

# Princeton

1746-1896

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## CHAPTER VI

## Life in Nassau Hall

1790-1830

IT was an eventful day for the entering freshman, especially if he lived in a state remote from Princeton, when he told his father and mother goodbye, turned his back on home, and set out to begin his college career. In the family coach with him was his chest, filled with clothing, a few books, and perhaps a box of delicacies; in his pocket a letter to Dr. Witherspoon, or Samuel Stanhope Smith, or Ashbel Green. A journey of hundreds of miles might lie before him, marked by changes from stage wagon to stage boat and back again to stage coach, by dangerous ferry trips over great rivers, by nights in uncomfortable wayside taverns. But however fearful the youngster was at heart he kept a brave face befitting a young man of fifteen. Traveling was full of interest, and he gazed wide-eyed as he passed woods and fields and villages, or as the coach stopped to change horses, or to take on passengers. Yet it was usually a tired and homesick boy who arrived at Princeton and engaged a bed for the night at the Sign of the College.

The next morning the freshman had to gather all his courage to cross the street to the President's House, present his letter and face the professors and tutors for the ordeal of entrance examinations. These over, he hastened out with a burden lifted from his soul to secure a room, bring over his chest and await his future roommate, who would be his closest companion and who might make or mar his college career. When the roommate had made his appearance and the two young men had greeted each other, they went to a store on Nassau Street to make their purchases—two cots, with a

single mattress each, a washstand, a table, a few chairs, a bookshelf, shovel and tongs.<sup>1</sup>

To the newcomer Nassau Hall seemed impressive with its great stone walls pierced by long rows of windows, its hallways running the entire length of the building, its many bedrooms and studies, its Prayer Hall, its classrooms, its cupola. He was interested in the library, the cabinet of curiosities, the orrery, the scientific apparatus. But he now had to purchase books, secure a seat in the refectory, go over to the bank to pay his tuition fee and room rent, unpack his clothes. If he happened to be from the south he found, when he strolled out on the campus, that his broad-brimmed hat, bobtailed coat, baggy breeches, and high-heeled boots subjected him to good natured raillery,<sup>2</sup> even though there were scores of other southern boys in college to keep him in countenance.

With the ringing of the bell in the cupola the freshman turned toward the refectory to join the stream of boys who were pouring into the hallways and down the steps for supper. In the early days of the college meals had been served in a room in the basement, but later a separate building had been constructed and connected with Nassau Hall by a covered passage. This, in turn, had given way to a room on the first floor of the stone building later known as the Philosophical Hall, opposite Stanhope Hall. The students waited at the door until a servant opened it, and then entered and looked for their seats. They were arranged by classes at three long tables and stood at attention until the tutor took his place and said grace. They then sat down on the benches and ate their supper.

To many an incoming freshman the supper seemed unusually simple, almost mean, consisting as it did only of bread and butter, with milk. He was soon to learn that breakfast was similar, with bread and butter, and occasionally radishes, served with coffee. At dinner the food, both in quantity and variety, was more in keeping with the appetites of growing

<sup>1</sup> Princeton Library MSS, AM 9976.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, AM 11815.ARRIVING  
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FOOD

boys—ham, veal, beef or some other meat, with potatoes and fresh vegetables in season, for dessert, if any, apple pie or chocolate cake. On festive occasions, of course, the meals were more elaborate. "Our dinner was composed of chickens and pigs, not alive or with knives in their mouths crying 'come and eat me,' vegetables, pies, puddings, porter, lemonade, wine, raisins and figs," wrote William B. Clymer, of the Fourth of July celebration of 1819.<sup>3</sup>

The boys did not expect a banquet every day and were satisfied with their usual plain fare so long as it was wholesome and of good quality. But when the steward neglected his work, or tried to gain a few dollars at their expense, the letters to father or mother were full of complaints. "We eat rye bread half dough and as black as it possibly can be, old oniony butter and sometimes dry bread and thick coffee for breakfast," said one boy in 1781, "a little milk or cyder and bread and sometimes meagre chocolate for supper; very indifferent dinners such as lean, tough boiled fresh beef with dry potatoes. . . . We may be said to exist and not to live as it becomes persons of good extraction."<sup>4</sup> On one occasion, when the butter was bad, some of the boys carved it into an image of the steward and hung it up by the neck in the dining room.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of a professor or tutor, while a restraining force, did not necessarily assure good order at meals, and we find a record of one youngster who had a long argument with a friend at breakfast over the propriety of snatching bread and butter before grace was over.<sup>6</sup> A few days later when no tutor appeared at the opening of the door of the refectory, the same boy was bowled over by the mob who stormed the room. When he had disentangled himself from those who had fallen on top of him and had taken his seat, he found that the meat pie had been swept off, some of the lads seizing near one-third of the whole. Usually restlessness or dis-

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, AM 10230.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, AM 8797.

<sup>5</sup> *Philip Vickers Fithian, Journal and Letters*, John R. Williams, ed., p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> "Journal at Nassau Hall, *Princeton Library MSS*, AM 10841.

approval of the food or dislike of the tutor was expressed by the scraping of feet on the floor under the table. This practice was especially annoying since it was so difficult to detect, and anyone whom the tutor suspected was promptly ordered to leave the room.

