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Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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Israel Williams and the Hampshire College Project of 1761–1764

William L. Welch

With his troops demobilized at the end of the French and Indian War, Israel Williams, military commander and “political boss” of Western Massachusetts, could turn his thoughts exclusively to the pursuit of peace for the first time in his long public career.¹ In 1760 Williams culminated thirteen consecutive terms as Hatfield’s representative to the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature with his election to the upper chamber of that body, the Provincial Council, which also served as an advisory board to the governor. Over the next several years, as a member of “the board,” he was actively engaged in a scheme to found a college in Western Massachusetts. On no single issue of Williams’ career was his pride in himself and in his region so clearly pronounced. Yet Williams failed in this endeavor, partly because of a basic antagonism between Eastern and Western Massachusetts, but also because of limited influence of “river gods” in Boston.

Williams’ motives for promoting a college in the West in the early 1760s were probably mixed, though to some Easterners at least it was all a matter of personal vanity. In the midst of the 1762 struggle for a charter in the General Court, Oxenbridge Thacher, a prominent Boston attorney, wrote to Benjamin Prat, chief justice of New York but formerly of Boston: “The monarch of Hampshire county . . . took great offense at his son’s being placed some years ago something lower in a class at our college than befitted ye son of a King.” He therefore, and “his privy council,” said Thacher, came down with a petition to incorporate a college in that county.² The son referred to was Williams’ oldest boy, John, a member of the Class of 1751 at Harvard, who in an age when students’ names were listed in the college catalog according to the social standing of their parents, had been placed fourteenth in a class of thirty-six. It was indeed a circumstance that had galled his father, and a younger son, William, had turned his back on Cambridge altogether and gone down to New Haven to be graduated fourth in a class of sixteen from Yale in 1754.³

What Thacher failed to mention, and probably as a Bostonian was not even aware of, was the great groundswell of popular support for a college in the West in the early 1760s. There had been tremendous growth in population there since the end of the Indian wars. This coupled with a real devotion to learning on the part of westerners were important factors in the college movement.⁴ So were the high fees westerners associated with a college education at existing schools, and the notion prevailing among them that moral standards in the older towns were
slipping. As Williams later put it in a letter to a friend, it was generally felt in
the West that Harvard was unhappily situated, being too close to Boston "where
Luxury and Wickedness prevail'd." As a result, youth allowed to attend school
in Cambridge were frequently corrupted in their morals, and instead of pursuing
their studies often spent their time in idleness and vanity, "and how they might
conform to ye beau world in their dress and behavior." "These considerations,"
wrote Williams, "excited us to attempt ye erecting a Seminary in Hampshire
where Youth wou'd not be exposed to Such diversions and Temptations, and
where promising persons . . . might with a tollerable expence obtain an
Education."\(^5\)

Funds for the undertaking were not lacking. Most important was a residuary
bequest of £1000 sterling left in the estate of Colonel Ephraim Williams. Shortly
before his death at Lake George in 1755 Colonel Ephraim had drawn up his last
will and testament and appointed cousin Israel and associate John Worthington
of Springfield as his executors. Among the provisions of his will was a stipulation
that part of his lands be disposed of within five years after an established peace,
and the proceeds, together with the interest on money arising from his notes and
bonds, should be appropriated towards the support of a "Free School in a Town-
ship west of Fort Massachusetts, called the West Township," provided the town-
ship was determined to be part of the Bay Colony, and provided as well that the
province would name the grant Williamstown.\(^6\) Should such provisos not be
complied with, however, it was Colonel Ephraim's desire that his money be
disposed of as directed elsewhere in the will. The alternative referred to was to
take effect if his brothers died without issue, in which case his estate was to be
sold and the money put out to interest, the funds so derived being used for some
pious or charitable purposes, such as propagating Christianity, or for the support
of the poor in Hampshire county, or for the general encouragement of
education in the county.\(^7\)

The Ephraim Williams bequest thus had certain prior conditions. In order to
apply for it a prospective school would have to agree to establish at West Hoosuc,
but only when the province had agreed to incorporate it and re-name it Williams-
town, provided to begin with that the township were found to lie in Massa-
chusetts. In 1761 when the movement for a college began in the West none of
these conditions had been fulfilled. Although five years still remained for
compliance, since hostilities had just ended and a formal treaty of peace with
France had not yet been signed, as executor and promoter Israel Williams opted
in favor of the will's alternative provision. Whether this clause was operative or
valid seems never to have concerned him or anyone else. Such was the demand
for a college in Hampshire county in the early 1760s that cousin Ephraim's
bequest was seized upon with alacrity to be the financial nucleus for such an
institution.\(^8\)

