

Chasing Mr. Rockefeller's Dollars: Denison University, the University of Chicago, and Educational Philanthropy

Dennis M. Read¹

Abstract

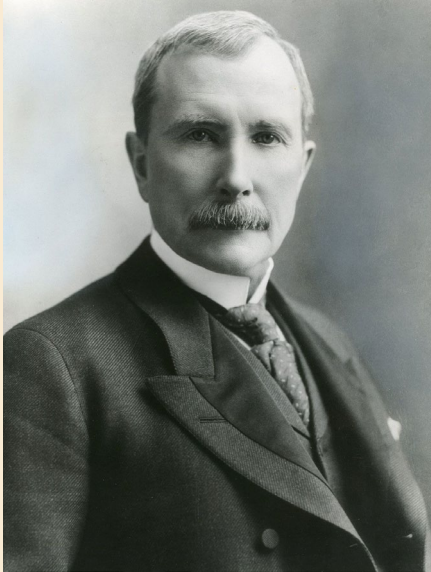
This article details the late 19th century shift in Rockefeller's educational philanthropy that reflected a blending of his initial Baptist motivations for giving with increasingly secular intentions. His giving patterns to Denison University and the University of Chicago illustrate that evolution. Beginning in 1868, he gave generously to Denison University in Granville, Ohio, increased his involvement over subsequent years, becoming a trustee and making larger gifts to the institution. Over time, however, competing appeals drew Rockefeller's attention away from Denison. Beginning in 1890, he became the major benefactor of the reestablished University of Chicago, as his involvement with Denison waned. The shift in Rockefeller's philosophy of giving marked a major turning point in higher education as large-scale philanthropy increasingly supported universities committed to research. The article traces this shift through original correspondence and archival materials.

Keywords: educational philanthropy, John D. Rockefeller, Denison University, University of Chicago, Baptist higher education, research universities

A substantial body of scholarship examines John Davison Rockefeller (see Figure 1; 1839–1937) and his philanthropy. In his biography of Rockefeller, Ron Chernow states that he “must rank as the greatest philanthropist in American history” (Chernow, 1998, p. 566). Olivier Zunz, John Harr, and Peter Johnson indicate how his giving increased proportionately as his fortune grew (Zunz, 2012, p. 8; Harr & Johnson, 1988, pp. 15–16). In a 1906 statement, Rockefeller asserted that “the power to make money is a gift from God...Having been endowed with the gift I possess, I believe it is my duty to make money and still more money and to use the money I make for the good of my fellowman

¹ Dennis M. Read, PhD, is an Associate Professor Emeritus at Denison University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to readwrites@gmail.com

Figure 1*John D. Rockefeller, 1884*

Note. From *John D. Rockefeller, 1884*
[Photograph], Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.

according to the dictates of my conscience" (as cited in Abels, 1965, p. 280). Many scholars critically examined what they characterize as racist and hegemonic intentions in his giving and their relationship to his ruthless business practices (Anderson & Moss, 1999; Davis, 2006; Janak & Helmsing, 2017). Near the end of the 19th century, however, those dictates evolved as his initial religious motivations for giving blended with increasingly secular aims that reflected the rise of Progressive era thought. The evolution of Rockefeller's giving philosophy was consequential and had profound implications for educational philanthropy. His educational philanthropy shifted from advancing secular morality to

promoting social and scientific studies. His initial support of Baptist catechism diminished as he shifted toward promoting capitalistic principles and practices. This shift can be traced through Rockefeller's involvement with two institutions of higher education, Denison University and the University of Chicago. Their subsequent development diverged: Denison remained an undergraduate liberal arts college, whereas Chicago became a major research university with extensive graduate education.

The shift in Rockefeller's philosophy of giving marked a major turning point in the evolution of higher education as large-scale philanthropy increasingly supported universities committed to research. The late 19th century saw the confluence of large-scale philanthropic giving and the emergence of the modern research university driven by rapid industrialization and the rise of immense private fortunes (Geiger, 2014). Although the University of Chicago was among the early institutions to emphasize research,

several universities preceded it, each established with substantial support from a major benefactor. Cornell University was established in 1865 with a \$500,000 grant from Ezra Cornell; Johns Hopkins University was established in 1876 with a \$7 million grant from its namesake; and Stanford University was established in 1885 with a \$5 million grant from Leland and Jane Stanford (Zunz, 2012, p. 9). According to Zunz (2012),

Philanthropists found in educators and scientists grantees who could put the new money to work for both credible and important goals. The idea was not simply to expand the number or size of academic institutions, but to create an educational establishment that was ecumenical and open to science rather than denominational in outlook. (p. 23)

These universities formed the vanguard of modern higher education, with other public and private universities following suit. Harvard president Charles William Eliot acknowledged this pattern when he stated in 1901 that “the graduate school of Harvard University, started feebly in 1870 and 1871, did not thrive until the example of Johns Hopkins forced our faculty to put their strength into the development of our instruction for graduates” (as cited in Curti & Nash, 1965, p. 118).

