MORE LETTERS TO LABAN CLARK
Relating Particularly to the History of Wesleyan University
edited by Frederick A. Norwood

Among the letters to Laban Clark preserved at Garrett Theological Seminary are several which deal with his work as one of the founders and president of the Board of Trustees of Wesleyan University in Connecticut from 1830 to 1868, the year of his death.* Because they deal with the history of one of the most important educational institutions established under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and because they were written by some of the most eminent figures of the early nineteenth century, they are offered here for the use of historians.

Laban Clark, member of the New York Annual Conference, was presiding elder of the New Haven District in 1829. His duties brought him to Middletown, Connecticut, at a time when the property of a defunct academy became available. He acted vigorously, taking a proposal to his conference to purchase the property for a Methodist college. As a result a joint committee was established with three representatives from the New York Conference (John Emory, Samuel Luckey, and Heman Bangs) and three from the New England Conference (Timothy Merritt, Stephen Martindale, and Wilbur Fisk). When the institution was established in 1830, Clark was elected president of the Board of Trustees, and also president of the Joint Board, a body composed of representative members of the annual conferences.

The first meeting of the Board of Trustees, August 24-26, 1830, resulted in the election of Wilbur Fisk, then president of Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, as president of the fledgling college. Fisk, most famous as a Methodist partisan in the Calvinistic Controversy of the early nineteenth century, was well qualified to assume leadership of a Methodist collegiate institution in the center of the highly educated environment of New England, which still basked in the glories of Puritan churchmanship and Edwardian theology. Three of the letters are from his pen.

Those who wish further background of context for these letters are referred to the following: Archives of Wesleyan University; Carl F. Price, Wesleyan’s First Century (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1932); George C. Baker, An Introduction to the History of Early New England Methodism, 1789-1839 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1941); George Prentice, Wilbur Fisk (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1890); Joseph Holdich, The Life of Wilbur Fisk,


1. From Wilbur Fisk, September 12, 1829. This letter was written from Wilbraham, Massachusetts, where Fisk was head of Wesleyan Academy. In May, 1829, Clark had presented the proposal to obtain the Middletown property for a college, and a meeting was called for New York composed of representatives of the New York and New England annual conferences. Fisk’s concern for the continuing welfare of the Wilbraham institution and for the financial stability of the new enterprise is evident.

Wilbraham Sep 12, 1829

Dear Brother,

I have no other objection to the meeting of the committee in New York than that there seems to be a propriety of our meeting where we can have personal communication with the Middletown gentlemen. I am satisfied on reflection that some of the conditions in their proposition should be altered. I have feared from the beginning that the prescribed sum could not be raised. I have no objection that the trial should be made but I have a strong objection to set up a school next fall and proceed to raise a confidence in the publick that we shall have a College and put ourselves to the trouble and cost of getting it up and of soliciting funds and then in case of failure in the subscription be liable to be driven from the premises. And how can we consult on this subject so well as by a personal interview? Whether the other members of the committee will object to going to New York I cannot say. As it will probably be too late for steam boat navigation I should think it would add much to their journey & expense. Besides some of the committee have never seen the premises, and this would be desirable in order to their coming to a decision. Br Merritt proposed having the meeting at Middletown.¹ However after making this statement and giving these reasons if you still think it best to have the meeting at New York let me know & I will notify the other members of our committee. That there should be a general meeting of the committee somewhere & at some time I am fully convinced of. The time proposed suits me the best of any as it is in our vacation. It is the opinion of most of our brethren with whom I have conversed on this subject, that considering the great & repeated exertions we have

¹ Timothy Merritt, one of the three on committee of New England Annual Conference.
made in our Conference in behalf of the Academy² very little could at present be raised in our Conference for a College at Middletown. Some of our trustees however seemed willing to unite in the object provided some permanent arrangement could be fixed upon by which this seminary could have its existence and immunities secured to it. But none of us seem willing to put our hands to an institution which shall in process of time swallow up our Academy as the "Advocate" swallowed up our "Herald."³ All this however can be discussed at the meeting. Be pleased to write again soon.