Sometime in 1761, a committee of seventy-four interested persons was
formed in Hampshire county to promote the college. Prominent in the group in
addition to Israel Williams, were other "machine" members, including John
Worthington of Springfield, Oliver Partridge of Hatfield, Elijah and Thomas
Williams of Deerfield, and Joseph Hawley of Northampton, as well as ministers
such as Jonathan Ashley of Deerfield and Timothy Woodbridge of Hatfield.
Meetings were held at Williams’ house in Hatfield where the chief topic of conversation was the best means for securing a charter. Williams personally favored a royal grant directly from Governor Francis Bernard, acting in the King’s name, and consequently was in consultation with William Smith of New York, with whom he was friendly and who agreed to prepare him a document. As envisioned in Smith’s draft the name of the school was to be Queen’s College, in honor of Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg, George III’s recent bride. It was to be governed by a board of trustees that included Williams and several others of the Committee of Seventy-four, and as a corporation be authorized to hold property, “Lands, Tenements, and Hereditaments . . . either by Devises, Gift, purchase or otherwise,” with an annual income of up to £1000. It might also “Confer the Honors of learning on such persons as they [the trustees] should Judge qualified.” Further, the Governor of Massachusetts was to be the school’s official visitor, and March 17, 1762, was set aside as the date for the first meeting of its board of trustees.

Having prepared his draft, however, Smith had second thoughts about it. He decided that “it was not good” in light of the powers granted the Massachusetts General Court in the provincial charter, powers that did not specifically include forming corporations or granting charters but were seemingly broad enough to cover both. To verify the point, Israel also conferred with Jeremiah Gridley, a leader of the Boston bar, who corroborated Smith’s belief that the power to grant charters did indeed belong to the legislature. In January 1762, it was decided at a meeting of the promoters to lay the matter before the General Court. When he went down to Boston later in the month Williams carried with him a memorial to the legislature on the subject, together with the form of a tentative college charter.

On January 20 and 27 Williams attended sessions of the Council at Boston, and he also sought an interview with Governor Bernard. In a letter to Smith he described his meeting with the governor. According to Williams, Bernard expressed himself “pleasd” with the college proposal, and offered “sundry things” he felt would make the design of the school more useful. “As to the Charter he was of opinion he had a right to give one as the King’s Representative,” said Williams, but if the promoters were inclined to pursue the method they had already settled upon, and the General Court passed an act of incorporation, Bernard promised to approve it. In addition, he agreed to “give us a Charter that shou’d lead, and said that might serve us, Shoud ye [legislative] Act be disapprov’d by the King.”

On January 29 Williams filed his petition with the General Court and it was referred to committee. On February 10 the committee reported favorably and the House ordered a bill for incorporation brought in. On February 19 the college bill (largely Smith’s draft) was introduced and read the first time. On the 24th it was read the second and third time, passed to be engrossed, and sent up to the Council for concurrence. That same day, however, despite Williams’ best efforts, the Council defeated the measure. In his letter to Smith, Israel described what happened:
We met with opposition where we fear'd from ye Council, who make part of the board of overseers of Cambridge College, the major part of whom were fix'd to hinder our design and one Said he had as live See ye College at Cambridge ras'd as to have a School Set up in ye County of Hampshire, for it wou'd be ye ruin of Cambridge and so said others... 

In another letter Williams was more specific about Council opposition. When the affair was under consideration before the Board, he wrote, the members were divided in their sentiments. The objection was that although the college would be a hundred miles from Cambridge, it would still be harmful because education in the West would be cheaper. Likewise, a college in Hampshire county established by an act of government would become an object of the government's concern, and part of the aid granted to Harvard in the past would be withdrawn. In addition, Cambridge college had always been beholden to the people of Hampshire and Worcester counties for their generosity, and should they have a school of their own to support they would withhold their assistance now. Furthermore, said the Board, there was a prospect that Harvard would soon become a “respectable University and make a figure in ye world.” A new college in Hampshire would dash all hopes for such a “noble Event.” It would also lead to setting up other colleges in distant counties, which would soon make learning “contemptible.”

But the matter was yet to be settled. Despite the Council's vote, Governor Bernard kept his word and issued his own charter to the promoters, though to palliate Harvard it did contain certain reservations. To begin with, Queen’s College was specifically denied the privilege of granting degrees, and it was also precluded from receiving any financial aid from the province. The governor, however, had not reckoned on the opposition. Rumor of what he had done leaked out, and almost immediately he was besieged by a group of Harvard’s Overseers who urged him to reconsider his action until their full board should meet. Obviously shaken at the response he had generated, Bernard promised to meet formally with the Overseers, and then hurriedly retrieved his charter from Williams.