Although the regulations at first forbade the student "to make any treat or entertainment" in the chambers or "have any private meals," this rule in time was modified, so that the boys were "indulged to make a dish of tea" after evening prayers. And it was found impossible to prevent them from purchasing a watermelon in season and inviting their friends in for a feast, or from opening a box of delicacies from home, or from stripping a nearby cherry tree. One student relates that he bought some whortleberries from country people who were peddling them, but when he got into a scuffle with a classmate, most of them were crushed in his pocket.<sup>7</sup>

The living conditions in Nassau Hall were even plainer than the food, and the sons of the wealthy could not help contrasting them with those in their own residences. Instead of hardwood floors they found the hallways paved with brick and those of the rooms covered with simple planking; instead of paneled or papered walls, bare plastering often smudged with candle smoke or marred by crude drawings; instead of Chippendale chairs or Sheraton tables, the cheapest and plainest furniture.

The rooms from Number 1 to Number 16, situated in the basement, were extremely undesirable because of the dampness, which even the digging of the so-called moat had by no means eliminated. As there were no gutters to the building, water from the roof poured into this ditch whenever it rained and, seeping into the massive stone walls, gave a permanent chill to the entire lower floor. Not infrequently parents wrote to the president demanding that their sons be transferred from these "damp, unhealthy" rooms to more wholesome quarters under threat of taking them out of college.<sup>8</sup> When

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Philip Stuart to Ashbel Green, June 19, 1814, *Maclean MSS*, Princeton Library.

an epidemic of dysentery swept through the student body in late May and June 1813, President Green ordered the steward to keep fires going in every basement room. "The 'entry' was so damp that I certainly would not have permitted a son of mine to lodge in it without keeping a fire constantly in his room,"<sup>9</sup> he said. Later, with the erection of other dormitories, the lower floor of Nassau Hall was abandoned.

Upon ascending the stairs to the upper floors the student found the rooms far more pleasant. Not only were they dry and well lighted, but their occupants, when they lifted their eyes from their textbooks, might look out over the charming, peaceful New Jersey countryside, toward Tusculum on the north, or the woods and fields beyond Stony Brook on the south. Yet this beautiful view could be enjoyed only in mild weather, for when the windows were closed, one could not see through the thick, rough, greenish little panes. Every room had its washstand with basin and pitcher filled from the college well.

In the corner of bedrooms or studies, or in the hallways were stacks of wood. Even in November the air was sharp and fires were going in many of the chambers and lecture rooms. Each student paid for his own wood, the three cords which he consumed during the year costing him on the average about \$14.<sup>10</sup> In 1802 President Smith made a contract with one Oliver Hunt "to supply wood for the college and engaged John Green to cut and carry it into the students' rooms."<sup>11</sup> With the opening of the Pennsylvania mines, the thoughts of the college turned to coal as a substitute for firewood, and the trustees directed President Carnahan to investigate the new fuel.<sup>12</sup> They were interested, no doubt, not only in the cheapness and heating capacity of coal, but also in whether it offered rioting students a less dangerous weapon than wood. At all events, it eventually came into universal use, together with the picturesque Franklin stove.

<sup>9</sup> President's Report, Sept. 1813, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Princeton Library MSS*, AM 9976.

<sup>11</sup> *Faculty Minutes*, 1, Dec. 10, 1802.

<sup>12</sup> John Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey*, II, p. 282.

The freshman's sleep during his first night in college was apt to be troubled by dreams of bespectacled professors, of long assignments in Livy and algebra, and of innumerable strange faces. At five in the morning, when it was still quite dark, he woke with a start at the blowing outside his door of a horn which sounded like the last trumpet.<sup>13</sup> It was the servant whose duty it was to rouse the students for morning prayers. In earlier days all sleep was supposed to stop with the ringing of the old bell in the cupola, and when this proved ineffectual, the rouser went through the hallways and knocked on every door. This, in turn, was superseded by the blast of the horn. At its summons the student hustled out of bed, lit his candle, washed his face and hands, got into his clothes and joined the stream of boys on the way to the Prayer Hall.<sup>14</sup> Those from the two upper stories entered the gallery while the others filed in at the lower door and took their seats on the main floor. On the opening day it was the president who conducted morning prayers. He mounted the pulpit in the south end of the room, the roll was called, and all united in singing a psalm, after which he made a brief talk, expressing the hope that the students would improve their time by hard study, observe all the laws of the college, and open their hearts to the influence of religion. It was only on special occasions that the president graced either morning or evening prayers, for it usually fell to the lot of the tutors to conduct these services. The students as a rule preserved order in the Prayer Hall, because they realized that any disrespect to religion would bring speedy and severe punishment.<sup>15</sup>

It was the bitter cold of winter mornings as well as the earliness of the hour which made prayers so unpopular. "I huddle on my clothes anyhow and push into the hall all open and unbuttoned, tho' by far the coldest morning of the season, and escape being tardy," wrote one boy in his diary in 1786.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Faculty Minutes*, 1, Dec. 10, 1802.

<sup>14</sup> *Princeton Library MSS*, AM 10841.

<sup>15</sup> *An Account of the College*, p. 27; *Trustees Minutes*, 1, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> "Journal at Nassau Hall," *Princeton Library MSS*, AM 10841.