Chapter 1

THE PREHISTORY AND THE FOUNDED

It has been the time-honored, if not always candid, practice of American colleges to claim as great antiquity as they can, usually by arrogating to themselves the seniority of non-collegiate educational institutions which either existed on the site of the college later to be established, or developed into the authentic collegiate foundation. By this form of polite fiction it could be claimed that Ursinus College began with the founding of Freeland Seminary in 1848 or, by a more tenuous claim, with the establishment of Todd’s School in 1832. Todd’s School, a one room grammar school, was located on part of what is now the campus. Freeland Seminary occupied adjoining property and was incorporated as the Academic Department of the College when Ursinus was founded in 1869.

But the history, if not the existence, of Ursinus did begin before the granting of its charter by the Pennsylvania legislature on February 5, 1869. Ursinus was the outcome of a protracted and bitter contention in the German Reformed Church, a dispute of such intensity that it threatened for a time to split the Church. Some of the essential issues in the struggle seem to a non-theological observer of the twentieth century as hair-splitting and as academic as the famous medieval argument over how many angels could sit on the point of a needle. But it must be remembered that to the clergy and laity of the Church in the mid-nineteenth century these were matters of spiritual life and death. What is recorded here is a deliberately simplified account of the main sources of contention and the specific events and conditions that produced Ursinus.

The German Reformed Church, or the Reformed Church in the United States, was historically Calvinistic, deriving its theological dogmas from John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and Zacharias Ursinus. Doctrine and polity had changed very little from its founding in the sixteenth century in Germany. The Church in America was primarily congregational in government and simple, or what came to be called “low church”, in its patterns of worship. It found its ultimate authority in the
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Bible rather than in any of the historic creeds or formularies of Christianity however ancient or revered.

Change, and dissension, came through the gradual development from about 1840 on of what was to be called Mercersburg theology (the eastern theological seminary of the Church was located in Mercersburg) or Nevinism, after Dr. John Williamson Nevin (1803–86). Professor of Theology at the Seminary from 1840 to 1851, acting president of Marshall College from 1841 to 1853, and president of Franklin and Marshall College from 1866 to 1876, he was the acknowledged leader of the movement to develop and alter Reformed theology and the Church. Though of Presbyterian background and educated at Princeton, Dr. Nevin gradually developed a theology akin to that of high Lutheranism and Anglo-Catholicism. It was called by some of its adherents a “Christocentric theanthropological” theology. To put it more simply, it stressed the incarnation of Christ more than his death and atonement, it held that the creeds and the early tradition of the Church were of higher authority than the Bible, it maintained that the sacraments had objective power and that ministers had a priestly office. It advocated the adoption of a formal fixed liturgy, the use of an altar in the church, and the abolition of free prayer. All of these ideas were anathema to those who did not believe in “historical development” as it was called. They sensed that, intentionally or not, the cumulative effect of these innovations would be to transform the church of their fathers into something strange, something not “echt Reformiert.”

Just as Nevin and his associates did not develop Mercersburg theology all at once or indeed see clearly where it was leading, neither did those who came to oppose it see for some time the scope of the transformation which it portended. Especially was this true of Dr. John Henry Augustus Bomberger (1817–1890), who was to become the leader of the “low church” party and the founder of Ursinus. An active and producing scholar from his early days as a pastor on, Dr. Bomberger was not at odds with Mercersburg for some years and his stance might be called irenic until the 1850’s.

The specific chain of events leading to the founding of Ursinus began with an action taken at the Eastern Synod at Hagerstown in 1848. A proposal had been made preceding that synod that an improved order of worship, or liturgy, for the Church should be prepared. At the Hagerstown Synod a committee was appointed, with Dr. Bomberger as chairman, to “take into consideration the whole matter of progress in this direction.” At the Synod at Norristown in 1849 the committee made a report favoring the preparation of an order of worship containing such forms as were peculiar to the German Reformed Church and in keeping with its doctrines and history. It recommended that in the creation of the new order of worship the Palatine Liturgy should be “followed as the true ideal and as furnishing the larger portion of the material needed.” At this time Dr. Bomberger was the central figure in the deliberations, and the report reflected his position as it was then and as it remained.