Rockefeller's Early Philanthropy

Rockefeller was charitable from an early age. Chernow (1998, p. 50) notes that at age 20 he was giving more than 10% of his earnings to good causes. According to Chernow, by the time Rockefeller rose to financial success, he was giving away both small and large portions of his wealth to individuals and institutions he considered worthy. He received unending solicitations and considered them carefully. Chernow further notes that Rockefeller's deeply rooted Baptist faith caused him to favor applicants and causes associated with that denomination, but he also supported causes for Native Americans and Black Americans. Most notable was his support for the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary beginning in 1882 and continuing for many years. The institution was renamed Spelman Seminary, later Spelman College, in honor of Rockefeller's wife, Laura Spelman Rockefeller (pp. 240–242).²

²Rockefeller also gave \$59,200 to Tuskegee Institute between 1896 and 1903 and \$460,907 to Vassar College between 1880 and 1902 (Rose, 1998).

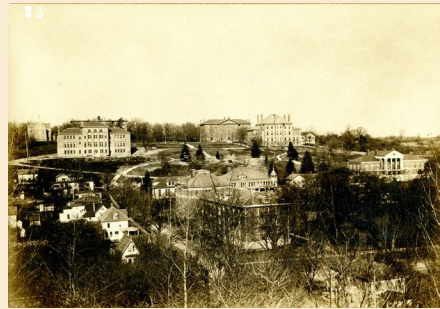
When Denison University (see Figure 2) was founded in 1831 in Granville, Ohio, as the Granville Literary and Theological Institution, it became the second Baptist college west of the Allegheny Mountains (Dunphy, 2019).³ Chessman and Southgate (1981) state that in 1853, a Muskingum County farmer, William S. Denison, promised the college \$10,000 in exchange for naming rights. He came through with only \$2,000, but the name had already stuck (pp. 21–22).

Denison University had better luck with Rockefeller. The institution's historians Chessman and Southgate (1981) traced Rockefeller's early involvement with the institution and his reasons for supporting it. Denison president Samson Talbot first secured Rockefeller's support in 1868, when Rockefeller was 29. He gave Denison \$500, equivalent to approximately \$11,700 in 2025 dollars based on historical U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI) data from MeasuringWorth (Officer & Williamson, n.d.). Rockefeller's wife, Laura Celestia Spelman (1839–1915), had family ties to both Granville and Denison. Her grandfather, Samuel Buel Spelman (1786–1873), arrived in Granville in 1811, seven years after his uncle, Timothy Spelman (1756–1828), came with four others to establish the village. Timothy Spelman's daughter, Hannah Spelman Granger (1796–1855), witnessed the college's conception in her home, and after it was established in 1831, her uncles, Thomas Herrick Spelman (1787–1864) and Sylvester Spelman (1789–1873), were early trustees.

Six years later, in 1874, Rockefeller's connection with Denison was firmly established when he became a trustee (Chessman & Southgate, 1981, p. 25). By then, Rockefeller had already accumulated considerable wealth and had

Figure 2

Denison University Campus, 1905–1906



Note. Courtesy of Denison University Archives & Special Collections, Granville, Ohio.

³ The first Baptist institution was Shurtleff College, originally Rock Springs Seminary, established in 1827 in Alton, Illinois. Rockefeller made a cash donation to it in the 1890s. The college closed in 1957, and the campus was acquired by Southern Illinois University (Dunphy, 2019).

become a devoted benefactor to Baptist causes, though hardly a freewheeling one. He carefully studied the many appeals made to him, required detailed explanations of the need, and set firm conditions before writing a check (Nielsen, 1996, pp. 30–31).

One such appeal came from fellow trustee Henry F. Colby, who wrote to Rockefeller on February 3, 1880: “may I not venture to express the hope that one of the largest gifts of your life will be made at no distant day to [Denison]?” (Colby, 1880, para. 3). He elaborated:

It has a good foundation and a wide field; is doing excellent work and is the only college which the Baptists have in the great state of Ohio. But it is imperatively in need of money for the better support of its faculty and the enlargement of all its facilities. It cannot expect much, if any, help from outside the State; and the number of Baptists within Ohio who have large means is very small. (Colby, 1880, para. 3)

Colby’s solicitation was strengthened shortly thereafter by a report from George O. King, pastor of the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church in Cleveland, where the Rockefeller family worshipped. On March 31, 1880, after a two-week teaching residence at Denison, King (1880) wrote to Rockefeller:

While there associated with the professors and students I had a good opportunity of judging of the work done in the institution and was very much pleased and interested. ...

