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## Forging a Society

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# Forging a Society

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Sidney Harper Marsh, the author of the following compilation of documents, was the first president of Pacific University. Hailing from New England, Marsh found that the frontier around the university and throughout the rest of Oregon lacked what he considered a good and stable society. Marsh wanted to create a New England-like college atmosphere as he believed it would better the society of the frontier. At the time, Forest Grove was just a frontier town, surrounded by a developing rural hinterland. Marsh found their lack of education and use of the barter system among other things to be discouraging for a more evolved society.

Pacific University was established before the territory became the state of Oregon. Sidney Marsh served as the first president from 1854 to 1879. In each of his papers, he examined some element of social life that he believed was an important aspect of a successful society, aspects certain to address the backwardness of the society in which he found himself. His ideas of progress were mutually reinforcing; they were all based around nineteenth century liberalism and natural law. He believed that productivity would turn the land to its intended purpose, that money should be based on gold and silver and that education is necessary for social advancement. As a school administrator, Marsh saw education as a leading opportunity for the individual members of the community to improve themselves. Education leads to opportunity and is one of the leading contributors to a good life. However, his education vision was infused with New England religion, and Marsh argued that people must use education the way that God intended them to, so they can benefit their community. He also believed that trade would make society better, and he wrote about the backwardness of barter and the need for a stable form of currency. In doing so, society would be stabilized. Eventually, Marsh succeeded in using the institution to achieve the society he believed to be most beneficial.

Marsh viewed education as the most important component of improving society, particularly in regard to the farming community. By educating the farmers' children, Marsh argues that they would be capable of improving the productivity. In the document addressed to "Gentlemen of the Society," he wrote, "He will seek labor saving machinery for he can thus accomplish the same in less time + have more for other pursuits."<sup>1</sup> Marsh believed that the only way to improve the farmer's way of life was through education. He believed that lack of education was the only thing that kept these hard-working producers from being able to be civilized. A proponent for education, Marsh said, "It should be our pride to participate in

building up all that looks to the [nurture?] + education of the young.” From this passage, it can be surmised that Marsh saw a future where, regardless of occupation or status, everyone was given an education. Advancements in machinery allowed farmers to produce more, while also giving them the opportunity to be educated, and improve their lives. As society becomes more inter-connected, the advancement of the farming production and education would benefit the community rather than just the individual farmer.

In his narration, Sidney Marsh is trying to convey to John Eaton that through his efforts, Pacific University is self-sustainable and prosperous. Marsh makes this apparent throughout the narration as he conveys the acquisition of new teachers, the improvement of the library, and the increase in the size of the student body at the University. Covering the years 1852 to 1871, Marsh’s narrative provides an idea of the curriculum offered at Pacific University, such as Ladies’ courses to provide missionary and religious training, and the structure of the University’s academics. Marsh uses this narration to explain to John Eaton why the University needed further funding, and the kind of institution that this funding will make Pacific University.

Due to his goal to civilize Forest Grove and the greater surrounding areas, Marsh aimed to create a better medium of exchange. Marsh suggests the flaws of a barter economy, and he uses the hypothetical example of using sheep as a form of currency to demonstrate the reasons why a progressive and productive community requires a stable source of money. Using a sheep as a metaphor of currency in and of itself, Marsh argues, “would always [bring] a difficulty in getting the worth of it in chairs, knives, etc.” In other words, bartering with goods and animals does not allow for a standardized medium of exchange. One would never be able to trade a sheep for a certain amount of goods on a consistent basis, because, like the goods, one would be purchasing, sheep have different values at a different period of time; they do not allow for a standard, consistent economic market. Marsh discusses the need for credit and checks to ensure that people can purchase items they need despite not having money at hand. Although, he does not specifically provide a concrete vision of how the people of Forest Grove should run their local economies, he seems to present a vision of Oregon integrated into the national economy, with a more consistent economy backed by a standard currency. In doing so, Marsh believed that a society could be made better by abandoning the barter system and installing a unified form of currency.

In Marsh’s speech titled “Money & Currency”, Marsh has laid out a blueprint for creating the ideal form of currency. In this speech, Marsh indicates his concerns about the standards of value in the marketplace. His solution to this is to create a stable currency that is a “medium of exchange” and a “standard of value”. Marsh discusses the need of a quality of currency in order to help the society succeed. The subject of this speech reveals that Marsh perceived that the problems existed with the contemporary marketplace. Marsh stresses that money should have multiple uses. However, he also stresses that it not be taken lightly. In doing so, currency should be in a controlled environment to avoid the currency surpassing its supposed

value; in that he stresses the importance of currency backed by precious metals. In this speech, Marsh reveals his vision of what a proper society is and how it should run. Marsh, a man of intelligence, displays his thorough knowledge of money and how it would benefit the society as a whole.

When addressing the graduating class of 1868, Marsh urged his students not to follow blindly the word of God; they are here to use their education in order to understand *why* God wants them to carry out what he asks of them. He stressed that evidence of the Kingdom of God exists both in the Bible, and as the world in which these students would soon enter. The goal was to make the world we live in correspond to the ideals of religion. To do this, Marsh indicates that we must prevent sin and the devil from corrupting our ideas. Those ideas of men that help create a better society or a stronger culture are more powerful than the ideas that merely help a single individual. Marsh stresses that an idea inspired by God meant for the betterment of mankind is more powerful than the strength of any army. An idea, if right and just, will stand on its own against resistance from men who are “malignant and spiteful.” For Marsh, the ideals fostered in the Christian college environment were the basis for a good society; in this he elaborates on his more famous words that currently adorn Jefferson Hall: “Right thinking leads to right action.”

Sidney Harper Marsh came to the west coast with a mission. He wanted to create a New England-like environment in order to develop the frontier. Marsh established a university that would eventually educate the people of the frontier on how to make their lives work within their society. He believed that through education, society would be better off and able to succeed. Through his letter to John Eaton he was able to describe the transformation of Pacific University, as it began to provide an appropriate education for this frontier society. In Marsh’s discussions on money, he made it clear that economic value is important, that trade is progressive, and that value is grounded in divinely created metals. Marsh brought a strong belief in God. He believed that if the students were willing to live a life that benefited others, they would succeed within society. Sidney Marsh was a determined man, always pushing the students and society to its limits in order to make them achieve. His goal was to achieve an ideal society consistent with his New England childhood.

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<sup>i</sup> Marsh was in the habit of communicating with the Society for the Promotion of Theological and Collegiate Education at the West. This piece may have been written to that body.