The Synod at Norristown approved the report and appointed a new commit-
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In 1861 the Synod at Easton resolved that one order, not two, was needed, and it instructed the committee to proceed "in a way not inconsistent with established liturgical principles and usages, or with the devotional and doctrinal genius of the Reformed Church." To the adherents of Mercersburg theology the first part of this instruction was the operative element; to Dr. Bomberger and his associates the second part was the essential direction, and there seemed at that time no via media. The split of opinion, which involved not simply the nature of the order of worship but the distinctive character of the Church, came into fuller view in the Synod at Chambersburg in 1862, for there the committee presented two reports, the majority one written by Dr. Nevin and the minority one by Dr. Bomberger. The Synod did not resolve the issue but simply continued the committee, whereupon the majority pursued their labors and submitted the "Revised Liturgy" to the Synod at York and, a few weeks later, to the General Synod at Dayton in 1866.

At the Synod in York Dr. Bomberger was jeered and interrupted by members of the opposition as he again made a minority report protesting the disregard of the original instructions given the committee. In the action taken the committee was discharged, optional use of the Revised Liturgy was allowed in Eastern Synod until adoption by the Church at large, and the Revised Liturgy was referred to General Synod. In Dayton the action was passed (64 to 57) that the Revised Liturgy "be and is hereby allowed as an order of worship proper to be used in the congregations and families of the Reformed Church." In both Synods the actions were permissive rather than mandatory, but the adherents of Mercersburg interpreted them as constituting full approval and sought to introduce the Revised Liturgy wherever they could, even using the authority of Synod to implement their desire.

Although outvoted at Dayton as it had been in earlier tests of strength, the low church party did not give up the fight, and a short but intense warfare of tracts ensued, the chief documents of which were Dr. Bomberger's "The Revised Liturgy" in 1866, Dr. Nevin's "Vindication of the Revised Liturgy" in 1867, Dr. Bomberger's "Reformed, not Ritualistic" that same year. In the first the proposed remedy was to modify the Provisional Liturgy, that of 1857, changing in it all parts of doubtful impact or contrary to pure doctrine. In the rejoinder Dr. Nevin sought to establish that the theological position espoused by Mercersburg was consonant with that of the Christian Church in terms of its whole history, not simply that of Protestantism since the Reformation, and to show that those who believed as Dr. Bomberger did were in fact schismatic. In the counter-rejoinder Dr. Bomberger gave a full, even elaborate, statement and defense of the distinctive beliefs and practices of the Reformed Church, warning that the "new" theology of Nevinism would not only destroy the distinctive nature of the historic faith but weaken its hold upon its believers and lead to defections. This last prophecy was fulfilled.

Without assessing the whole controversy in extenso it can be said in the easier perspective of a hundred years that there was sincere belief on both sides and that both sides won and lost. The crucial point is that Dr. Bomberger and those who thought as he did were in the minority. Had they been the majority Ursinus would...
never have been founded. But as matters stood they saw little hope of saving the Church from what they believed to be a terrible perversion. Franklin and Marshall College and the Seminary at Mercersburg (it moved to Lancaster in 1870) were in the hands of their opponents. So also were the *Reformed Church Messenger*, the official church paper in the East, and the *Mercersburg Review*. Thus they could expect to be outvoted in the synods, as they had been time and again, and they had no publication in which to state their case and no college or seminary in the East in which to train new champions for the historic faith. That it was in dire straits was, they felt, shown by the fact that several ministers trained in Mercersburg and several students and faculty members at Franklin and Marshall became converts to Roman Catholicism. The times called for extreme efforts.