Yet even before the governor could meet with the Overseers, the General Court interjected itself back into the affair. As Williams described it, on March 6

just as ye Assembly broke up... young Otis told the house what the Governor had done, and complain’d of it as an Infraction upon the Constitution, and by his Clamour persuaded 28, not one third of the house when together, tho ye majority of those present, to vote to desire the Governor not to give us a Charter...

With prorogation at hand the Council took no notice of the House action, though Bernard must have been wondering at the wisdom of his supporting a western college, if it meant alienating so many important eastern “interests.”

On March 8, 1762, the governor met formally with Harvard’s Board of Overseers in the Council chamber. Present in addition to Bernard were
Lieutenant-Governor Hutchinson—Israel Williams' political ally—twelve of the twenty-eight Council members, the President of Harvard, the six ministers of Boston, and the minister of Roxbury. Bernard laid the proposed charter for Queen's College before the board, and a hot debate ensued. Williams, while not present, reported that "many hard things passd." The governor, lieutenant-governor, and secretary, and some others "friendly to our design," he wrote, were insulted by some of the ministers. Oxenbridge Thacher was more explicit on this meeting. Governor Hutchinson "was put to his trumps," he told Benjamin Prat. He is the idol of the clergy, and in "strict alliance . . . with the monarch of Hampshire and his dominions." The only card he had to play was to delay the question, said Thacher, which he did pretty dextrously. "He magnified ye abilities & interest of ye Hampshire members, intimated it would be dangerous to offend them, [and] suggested that measures should be taken to quiet them & persuade them to give up." But all was in vain. After five hours of nearly continuous debate, the board voted "That His Excellency the Governor be requested . . . not to grant the said Charter," and a committee was duly appointed to attend him on this. The Overseers also decided to appoint a special committee to draw up a detailed statement of their grievances.

On March 18 the Overseers met again, this time in executive session, and the committee appointed to meet with the governor reported that he had said that he would take the request on Queen's College under advisement. The committee established to prepare a remonstrance also submitted its report, a document consisting of some twenty-four arguments. The gist of it was that Harvard had been founded by the government, and its powers and privileges confirmed by the provincial charter, hence it was not proper for the government to lessen those privileges now. Furthermore, a second college was not needed and if one was established it would compete with Harvard for students, gifts, and bequests. The result would be two weak colleges, each unable to provide the education needed for the preparation of civil servants and ministers. Moreover, if the new college had inferior powers now, they could be amended later, and while it might be possible to educate more students with two colleges, their preparation would be inferior. The remonstrance closed by urging the governor not to issue a charter or to facilitate an application for one "elsewhere." It was adopted unanimously by the Overseers.

On April 1, 1762, Harvard's diligence paid off. On that date its Board of Overseers received formal assurances from Governor Bernard that he would "suspend the issuing of the Charter and . . . not assist any applications for a like Charter elsewhere." On April 17, the General Court having reassembled and a joint committee being appointed to inquire of the governor as to his intentions regarding Queen's College, Bernard tersely reaffirmed the answer already given to Harvard.

Why did Bernard concede? In particular, why did he fail to support the "political boss" of the West in a project that he himself had called "laudable"? Williams thought the answer lay in the governor's timid character. According to him, "His Excellency was overaw'd" and being "much threatened (tho in his opinion not alter'd as to ye utility of the design) was afraid to redeliver the Charter, fearing it might occasion him trouble. Writing home at the same
time Bernard himself put it this way:

As the prosecution of this affair was no ways an interest of my office & it might have impeded Affairs of greater Consequence, I put a stop to the Charter still insisting on the Kings right of granting Charters, tho' I did not think proper to persist in perfecting this particular one, upon which the whole Dispute immediately subsided.24

In truth, both men meant the same thing. What the governor had learned after only two years in Massachusetts was the custom of subordinating western needs to eastern “interests.” Without question he wished to establish Queen’s College. After all, he would have been its royal visitor, and it would have been a symbol of his concern for higher education. Furthermore, he would have relished scoring a constitutional point with the General Court. But at the same time he could not afford to offend the legislators. It would not look well at home if he could not work with them, and besides he was dependent on them for his salary. So Bernard did what any good politician would do in like circumstances, he yielded to expediency and the stronger interests. In the long run, the applause of the East, and especially of Harvard College, together with the votes they held in the legislature, simply had more weight with the governor than the western frontier in the Hampshire College project.

