

William Harold Payne

BY RICHARD WILLIS

William Harold Payne was appointed the chair of education at the University of Michigan (U-M) in 1879, the first appointment of its kind in the United States and the fourth such professor of education in the world. With that appointment, Payne was to create a chair of pedagogy—the method and practice of teaching in education—to supply Michigan with instructors who would be given the opportunity to learn the theory of teaching.

Payne was born on May 12, 1836, in Farmington, New York. He attended school while working on the family farm. In 1856, Payne married Eva S. Fort. He also taught young children in Victor, New York, from 1856 to 1857.

A year later, he was appointed principal of the Union school in Three Rivers, Michigan. He held that post for six years. Payne was the superintendent of schools in Niles, Michigan, from 1864 to 1866. During the period of 1866-1869, he was the principal of the Holy Ghost Seminary in Ypsilanti. Before Payne's appointment at U-M, he was superintendent of schools in Adrian, Michigan, from 1869 to 1879. In 1872, he was awarded an honorary master of arts degree from U-M. He also edited the Michigan Teacher and had a reputation for being a talented author.

During his tenure at U-M, other institutions followed suit in forming departments of education. Johns Hopkins, Indiana, Cornell, and Ohio Universities—along with the Universities of Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Kansas—all established education departments.

In Payne's management and organization of new courses in the department of education at U-M, he stated that the general aim was to offer opportunities for the study of education in three main areas: practice, science, and history. He also addressed the best ways to impart knowledge to students. Equal attention was given to subject matter and methods. The grammar and vocabulary of a language were essential for a trainee to learn, but so were the pedagogical principles to get the message across. Payne looked upon education with a great deal of optimism and hope.

At U-M, Payne was skeptical of educational fads and mechanical instruction. He was particularly critical of aimless teaching and questioned the mode of educational

WILLIAM HAROLD PAYNE
1836-1907

A portrait of William Harold Payne. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, University Special Collections.)

progress that was used by so-called educational pioneers. He believed students should not learn science, but rather discover it. Payne was equally scathing of those who thought books should be thrown away.

He also abhorred the tendency in modern education to promote merely the mechanical aspects of teaching. Here, he claimed, children were treated as empty objects, trained, and fitted into regulation shape—as the artist might deal with senseless wood and iron. Payne was further disturbed by the failure of young teachers to manage their classes and oversee the study of their children.

William Payne left U-M in 1887 and became chancellor of the University of Nashville and president of Peabody Normal College from 1887 to 1901. He returned to U-M in 1901 and worked alongside some of his former students who were now teachers. He passed away on June 17, 1907. ■

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