Yours in Christian Bonds. W. Fisk

2. From John Emory, January 21, 1830. He was elected book agent in 1828, and edited the Methodist Quarterly Review. In 1832 he was elected bishop. See his article on education in MQR, XIII (1831), 160-89. He was one of the members of the joint committee of New York and New England Annual Conferences.

New York Jan 21, 1830

Dr Brother

I send you, with this, two pamphlets showing some recent doings in this City respecting a University—Columb⁴ College ¹—Having been invited, I have attended several meetings of gentlemen in regard to the University, & have been placed on their standing Commee, & also on one for devising the courses of instruction.—I have stated to them my views in favor of a University in the proper sense, as a Professional School, etc.—etc.—& also my engagements in regard to our own College, & finding that it will be impracticable for me to attend to both with advantage, & also that, in consequence of the stand taken by Columb⁴ College, the University here will be driven in fact to become, in part at least, another College, I purpose to resign my post in the Committees of the University of New York, though, on the broad and liberal basis on which I shd wish to see a true University, in such a City, I most heartily wish it success, & believe that every College in the land will be interested in its success, & particularly ours as the University also wd be interested in our success.

Applications will doubtless be made here speedily for subscriptions, & to our friends among others—ought we not then to anticipate this?—I think it of great importance that you shd come here immediately, & let us have a consultation, & take some active

³ The Zion's Herald merged with the Christian Advocate in 1828.
⁴ Columbia University, founded 1754, named Columbia College 1784.
measures. I have not the means this moment to consult Bros. L. & B., but cannot doubt their concurrence—C4 Bro. Burch come also we shd be glad; yet, if not, we cd still make a quorum, & I think might set on foot here conditional subscriptions.—

Please write immediately.

In haste, very affly

J. Emory

3. From Thomas M. Drake, M.D., Professor at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, scientist and Methodist, elected but did not serve on faculty of Wesleyan University.

Ohio University Jany. 30th 1830

Dear Brother

A few days ago I rec'd yours of the 5th inst.1 I perused it with pleasure and satisfaction on two accounts. First it gave me great pleasure to learn that there is the fairest prospects of accomplishing that, which I so earnestly desired, the establishment of a literary and Scientific Institution, under the direction of our own Church, on an enlarged scale & a permanent basis.—Such an institution is needed, on account of the power, which the Presbyterians have acquired in New York and New England. Such an Institution will concentrate some considerable literary & Scientif talents, the force of which will be more felt, and the lustre of which will be more brilliant, than they are now in their present, scattered, and perhaps somewhat rusty condition. Such an Institution will give a character & influence to our Church in your parts which it does not now possess, will gradually improve the taste & talents of our Ministry and add to their weight and influence in society at large.—

It also afforded no small degree of satisfaction to perceive that you had not forgotten me. That you are willing to ascribe to me the best & noblest feelings, a strong feeling for the character and welfare of our church and also a desire on your part to promote my interest when opportunities presented themselves.

I could not at present say that it would be in my power to serve you if I were elected. My reasons are as follow. First I was chosen in a storm & contest between Presbyterians & the Friends of Methodism for power in this Institution.2 I was not aware of this at the time. I only learned it after I came here. I am the only Officer be-

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1 An invitation to join the faculty of the new college.
2 Ohio University, Athens, chartered 1804, opened 1809.
3 Samuel Luckey and Heman Bangs, members of New York Annual Conference, along with Emory.
4 Thomas Burch, member of New York Annual Conference, newly appointed minister in Middletown.
longing to Our Church in the Institution & unless there was some other person to take my place here, who would stand fast for the best of causes & protect the concerns of Methodism, I would have to see my way clear in regard to usefulness & more usefulness, before I could abandon them here. Money alone could not induce me to do so. There is but one way in which, at present, I can perceive it possible to be accomplished, and that would be by getting Wm Bangs here a while privately to learn the practical part of my business here & then try to Elect him in my place.—