Defeated at Boston in the spring of 1762, Israel Williams and the other promoters of Queen’s College were yet determined to have their school and met regularly during the rest of that year as its unofficial “trustees” to plan new strategy. By December they had developed a plan. Since Williams had always favored a royal charter, they decided to apply directly to the King. To sponsor them they would seek the support of General Jeffery Amherst, still in America, but about to return home to England. Amherst, it was believed, as the architect of Britain’s New World empire, would have easy access to the throne, so Jonathan Ashley of the college committee was chosen to go to New York to lay the matter before him. Ashley carried with him a letter of introduction from Williams and a formal petition to the Crown.25 In his letter Williams referred to the General’s “generous disposition to be in every way Serviceable to mankind,” and hence the subscribers approached him in “an Affair of no small importance . . . .” Many well disposed persons, he wrote, anxious to promote learning, had offered large sums of money to found a college in Hampshire county. It was their desire to secure a royal charter for their school, but “our meanness as well as our Scitation forbids our approaching the Throne.” Could the General, considering his “just right to favours,” be prevailed upon to interest himself in the matter, however, they did not doubt their success in “obtaining the Kings Letters Patent.”26

The petition to the King was no less flattering. After detailing the sufferings of Westerners in the Indian wars, and their contributions to British victory in 1759, it went on to describe the advantages that might arise from a new college. Since the reduction of Canada, western Massachusetts had been filling up with inhabitants “in Danger of growing up barbarous and uncivilized unless furnished
with Men of Learning." Considering the west's distance from existing schools, however, it was unlikely enough good teachers could be found. But westerners themselves could fill the deficiency with their own college. Other worthy ends would also be served by the establishment of a western academy, the most notable being that graduates of the new school would engage in preaching Christianity to the Indians, more firmly attaching them to His Majesty's Government. The petitioners, therefore, "humbly prayed" that His Majesty would create them a "Body-politick" by his royal charter with power to manage a "Collegiate School," that he would graciously name it Queen's College, and that he would authorize the "Governors" of the new school to confer the "Honors of Learning" on such persons as they judged qualified. 27

Unfortunately, Ashley's mission proved abortive. He got no closer to New York than Norwalk, Connecticut, where news of smallpox in the city detained him, and he had to confer with Amherst by proxy. Probably it made little difference. Amherst received the application of the promoters politely, but declined to act upon it and thus involve himself in Massachusetts politics. Almost immediately he returned their petition with a few words of advice, words that must have been of small comfort. He agreed, he said, that "Nothing could be of greater Use to the Country than Erecting Seminaries for the Education of Youth," but he thought that the promoters' application for a royal charter should come first through the Governor and Council of the Bay Colony. Upon proper endorsement of their plan by provincial authorities, he promised to do everything in his power to assist them in procuring a patent from the Crown for a college in Hampshire county. 28

Disappointed, the promoters were still unwilling to abandon their project, and during 1763 and 1764 they actively solicited aid in England through the auspices of William Smith. But Harvard was also active "at home" with its friends among leading English Dissenters. The Overseers bombarded them with remonstrances and letters warning that a new college in Massachusetts would create a split in New World Calvinism, and thus encourage the ancient royalist design of an Anglican bishopric for America. It was even suggested that Governor Bernard as a "High-Churchman" had involved himself in the scheme for this purpose. Though untrue, these were powerful arguments in England in the hands of the "right people;" for the last time, Israel Williams' access to the Crown was blocked. 29 In the end the Hampshire College project failed in London for the same reason it had in Boston—eastern influence was too powerful for westerners to overcome—and western Massachusetts had to wait another thirty years for its own college.
NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of the Williams "machine" in pre-Revolutionary Western Massachusetts, including its control of gubernatorial patronage in the West in exchange for votes it could deliver to royal governors in the provincial legislature, see William L. Welch, "River God: The Public Life of Israel Williams, 1709-1788," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maine 1975), Chapter 2.

2. Oxenbridge Thacher Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings XX (Boston, 1884), 47.


4. From a mere frontier Hampshire county had grown to include twenty-nine incorporated towns by 1762. Three years later there were two more towns in the county, and a total population there of more than 17,000. If one includes newly created Berkshire county, then total Western population stood at over 20,000 in 1765. See Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, American Population before the Federal Census of 1790 (New York, 1932), 21, 26-7; Henry Lefavour, "The Proposed College in Hampshire County in 1762," MHS Proceedings LXVI (Boston, 1942), 53.

5. Israel Williams Letter, December 20, 1763, Israel Williams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, II, 181-2. Williams' personal commitment to education was beyond question. He was responsible for setting up the grammar school at Hatfield, and was a firm supporter of that at Hadley. He also strove mightily to prevent the diversion of the Hopkins funds from the grammar schools of New England. The latter were part of an early bequest left for the general support of education in New England. See also Shipton, Harvard Classes, 1726-1730, VIII, 315; and Sylvester Judd, History of Hadley, (Springfield, 1905), 48-62.)