The first step was taken on February 5, 1867, when a small group met at the home of Emanuel Kelker in Harrisburg and resolved on three measures: 1, to call a general conference of those opposed to the Revised Liturgy; 2, to found a college “das auf dem Grunde der alten lehre der Vater stehe”; 3, to start a monthly magazine to defend their principles. Circulars were sent in July to 337 persons, inviting them to the conference, which was held in Myerstown on September 24. One hundred and ninety persons attended, of whom 36 were ministers. Most of those attending were Pennsylvanians, and there was a handful of people from Maryland, Ohio, and North Carolina. The “low church” party was strong in the South and West, but the Myerstown Convention as it was thereafter called represented chiefly the Eastern opposition to Mercersburg.

In the Convention resolutions were passed declaring loyalty to the German Reformed Church and opposition to the new liturgy both for its intrinsic nature and for the unconstitutional and high-handed efforts being made to introduce it. The ongoing work of the Convention was delegated to a “Business Committee” composed of four clergy, the Revs. F. A. Ruple of Middletown, Md., A. S. Vaughan of York, George Wolff of Myerstown, and J. H. A. Bomberger of Philadelphia, and seven laymen. In their hands were laid the tasks of founding the proposed monthly periodical and the college.

The first issue of the *Reformed Church Monthly* appeared in January, 1868. Dr. Bomberger was the chief editor and writer, and associated with him were Dr. Jeremiah H. Good, professor of mathematics in Heidelberg College and of theology in the Theological Seminary there (Tiffin, Ohio), and Rev. Professor J. H. Klein of the Mission House in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. These were not token associates, for the western part of the Church was firmly on the low church side. Dr. J. H. Good and Dr. George W. Willard, the president of Heidelberg, were as staunch and combative in their opposition to Nevinism as Dr. Bomberger. During the nine years of its existence (1868–76) the *Reformed Church Monthly* was an aggressive and hard hitting publication, owing much of its vigor to Dr. Bomberger, who once in the arena of theological forensics gave and asked no quarter. The *Monthly* was used also to describe and publicize Ursinus and its seminary, and is therefore an authoritative source of information on the earliest years.
The "Business Committee" appointed at the Myerstown Convention was geographically too spread out for effective action in the major enterprise it was to undertake, and so on November 10, 1868 six persons—the Rev. J. H. A. Bomberger, First Church; John Wiest and Abram Kline, Christ Church; A. W. Myers and William L. Graver, Trinity Church, all of Philadelphia; the Rev. H. H. W. Hibscluman, St. Luke's Church, Trappe—met in Philadelphia and took the following action:

WHEREAS, there is an increasing demand in the Reformed Church for educational facilities, and whereas we have no such school in this section of our Zion distinctively Reformed and adapted to the wants of our sons, both intellectually and morally, therefore RESOLVED, that we found and establish at such a place as hereafter be determined an institution of learning that shall afford young men the advantage of a collegiate education.

The reference to "this section of our Zion" is a little puzzling. It could mean the bounds of Philadelphia Classis (Philadelphia and Chester Counties and the lower part of Montgomery County), in which support for the venture was strong. More probably it meant the East generally as distinguished from Ohio and the West where the orthodox Heidelberg was situated. The resolution was not meant to imply that the new college should be either sectional or rigidly sectarian, that is, exclusively Reformed, in character. From its opening Ursinus drew some support and students from other denominations and other areas, although at the outset few came from beyond the immediate area.

On December 29, 1868 the Board of Directors was named. It consisted of the following persons: from Philadelphia, W. D. Gross, Abram Kline, H. K. Harnish, John Wiest, A. W. Myers, A. Van Haagen, J. H. A. Bomberger, J. G. Wiehle, J. Dahlman, George Schall, W. L. Graver, and N. Gehr; from Chester County, J. Knipe, William Sorber, and Nathan Pennypacker; from Montgomery County, James Koons, Henry W. Kratz, Abraham Hunsicker, Sr., J. W. Sunderland, H. H. W. Hibscluman, and Emanuel Longacre. The organization of the Board was completed on January 12, 1869 with the election of the following officers: President, Abram Kline, Philadelphia; Vice-president, the Rev. H. H. W. Hibscluman, Trappe; Secretary, Henry W. Kratz, Trappe; Treasurer, J. C. Wanner, Philadelphia. A few years later (1873) Abram Kline resigned from the presidency of the Board and was succeeded by Henry W. Kratz, who held this key position until 1910.