I am convinced that so far as it goes the work done there is good work. It is not superficial. So far as my knowledge goes I think that there is not an Institution in O. that does better work. (paras. 1–2)

Later in the letter, King continued:

I remember a conversation we once had with reference to Cleveland being a better location for a College than Granville and your offer to donate the land for the purpose at Forest Hill if a change could be made in location. So that when I was in Granville I mentally made some comparisons between the two locations and I confess my views were modified very much. ...

There are not so many things in Granville to distract the attention of the students from their studies.

There are not the same temptations to dissipation.

The atmosphere of city social life is unfavorable to correct habits of study to those who inhale it and especially such as inhale it freely. (King,

1880, paras. 10–13)

King added that Denison had begun a campaign to raise an endowment of \$100,000 but noted that “it could make good use of an endowment of \$200,000” (King, 1880, para. 15). Rockefeller ultimately contributed \$20,000 in two installments, more than twice the amount he had previously given to Denison. He withheld the second \$10,000 payment, however, until he learned that the institution had raised \$90,000 (Shepardson, 1931, p. 163).

Other Baptist colleges vied with Denison for Rockefeller’s largesse. Among them was the original University of Chicago, now known as the Old University of Chicago. In a letter dated March 5, 1883, Mary Eleanor Anderson (1883), wife of University of Chicago president Galusha Anderson, wrote to Rockefeller that the strain her husband was experiencing from the college’s severe financial duress could be fatal. “I fear he will die if help does not come from some quarter,” she stated (para. 5). She added:

The gentlemen outside of our denomination who have helped us hitherto this year have failed to assist us. They, many of them at least, say that they will see what the Baptists do and then decide whether they will help. As these gentlemen have been our main support, this action leaves us in distress (Anderson, 1883, para. 4).

Her letter expressed a desperate plea near its end: “The only way out will be either for some large-hearted man to interfere and straighten things up, or for us all to give up the ship” (Anderson, 1883, para. 7). Her appeal underscored both the university’s financial desperation and the hope that Rockefeller might intervene.

The following year, on February 19, 1884, President Anderson wrote to Rockefeller requesting a donation of several thousand dollars to reach a goal of \$10,000 for immediate expenses. Anderson (1884a) wrote, “If you cannot, in view of what you are doing for other objects, do as much as you would, perhaps you can help me some. Help must come from some source” (para. 1). Rockefeller, however, replied that he was unable to contribute at that time (Anderson, 1884b).

Rockefeller continued to support Denison. On October 27, 1884, Denison president Alfred Owen wrote Rockefeller requesting funds to support advanced work in natural history (Owen, 1884a). By November 5, Owen had received Rockefeller’s \$100 contribution (Owen, 1884b). Owen thanked him, writing: “I

have a faint conception of the pressure put upon you & felt exceeding reluctance to add to your burden. But I remembered that you already have such a stake in the prosperity & power of our college as to bind you to its interests, & I felt the need of progress here if we are to hold our place" (Owen, 1884b, para. 1).

On February 21, 1885, President Anderson of the Old University of Chicago again approached Rockefeller for financial assistance. In his letter, Anderson described the university's precarious financial condition, including debts amounting to \$300,000. Anderson (1885) wrote, "If some man would come forward and give to this University \$500,000, pay its debt, and begin the endowment of it, he would do a better and grander thing than men are often permitted to do" (para. 1).

The Old University of Chicago closed in 1886 amid its continuing financial difficulties (Boyer, 2024, pp. 29–36). The following year, Anderson succeeded Owen as president of Denison University (Shepardson, 1931, p. 172). He immediately began a campaign to raise \$100,000 for the Denison endowment. In a letter dated May 18, 1887, Anderson (1887) approached Rockefeller about the campaign, inquiring "what each trustee can and will do towards it" (para. 1). He asserted, "We must enlarge and strengthen the departments of this University in order to make it most largely efficient" (Anderson, 1887, para. 1).

Trustee Colby pressed Denison's case more forcefully several months later in a September 27, 1887, letter to Rockefeller. "Denison is beyond comparison the best established Baptist college west of the Alleghanies," he boasted (Colby, 1887, para. 1). Yet, he continued, "there is much needed to bring Denison up to all the demands of the age. It is the centre at which Baptist young people, in all this central section of our country, must be educated in increasing numbers" (para. 1). Colby (1887) then invoked Rockefeller's ties to Ohio: "As Ohio has been your home & the scene of many of your religious associations and business activities I wish we might have a building at Granville which in years to come might be associated with your memory" (para. 1). In seeking support for the fundraising campaign, Colby added, "we trust that you will not wish to be left out" (para. 1).

Colby emphasized Rockefeller's Ohio connection, but Rockefeller had moved to New York City four years earlier, placing him considerably farther from Granville (Chernow, 1998, p. 218). His attendance at Denison trustee meetings had never been regular, a point Colby raised near the end of his letter:

"We have regretted that your many engagements have prevented our having the benefit of your counsel in our trustees' meetings" (Colby, 1887, para. 3).