I have, no doubt, but I might be of some service to you. Three years practice, with a tolerably good apparatus, has enabled to discharge the duties of an Instructor in Natural Science in a very different manner from that, when I possessed nothing but Knowledge from mere reading and theory.—You ought, if possible, in your Chemical etc. department to get a man, who has practical skill united with theoretical Knowledge. No one fully knows the disadvantage of a want of this practical Knowledge & manual dexterity in performing operations as an Instructor in this department of Science.—It is only after he has learned, that he sees wherein he has failed, for the want delicate & accurate experiment, to throw a sufficiently clear light upon different subjects.—

Again, another obstacle is that, considering the cheapness of living in this place, I have a tolerably good salary; it is also certain as it arises from the rent of all the town lots & farms in this & the adjoining township. Our funds are therefore sound and [the] Institution can always be supported here independent of tuition bills. My salary, at present is what it was at first $600, with the prospect of it being increased as the debt of the Institution is almost Extinguished & more of our lands are becoming settled every year.—A family may be supported handsomely on the half of my salary here. I am also Vice President of the Institution & my friends hold out the Encouragement of placing me at its head when a vacancy occurs, which according to the course of nature cannot be many years distant.

Another reason Mrs. D. would be rather unwilling; but this could be surmounted. It would cause a sacrifice of her property, part of which arises from the evils of slavery.—I must close. Write me again and tell me how you are coming on. I remain your Sincere friend.

T. M. Drake
Rev. L. Clarke.

[Added fragments:] Would it be possible for you to get any of the

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3 William Bangs, son of Nathan, graduated from Ohio University, 1829 with highest honors; became professor at Augusta College, Kentucky, then entered ministry in New York Conference.
Scientific men on your District to send us some minerals. Such as are not common, or not to be obtained in our country. Ours is a secondary country. If any could be obtained they might forwarded to the Book-room & on through their agency at our expense. T. M. Drake

I have written to Br Bangs on the subject of your letter, have requested him to write me.—I have not told you any thing about Mrs. D. She is about 20 a black haired, black eyed, fine looking Virginia girl. My change has contributed very much to my happiness.—

4. From Wilbur Fisk, February 27, 1830
Wilbraham Feb. 27. 1830

Dear Brother

Yours was duly received and I approve of the proposed alterations in the Report. I was in Boston in Jan and had conversation with Br Martindale respecting the pieces which came out in the Advocate in relation to the College. We were agreed in the opinion that either the writer of those pieces had treated the N Eng. Con. & their Committee with unbecoming neglect or the N Eng. Con. and their Committee had been unpardonably officious. Our Conference supposed they were invited by the N. York Con. to appoint a Committee to cooperate with them by Counsel & money & patronage to build up a College. In that view they appointed a Committee—your Committee received them—and we acted. But the Advocate carried the idea that the N Y Con. was the Sole agent in this business; and none can suppose from those publications that the feelings or interests of any other Conferences were thought of.

Br Peck says you mentioned a young lady to him who you thought would answer our purpose for a preceptress here. We have some partial engagements with one but we may fail and in that case we should want to know where we could get another. We want one who is accomplished in the ornamental branches and who will be well qualified as a lady a Christian & a scholar to take charge of such a school. Would this young lady answer this description. Be pleased to answer this inquiry when you next write and inform me what the address of this young lady is that, if we should need her, I may know where to direct a letter.

3Stephen Martindale, member of the special committee of the New England Annual Conference.
4 The sensitivity of the New England Conference has not been generally known.
5 George Peck, appointed in 1829 to Ithaca, Susquehannah District, and in 1830 to Utica, Oneida District, Oneida Conference.
I have written to Br Olin 4 & received an answer. He writes favorably. His health is improving and there is some prospect of his being able to serve us if we should wish. What are they doing at Bridgeport & Troy?

