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**Title:** "The Mermaid of Old West," by Charles F. Himes

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### Contact:

Archives & Special Collections  
Waidner-Spahr Library  
Dickinson College  
P.O. Box 1773  
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

[archives@dickinson.edu](mailto:archives@dickinson.edu)

*The*  
Mermaid of Old West



Dickinson College



# The Mermaid of Old West

AN OLD, UNIQUE, AND CLASSICAL  
WEATHER VANE

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*By Professor Charles F. Himes, Ph.D.*

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No sketch of "Old West," as the oldest of the group of college buildings at Dickinson has come to be almost affectionately designated, would be complete without an allusion at least to the so-called "Mermaid" that surmounts its beautiful belfry as a weather vane.

But the history of the venerable building itself is so interesting, and so crowded with incident and tradition, that little more than a passing notice can be allowed in the accounts of it, to the "Mermaid," one of its most prominent features, and at the same time so unique that it seems entitled to a monogram all its own.

Indeed, whilst the building itself is recognized as one of the finest specimens of college architecture of its period, the "Mermaid" is so little understood, or rather so misunderstood, that it seems out of keeping with the general high character of the building, and allusion to it by some may be accompanied by a half apologetic smile, or perhaps, at times it may be explained away as belonging to a much later date than the building, even as late as 1833.

However that might be, to the Dickinsonian, of earlier or later years, "Old West" would not be "Old West" without the "Mermaid," and it may be assumed, therefore, as certain that no apology will be called for, for an attempt to establish its high origin and its exceptional character in the family of weather vanes, as well as its thorough accord with the purposes and character of the building.

There are, however, no precise data; not even traditions as to its name, or its origin, or the date of its erection to start with. In the absence of any information on these points, the name it bears would doubtless be suggested to

any one by its appearance, and whatever the worker in iron of that date may have intended to fashion, he has failed even in suggesting it. The only one thing that can be asserted as certain in regard to its present name is—that the memory of no alumnus, not even of the oldest, “runneth to the contrary.” If it proves a misnomer, then it must be on other grounds than appearance; and in the absence of any plausible answer, even by tradition to the very natural questions as to who, or what suggested a mermaid as a weather vane, it would have to be regarded simply as an inexplicable architectural freak, without any particular significance.

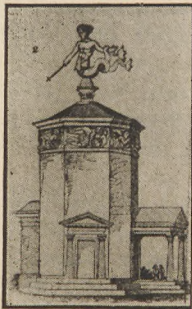
As to the date of its erection, however, which incidentally furnishes a clue to the answer of the other questions, there is at present no doubt whatever. An old print has turned up, of a date not later than 1810, in which the first “college house,” in its loneliness bears the name—“Dickinson College”, not West College, or “Old West.” In this print the so-called “Mermaid” not only appears in its present conspicuous position, but rather exaggerated in size, as if the artist intended to emphasize its position there. A closer examination of the print not only fixes the date of the “Mermaid” with greater precision, but with it, with highest probability, its origin.

The present building—“Old West College”—bears upon its front a tablet, which states that the College was burned down in 1803, and rebuilt in 1804. The present building was erected on the foundations of the first one, and upon the same general plan, with architectural modifications by the eminent architect, Latrobe, the architect of the capitol at Washington, and according to his emphatic recommendation was built of stone instead of brick. The old print, alluded to, is not simply of a brick building, but shows no tablet on the front, and there is nothing to suggest the brown-stone on the corners and the windows of the present building.

This removal of the date of the “Mermaid” to the first building, with which Latrobe had nothing to do, makes it plain that it was not a suggestion of his, although otherwise, by reason of his well known partiality for Grecian models and style, it might easily have been ascribed to him, as will appear. Its suggestion must, therefore, be looked for elsewhere, and its author is not hard to find.

The college was then, and had been for twenty years under the administration of that most remarkable man, Dr. Nisbet, its first president. He was acknowledged as

without a superior as a classical scholar, not only in America, but in his native Scotland, whence he was induced to come, largely by Dr. Benj. Rush, and others to take charge of the new college in the western world. As Taney, subsequently Chief Justice of the United States, who was graduated under him, narrates, he frequently heard recitations in the classics without the text before him. The funds for the erection of a "college house" were largely secured by his personal efforts. No one could have had a greater personal interest in the details of the building, or greater influence in shaping them. It is hardly conceivable that he would have sanctioned, much less have originated any design for anything so conspicuous as a weather vane, that would have been violative of classical taste, much less that savored of the grotesque. In the early part of that century there was unusual interest in the art and architecture of Greece, and it may be assumed that he was not unfamiliar with the suits of explorations there. The Octagonal Tower of the Winds\* could not have escaped his notice, with the eight



eight sides, and the swiveled Triton, of beaten copper surmounting it, with a wand in its right hand that pointed, as it turned, to the direction of the blowing wind. What could have seemed more suitable to him to add a finishing touch, classical and at the same time unique, to a building devoted to higher classical education, than a copy of this, probably the first known weather vane. It seems justifiable, therefore, to assume this high origin and character for the "Mermaid" of "Old West."

The iron-worker of that day doubtless did his best in fashioning it. If his work through all the years has suggested a mermaid rather than a triton, there is after all not much real difference between the two to be explained away.

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\*A description is given, with a wood-cut, in Eschenburg's "Manual of Classical Literature," Translation by N. W. Fiske. Philadelphia: E. C. & J. Biddle, 1851, Page 31, Fig. 2, Plate XXI, p. 178.

## Mermaid of Old West

This Tower, or Temple of the Winds, dates before 100 B. C. It is constructed of marble, and is still as a whole in a good state of preservation, with the carvings of the winds on the tops of its eight sides, and traces of sundials remaining. The Triton of beaten copper, to be sure, is gone, and the present roof is of the Turcogrecian period, but full and reliable descriptions of it, of an early date, remain, which fully substantiate the preceding statements. Vitruvius, in the volume of his work which treats of wind-gods and sundials, describes the metal Triton, and credits it to

Andronicus. But whether he designed the whole temple as it is, or restored it and added the Triton, or whether, indeed, a triton is, or is not a wind-god and appropriate as weather vane on the Temple of the Winds may be matters of discussion for classical scholars and archeologists, but the facts of interest to us are simply that the Athenians, who knew more about tritons than we do, settled that for themselves, bore with the suggestion, and permitted it to be carried out, and that descriptions of the Triton, and the name of the architect who placed it there have survived the years.

In thus establishing the high character of the "Mermaid" of "Old West", which has for so many college generations fortold clear weather, when the north-west wind blew, it is hoped that it may be secured against any spirit of innovation and progress that with iconoclastic fury so often obliterates old landmarks, simply because they are old, and perhaps misunderstood.

The beautiful old belfry, which it surmounts, still intact, but almost pathetic in its unbroken silence, was a fitting support to the "Mermaid;" and the time may come, when it will again hold a sweet toned bell, not to be rung to death in the celebration of comparatively trifling events, by frequent and prolonged ringing, but to be reserved for long life by calling together the sons, and daughters, of Old Dickinson, only on the greater occasions of the college.