A year later, Anderson was still negotiating with Rockefeller over his contribution. Before committing himself, Rockefeller asked Anderson to outline the fundraising goals. In a November 12, 1888, letter to Rockefeller, Anderson (1888) explained that the funds would support additional professors in history, economics, and modern languages; a science laboratory; a new building for the college preparatory program; and an expanded library budget. The fundraising goal had increased to \$200,000, with a deadline of January 1, 1890. Emphasizing Denison's importance to Ohio Baptists, Anderson (1888) stated, "This is the only college that the Baptists have in this great State" (p. 2). He then appealed directly to Rockefeller: "I don't want the Baptists here behind everybody else in matters of Education, do you?" (p. 2). Underscoring his determination to secure Rockefeller's support for Denison, two months later, on January 31, 1889, Anderson added in a subsequent letter, "I don't just like to see any money go past Granville further westward" (Anderson, 1889, p. 2).

Colby and Anderson's efforts finally paid off. Rockefeller gave \$25,000 toward a \$100,000 pledge, half the fundraising goal. The remainder was not raised until a decade later in 1900. By then, Anderson had left Denison and Daniel B. Purinton was president (Chessman & Southgate, 1981, p. 61).

Throughout these years of Rockefeller's strong involvement with Denison, its presidents and trustees based their appeals to him on the college's Baptist affiliation and its bucolic location. They sought to strengthen an established college in modest and incremental ways, rather than to enlarge its size or expand its curricula. Rockefeller clearly shared this approach, serving as a trustee and contributing more money to Denison than to any other institution of higher education during this period.

Changing Philanthropic Directions

By the mid-1880s, the influence of Rockefeller's Baptist faith—previously a major driving force in his philanthropy—began to diminish. This shift occurred in part because other Baptists, especially Frederick T. Gates and William Rainey Harper, convinced him that higher education should focus on measurable societal improvements through scientific methods and pursue such efforts on a

large scale. Gates took over Rockefeller's philanthropic work—Chernow (1998) calls him “the tutelary spirit of the Rockefeller philanthropies” (p. 470)—and Harper became the first president of the resurrected University of Chicago.

The revival of the University of Chicago resulted largely from the efforts of Thomas W. Goodspeed, secretary of the University of Chicago Seminary. Rockefeller respected Goodspeed, who recognized that Rockefeller's support was critical to building a new University of Chicago (Boyer, 2024, pp. 36–38). On January 7, 1887, he wrote Rockefeller:

To found this institution, in this place, will, it seems to me, be the glory of a man's life. Its manifest destiny is to become one of the foremost seats of learning in the land. I cannot believe that a nobler opportunity can ever be presented to you to do a great and noble thing for strengthening the denomination, blessing the youth of the future generations and building up the kingdom of God. (Goodspeed, 1887, p. 4)

Four days later, William Rainey Harper, a Yale professor, wrote to Rockefeller:

there is no greater work to be done on this continent than the work of establishing a University in or near Chicago. ... It is safe to make the prediction that in ten years such a University would have more students, if rightly conducted, than Yale or Harvard has today. (Harper, 1887, p. 1)

Two years later, on March 28, 1889, E. Benjamin Andrews (1889) went even further, telling Rockefeller of his conviction “that the rearing of a noble institution of learning in that city was [of] the very foremost educational interest of our denomination in this age” (p. 1). Warming to the idea, Andrews (1889) fervently added:

Any Christian man who is aware, as I happen to be, of the efforts made in recent years by unbelievers to capture the State Universities in the West, will tremble, almost, to think that so important a centre as Chicago has remained thus long open to occupation by them. We ought to take possession at the earliest possible moment, and to do it in such a triumphant way that no one would ever think of contesting our title. It is my firm belief that no other chance so clear and certain as this to effect a work of towering grandeur for Christian education was ever placed before any man or set of men since the gospel was first preached. ... The erection of the University suggested would indeed be in the religious history of America an event, a

turning-point, not less vital than the Louisiana Purchase in our political history. (pp. 1–2)

This resounding call is even more remarkable when one remembers that Andrews had been president of Denison from 1875 to 1879 and was, in fact, interred in the campus cemetery upon his death in 1917. At the time he wrote his letter to Rockefeller, Andrews was professor of political economy and finance at Cornell University (University of Nebraska–Lincoln, n.d.).

Such high-flying rhetoric was necessary to break Rockefeller's resistance. At the end of 1886, Rockefeller (1886) had written Goodspeed, "There is hardly a chance that I could give the least encouragement for assistance in respect to the university" (p. 1). On February 6, 1888, Rockefeller (1888) wrote to George C. Lorimer, "The report was incorrect about my being connected with the effort to establish a university at Chicago, and I am so heavily weighted with other undertakings that I cannot give any encouragement in this direction" (p. 1).

