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# The Legacy of William Gibson: Estate Gift Made Cedarville a Reality

Lynn A. Brock

*Cedarville University*, [brockl@cedarville.edu](mailto:brockl@cedarville.edu)

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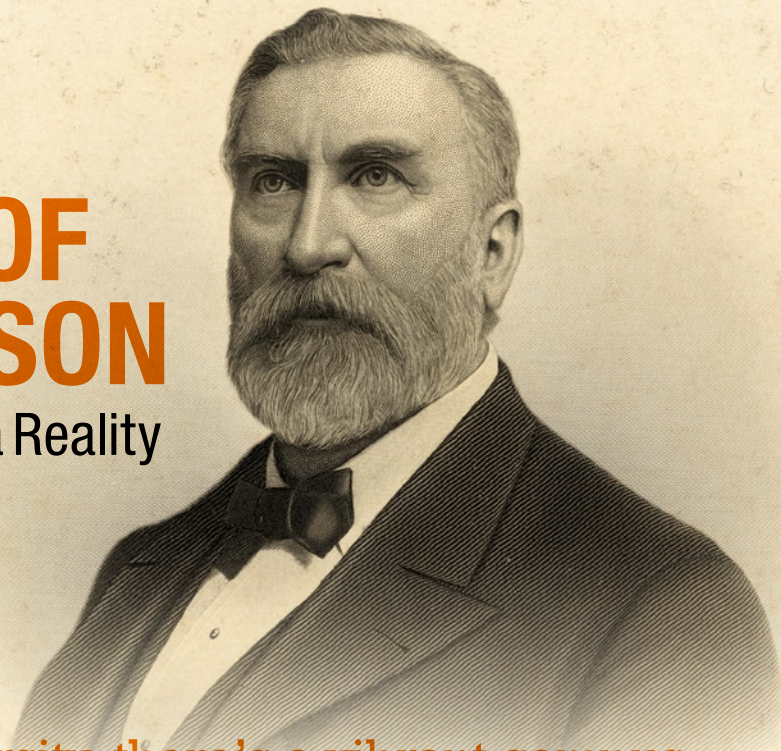




# THE LEGACY OF WILLIAM GIBSON

## Estate Gift Made Cedarville a Reality

BY LYNN BROCK '68



Today at Cedarville University, there's a vibrant campus serving nearly 4,000 students soaking in God's truth, discipling one another, and studying diligently for professions where they can shine the light of Christ.

But in 1887, there was a different picture. No campus existed, just a charter from the state of Ohio, and a flickering hope for success that would be extinguished unless God provided.

By 1890, the founders and first trustees of Cedarville College faced the end of their dream in the absence of meaningful financial support. At their meeting that year, the trustees, having now decided to close before the college had even opened, recommended, "that the whole enterprise be abandoned, that the treasurer be instructed to sell the lot (purchased in 1888) ... refund the money that had been contributed ... and cancel the subscriptions."<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian church did not accept this recommendation. What had started with much enthusiasm was now handicapped by lack of sufficient funds.

At the height of this crisis, the trustees received word of a \$25,000 bequest made to Cedarville College from the estate of the late William Gibson of Cincinnati, given in memory of his father, Peter. God had provided.

William had been a partner with his father in a Cincinnati plumbing business and was active in a Reformed Presbyterian church there. He was not only a business owner, but also a philanthropist who became, according to his obituary, a "substantial citizen" of Cincinnati.<sup>2</sup>

In his will, William pledged significant assets to a number of Presbyterian denominational agencies, but none as significant as the amount designated for Cedarville College. The will had been written in 1888 while Cedarville College existed only as a name printed on its charter received the previous year. The will was signed by Thomas Gibson, one of three executors and William's cousin, but who also served as Chairman of the Cedarville College Board of Trustees and was one of five founders of the institution.

Could it be that Thomas took it upon himself to remind William that this new school, designed to minister to college-age youth from Reformed Presbyterian churches, needed resources to launch its ministry? No one will know this side of heaven, but the Lord was at work.

