadership for the new congregation until a permanent pastor could be named, which occurred in 1815 with the selection of Rev. John Seward. After leaving Aurora, Derrow traveled to other parts of the Western Reserve, finally settling in Vienna, about eight miles east of Warren, Ohio, where he operated a school and served as minister of the local Presbyterian church until his death in 1828.

Examining Rev. Derrow through a modern lens, we see the consummate networker, building ties that would support and sustain his new congregation. In founding the Aurora church, he relied heavily on the good offices of John Singletary, the township’s postmaster. Through him he gained access to the community’s leaders, many of whom were later involved in the successful campaign to gain a charter for Western Reserve College in nearby Hudson in 1826. Derrow’s successor, Rev. Seward, was one of the founding members of the College’s Board of Trustees. Postmaster Singletary’s son and his family operated a boarding house in Streetsboro that provided accommodations for many of the College’s students. Derrow remained close to both Seward and Singletary, and through them presumably to the College.

When Derrow died in 1828, only two years after the College opened, he was survived by Laura Loomis Derrow, his third wife – his first two wives having died. His will includes the following provision:

“To my true and loving wife, Laura L. Derrow, one half of my library, such books as she shall select. And to the theological and literary institution or college of the Connecticut Western Reserve, the other half of my books.”

At the time, Derrow’s bequest constituted a significant share of the library holdings for the small institution, and thus formed an important foundation for broader study. Although the books he contributed are primarily transcripts of sermons and other religious speeches, many of them address important public issues of the day, such as the criteria for a just war or for appropriate punishment for crimes.

The Special Collections Room in Kelvin Smith Library contains the entire pre-1850 library collection of Western Reserve College, including Derrow’s books. They are among the books that I invite students in my SAGES course on the history of the

University to compare to modern textbooks, and the exercise is quite informative. Today these books are also part of a library that was one of the first in the nation to integrate electronic resources with traditional library holdings and services.

A small sidelight: In the process of researching Derrow. I have found his name was spelled either D-E-R-R-O-W or D-A-R-R-O-W, apparently interchangeably, throughout his life. The signature I believe to be his uses the E, and so do I.

Rebecca Perkins Kinsman

By the mid-1830s, Western Reserve College was scarcely a decade old and had weathered – if painfully – a deeply divisive battle between the Abolitionists and the Colonizationists, both groups opposed to slavery. It was also a difficult time in the nation's economy, and a severe depression threatened the very existence of the College. The turbulent economy of the 1830s followed nearly two decades of rapid economic growth, fueled by westward expansion and speculation in land values. Matters came to a head with the Panic of 1837, when almost half of the nation's 850 banks closed and many others failed partially. The federal government had refused to regulate the banks, and there was widespread mistrust in the notes issued by local and regional banks since most of them did not have enough gold and silver to back up their paper notes.

Into this situation stepped Rebecca Perkins Kinsman. Born in Connecticut in 1773, she was 19 when she married a local man, John Kinsman, who was about twice her age. Her husband was one of the early settlers of the Western Reserve, and Mrs. Kinsman joined him in 1804 in a new town named Kinsman, just inside Ohio near the Pennsylvania border. John Kinsman was quite successful in business and in public life. He left a large estate at his death in 1813, which according to the terms of his will was to be administered by Mrs. Kinsman's older brother, General Simon Perkins, later known as the founder of the city of Akron.

Nonetheless, Mrs. Kinsman seems to have had considerable control over the management of the estate, giving generously to support a number of religious and educational causes. Just as the Panic of 1837 hit, Mrs. Kinsman made a gift of \$6,000 to Western Reserve College, an amount reportedly equal to the entire budget of the College for that year. By comparison, this year's budget for the university is about \$800 million. In gratitude for this gift, which literally allowed the institution to survive, the College's trustees granted her and her heirs perpetual, tuition-free scholarships.

While there is little by way of official documentation for the motives behind Mrs. Kinsman's generous gift, we do have a document in the University Archives that dates from the 1930s and quotes her great grand-niece, Grace Beaumont, a sophomore in Flora Stone Mather College. "Madame Kinsman," as she was known in the family, was apparently a "benevolent dictator" in the area around the town of Kinsman. When she heard that Western Reserve College was having difficulties, she wrote to her brother, "We must not let that college down... You must give, and I will give." They did, and to their gifts we can trace the survival of the College and the creation of the Perkins Professorship in Physics. That chair is held today by Dr. Philip Taylor, who is widely known for his research in the field of soft condensed matter, which has applications in such materials as polymers and liquid crystals – certainly pursuits neither Mrs. Kinsman nor her brother could have imagined.

