

BICENTENNIAL CHARTER DAY REMARKS

President David Hodge

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On what was likely a cold Friday, February 17th, 1809, a still young Ohio Assembly passed a bill authorizing the charter of Miami University. A federal land sale agreement in 1794 had failed to identify a place for a university in the Miami valley, and now it was up to the new state of Ohio to authorize a group of intrepid citizens to make this marvelous, but precarious, “idea” of a university a tangible reality.

Many fine ideas never become reality, but we are here today to celebrate an idea that did, an idea powerful enough to be sustained over two centuries and commanding enough to inspire a third century of even greater accomplishment. To be sure, it remains an imperfect and evolving idea, and, as our history demonstrates, the idea requires constant nurturing and change to meet the challenges of the day and the morrow. But as history also demonstrates, the central values of the Miami idea are strong and enduring.

In addition to approving the Charter, the Assembly named Miami’s first Board of Trustees and charged them with finding a site for the university. The Trustees turned to the Rev. John Browne to promote a university that literally was only an idea. Yet it was an idea that inspired gifts and led the Board to hire Robert Hamilton Bishop as Miami’s first president in 1824. It was an idea so grand that the Reverend Browne had the audacity to visit President Madison himself to ask for a contribution.

But it was up to President Bishop to put in place a faculty, to implement a curriculum, to see the cupola placed on the first building, and to admit the first class of college students, making the idea tangible. Drawing from long-held notions of what a university should be, he created a curriculum that was classical in design and hired a faculty who were both demanding and supportive of students, qualities that would guide the early growth of the university and that continue to guide us today.

From the very beginning students have been engaged in actively shaping the idea of Miami. The forerunner of the Miami Student newspaper, for example, was published in our third year. Although the newspaper was warmly welcomed by faculty, not all student initiatives were so well received. Most notably, during Miami's early days, tension grew over the creation of secret societies that would eventually become fraternities. This tension would severely test the idea of Miami in the 1848 Snow Rebellion, when Miami students, reflecting the national struggle between students and university authorities, filled Old Main with snow in protest over restrictions on literary societies.

All but 68 of Miami's 112 students – including nearly half of the seniors – were expelled until the Board of Trustees reversed the President's actions and re-instated most of them. Since another of the Trustees' actions was to sack the President, I must confess that telling this part of our history always makes me nervous! But it is a moment that stretched the idea of Miami, without a doubt making Miami a better university by embracing the notion of an active, engaged student body. Student-initiated social and intellectual life had become a permanent core part of the idea of Miami.

During the Civil War, Miami contributed greatly to the leadership of the nation, solidifying the highest expectations for our university. Thirteen

Miamians rose to the rank of general. Two members of Lincoln's cabinet were Miami students. Five Miamians were governors, while three were U. S. Senators. Nine alumni were college presidents, and eleven graduates served as newspaper editors. The Miami idea was having an impact well beyond our campus and the state of Ohio, an impact that would eventually include electing a Miamian as President of the United States. We were clearly a nationally recognized university.

Despite this amazing level of success, scarcely a dozen years later the idea of Miami seemed dead, the victim of the demographic shadow of the Civil War, the economic panic of 1873, a restrictive admissions policy, and, most importantly, an outdated curriculum. The sense of despair of the times was captured in a letter to the Board of Trustees from Professor Robert Bishop, Jr., son of our first president. He wrote

“We are in difficulty and in trouble: There is much to discourage and dishearten: We are in debt; the number of students is decreasing, one or two of the faculty are about to retire; the State will not aid us; we have, it may be, few warm friends, and some avowed enemies”

Even at this moment of grave concern, though, Professor Bishop continued to believe in the idea of Miami. He continued in his letter

“...Still, I do not despair of the University. I saw her in 1849, when as deeply in debt and with fewer students, she was involved in difficulty and trouble. She did not perish then; and she need not perish now. The energy and harmony of action which were successful then, will, with the blessing of God, be equally successful now.”ⁱ

Of the 512 colleges and universities that existed at the start of the Civil War, only 104 survived, and Miami is among them despite the

seemingly insurmountable odds it faced when it closed in 1873. Yet, because of the power of the idea, and the visionary efforts of trustees, alumni, and local civic leaders, Miami re-emerged twelve years later, giving birth to a “new” idea of Miami, a Miami that would embrace a more progressive stance for change.