Application was made on behalf of this self-constituted board for a charter for the new college. Contacts were made and the preliminary negotiations in Harrisburg were conducted by Henry W. Kratz and J. Warrene Sunderland, representing the Board, and by Montgomery County's representatives in the State Legislature, Senator Stinson and Representatives McMillen and Eschbach. The charter, which will be quoted and commented on a little later, was granted on February 5, 1869, just two years after the initial meeting in Harrisburg.

In the meantime thought was being given to the location of the college. At the
Freeland Seminary, a preparatory school located in Freeland, now Collegeville, was purchased in 1869 by the Board of Directors of Ursinus College. Its two connecting buildings, later called Freeland and Stine Halls, and seven acres and one hundred and thirty-nine perches of land were purchased for $20,000.

suggestion of the Rev. H. H. W. Hibschman the six “organizers” considered purchasing the preparatory school established in 1848 by Bishop Abraham Hunsicker, which was located in Freeland, now Collegeville, and called Freeland Seminary. The school was in fairly prosperous condition, but the principal, Adam H. Fetterolf, desired to withdraw from his position (he later became head of Girard College), and the owner of the school, the Rev. Henry A. Hunsicker, son of its founder, was willing to dispose of the property. Negotiations for its sale were speedily concluded, and in January 1869 Freeland Seminary with its two connecting buildings, later called Freeland and Stine Halls, and seven acres and one hundred and thirty-nine perches of land were purchased for $20,000. The purchase was confirmed at the meeting of the Board of Directors on February 3, two days before the granting of the charter in Harrisburg.

Freeland, where the Seminary was located, was in 1869 a scattering of homes and farms on the Ridge Pike about a mile from the Perkiomen Creek, having as its center, so far as there was a center, the Seminary and Trinity Christian Church
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(founded in 1854 as “The Christian Society of Freeland”) diagonally across the Ridge Pike from it. The area in the lower part of what is now Collegeville, near the railroad and the creek, was called Perkiomen Bridge. Small as the community was it had had two other names. The first was Phillip’s Ford, after an early innkeeper along the creek. The second was Townsend, a name which did not catch on, after Samuel Townsend of Philadelphia. When the post office was moved to Fifth Avenue and Main Street in 1861, the Postal Department made Freeland the official name, but the residents down town fought against this, and harmony was achieved only when the Reading Railroad, to whose station the post office was moved in 1869, chose the name Collegeville, probably as much in recognition of Pennsylvania Female College, which had been there since 1853, as of Ursinus, which at this time had not yet begun collegiate instruction.

Freeland Seminary of Perkiomen Bridge, as it was called in 1848, was established by the Rev. Abraham Hunsicker on land bought from William Tennant Todd, son of Andrew Todd, who gave the land for what was called Todd’s School to the community in 1832. Mr. Hunsicker had been elected a minister of the Skippack Mennonite Church in 1847. Later that year he was made bishop of the Skippack, Providence, and Methacton churches. Conscious of his own inadequate preparation for the work he had been called to do, he proposed to establish a seminary or preparatory school so that the younger generation and those to come would have better opportunities for education than their elders had had. This enlightened attitude did not find favor in the Mennonite communities, which held then as the Amish do now that education beyond the three R’s was unnecessary at best and at worst tended to make people worldly. Abraham Hunsicker gave other causes for offense—he adopted some modern conveniences, he espoused the abolition of slavery, and he favored taking part in politics—and was accordingly suspended by the General Conference of Mennonites in 1851. It was this suspension that led him, with three others, to organize “The Christian Society of Freeland.”

