

City College of New York North Campus

Individual Landmark

138th-140th Streets between Convent and Amsterdam Avenues

Designation Date: May 26, 1981



Shepard Hall on the City College of New York North Campus. Photo by Lorraine Colbert

The story of the founding of the College of the City of New York begins with the story of Townsend Harris, who was born in the village of Sandy Hill in Washington County, New York, on October 4, 1804. He grew up in this small upstate agricultural community in a family that was honest, industrious, and resourceful. These qualities characterized Townsend Harris throughout his life. He received only a moderate amount of education at the local school where he learned the "three Rs," which at that time were considered enough for any country boy.

When he was 13 years old, Townsend Harris was sent to New York City, and placed in the employ of a man who owned a drygoods store. A few years after that, his family moved to New York and he and his father and his brother John started a business importing and selling china and crockery. Their venture proved to be successful, but disaster intervened and their store was blown up with gunpowder in the attempt to stop the great fire of December 16, 1835. John and Townsend Harris reorganized the firm, and they continued in partnership until 1848.

Harris was a man of great intelligence, who was vitally interested in everything in the world around him. Exposure to the culture of New York opened new vistas for him. He felt very keenly his lack of higher learning and, through his own personal efforts, educated himself in college subjects. He was particularly interested in languages, and he learned to speak fluent French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and Portuguese.

Harris was well received socially, and was quite active in civic affairs. He was a volunteer fireman, a member of the militia, a trustee of the Northern Dispensary, a member of the Board of Education and a commissioner of the Ninth Ward. He was elected President of the Board of Education for two terms, 1846-1848, and it was during this time that he proposed free education at the college level for all young men who had graduated from the "common schools" of the city.

This was a very novel idea, and it was not received with universal enthusiasm. Harris was not to be deterred, however, and he enlisted the support of several influential men, among them James Gordon Bennett, editor of the *Herald*, and William Cullen Bryant, editor of the *Evening Post*. Both of these men strongly advocated the cause of the Free Academy in their editorials. Bryant wrote, "The Academy will give us intelligent mechanics, whose influence among our people, extending throughout the Union, and reacting upon ourselves, cannot fail to elevate our national character." The way was not smooth by any means, but it became easier as more and more publicity was given to the matter.

On February 23, 1847, the Townsend Harris Memorial and Draft of Bill was read into the record in the State Senate, and referred to the Committee on Literature. The bill was read out, referred to committee, reported upon, and amended for several weeks. Finally, the bill was approved 63 to 30 in the Assembly, and 20 to 0 in the Senate, and on May 7, 1847, Governor John Young signed the bill. It became Chapter 206 of the Laws of 1847, subject to the approval of the people of New York City. In a referendum held on Monday, June 7, 1847, the voters of New York went to the polls to render their verdict. When the votes were counted, 19,305 were in favor and only 3,409 were opposed. "The people of New York had set up a democratic institution of higher learning through the free and full use of the democratic process."

Now that the Free Academy was an accomplished fact, things happened quickly. A site comprising sixteen lots on Lexington Avenue between East 22nd and 23rd Streets was secured. This was an area somewhat uptown from the northern reaches of the populous city, which then extended as far as 14th Street. By November 1847, the Board of Supervisors and the Common Council had agreed on the purchase of the site, and the appropriation of funds to begin construction.

Just as Townsend Harris had carried the day, and his dream of a Free Academy was realized, fate decreed swift and immediate changes for him. Late in November, 1847, his mother died. He had been devoted to her, and she had supported and encouraged him in all his endeavors. He entered a period of melancholy, neglecting both business and public obligations, and in a touching letter dated January 26, 1848, he submitted his resignation to the Board of Education as its President, and as Chairman of the Executive Committee on the Free Academy, thus terminating all connection with the project.

The story of Townsend Harris continues, however, and, although it digresses from the story of City College, it must be told to complete the amazing history of his life. After several months of mourning and soul-searching, Harris drew himself together and decided to completely change his life. He was a middle-aged bachelor who had led a prosaic, hard-working life with no time for leisure. He now wanted to leave New York and its memories and, in characteristic fashion, he acted quickly and decisively.

During the summer of 1848, he sold his interest in the family business, purchased a half-interest in a vessel bound for California, and, leaving family and friends behind, he embarked on a great adventure. With the idea of becoming a sea captain, he applied himself during the six-month voyage around Cape Horn to learning everything about sailing square-rigged ships. On arrival at San Francisco, he purchased the other half-interest in the ship and became owner and master all at once.

The next six years he spent as captain of his own ship, His travels took him to China and the Dutch and English Indies and near, but not to, the forbidden island of Japan. Between voyages, he resided in China where he occasionally assisted the acting Vice Consul of the United States at Ningpo. The landing of Commodore Perry on the island of Japan excited Townsend tremendously and he wrote a letter of congratulation to Perry. The Commodore replied on January 7, 1854, in terms of "hearty gratification."

Realizing that the opening of Japan would have to be most carefully managed, Harris made a study of the situation. He composed a 119-page manuscript outlining the problems to be solved, and giving the benefit of his years of experience in the Far East. On March 24, 1854, he wrote in a similar vein to William L. Marcy, who was Secretary of State in the cabinet of President Franklin Pierce and a personal friend of Harris. As a result of this letter, Harris was summoned to Washington to discuss the matter of Japan, and on August 4, 1855, he was appointed United States Consul General for Japan.

The only foreign languages known at that time in Japan were Dutch and Portuguese. Fortunately, Harris was fluent in both. He labored long and hard to negotiate a binding treaty, which was successfully concluded and signed on July 29, 1858, On January 7, 1859, by a unanimous vote of the Senate on President James Buchanan's nomination, Townsend Harris

was officially appointed Minister Resident of the United States to Japan. He moved into the new American Legation in Kanagawa where the United States flag was first hoisted on July 1, 1859.

Townsend Harris served most creditably in this post until July 10, 1861, when he wrote a letter of resignation to President Abraham Lincoln, pleading ill health and a great desire to return home to New York. His years of retirement were active. He helped found the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He spent considerable time at the Union Club at the corner of East 22nd Street and Fifth Avenue, where he organized the Club library. He was, of course, gratified to see that the Free Academy, now the City College, was flourishing. He died on February 25, 1878, after a short illness, and was buried in Greenwood Cemetery. Succeeding generations of New Yorkers owe their thanks to this great man for the College of the City of New York.

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