



ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY — Pioneering in Lutheran Education —

When the German seminary students came upon the building, they nicknamed it "*die Kaffeemuehle*" because of its similarity to a German coffee mill; and it was thus affectionately called "*The Coffee Mill*" until its demolition in 1931. It was to this building that Concordia Seminary moved in 1875 from St. Louis, but its original name was Illinois State University, and the story takes us back to an earlier and interesting period of our church's history.

Illinois State University was the cherished project of our church's founder, *Rev. Francis Springer*. In addition to being a Lutheran minister, Springer's forte was education. Immediately upon arriving in Springfield in 1839, he rented a schoolroom and established a private "English and Classical School." As the sole teacher he offered an awesome curriculum including writing, arithmetic, English, astronomy, rhetoric, Latin, Greek, chemistry, natural philosophy, mental and moral science, and evidences of Christianity. Two years after starting

the school, he began founding our church in his home.

In 1847, Springer left the Springfield congregation and his teaching duties to become president of the newly formed "Literary and Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Far West." Located in Hillsboro, Illinois, its common name became "Hillsboro College." Rev. Springer also accepted a call to be pastor to Zion Lutheran Church in that city. The dynamic Springer gave the small institute a full measure of his energy and talents, and it began to grow. It was the purpose of the institute to prepare young men for the holy ministry; yet, four years later, the school still lacked a theological department. This deficiency was cured with the arrival of *Rev. Simeon Walcher Harkey*.

Rev. Harkey was a veteran pastor and had taught at the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary where he and Springer had earlier been classmates. After accepting the call Harkey con-

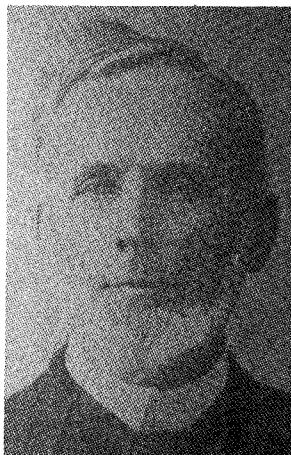
"Tell of all his wonderful acts!"

ducted a successful money raising campaign in the east for Springer's school. Like Springer, Harkey would serve as pastor to our congregation; unlike Springer, Harkey was a theological conservative, and the differences would lead to serious problems for the school. At the time, however, both agreed that the school had to be moved to a more promising site, and that was Springfield. The Lutheran Synod of Illinois (successor to the Synod of the West) had approved the move in convention.

In 1852 Springer's institute moved to our town, and it was planned to change the name to Melancthon College. However, the adopted name was Illinois State University. The choice of the lofty title has led to speculation. It was a private school with no connection with the state of Illinois (except for being chartered, a necessary requirement). It was not, nor was it intended to be, a university in the conventional sense of the term. Not only was the word Lutheran omitted, the name didn't even hint at a religious connection.

The probable reason for the name was the unrealistic expectations of Springfield's leading lay citizens whose support Springer needed. And, at first, Springfield's non-Lutheran element did support the school. Some key people were among the trustees, and financial gifts were forthcoming. Further, Springer, with his educational outlook, was open to the school acquiring a prominent secular nature with theology and preparation of ministers taking a lesser role. Harkey disagreed and angrily wrote, "This is a

vital point. I am a Lutheran and am laboring to beg money from Lutherans to build up a Lutheran institution. I will not lift up a finger to build up any other than a Lutheran institution." This was written in the month that the school opened classes in Springfield, April 1852; so we see that from the onset, there were fundamental differences between the school's two leading figures.



Springfield Mayor James Conkling spoke at the cornerstone laying ceremony.

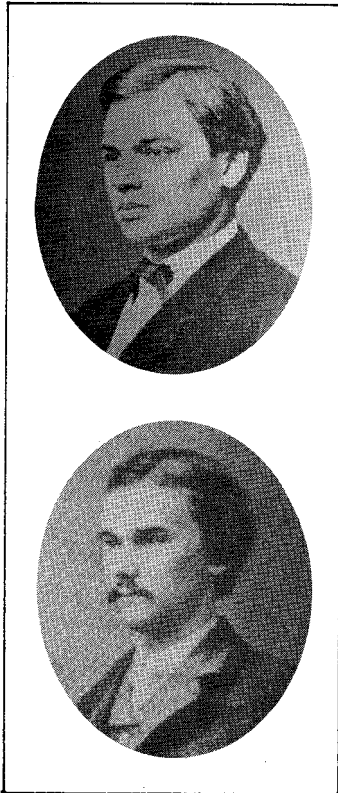
Classes were held in temporary quarters, but work began on what was to be an imposing edifice. Land for the new school was donated by the family of *Pascal Enos*. Springfield's support for the new building was substantial; and the city's mayor, *James C. Conkling*, gave the address at the cornerstone laying. Progress proved to be slow. The school began using the building in 1854 even though the four story structure, with a cupola (called an observatory) on the roof, wasn't completed until 1859. Two expansive wings were in the original design but were never built. Even so, for Spring-

field during that era, the school was “a decided ornament to our Capital.”