I will attend your Conference if my avocations [ ? ] will permit.

Your Brother & Fellow laborer in the Common Cause

W. Fisk.

5. From Wilbur Fisk, November 21, 1835.

Rev & Dear Brother.

Here we are still in Paris, but we begin to think it is all one to our friends in America where we are; for we have not heard a lisp from them since we left—Of course we infer that you find nothing to remind you of our absence—therefore we make the second logical inference that all things go on as usual. This last consideration gives us some comfort—for we would not desire to be painfully missed. I feel desirous however to hear from you all & have the particulars especially of the University how it prospers—whether the monied concerns go on well—whether the money is obtained from the Quarry & from Stamford. Whether the [illegible name] place is secured & the Bailey lot—whether the chemical laboratory is in progress—whether the students conduct themselves well, etc. I have written to Bro. Smith 1 to send me some catalogues to London so that I can get them in the spring & also requested him if you got a print of the College buildings to send me in the same bundle some of the copies—They will be of use to me England if I should attempt to solicit anything for the College. I know not which would be best whether to take a print of the buildings as they are—say from the painting Thorpe executed for G.P. Disoway, Esq. 2 or a print from your plan, stating on the print what buildings are erected & what not—please to consult with the Committee & if it is thought worth while to strike of a print of some kind send me a half dozen as before stated in Bro. Smith’s packet. I shall draw shortly on the Treasury for between one and two thousand dollars—I have already made a purchase of apparatus to the amount of above 1000$ but part of it will not be ready until February. 3 Those which are now ready will be sent off in about two weeks. I am waiting to consult some of the scientific men here before I purchase several other important & costly instruments in Astronomy, Electro-magnetism,

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4 Stephen Olin. See letter of November 11, 1839.
1 Augustus W. Smith, fourth president. He was one of the original faculty members, in mathematics. He served as acting president during Fisk’s European tour.
2 Assistant to He£nan Bangs, special financial agent.
3 The Archives of Wesleyan University have several letters on scientific apparatus addressed to Smith.
etc. Perhaps some of these I shall not purchase until I return to England. I find there is an opportunity of doing much better by being on the spot to make the purchase in person than by order; not so much on account of the price, for the prices are all fixed, as on account of the kind of instruments. I shall also make a small purchase of some of the most approved modern scientific works in the French.

I could write many things respecting this country which I doubt not would be interesting to you but I may do this perhaps in a more general way. Be pleased to remember us to all friends especially to Mrs. Clark who I hope is better & to your daughter. My health is improved & so is Mrs. Fisk's. Mrs. [illegible name] is as fat as a porpoise—we shall leave Paris for Italy providence permitting in about 12 or 14 days.

With Esteem & affection—
Yours in Gospel
W. Fisk

6. From Stephen S. Olin, November 11, 1839. He was elected president of Wesleyan University August 6, 1839. Since he was in Europe traveling for his health during this period, Clark's letter announcing his election reached him only in November. The letter below is his reply. In fact, he did not serve as president owing to his extensive travels, the death of his wife, and his own precarious health. After the brief term of Nathan Bangs he was again elected to the office, and this time served effectively for nine years until his death.

Trieste Nov 11. 1839

Gentlemen:

I am sorry to inform you that I did not receive your letter, written in April, until yesterday, nor have I had from any other quarter, any intimation of the wishes which that letter conveys with regard to my becoming President of the Wesleyan University. I have however, just got a letter from a friend in Paris informing me that he has seen it announced in the Christian Advocate & Journal that I have been actually elected to fill that office. From the official character of that paper taken in connection with your communication, I am rather called upon to consider the question of accepting an appointment already conferred than that of becoming a candidate for it. I wish it were in my power to speak definitely upon the subject. The interests of the Institution probably require a definite answer but the uncertainty with which the state of my health invests all of my arrangements, would render such a reply impossible if no other circumstances demanded my consideration in a matter involving such important interests.
You are probably aware of the relation in which I stand to Randolph-Macon College. I resigned my office there before leaving Va. but subsequently consented that my resignation should not take legal effect until the next meeting of the Board, as they were unable to select my successor and thought such a delay would be useful. I learned so lately as January last that my name was still published as President, more that a very confident expectation of my return to there was still entertained by the Trustees and the public. I wrote immediately to the President of the Board stating what I had fully stated before, that my ill health still disqualified me for active service—and further that all of my medical advisers warned me against returning to a southern climate in consequence of which I had no expectation of being able to comply with their wishes, whatever change might take place in regard to my health. I have not heard from the Board since & I do not mention this matter as reflecting upon that body from which I have uniformly received the most honorable & unexceptionable treatment, but I could not speak of listening to your proposal before guarding against any possible misunderstanding in this matter. I ought further to say that it has, for sometime, been my cherished purpose, should Providence permit, to employ any health to which I might attain rather in the ministry & in studies immediately connected with preaching the Gospel than in teaching. My preference is so decisive that I should yield it with reluctance, tho in this as in every other matter I am prepared to receive the openings of Providence and the voice of the church as paramount authority. With regard to my health—I do not feel competent, at present, to engage in any pursuit involving labor and responsibility. I have experienced a gradual improvement during many months & I flatter myself, a very decided improvement within the last two months, having derived signal benefit from drinking the mineral water of Marienbad in Bohemia. With the hope of still further amelioration in my health as well as of obtaining some useful information I have made arrangements to sail for the Levant in the course of this week. My visit to Egypt, Palestine, Greece & Constantinople may employ 4 or 6 months, after which it is my present intention to return immediately to the United States. It seems to me that I can not finally settle the question now before me until my return home—until I may be more fully satisfied with regard to my health. I should be glad also too to know more perfectly the circumstances that may have attended my election. I could not, under more favourable hopes

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1 Randolph-Macon College, Virginia. He was elected president in 1832 but began work only in 1834. He served until 1836, when, on leave of absence, he embarked on the travels reported in this letter.
with regard to my ability to be an active or useful teacher, consent to succeed such a man as you have lost, without a full and perfect concurrence both of the appointing power & the Faculty. In my present state of health I should of course deem such unanimity still more important. With it and with all the confidence it would tend to inspire within the walls of the University & with the public, I should enter upon so high and difficult a field of action with extreme distrust of my ability to be useful. Without such supports, it would be rashness & folly to make the attempt. The letter of the Prudential Committee induces me to believe that the time which I may deem it necessary to take for considering this grave question, will not be thought unreasonable by the Board and that you would not wish me to give up my voyage to the Levant with its probable advantage to my health, in order to return to America immediately. I shall be happy to hear from you again upon this subject, & in the main if I can be useful to the University during my stay in the old world, you may command my services to any extent within my power. A letter addressed to the care of Wells & Co. Paris will commonly reach me without much delay.

I remain gentlemen, very respectfully yours,

S. Olin

Messrs. Clark Hubbard
and [illegible name]

P.S. Not having an opportunity to send the above immediately after it was written, I have given much reflection to the subject & have been led to the conclusion that in view of the actual condition and wants of our literary Institutions, I should not be at liberty to follow my preference for the ministry, had I health now to enter upon the field of labor to which I am invited. With this conviction, and believing it may be more satisfactory to the Board & possibly useful to the University, to have a more definite reply I am ready to say, that if there was entire unanimity in my election [not] only in the Board but what I esteem even more important, a full consent of the Faculty, I will make my acceptance of the office conditional of the Faculty, & possibly useful to the University, to have a more definite reply I am ready to say, that if there was entire unanimity in my election only in the Board but what I esteem even more important, a full consent of the Faculty, I will make my acceptance of the office conditional than the state of my health and the dispensations of Providence render it unavoidably so. I must however consider the letter of the Gov[ern]ing Committee which offers all the indulgencies that my health as containing substantially the terms upon I should dare to make this [state]ment. This reference to my infirmities in all my arrangements I for the present, at least, compelled to keep in view as quite an indispensable condition.