Scarcely two years after re-opening, Miami admitted women for the very first time, including the daughter of President McFarland. Now I am sure that everyone here today thinks that admitting women was a really smart decision! But it was a decision that radically changed the “idea” of Miami and was extremely controversial at the time.

The number of women at Miami remained quite small until the Ohio State Normal College, a teachers college, was installed at Miami in 1902. This change not only increased the number of women, but also stretched the educational span of Miami, moving beyond the classical liberal education to include professional fields. The idea of Miami was being extended to meet the needs of an evolving society.

Additional changes in curriculum, plus the construction of a new science building, new residence halls, a gymnasium, and Miami Field were part of the move to become a more secular and collegiate university. It was also a time of growing ambition for Miami as reflected in the Centennial in 1909.

The Centennial celebration was a grand, week-long affair, that took place in a very hot June along with commencement. Miami alumni commemorated the Centennial and took a step toward the future by raising half of the funds needed to construct the new Alumni Library, a building that would play a central role for the next century, and that

now, as Alumni Hall, continues to provide an exceptional learning environment for architecture and interior design.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of Miami became increasingly modern and complex. These changes are perhaps best reflected in the life of President Alfred Upham, who arrived at Miami by horse and buggy as a student in 1898 and died as Miami's President in 1945, two years after Miami had constructed its own airport.

As a senior, Upham wrote the words to our Alma Mater. As a professor, Upham was instrumental in launching Miami's first Homecoming in 1914. In a speech on behalf of the Society of Alumni he said, "*A student body... is something more than a group, it is a never ending procession...the alumni are an integral part of the procession...they are mighty important factors in what shall come after them.*"ⁱⁱ Upham understood how the traditions developed by students would forever link them to the idea of Miami as passionately loyal alumni, making Miami a stronger university. He understood, as we do today, that academic life is the foundation of our enterprise, but he also believed that the idea of Miami should exist in their hearts as well as in their minds.

One of the best examples of this deepening emotional bond to the idea of Miami is an account of the legendary football coach and Miami alumnus, Paul Brown's first trip to the place Miami. In the fall of 1926, Brown took a train to Hamilton and then shared a bus filled with Miami students on their way to Oxford. As described in his most recent biography, "*On his final leg of the journey, Brown was introduced to the infectious spirit found at Miami. As the bus made its way up a hill near the campus, a student rose from his seat and shouted, 'Crimson Towers, everybody up!' Upon that command every occupant on the bus stood*

and sang the Miami fight song. Though he didn't know the words, Brown was entranced.”ⁱⁱⁱ

To be sure, the first half of the twentieth century had its enormous challenges as well. Miami struggled through the Depression and then was inventive and responsive to the nation's needs during World War II. At the end of the War, like many other universities across the country, Miami welcomed a large new cohort of veterans as students under the GI bill. This cohort launched a nearly three-decade, three-fold period of growth in the size of Miami in Oxford, increasing from 5,000 students in 1950 to almost 15,000 students in 1980. Included in this growth was our union with Western College, whose values and alumnae continue to inspire our curriculum and students.

The sheer change in size brought a new vision of the idea of Miami. A much larger Miami would struggle with its identity, yet the core idea of Miami would continue. We remained a university committed to the development of the whole student, and, despite our size, committed to exceptional academic accomplishment based on a liberal arts foundation for all students, so that we would continue to produce graduates of uncommon quality.

Miami not only grew in size on the Oxford campus, but in 1966 we opened Ohio's first regional campus in Middletown and followed it two years later with a campus in Hamilton. Just a few weeks ago, we opened the new Voice of America Learning Center in West Chester. These endeavors have certainly stretched the idea of Miami, although they fit perfectly into our mission as a public university.