6. Colonel Ephraim had heavily invested in wild lands, especially at Hoosac. (See Massachusetts Archives, State House, Boston, XXXII, 194-6; XXXV, 6; LIX, 350-54; I. Williams Papers, I, 50, 55; Dwight Collection, Williams College Library, 9, 15, 17, 18, 21; Perry, Williamstown, 239-40, 242-43; Wyllis E. Wright, Colonel Ephraim Williams, A Documentary Life (Pittsfield, 1970), 35, 36, 41-2, 52-5; Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1715-1764, (Boston, 1919-1970), XXIX, 80.)

7. The will, dated July 22, 1755, is in the I. Williams Papers, II, 176; also MA, LVIII, 590-93a; Dwight Collection, 43; Wright, Ephraim Williams, 110-12, 153-8; and, Perry, Williamstown, 312-13, 479-83.

8. It must be said by way of justification, too, that boundary problems at West Hoosuc had been and continued to be troublesome, and the year 1761 saw little chance of their being settled promptly. The northern boundary of the township, between it and the New Hampshire Grants, had been determined by Richard Hazen's survey run in 1749, and still is the boundary between Massachusetts and Vermont. The western line with New York, however, remained disputed till 1784. (See Lefavour, "The Proposed College," 56-7;

9. William Smith (1697-1769) was a distinguished lawyer and member of the Provincial Council of New York. He was also married to the widow of Israel Williams’ brother, Elisha Williams. (See *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1955-1964), IX, 352-53; Shipton, *Harvard Classes, 1726-1730*, VIII, 315; C. K. Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of those who attended Harvard College in the Classes 1701-1712*, V, (Boston, 1937), 597; and, Israel Williams to Mrs. Elisabeth Williams, July 26, 1755, Yale Library MSS.)

10. I. Williams Papers, II, 177; Lefavour, “The Proposed College,” 75-77. A site for the college was not specifically mentioned in the draft, but tradition has it that a building to house it had already been erected in Hatfield. See Perry, *Williamsburg*, 230; Daniel W. Wells and Reuben F. Wells, *A History of Hatfield, Massachusetts* (Springfield, 1910), 177-178; W. S. Tyler, *History of Amherst College* (Springfield, 1873), 14n.; and Lefavour, “The Proposed College,” 58.


15. Israel Williams Letter, December 20, 1763, I. Williams Papers, II, 181. See also “Minutes of Meetings to Establish Hampshire County College 1761-1762.”


18. Israel Williams to Wm. Smith, 1762, I. Williams Papers, II, 180; Bernard to Williams, March 16, 1762, Sparks MSS., Harvard University, Bernard Papers, II, 136; and Peirce, Harvard University, 275.


20. Records of Board of Overseers, MS., Harvard University Archives.


22. Bernard to Board of Overseers, March 31, 1762, Records of Board of Overseers; House Journals XXXVIII, 308, 311; MA, LVIII, 473; Shipton, Harvard Classes, 1726-1730, VIII, 316. See Bernard to Williams, March 16, 1762, Sparks MSS., Harvard University, Bernard Papers, II, 136.)

23. Israel Williams to Wm. Smith, 1762, I. Williams Papers, II, 180; also, “Minutes of Meetings to Establish Hampshire County College 1761-1762.”

24. Bernard to the Lords of Trade, April 12, 1762, Sparks MSS., Harvard University, Bernard Papers, II, 54; Acts and Resolves of the Province of Massachusetts Bay (Boston, 1869-1922), IV, 562-63.

25. See Amherst Papers, (Public Record Office W. O. 34, Vol. 102), Amherst College Library, Box 14, V. 102 (photostats), 29-31; Long, Jeffrey Amherst, 171-74.

26. Williams to Amherst, December 20, 1762, Amherst Papers, Box 14, V. 102 (photostats), 20.

27. Amherst Papers, Box 14, V. 102 (photostats), 21-24; also I. Williams Papers, II, 178; and, Lefavour, “The Proposed College,” 77-9.

28. Amherst to Ashley, December 27, 1762, Amherst Papers, Box 14, V. 102 (photostats), 27; also Ashley to Amherst, December 24, 1762, Amherst Papers, Box 14, V. 102 (photostats), 25-6; and, Amherst to Williams, December 27, 1762, Amherst Papers, Box 14, V. 102 (photostats), 28. See J. C. Long, “General Amherst and the College,” Amherst Graduates’ Quarterly XXIII (February, 1934), 89-95.