The role of *Abraham Lincoln* with Illinois State University has been much speculated on and often overstated. Rev. Francis Springer was a good friend of Lincoln’s, and they had been neighbors just a few years earlier. There is little doubt that the prominent attorney supported the school and spoke on its behalf. When it started operations, Lincoln purchased, as did many other citizens, a “perpetual scholarship” for \$18 a year which he faithfully paid each year. In 1860, the year he was elected president, Lincoln was chosen by the trustees to fill a vacancy on the school’s board. With his political concerns of the times, his participation seems to have been very limited as his name does not appear in any of the records.

Lincoln’s son, *Robert Todd Lincoln*, and *John Milton Hay* attended the school. John Hay was to become President Lincoln’s personal secretary during the Civil War and eventually was to be Secretary of State under President Theodore Roosevelt. In later writings, both men belittled the quality of education at Illinois State University.

While the school enjoyed a few moderate successes, numerous problems beset it. The differences between Harkey and Springer were fundamental, and in 1855 Springer resigned as president although he continued to take an active interest in the school. It was during this time period that the Lutheran Church in Illinois was undergoing a stressful realignment of synodical allegiances. Basic to it all were the

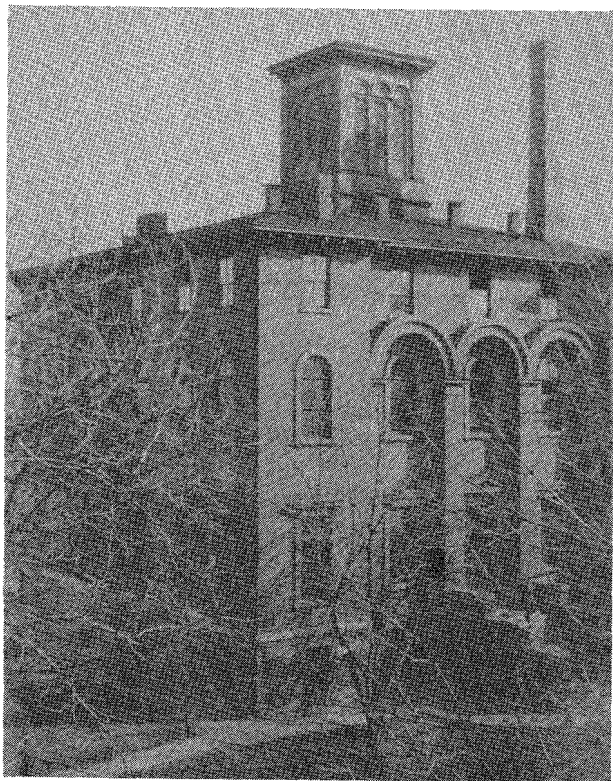


Robert Todd Lincoln and John Milton Hay were students at the school.

differences between the “old” or strict Lutherans and the “new” liberal Lutherans, and the controversy was magnified at the school. This led, in part, to a devastating blow in 1860 when the Scandinavian professor, Rev. Lars Esbjorn, suddenly resigned and withdrew a substantial number of Scandinavian students with him. (Eventually this withdrawal led to the formation of Augustana College at Rock Island.)

The Civil War robbed the school of students, diverted interest from it, and drained funds. Despite desperate attempts to maintain solvency, the

Illinois State University



financial picture deteriorated during the mid-1860's. Faculty and student morale plummeted while discipline problems increased. The university ceased operations in 1867, and in 1869 the building was disposed of at a sheriff's sale.

Rev. Springer had this to say of the failure: "The downfall of our struggling but hope inspiring seat of learning was effected largely by the frequent and heavy blows inflicted with the sledge of Teutonic orthodoxy, in the hands of German, Norwegian, and Swedish Lutherans." Perhaps a more objective view is presented by the late *Prof. Erich Heintzen* in his book, Prairie School of the Prophets: "More fundamental than the financial

causes was a flaw inherent in the nature of the institution, that is, the lack of a cohesive force in the mixed group of supporters. Generous civic-minded Springfield patrons, mostly un-Lutherans, welcomed the institution as a cultural force in their community. The Lutheran supporters saw the institution as an agency to advance the cause of Lutheranism, but they did not agree on what form that Lutheranism was to take."

Illinois State University was no more, but the divine hand of God was to use its efforts, and particularly the building shaped like a coffee mill, to bring to Springfield and Trinity one of Synod's greatest assets, Concordia Seminary.