The main building of Freeland Seminary was erected in 1848, and instruction began with three students under the principalship of Henry A. Hunsicker, who became also the proprietor in 1851. The school speedily prospered; there were 79 in attendance at the end of the first year, and by 1856 it had grown enough to warrant the construction of a north wing (later Stine Hall). It was both a boarding and a day school, attracting in the years before the Civil War some students from the South. Ironically, it drew few students from the Mennonite families whom it was created to serve. In the twenty-one years of its existence over 2000 persons studied at Freeland Seminary. But after the war its prosperity was decreased by the growing popularity of the normal schools. An effort was made to meet this competition by the establishment of a “normal class” in 1866. But without the resources provided by larger communities for the normal schools, which the towns sponsoring them considered to be great local assets, bringing income and prestige to those communities, and with the fact already mentioned that the principal in 1869 wished to resign, the time seemed to Henry Hunsicker ripe for selling the school.
Freeland Seminary came under the control of Ursinus College on April 6, 1869, although the legal transfer of the property was not completed until June. In the year preceding transfer the Seminary had an average attendance per term (three terms a year) of 85 students. As the Academic Department of the College it continued operations during 1869–70, before collegiate instruction began, and was conducted without a break until it was discontinued in 1910. Numerically it was for many years the largest part of the educational program, having more students than the College and the Theological Seminary.

When the Board of Directors applied to the Commonwealth for a charter for the new college they gave it the “name, style, and title of Ursinus College.” This name, which has given sports announcers and strangers so much difficulty through the years, was proposed by Dr. Bomberger and was intended to declare the Reformed orthodoxy of the College. Zachariah Baer (1534–83) was one of the most learned theologians and teachers of his time, in the second generation of the German and Swiss reformers, after Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, and Zwingli. A native of Breslau in eastern Germany, he entered the University of Wittenberg at the age of sixteen. There, as was the custom among scholars, he latinized his name to Zacharias Ursinus. After studying at Wittenberg (1550–1557), he travelled for a year in western Europe and then returned to Breslau to teach languages and religion. But a religious controversy broke out there, and after two years he resigned. Following a year spent in Zurich he was called in 1561 to the University of Heidelberg as professor of theology. In 1578 he became professor of theology at the new University of Neustadt, where he died in 1583.
This brief sketch gives no idea of the political and religious turbulence in Germany during Ursinus's lifetime, a turbulence by which he was harshly buffeted several times. His years as director of the Collegium Sapientiae at Heidelberg were not years of unruffled studiousness in an ivory tower, but filled with unremitting labors that gave point to the famous epigram inscribed over the door to his study: "Friend, whoever you are, who came here, either transact your business quickly and go away, or help me in my labours." Apart from his work as professor of theology, for a time teaching single-handed seventy students, he wrote many works of theology, some of which embroiled him in the furious cross-currents of controversy.

Ursinus is most famous, and doubtless this is what drew Dr. Bomberger to honor him, as a co-author of the Palatine Liturgy and as principal author (with Caspar Olevianus) of the Heidelberg Catechism. These two works were for the low church party in the Reformed Church in the United States the ultimate authorities for the cultus and doctrine they were seeking to preserve. Their views on dogma, worship, and church government were markedly like those of Ursinus, making the choice a singularly appropriate one. That Ursinus was, like Dr. Bomberger, at bottom a peaceable man who fought fiercely when attacked and that his name meant "bear" only accentuated that appropriateness.

The Act of Incorporation, or charter, for the college bearing the name of Ursinus is noteworthy in two respects. The first is that it is a university charter. Section I provides that there shall be established "an institution of learning, for the purpose of imparting instruction in Science, Literature, the Liberal Arts and Learned Professions." Section II states that the Board of Directors "shall have power to establish, from time to time, such departments of study and instruction as they may deem expedient" and "They may appoint a faculty or faculties." And Section 7 provides "That the faculty of any organized department in the College may, . . . , confer the degrees, honors, and dignities usually conferred by similar departments in the Colleges and Universities of this Commonwealth." The significance of these statements in the charter was that they authorized the establishment of the Theological Department, or Seminary, which the founders intended to create. There was no idea of creating a university in the full sense of that term, but post-graduate instruction in theology was a primary goal.

