Berea's Story

From the Berea College Catalog

This short narrative about Berea’s founding and history was taken from the 2016-2017 edition of the Berea CollegeCatalog.

In 1855, the Rev. John G. Fee started a one-room school that eventually would become Berea College. Fee, a native of Bracken County, Kentucky, parted with the church in which he had been ordained because it was not sufficiently against slavery and eventually was disowned and disinherited by his slaveholding father. He was a scholar of strong moral character, dedication, determination, and great faith. He believed in a school that would be an advocate of equality and excellence in education for men and women of all races.

Fee’s uncompromising faith and courage in preaching against slavery attracted the attention of Cassius M. Clay, a well-to-do Kentucky landowner and prominent leader in the movement for gradual emancipation. Clay felt he had found in Fee an individual who would take a strong stand on slavery.

In 1853, Clay offered Fee the 10-acre Madison County homestead on the edge of the mountains if Fee would take up permanent residence there. Fee accepted and established an anti-slavery church with 13 members on a ridge above an area known simply as "The Glade." They named it "Berea" after the biblical town whose populace was open-minded and receptive to the gospel (Acts 17:10).

In 1854, Fee built his home upon the ridge. The following year, a one-room school, which also served as a church on Sundays, was built on a lot contributed by a neighbor. Berea's first teachers were recruited from Oberlin College, an anti-slavery institution of higher learning in Ohio. Fee saw his humble church-school as the beginning of a sister institution "which would be to Kentucky what Oberlin is to Ohio."
Fee and his colleagues believed that "God made of one blood all peoples of the earth," which would become the school's motto. The second bylaw established another characteristic of Berea by asserting, "This College shall be under an influence strictly Christian." In the 2005 book *Berea College: An Illustrated History*, College Historian Shannon Wilson wrote:

The term 'Christian' was not specifically defined in terms of baptism or other 'theological tenets on which Christians differ'; but it was assumed that Christians would be marked by 'a righteous practice and Christian experience.' For Fee and his abolitionist supporters, slavery, sectarianism, and exclusion on the basis of social and economic differences were examples of 'wrong' institutions and practices that promoted schism and disobedience to God. These sins, left unamended, would prevent Berea from being a place of acceptance, welcome, and love.

Therefore, character became the chief qualification for admission, placing education within reach of all who desired its benefits.

Fee worked with other community leaders to develop a constitution for the new school, which he and Principal J. A. R. Rogers insisted should ensure its interracial character. They also agreed that the school would furnish work for as many students as possible, in order to help them pay their expenses and to dignify labor at a time when manual labor and slavery tended to be synonymous in the South.

The first articles of incorporation for Berea College were adopted in 1859. But that also was the year Fee and the Berea teachers were driven from Madison County by Southern pro-slavery sympathizers. Fee spent the Civil War years raising funds for the school; in 1865, he and his followers returned. A year later, the articles of incorporation...
were recorded at the county seat in Richmond, and in 1869 the College Department became a reality.

The first Catalog, issued for 1866-67, used the corporate name "Berea College," but the title *Berea Literary Institute* was printed on the cover because it was thought to convey better "the present character of the school." Enrollment that academic year totaled 187—96 black students and 91 whites. For several decades following the Civil War, Berea's student body continued to be divided equally between white and black students, many of whom went on to teach in schools established solely for African Americans.

In 1886-87, the school had three divisions: Primary, Intermediate, and Academic. Students could pursue a college preparatory course, a shorter course, or a teachers' course. In 1869-70, five freshmen were admitted to the College Department, and in 1873 the first bachelor's degrees were granted.

Berea's commitment to interracial education was overturned in 1904 by the Kentucky Legislature's passage of the Day Law, which prohibited education of black and white students together. When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Day Law, Berea set aside funds to assist in the establishment of the Lincoln Institute in Simpsonville, near Louisville, for the education of black students through the high-school level. The College also provided financial aid to send black students to colleges such as Knoxville College, Hampton Institute, Tuskegee, and Wilberforce. When the Day Law was amended in 1950 to allow voluntary integration above the high school level, Berea was the first college in Kentucky to reopen its doors to black students.

By 1911, in the aftermath of the Day Law, the number of students seeking admission to Berea was so great that the trustees amended the College's constitution to specify the southern mountain region as Berea's special field of service. The commitment to Appalachia, however, began as early as 1858 when Rogers, after a trip through the mountains, identified the region as a "neglected part of the country" for which Berea was founded to serve.
Curricular offerings have varied at Berea to meet changing needs. In the early 1920s, in addition to its College Department, Berea had a high school that included ungraded classes for students who had not had educational opportunities, an elementary school, and a vocational school, as well as a Normal School for teacher training. Although the general mission of serving students with financial need continued, units and divisions were reorganized through the years. In 1968, Berea discontinued its elementary and secondary programs and now focuses entirely on undergraduate college education.

Since its founding in 1855, the pillars of Berea’s educational mission have been learning, service to others, and labor. At the outset, Berea’s instructors truly were educators of “the head, heart, and hand,” to borrow a phrase from the art historian and social critic John Ruskin. Faculty not only taught in the classroom, but also supervised student work and encouraged students in acts of service to others. This holistic approach to education promoted in each student the self-sufficiency derived from manual labor and the strong sense that any vocation should serve others. Over time, learning, work, and service gradually evolved into more complex and independent facets of the institution, yet they always have remained the pillars of Berea’s distinctive educational endeavor.

At the turn of the 20th century, Berea’s academic, labor, and service programs became recognizable as separate entities within the larger institution, and the Labor Program began to attract national attention. Many new apprenticeships developed, including those in Appalachian craft traditions. In 1906, every student was required to perform some type of meaningful work. Gradually, labor mentors articulated learning goals for each job, and, in doing so, they provided a crucial and lasting link between learning (the head) and labor (the hand). Generations of Berea students have gained special insight into the dignity and value of all work and have seen how their labor helped to sustain the daily operations of the College community.
In 1969, President Willis Weatherford formally published Dean Louis Smith’s list of Berea College’s goals—including the fostering of learning, labor, and service—as the seven “Great Commitments.” President Weatherford encouraged the Faculty to affirm the Great Commitments as the guiding sentiment of the College. The Commitments had been used elsewhere before, but he framed them as the central statement of the College's mission. In 1993, Berea’s Faculty and Trustees revised the Weatherford-Smith text so as to include eight Great Commitments and a new preface. These eight Great Commitments serve to define Berea’s special mission. They set forth the ideals toward which the College and its people constantly strive. The Great Commitments are rooted in principles and purposes that have guided Berea since its founding.

Fee was the first president of Berea's Board of Trustees, serving from 1858-92, and Rogers was the first principal, 1858-69. The first Berea College president was appointed in 1869. Since then, there have been nine presidents:

Edward Henry Fairchild, 1869-89
William B. Stewart, 1890-92
William Goodell Frost, 1892-1920
William J. Hutchins, 1920-39
Francis S. Hutchins, 1939-67
Willis D. Weatherford, 1967-84
John B. Stephenson, 1984-94
Larry D. Shinn, 1994-2012
Lyle D. Roelofs, 2012 to the present

Today, visitors, students, staff, and faculty on the Berea College campus can learn more about Fee's visionary ideas by reading his quotes placed along the walking paths of the John G. Fee Glade Park in the center of campus.