

Archives and Special Collections

Dickinson College

Carlisle, PA

ARCHIVAL COLLECTION REGISTER

Title: **Presidents (1783-1833)** **RG 2/1**

Dates: 1783-1831

Material: Papers

Volume: 0.25 linear feet

Usage: There are no access restrictions on these records.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Dickinson College witnessed seven presidents from the time of its establishment in 1783 to the Methodist takeover fifty years later. The president, or principal, as the office was known then, taught many of the courses as the head of the faculty. The first president was Dr. Charles Nisbet, a Scotsman educated at Edinburgh and internationally renowned for his intellect. Having reluctantly accepted Dr. Benjamin Rush's offer of the presidency of a foundling college on the edge of the American wilderness, Nisbet eventually settled into his new home; after an initial period of unhappiness with his situation, he established a plan for the academic curriculum of the college – which often times conflicted with that of the trustees. Nisbet served the college for nearly twenty years until his death in 1804; the students who studied under him were some of the most successful in Dickinson history. Following him was Robert Davidson, professor of history and Belles Lettres as well as an active pastor in the local Presbyterian Church. Davidson had acted as principal during the brief period when Nisbet resigned in 1785 due to his reservations about the prospects of the college. Davidson served until 1809 when he resigned from the faculty in order to devote himself fully to the church.

The departure of Davidson led the trustees to elect Jeremiah Atwater of Middlebury College as the college's third president. Atwater sought to bring discipline to the college, in both its academic and financial affairs. In result, he was constantly at odds with his faculty and the trustees over the governance of the students, and these conflicts led to his eventual resignation in 1815. His replacement was Carlisle native John McKnight, who had been teaching at Columbia University. Upon his arrival at the college, he was met with a large financial debt – as had Atwater. Financial difficulties, as well as other controversies such as a student's death in a duel, caused the temporary closure of the college in 1816. When the school reopened in 1821, McKnight had taken a pastorate elsewhere. Instead, the noted minister John Mitchell Mason of New York occupied the presidency. Mason is credited with shifting the academic calendar to

start in September as well as instituting the issuance of reports to the parents of students. However, Mason resigned in 1824, two years after the tragic losses of his wife and son.

William Neill became the sixth president of Dickinson College in 1824. A strict disciplinarian like Atwater but much more popular, Neill enjoyed relative success; enrollment increased steadily, although two attempts to secure a theological seminary at the college failed (Atwater had also attempted and failed). However, in 1829 Neill suddenly resigned, and a large portion of the faculty went with him. The reasons for their departure are not certain, but conflicts with the trustees over the governance of the college and student discipline were the likely causes. Samuel Blanchard How, a tutor and instructor in the Grammar School under Atwater before preaching in New Jersey and Georgia, returned to assume the presidency in 1830. He found a troubled institution, with enrollment at an all-time low, conflict between the faculty and the increasingly disinterested trustees, and a dire financial situation. Although How supported a revision of the curriculum to favor a more practical education, the trustees were forced to close the college again in 1832. Dickinson would remain closed for nearly two years, during which time the Presbyterian Church relinquished control to the Methodist Church.

Below is a timeline of the presidents of Dickinson College from 1783 to 1833.

1785 – Charles Nisbet
1785-1786 – Robert Davidson (acting)
1786-1804 – Charles Nisbet
1804-1809 – Robert Davidson
1809-1815 – Jeremiah Atwater
1815-1816 – John McKnight
1816-1821 – *College closed*
1821-1824 – John Mitchell Mason
1824 – Alexander McClelland (acting)
1824-1829 – William Neill
1829-1832 – Samuel Blanchard How
1832-1833 – *College closed*

SERIES ARRANGEMENT AND DESCRIPTION

The Presidents 1783-1833 Record Group contains papers related the presidency of the seven men who served at Dickinson from 1783 to 1833. This Record Group corresponds with that of RG 1/1, the Trustees 1783-1833, which also documents the first fifty years of the college. The materials in this record group pertain to the president's duties in the administration of his office; any papers relating to his employment such as letters of acceptance or resignation and vouchers for salary are housed in RG 1/1. In addition, personal papers of the presidents have been removed to individual collections where applicable. The majority of the papers in this record group are correspondence with individual trustees regarding college business; also included are reports and resolutions from the faculty, as well as drafts of publications dealing with the curriculum. All materials in each series have been arranged chronologically.