The other noteworthy element is that Ursinus was incorporated as an autonomous institution. The charter states that the Board of Directors "shall have perpetual succession" and "have power to fill all vacancies in their own body." Thus, Ursinus was not created by the Church or controlled by it, although it was in a very real sense church-related. It was on this difference in its status from that of Franklin and Marshall that the opponents of Ursinus based their case in seeking to prevent individuals and congregations from giving financial support to Ursinus or to the students studying for the ministry here. A hundred years has made a difference. Now church-controlled colleges are divesting themselves of that control and seeking the autonomy Ursinus has always had, in order to qualify as recipients of federal and state funds.
The major part of the year 1869 was spent in completing the organization of the new college, selecting its officers, particularly the president, and, most difficult of all, obtaining the money to float the project. In all this Dr. Bomberger was more than active. As has been stated he proposed the name of Ursinus for the College, he suggested the device for the corporate seal, he helped to work out the provisions of the charter, he drafted the constitution by which the Board of Directors was organized, he recommended the titles of the several chairs for the faculty, and above all he engaged in the financing of the enterprise, for at the meeting of the Board on September 16 he reported pledges aggregating more than $25,000. Because of his prominence in the movement to create the College and because of his ability as a leader the Board on June 7 unanimously chose him as president. According to Dr. James I. Good, during these early months people were calling Ursinus “Dr. Bomberger’s College.”

Yet he hesitated to accept the office which seemed inevitably his. He saw the opportunity and the challenge. But he was past fifty, the duties were somewhat unfamiliar, and the salary more than uncertain. He had a large family to support and a very happy situation as pastor of the Race Street Church (Old First) in Philadelphia, which he had served since 1854. At the Board meeting on September 16 he stated that he could not give a definite answer as to acceptance “at this time.” The Board was not in a state of indecision. At this same meeting it fixed his salary at $2,400 per year, beginning October 1, and requested him to enter upon his duties as soon as arrangements could be made to that end. The salary was a promise rather than an assurance, as he knew better than anyone else. Fortunately this uncertainty was dispelled by his being offered the pastorate of St. Luke’s Church, Trappe, which had just been vacated by the resignation of Rev. H. H. W. Hibschman, who went to the church in Waynesboro. There is no record in the minutes of the Board of Dr. Bomberger’s acceptance of the presidency or of the professorship of “Moral and Mental Philosophy and Evidences of Christianity.” The pastorate of St. Luke’s he assumed on April 1, 1870.

On June 1 the Board of Directors authorized the establishment of the course of theological study. Efforts were already being made to prevent or discredit the teaching of theology here. The friends of Ursinus, however, persevered in efforts in its behalf, and in this same month Dr. J. H. Good wrote that the College “is in possession of a very handsome property, has already secured an endowment of upward of $30,000, and expects to be able to commence by September 6 with a full faculty, and this composed of men who stand on a par with those of any institution in the Reformed Church.” Some indication of where the support for Ursinus was coming from is given by the statement that twenty-five rooms had been refitted by the kindness of friends in “Lancaster (First Church and St. Paul’s), Harrisburg, York, Waynesboro, Philadelphia, Fogelsville, Myerstown, etc., etc.” It should be noted that the endowment boasted of by Dr. Good was largely in the form of pledges. The College already needed more money than it had, for on February 10 the Board had to meet an overdraft of $1,337, most of which was paid by President.
Bomberger, just as a year earlier the down payment of $2,500 on the Freeland Seminary property, due February 3, could not be paid until April 1. This was the shape of things to come. As President George L. Omwake succinctly stated in 1917, Ursinus was "founded on debt instead of an endowment." Finance has been the College's greatest problem throughout its first century.