During her student years, Ms. Beaumont liked to visit the portrait of her great-grand-aunt, which then hung in the President's Office. She described the portrait: "Her bright old eyes smiling through her square spectacles, her pink cheeks framed in her ruffled cap, in her muslin tucker and black silk, her wrinkled old hand putting a marker in her Bible..." I know her description is accurate: Mrs. Kinsman's portrait has hung in my own office since 1972, and I think seeing it every day has helped me appreciate the company of strong women – both at home and at work.

Laura Kerr Axtell

In 1876, when Leonard Case, Jr., prepared the trust that would lead to the creation of the Case School of Applied Science after his death in 1880, higher education was undergoing a dramatic reordering, one that later historians would describe as a revolution. Fundamental to this revolution was the rise of science – particularly applied science – into the pantheon of academic disciplines. This shift in collegiate education enabled some institutions to begin evolving into what we today call research universities, where advanced education and research are closely linked in a common mission.

Leonard Case was a Yale alumnus, a lawyer, a poet, heir to a very large fortune, and a person with a deep interest in natural history. Among the other members of the Case family in the area were his cousins Levi Kerr, who was a successful investor and businessman, and Levi's sister Laura Kerr. When Case died, Levi Kerr became administrator of his estate, though he died a few years later himself while vacationing

in Florida. His sister, by then already widowed by the death of her husband, the noted lawyer Silas Axtell, inherited a large estate from her brother.

In memory of her brother, and in support of the new institution founded by her cousin Leonard Case, Laura Kerr Axtell in 1885 contributed \$100,000 to the Case School to create its first endowed chair, the Levi Kerr Professorship in Mathematics. The gift was made just as the five-year-old school was moving from the Case family homestead on Cleveland's Public Square to its permanent site in what is now University Circle. Her contribution was equal to almost 10 per cent of the total funding left by Leonard Case's trust to found the entire institution – in today's terms, that would be the equivalent of 10 per cent of the University's \$1.5 billion endowment.

Over its life, the Kerr Professorship has been held by a number of very distinguished mathematicians. Its first holder was John Stockwell, a self-educated genius who was the first chairman of the Case School's faculty, in effect the head of the entire institution. Later occupants included Case President Charles Howe, Dean Theodore Focke, mathematician and astronomer Sidney McCuskey, and its current holder, James Alexander, chair of the Department of Mathematics, whose interests range across applications in biomedical science, engineering, optics, and logic.

At her death in 1890 at the age of 72, Laura Kerr Axtell's largest bequest was another \$50,000 to the Case School, plus an additional \$1,000 to repair the bust of her cousin Leonard Case, which had been damaged in the 1886 fire that raged through the Case Main Building. This bequest, combined with the earlier gift to create the Kerr Professorship, helped the still-young institution to establish itself among the leaders in the science-based "revolution in higher education."

In their own ways, Nathan Derrow, Rebecca Perkins Kinsman, and Laura Kerr Axtell invested their resources to help build institutions that would go beyond the boundaries of the world they knew, both intellectually and geographically. This wasn't easy: from the colonial era up through the 1870s, there was a strong tradition among American colleges – reflecting their European origins – that focused on preserving and passing along the prevailing understanding of an age-old culture. But this country was relatively new, with a spirit and a culture that were often at odds with those of Europe. These three donors, and others like them, were taking a gamble that the capacities they were helping to create would benefit their region and the nation.

Because of the institutional strengths that their generosity helped nurture, both Western Reserve and Case were able to provide supportive environments for advanced study and research in fields that were largely unknown during these donors' lifetimes, and to attract students and faculty from locations they could hardly have imagined. This combination of characteristics, in concert with society's evolving needs in the 20th century, helped both institutions emerge as national leaders in their fields as well as major forces in this region. And it was the increasing convergence of their widely recognized work in these priority fields that moved Case and Western Reserve to conclude that they could contribute more effectively by combining their strong traditions into a new institution.

Nathan Derrow, Rebecca Perkins Kinsman, and Laura Kerr Axtell – and all the others whose generosity helps the University see and move beyond the current state of the art – must be counted among the true heroes of this institution and of our entire society. It has been an honor to spend time with such a group here today.

Thank you.

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