Later that year, however, he engaged in long and detailed discussions with Harper about a new University of Chicago. On November 5, 1888, Harper (1888) wrote to Goodspeed an optimistic report:

It is absolutely certain that the thing is to be done; it is now only a question as to what scale. I have every time claimed that nothing less than four millions would be satisfactory to begin with, and have expressed my desire for five. Just what he wants to do and what his definite ideas are I cannot yet tell. I have never known him to be so interested in anything, and this promises much. (para. 3)

A major question was who would be at the helm of the resurrected university. On January 4, 1889, Henry L. Morehouse, field secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, wrote to Harper, "I believe that if the right man can be found to be at the head of the institution it would greatly expedite Mr. Rockefeller's decision; but the presidential timber is so scarce I hardly know where to look for the man" (Morehouse, 1889, para. 2). The "right man" turned out to be Harper himself. On September 26, 1890, Andrews (1890) wrote Rockefeller, "I have urged Harper to accept at Chicago and I rejoice as much as you or anyone in the outlook of the new University" (p. 1). Andrews had by then become president of Brown University and would lead its

transformation into a full-fledged university (Chernow, 1998, p. 348).⁴ Harper assumed the presidency the following July and, over the next 15 years, led the institution toward realizing the vision of Andrews and others (Boyer, 2024, pp. 73–131). Rockefeller’s initial gift of \$600,000 in 1890—equivalent to approximately \$21.9 million in 2025 dollars based on historical U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI) data from MeasuringWorth (Officer & Williamson, n.d.)—was substantially less than Harper’s \$4 million target. Rockefeller’s subsequent contributions, totaling \$35 million, further fueled the university’s growth (Chernow, 1998, p. 497).

Rockefeller’s decision to make such a large contribution to an institution of higher learning in a major and expanding city was at odds with George King’s earlier advice to Rockefeller not to move Denison to Cleveland because the temptations of a city to young men would strain their moral and intellectual fiber. Granville, with 1,366 residents in 1890, was, to King’s mind, relatively monastic (U.S. Census Office, 1892). By comparison, Cleveland had 261,353 residents and ranked as the 10th-largest city in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Chicago was larger still: its population more than doubled from 503,185 in 1880 to 1,099,850 in 1890, when it ranked behind only New York and Philadelphia (Gauthier, 2021).

In 1888, Frederick T. Gates, the first executive secretary of the American Baptist Education Society, prepared a study titled *The Need of a Baptist University in Chicago, as Illustrated by a Study of Baptist Collegiate Education in the West* that became an important part of the effort to secure support for a Baptist institution in Chicago (Rose, 1995). Gates examined 11 Baptist colleges in the West and concluded that their locations limited both their reach and their financial prospects. With the exception of the institution in Des Moines, he described the colleges as situated in small towns, removed from the region’s centers of population and wealth, and “out of the sight and interest of our wealthy men” (Gates, 1888, as cited in Rose, 1995, p. 34). Gates further argued that Chicago offered a fundamentally different environment, contending that the city would “lift so far aloft a Baptist college as an intellectual and religious luminary, that its light would illumine every state and penetrate every home from Lake Erie to

⁴ Chernow (1998) notes that Rockefeller vowed never to contribute to Brown University because Andrews supported free silver coinage, even though Rockefeller’s son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was a Brown University student (p. 348).

the Rocky Mountains” (Gates, 1888, as cited in Rose, 1995, p. 34). Gates later extended this argument to higher education nationally, contending that institutions located in rural communities struggled for financial support and students. He observed that more than two-thirds of the 34 colleges and universities with endowments of at least \$500,000 had achieved financial “success because they [were] located in cities of more than ten thousand people” (Gates, 1906, as cited in Hewa, 1998, p. 155).

Rockefeller met Gates (1853–1929) on January 21, 1889, and just over two years later, in March 1891, Gates became Rockefeller’s philanthropic and business advisor. A graduate of the University of Rochester and the Rochester Theological Seminary, Gates was a Baptist clergyman who soon assumed responsibility for much of Rockefeller’s philanthropy, much to Rockefeller’s relief (Chernow, 1998, pp. 361–367). Gates viewed Rockefeller’s rapidly growing fortune as an opportunity to make his philanthropy “wholesale” rather than “retail”—directing large sums to institutions capable of producing broad and lasting changes (Harr & Johnson, 1988, p. 27). The University of Chicago soon emerged as one such opportunity. Why, then, not Denison University?

The answer lies largely with Harper. Rockefeller’s association with Harper went back to 1876, when Harper was a faculty member at Denison and Andrews was president. Harper stayed for only two years, moving to a position at the University of Chicago Seminary (Boyer, 2024, pp. 68–69; Chessman, 1957, p. 123). When the University of Chicago was teetering on the brink, he had been offered the presidency but declined (Boyer, 2024, pp. 36–37; Chernow, 1998, pp. 307–308). Goodspeed (1886) wrote Rockefeller that “Dr. Harper does not feel that he can afford to risk so doubtful an experiment” (para. 2). Harper instead accepted the professorship at Yale. Five years later, Rockefeller’s munificent gift and promise of further support changed the situation. But, as a letter of February 2, 1891, from Henry L. Morehouse, field secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, to Harper makes clear, Rockefeller’s gift was contingent on Harper’s becoming president. If Harper declined the presidency, Rockefeller would withdraw his gift. “The two stand or fall together,” he wrote (Morehouse, 1891, p. 1).

