

BENNINGTON COLLEGE

GROUND-BREAKING EXERCISES

August 16, 1931

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS - ROBERT D. LEIGH, PRESIDING

In the name of the Trustees I welcome you as friends, well wishers, neighbors, and helpers of Bennington College. The nature of our surroundings suggests the informal, traditional New England barn raising rather than the colorful but solemn academic ceremony which might otherwise have seemed appropriate for this occasion. Modern developments in building construction have changed the character of neighborly aid in raising our buildings. But the help and the group cooperation are no less real. In this audience and among the even larger company who are unable to be here, are 231 people whose gifts have united in making this college possible and many others whose work and counsel have contributed to the same end.

This occasion then is fundamentally one of simple rejoicing that the money for starting Bennington College has been given; that the plans for the buildings have been completed; that the contracts for their construction have been let; and that today symbolically with hand and spade, tomorrow with tractor and steam shovel the digging will begin. Next summer at about this time or later, the buildings will be ready for the first college class to enter in September.

It is tempting to claim an importance for an occasion like this beyond the facts which I have mentioned. We have here some of the complex machinery by which modern man seeks to preserve his strummings and his talk for a possibly grateful posterity. But who can tell whether this one out of the myriad acts and words which crowd this hour throughout the world will deserve to survive the passing moment? Surely the significance of our ceremony lies in the lap of the inscrutable future. It depends on whether our cultivation of this ground produces a useful variation among living institutions.

Both in our physical plant and in our educational program we have consciously designed for immediate usefulness rather than for a hoped-for permanence. We are more concerned with making our plans adaptable for a changing future than in seeking through monuments of brick and stone to resist for a time inevitable change and decay. The buildings we have found on these grounds we are adapting to our use. The new construction is simple, flexible, and homegrown. Such beauty as the buildings possess will derive from their appropriateness for their immediate uses and their relation to a similar honest workmanship in the past. I hope that if prosperity eventually overtakes us we shall never attempt to strain at beauty with expensive structures borrowed from other ages and meant for other uses. Our buildings are to be homes and workshops rather than monuments.

So also in our educational program we are seeking to devise something of immediate usefulness to the group of girls to be put in our charge. By this I do not mean that we are so enamoured with the contemporary that we shall forget the past out of which it is largely made, that we shall drift along comfortably on the current of fashions in thought and habit, or that we shall try to encourage acquiescence in the standards and the practices of our day. But we do wish to keep to the fore the actual, the changing world which our students are living in, its art, its literature, its science, its social organization, and its other features which have not yet been caught up and organized into academic subjects.

This means a flexible program, one where the teacher can make close contact both with the student and with the life about him. It means that our relevant plans of today will be irrelevant tomorrow. It means that educationally as well as in our physical plant we must plan for

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change as a normal process not as an occasional interruption of a presumably static condition.

Our newness carries with it many handicaps. But for a time at least it brings advantages in the comparative facility for analyzing educational need without a warping institutional tradition. If we can use to the full, even for a generation, these opportunities it seems to me that we shall have justified the efforts put forth in creating the institution.