RECORD GROUP INVENTORY

RG 2/1 - PRESIDENTS (1783-1833)

Series 1 Charles Nisbet (1784-1804)

1.1 Miscellaneous Affairs

- 1.1.1 13 July 1785 – Letter to John Dickinson, re: Dickinson's gift to the College
- 1.1.2 18 Aug. 1785 – Letter to Benjamin Rush, re: Nisbet's return to Scotland
- 1.1.3 29 Nov. 1788 – Letter to Richard Wistar, re: payment on a shipment of books

Series 2 Robert Davidson (1804-1809)

2.1 Miscellaneous Affairs

- 2.1.1 13 Jan. 1806 – Letter to James Hamilton, re: prospects for state aid
- 2.1.2 27 Dec. 1806 – Letter to W. W. Woodward, re: honorary diploma to T. Scott
- 2.1.3 20 June 1808 – Letter to James Hamilton, re: visit of Mead and Barnet, and scientific apparatus

Series 3 Jeremiah Atwater (1809-1815)

3.1 Miscellaneous Affairs

- 3.1.1 4 Jan. 1813 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: requests names of students seen at local tavern

Series 4 John McKnight (1815-1816)

There are currently no records available for the presidency of John McKnight.

Series 5 John Mitchell Mason (1821-1824)

5.1 Miscellaneous Affairs

- 5.1.1 undated – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: lack of personnel to fetch water
- 5.1.2 undated – Manuscript versification of Psalm 1, 8, 9, and 15
- 5.1.3 23 Nov. 1821 – Letter to George Duffield, re: insurance for the College, and proposal of Alexander McClelland for Faculty
- 5.1.4 15 Jan. 1822 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: draft of College regulations
- 5.1.5 23 May 1823 – Resolution of Faculty to Mason, re: recommendations on examinations
- 5.1.6 24 May 1823 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: amendment to rules and regulations

RG 2/1 - PRESIDENTS (1783-1833)

Series 6 William Neill (1824-1829)

6.1 Miscellaneous Affairs

- 6.1.1 25 Aug. 1825 – Letter to John Bannister Gibson, re: admission of special students
- 6.1.2 30 Aug. 1825 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: new publication of rules and regulations
- 6.1.3 6 Sep. 1825 – Rules and regulations
- 6.1.4 1 Apr. 1826 – Letter to the committee on the Revision of Statutes, re: rules on student discipline
- 6.1.5 13 Apr. 1826 – Letter to James Hamilton and Andrew Carothers, re: proposed library rules, and scientific apparatus
- 6.1.6 28 Sep. 1826 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: complaints about the janitor
- 6.1.7 30 Mar. 1827 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: visitation of student rooms
- 6.1.8 22 Mar. 1828 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: new position in Chemistry
- 6.1.9 17 May 1828 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: Faculty control of student discipline
- 6.1.10 21 May 1828 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: recommendations for new professor of Chemistry
- 6.1.11 2 Feb. 1829 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: complaint of Peter Browne, and insurrectionary spirit among the students
- 6.1.12 11 Feb. 1829 – Letter to John Bannister Gibson, re: request of faculty for consultation with the Board
- 6.1.13 18 Feb. 1829 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: complaint against Alexander McClelland in regard to case of George Browne
- 6.1.14 9 June 1829 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: Belles Lettres Society request for a library room
- 6.1.15 6 Aug. 1829 – Letter to George Duffield, et al., re: request for copy of questions and answers for Faculty
- 6.1.16 22-23 Sep. 1829 – Letter to Board of Trustees, re: standing of Robert Birch, with discussion of Alexander McClelland and R. W. Cushman

Series 7 Samuel Blanchard How (1829-1832)

7.1 Miscellaneous Affairs

- 7.1.1 1831 – Report of Mathematics Department by Alexander McFarlane
- 7.1.2 26 Sep. 1831 – Report of Chemistry Department by Lemuel Olmsted
- 7.1.3 Oct.-Nov. 1831 – Proposed changes to language and mathematics curriculum, with extract from Faculty minutes