7. From Bishop Elijah Hedding, November 4, 1842. He was elected
bishop in 1824. He had long suffered from dysentery and rheumatism. This letter reveals serious health problems, although heart trouble did not become acute until 1850.

Saratoga Springs, Nov. 4., 1842

Rev. Laban Clark
Dear Brother,

I rec’d yours of the 10th of September. I entertain a deep feeling of thankfulness for your friendship, for your invitation to come to Middletown for a home and especially, for your generous offer to provide a place for me and mine to rest thro’ the winter. For some time I hesitated, and doubted whether to move directly there or take another course. But finally, as it was thought the state of my wife’s health required her passing some time here, we concluded to come here and board for a season. She will probably remain through the winter, I, perhaps, two months and then travel and visit the churches. If Providence [sic] permit, I intend to visit you, probably in February. If I can, I purpose to spend one Sabbath in Hartford, one in Middletown, and one in New Haven. But my health will not admit of my being much exposed in the winter. I shall be obliged to travel under particular care, and labor and lodge under particular restrictions.

At present I cannot settle the question whether I can make Middletown my home. I should be glad to say many things, but am hurried to write many other letters, so, you must excuse me.

Respects to your family.

Affec’y yours.

E. Hedding

P.S. Please, give my love to Br. Osborn and ask him to write me all he knows about that house of which he was speaking to me.

8. From Heman Bangs, July 22, 1853. He was a member of the New York Annual Conference, and spent most of his life in New York and New Haven. He served three years as financial agent for Wesleyan. The specific occasion of this letter was the election of Augustus W. Smith, professor in the college and a layman, as president.

New Haven 22d July 1853

Rev. L. Clark
Dear Brother

I address this note to you as president of the Board of Trustees of the Wes. University—At the last meeting of the Board, I handed in my resignation as Trustee & supposed it was acted upon and accepted, but I received a notice from Prof.
Lane, to meet the Board on Tuesday, Aug. 2d I infer, therefore, that the Board took no action on my resignation. My desire is that you would lay this before the Board & that they would now act & accept my resignation, for, after having done all that I have done for the wellbeing of that Institution & be treated as I have been & have my feelings lacerated & insulted as they have been—I cannot consent to act any longer as a member of the Board. One of your Board (a layman of great influence in the Board,) told me that the clergymen were the great hinderance to the prosperity of the Institution & they wished to be rid of them & they could do better without them & the Joint Board, by electing a layman, as President, fully indorsed this sentiment—Now I most sincerely love a religious education & as it is supposed that I am in the way—I make all speed to take myself out of the way—I also fear that the object of certain men, in the Board, is to drive a religious predominance from the University—I can have no fellowship with the movement. If we cannot have a religious education I desire no education at all. An infidel education I consider as worse than no education. I may be mistaken, as to the intention of men & really should be thankful that the future may prove my fears unfounded—but time will reveal all things.

For you, personally, I have the strongest affection & should wish, were it consistent with my views of duty, as I have heretofore done, stand by you, side by side & fight for right & truth—but in this particular I must break from you & wish you all joy and comfort—and hope that the University may hereafter pursue such a course as to secure the confidence of our people and its own prosperity & usefulness.

But aside from all the above considerations such are my prior engagement that I could not, if I would, be at Middletown on the 2d of Aug. at 8 O’clock A.M—for I have meeting in New-York on Monday evening Aug. the 1st

Our kind regards to sister Clark
Yours in Bonds of undying love
Heman Bangs

1 The Joint Board, to be distinguished from the Board of Trustees, was provided from the start to represent the interests of the annual conferences.