In 1891, after a short illness, William Gibson died. Soon, the substantial bequest of \$25,000 arrived at the critical moment when the Cedarville College trustees were convinced they should abandon the project. To understand the significance of this gift, \$25,000 is equivalent to \$650,000 today, substantial now as it certainly was in 1891. This timely gift revitalized and invigorated the trustees.

At the board meeting in 1892, the trustees passed a resolution: "In view of the fact that a bequest of \$25,000 had been made to the Cedarville College by the late Mr. William



Gibson ... that an effort be made to revive an interest in that institution, and that the pastors in the different congregations be requested to bring the matter before their people at an early day, and urge them to contribute liberally for the establishment of said college.”<sup>3</sup>

In May 1894, the trustees authorized constructing or renting a suitable building and hiring instructors. A home on State Route 42, north of Cedarville, was rented and the college opened the fall of 1894 with 32 students.

Annual payments from the Gibson bequest kept the college going in those early days, and trustees invested the final \$20,000 payment in commercial rental property in Cincinnati from which the college received a regular annual income. Strong enrollment the first year clearly indicated the college would need to construct its own facility. Founders Hall was erected in 1895, funded primarily



by contributions from individuals and churches. Students attended classes there that fall.

June 10, 1897, dawned with the prospect of the first Cedarville College commencement. Five graduates would receive degrees during the ceremony at the

Cedarville Opera House. Martha McMillan, whose son Homer graduated that day, said in her journal, “Rev. Charles Frederick Pass of Cincinnati delivered the class oration. The principle thought he tried to impress on the class was to consecrate, devote, and dedicate their life — soul and body to the best and highest good in life. The blessings and privileges we enjoy today are the gift and sacrifices of those who have gone before us.”<sup>4</sup>

William Gibson’s bequest provided the motivation and the financial resources to make that first commencement possible, enabling a fledgling college to hire a president and faculty, recruit students, and begin a legacy of education founded on “the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus Christ.”

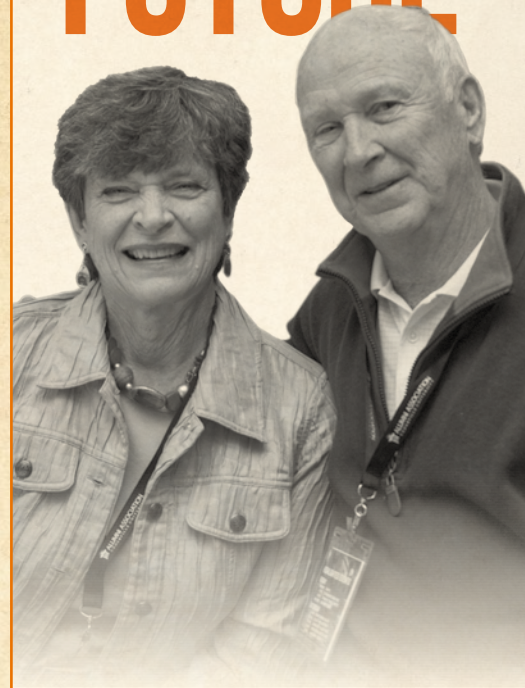
Even with the impact of the future challenges of World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the college’s financial crisis of the 1950s, there has not been a year since 1897 without a commencement at Cedarville University. This is in no small measure the result of the gift of William Gibson, who never saw the reality of Cedarville College, but believed in its mission enough to give.

1. *Minutes, Board of Trustees, May 26, 1890.*
2. *Cleveland McDonald, History of Cedarville College, 1966, p. 25.*
3. *Minutes, Board of Trustees, May 24, 1892.*
4. *Martha McMillan, Journal entry, June 10, 1897.*

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**Lynn Brock '68** is Dean of Library Services, Professor of Library Science, and the University Archivist. He has served at Cedarville University for 48 years.

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