Gates later wrote that the pair complemented each other. While Rockefeller was “temperamentally cool, reserved, cautious, circumspect, deliberate, amazingly patient, but in the end inflexible, adapting means to ends with long

and accurate prevision," Harper was "ardent, highly imaginative, with limitless capacity and insatiable eagerness for work, an undaunted optimist, minimizing difficulties, magnifying opportunities, rapid in conception, confiding, unsuspicious, bent on immediate results, willful, and impatient of opposition or delay" (Gates, 1977, p. 193).

As Boyer (2024, pp. 38–40) and Chernow (1998, pp. 302–303) report, competing with Harper for Rockefeller's attention was Augustus H. Strong, a Baptist minister who had been closely associated with Rockefeller in Cleveland. After Strong had assumed the presidency of the Rochester Theological Seminary in 1872, Rockefeller had contributed \$500,000 to it over several years. Like Harper, Strong dreamed of establishing a major Baptist university. His university would be located in New York City and he would be its president. Beginning in the 1880s, he badgered Rockefeller with solicitations for a contribution. He asked for an initial gift of \$20 million, far exceeding Harper's request. He was also adamant about branding the institution as Baptist, a bulwark against godless progressive thought. Rockefeller never gave Strong's campaign serious consideration.⁵

Harper's idea about higher education had won over Rockefeller. In his view, the promulgation of the Baptist faith was less important than the pursuit of all knowledge through open inquiry. Harper imagined a comprehensive university including schools of law, medicine, and engineering alongside traditional disciplines (Boyer, 2024, p. 74). He envisioned a national research university, and he wanted it to come into being as quickly as possible. That required the best minds and the right tools—laboratories, libraries, technical equipment. He needed Rockefeller to bankroll this audacious venture.

Harper's enthusiasm, however, risked repeating Strong's mistake of overreaching, and in 1889 Rockefeller backed off his support. Gates intervened to reassure Rockefeller, promising a gradual building plan. Tension between Harper's ambitious schedule and Rockefeller's caution never eased during the University of Chicago's years of growth (Chernow, 1998, pp. 311–315).

While Rockefeller disagreed with Harper's rapid pace, he admired his results. Waldemar A. Nielsen (1996) points out that Rockefeller's philanthropic goal was to achieve something more than "human uplift." Rockefeller, he wrote,

⁵ Strong's son, Charles, married Rockefeller's daughter, Bessie, in 1889 (Chernow, 1998, p. 306).

“believed that work and productivity were the basic source of human well-being and that the task of philanthropy was to attack the root causes of distress, not merely to alleviate symptoms, and to nurture those qualities that enabled people to help themselves” (Nielsen, 1996, p. 31). For Rockefeller, the rational means of pursuing this task was the scientific method. Rockefeller later wrote of his preference for “scientific men” who “arrive at some helpful contribution to the sum of human knowledge” rather than for a faculty whose teaching was fundamentally religious (Rockefeller, 1909, p. 148). When the General Education Board (GEB) was incorporated in 1903 with Rockefeller funding (Iacobelli & Shubinski, 2022), Rockefeller wrote that its purpose was “working out, in an orderly and rather scientific way, the problem of helping to stimulate and improve education in all parts of the country” (as cited in Sears, 1922/1990, p. 93). Rockefeller contributed \$53 million during the first decade of the GEB. Harper, with Rockefeller’s millions, was able to realize that progressive goal quickly. At the quinquennial commemoration of the University of Chicago in 1897, Rockefeller said of his gift, “It is the best investment I ever made in my life” (Chernow, 1998, p. 325).

Harper formally assumed the presidency on July 1, 1891, and the new University of Chicago opened its doors on October 1, 1892. Over the next decade and a half, he rapidly built the university into a major research institution by recruiting distinguished scholars and offering them higher salaries, reduced teaching loads, research support, and new laboratory facilities (Boyer, 2024, pp. 73–80). According to Judith Sealander (1997), the University of Chicago quickly developed into an important center for academic research and “within a decade Chicago was known internationally as a leader in many new disciplines—particularly those of sociology, anthropology, and psychology” (p. 82).

Harper also expanded the university’s professional offerings, establishing the College of Commerce and Politics in 1898, the predecessor of the Booth School of Business, and the Law School in 1902. Both reflected his interest in connecting advanced study with contemporary professional and social problems (Boyer, 2024, pp. 99–100). This emphasis also aligned with Rockefeller’s preference for philanthropy that produced tangible results.