In many regards, the opening of the Luxembourg center in 1968 was even more radical than the opening of the regional campuses. Much in advance of most other universities, Miami saw the need to provide international learning experiences for our students, anticipating the inevitability of a global perspective. Today we take this need for granted and have set a goal of having at least half of our Oxford students study abroad for credit before graduation. We have also dramatically increased the number of students from abroad who study here. Their presence greatly adds to the diversity of thought and experience on the Oxford campus, and they connect us to places and people throughout the world.

Like many universities, understanding the value of diversity, and accepting the responsibility to give the opportunity of a Miami education to all races and social and economic groups, did not always come easily to the idea of Miami. It was not until 1903 that Nellie Craig, Miami's first African American student, was admitted, and not until 1925 that the first African American students received bachelor's degrees.

Significantly, we can point to real progress in the past few years, although we recognize that much remains to be done to ensure that everyone, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or economic circumstances, is welcome and engaged on our campuses. It is now clear that the idea of Miami unequivocally includes, indeed demands, a diverse student body and a diverse faculty and staff.

For Miami, a unique aspect of our diversity is our bond with the Miami Tribe. Forcibly removed from their homelands, this land, in 1846, the Miami Tribe is now located in Oklahoma. Though we share their name,

it was not until the 1970s that we began to create the partnership that continues to grow in strength and impact.

Each year we welcome new tribal students who add to our community, and each year they and others work to reclaim their culture and their language. The idea of Miami will forever be entwined with the people who were here before us and are now of us and we of them. How fitting it is that we complete this reflection on our history by celebrating the circle that has brought us to our beginnings.

However, today we do more than celebrate our two centuries of history. Today is the first day of our third century. Like many previous generations, we find ourselves in challenging times. Yet I am certain that we will prevail, that our third century will be our best century.

The perspectives gained from 200 years of history provide the vision and the confidence to imagine and to grow the idea of Miami as the Engaged University, a Miami that, in the words of our new Mission Statement, “is deeply committed to student success, builds great student and alumni loyalty, and empowers its students, faculty, and staff to become engaged citizens who use their knowledge and skills with integrity and compassion to improve the future of our global society.” The idea of Miami as the Engaged University is clearly recognizable from our past, yet fresh in its vision for our future.

The idea of Miami has survived, and thrived, because it provides a powerful sense of mission and of possibility, yet it continues to evolve. The idea was born two hundred years ago today, carried forth by the audacity of Reverend Browne...in the vision of Robert Hamilton Bishop...in the courage of Nellie Craig...in the wisdom of Chief

Leonard. It resided in the hopeful minds of those intrepid citizens who gathered on this February day 200 years ago, citizens who could never have imagined what was to become of their idea.

But most importantly, the idea of Miami resides in each of us. Our individual hopes and dreams, our achievements and contributions, will continue to shape the evolving idea of Miami for generations to come.

As President Millett said at the time of our Sesquicentennial, the best way to honor the past, is to build the future. And so today we celebrate a moment where the past and the future meet in celebration and anticipation. The student Alfred Upham captured this moment perfectly when he wrote in our Alma Mater, “Old Miami New Miami, days of old and days to be.”

Now it is our turn, our time, to move the idea of Miami forward, to create a future filled with extraordinary “days to be.” This enduring idea that we call Miami, this idea that is two hundred years old today, calls for all that we can do to secure a better future for our region, for the State of Ohio, for the United States, indeed for the world.

For love and honor, thank you.

ⁱ Report of Robert Bishop, Professor of Latin, to the Miami Board of Trustees, June 7, 1873. From the Minutes and Materials of the Board of Trustees of Miami University, Miami University Archives.

ⁱⁱ Alfred Upham’s remarks to Homecoming alumni and visitors (assembled at the “men’s smoker”), quoted by The Miami Student, November 19, 1914, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew O’Toole, Paul Brown, Cincinnati: Clerisy Press, 2008, p. 14.