Harper’s vision of a university was consistent with Rockefeller’s business principles, and his efforts produced an ambitious enterprise yielding notable achievements. In his recent history of the University of Chicago, John W. Boyer

(2024) states, “Harper’s university was to be, in the broadest sense, an instrument for the perfection of human reason, searching for social and ethical truth in a society that would become ever more Christian, more providential” (p. 72). For Harper, however, the university’s quest remained fundamentally religious. “There is but one thing in the Universe sacred aside from God,” he wrote in 1891; “that thing is truth. Searching for truth is searching for God” (as cited in Boyer, 2024, p. 114).

This lofty declaration can be understood as an effort to improve the status quo rather than revolutionize the beliefs and practices of society. The central assumptions that were embedded in capitalism, government, and law were largely left unchallenged, allowing hegemonic values and norms to continue (Fisher, 1983; Slaughter & Silva, 1980). Faith in such a system can limit free inquiry and leave unquestioned the ways that Rockefeller’s fortune was acquired. Rockefeller always maintained that he played no part in the design and operation of the University of Chicago. But he did not need to. Implicit in Harper’s decisions and actions was an endorsement of Rockefeller’s fundamental values.

In the last pages of his biography, Chernow states that Rockefeller left “a contradictory legacy,” one of “godliness and greed, compassion and fiendish cunning... The fiercest robber baron had turned out to be the foremost philanthropist” (Chernow, 1998, pp. 675–676). The University of Chicago is a monument to his philanthropy, a colossus of higher education that rose quickly over several decades. While embodying Harper’s vision, it carries the imprimatur of Rockefeller, whose support Harper carefully cultivated throughout the university’s accelerated growth.

While in practice the University of Chicago (see Figure 3) became a

Figure 3

The University of Chicago Main Quadrangles, 1915



Note. From General Campus Views: Main Quadrangles, 1911–1920 12 [Photograph], 1915. University of Chicago Photographic Archive, apf2-02756, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

nonsectarian institution, it remained nominally Baptist. Its charter states that two-thirds of the trustees and the university president “shall be members of regular Baptist churches” and “in this particular this charter shall be forever unalterable” (as cited in Sears, 1922/1990, p. 93). These stipulations remained in place until 1923, when the Northern Baptist Convention voted to change the composition of the board to three-fifths Baptist members, increase its membership to 25, and drop the requirement that the president be a Baptist. When the point was raised that Baptist money built the university with the understanding that the church would have control forever, it was countered by the fact that of the \$36 million contributed by Baptists, \$34 million came from Rockefeller (“Chicago University Freed by Baptists,” 1923, p. 10).

On the heels of his generous gift to the University of Chicago, Rockefeller received a fervent plea from University of Rochester trustee Myron G. Peck on May 11, 1892:

The University of Rochester appears to be practically at a stand-still, and its Board of Trustees seem moribund, as to resources for progressive movement. ... By the death of some of its benefactors, and the new demands on others, this institution is deprived of some of its former support. It needs to enlist the interest and support of new friends. It ought to secure both of these in Rochester, where prosperous industries, manufacturies and commercial enterprise are creating considerable wealth. (Peck, 1892, p. 1-2)⁶

Peck did not ask for monetary support from Rockefeller, but he certainly was asking for help. His approach was to make the University of Rochester less closely identified with the Baptist church to attract a greater number of benefactors. He shared that opinion with Harper, but his powers of persuasion were far less effective than Harper's. Moral support, much less financial support, would have to come from elsewhere. A deep-pocketed benefactor did not appear until 1899, when George Eastman's philanthropic relationship with the University of Rochester began with the gift of a Kodak camera to a geology professor (University of Rochester, n.d.-a). Although Eastman's grandfather had been a Baptist minister, Eastman himself belonged to no faith. By the time of his death in 1932, Eastman's gifts to the university totaled more than \$50 million (University of Rochester, n.d.-b).

⁶ For a full treatment of the Baptist affiliation of the University of Rochester, see Aubrey Parkman, “President Hill and the Sectarian Challenge at the U. of R.,” *Rochester History* (1971), [1]-24.1–24.

After his largest donation to Denison, Rockefeller remained a trustee for another two years but had little further involvement and kept his checkbook closed. He resigned in June 1892, after having served 18 years (Rose, 1998). Rose suggests that one reason for Rockefeller's withdrawal from Denison was that he had not been involved in selecting its new president in 1890. Rockefeller wrote King in December 1889:

I suppose the Mr. Peters you refer to is the new President of Denison. I have not the pleasure of knowing him, and had no knowledge whatever in respect to his being chosen for the position, until I chanced to hear of his appointment. The choice of a President for such an important educational institution brings with it a great responsibility, and I sincerely hope those who took this responsibility, as well as others equally interested in the affairs of the University, will see as time goes on, that he is in every way the best man for the place. (as cited in Rose, 1995, p. 32)⁷

There were other reasons for Rockefeller's withdrawal. While Denison initiated a master's program in the sciences in 1887 and considered starting other graduate programs, those plans did not come to fruition and the institution remained strictly an undergraduate college (Chessman, 1957, p. 131). Denison remained affiliated with the Baptist church until the 1960s (Denison University, n.d.-c). In 1931, Denison installed a Centennial Plaque at the university's main entrance identifying the institution as a "Christian College of Liberal Arts," a phrase reflecting its Baptist heritage (Reed, 2024). During Denison's 175th-anniversary celebration in 2006, the plaque was replaced and later moved to Swasey Chapel (Reed, 2024).

Although no college or university received support from Rockefeller approaching the amount he gave to the University of Chicago, Rose (1998) noted that during the 1890s the American Baptist Education Society channeled \$539,069.24 of Rockefeller's contributions to 34 institutions. The breadth of this distribution demonstrates that Rockefeller's support for higher education reached well beyond Chicago, even though the University of Chicago remained unmatched in the scale of his giving.

Rockefeller's philanthropy also enabled the founding of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research in 1901 "for the purpose of discovering the

⁷ The new Denison president was actually Daniel B. Purinton. Rose does not identify "Mr. Peters," and I have likewise been unable to do so. See Rose and Stapleton (1992).

causes, manner of prevention, and the cure of disease" (Rockefeller Archive Center, n.d., "The Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research" section, para. 1). The institute was renamed The Rockefeller University in 1965 (Rockefeller University, n.d.). Rockefeller established the General Education Board in 1902, further institutionalizing his approach to philanthropy (Rockefeller Archive Center, n.d.). Over the course of its existence, "the GEB distributed \$325 million to improve education at all levels, with emphasis upon higher education, including medical schools" (Rockefeller Archive Center, n.d., "The General Education Board (1902–1965)" section, para. 1).

Conclusion

The history of Rockefeller's relationships with Denison University and the University of Chicago demonstrates how a religious commitment could lead to different philanthropic outcomes depending on the historical circumstances, institutional ambitions, and the influence of key individuals. Rockefeller's Baptist faith remained important to him, but his thinking about how best to distribute his growing wealth evolved. Influenced by figures such as Gates and Harper, he increasingly directed his major educational philanthropy toward the research-oriented University of Chicago rather than Denison. Nor did he embrace Strong's competing vision for a new Baptist university in New York City. Rockefeller's experience illustrates how philanthropists build institutions according to their convictions, even as those convictions—and their understanding of how wealth might best be used—change over time.

One final effort by Denison to secure Rockefeller's financial support came in 1914. Denison president Clark W. Chamberlain wrote to Edward Judson, pastor of the Memorial Baptist Church in New York City, asking him to appeal to Rockefeller on Denison's behalf. Judson responded on May 16, expressing hope that an appeal might succeed because of Rockefeller's interest in education and his connection to Granville, while acknowledging that his own influence with Rockefeller had diminished considerably (Judson, 1914).

Rockefeller had supported Judson's ministry since the early 1880s and contributed \$40,000 toward the construction of Judson Memorial Church at Washington Square (Chernow, 1998). Their longstanding relationship helps explain why Chamberlain turned to Judson to advocate for Denison. Even

Judson, however, acknowledged that his influence with Rockefeller had diminished. The 1914 correspondence represents one of Denison's final documented efforts to renew Rockefeller's personal financial support.

During the 20th century and into the 21st century, Denison University and the University of Chicago followed markedly different institutional paths. Denison remained an undergraduate liberal arts institution, and as of fall 2025, it enrolled 2,458 undergraduate students (Denison University, n.d.-a). Chicago developed into a major research institution and reported 10,968 graduate students and 7,569 undergraduates in fall 2024 (University of Chicago, n.d.). Their financial scale likewise differs considerably. Denison's endowment exceeds \$1 billion (Denison University, n.d.-b), while the University of Chicago's endowment ended FY2025 at \$10.9 billion (University of Chicago, 2025). In the ranking of endowment per student among colleges and universities, however, the University of Chicago is 47th and Denison is 74th, not far behind, with endowments per student of \$548,074 and \$403,345 respectively (College Raptor, n.d.).

Private philanthropy helped shape both institutions, but Rockefeller's support gave Harper the resources to realize his ambitious vision for the University of Chicago. Yet Harper retained an affection for Denison and the community he had left behind. In 1899, Harper wrote to his former Denison colleague, Professor Richard Steele Colwell, "How often I long for the quiet pleasant days of old Granville!" (as cited in Boyer, 2024, p. 146). His remark provides a fitting reminder that the divergent paths of Denison and Chicago were not inevitable. They emerged from a particular convergence of institutional ambition, personal relationships, geography, religious commitments, and evolving ideas about what philanthropy could accomplish. Had Harper remained at Denison, Rockefeller's philanthropy might have flowed differently, altering the trajectories of both institutions.

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