



John W. Burgess and the Birth of the University

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Roger Bagnall

Many alumni know "Burgess" as a section of Butler Library. Less familiar is the vital role that John W. Burgess (1844–1931) played in the transformation of Columbia from a college to a university. Burgess helped to realize Columbia president Frederick A. P. Barnard's dreams of a university and built graduate faculties that would fulfill the ambitions of Barnard's successor, Nicholas Murray Butler, for a truly international university.

Burgess's original model was the German university of the late nineteenth century, but what evolved out of his modest graduate program (initially a School of Political Science attached to the Law School) was a complete graduate school with a broad international reach. This was well suited to the global vision of Butler himself and of later colleagues like James T. Shotwell (active in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) and the distinguished international lawyer Philip Jessup. Indeed, as Roger Bagnall tells the story, Burgess's vision reveals the lineaments not only of a graduate school especially strong in the social sciences and public affairs, but also something much like our present School of International and Public Affairs. To all this one could well add Burgess's role in building a small college library into a major university library, which itself became a monument to Butler.

For some in Burgess's day who identified strongly with the original undergraduate school (the School of Arts, as it was then known), this major expansion into the graduate arena appeared to be a real threat—a university taking over what had been cherished as an intimate liberal arts college for young New York gentlemen. But the College faculty met this challenge with a new development of its own in the early twentieth century: a program of undergraduate liberal education (known today as the Core Curriculum) that became a living legacy in its own right.

Roger Bagnall, an expert in classics, ancient history, and archaeology, has served as one of Burgess's successors in the role of dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (1989–93) and deputy vice president for Arts and Sciences (1992–93). A graduate of Yale (B.A. 1968) and the

University of Toronto (Ph.D. 1972), Bagnall chaired Columbia's classics department in 1985 and 1986 and again from 1994 to 2000. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2000 and the American Philosophical Society in 2001.

—Wm. Theodore de Bary

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Thank God, the university is born. Go ahead." The most celebrated eight words of Columbia's history were this telegram from trustee Samuel B. Ruggles, for which Professor John W. Burgess was roused from his sleep in Paris on June 8, 1880. They marked trustee approval for the start of the School of Political Science, the first part of what was to become the Graduate Faculties and later the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. With them, Columbia stepped boldly forward into the small circle of universities in the vanguard of graduate education and research in the United States and laid the foundations for decades of preeminence as a doctoral institution. The decision was recognized at the time by some of the principal actors for the historic move that it was. In later years, Burgess was, as Columbia's first graduate dean and one of the best-known figures in American social science, to place these events squarely at the center of a foundation legend, with himself as the hero. His memoirs, written in old age but in a still firm hand a half-century later, are constructed around those stirring days of 1880, when he was just thirty-five years old. At President Eisenhower's Columbia inauguration in 1948, Professor Robert Livingston Schuyler was still describing Burgess as a "great Founding Father of Columbia."

The route to the trustees' meeting of June 7 was a complicated one. Burgess described it in his reminiscences, but he never understood some of the most interesting detours and potholes. The actual story has remarkable significance for the university of today and much of its most recent history. Although Burgess worked closely with some of the trustees and lobbied them to a degree scarcely conceivable to today's faculty, he was not privy to their discussions or their minutes. From these we can see that the form taken by the Graduate School was as much the child of Ruggles and of President Frederick A. P. Barnard as it was of Burgess.

Samuel Ruggles, nearing eighty at the moment of his triumph (he died a year later), was a successful businessman and economist, a Yale graduate but for many years a Columbia trustee. He was part of the group of trustees who had sought since the early 1850s to transform a sleepy undergraduate college into a real university, with only partial success. The Law School (launched in 1858) was narrowly profes-

sional and functioned practically as a private, for-profit venture of its sole professor, Theodore Dwight. Other ambitions had to be set aside, except for the School of Mines (founded in 1864), the ancestor of today's School of Engineering and Applied Science and an early model of every-tub-on-its-own-bottom budgeting. (The College of Physicians and Surgeons was a separate institution in this period.) Jurisprudence and public law were taught by Francis Lieber but to tiny audiences, because they were not required. After Lieber's death in 1872, it took four years to find and attract a replacement—Burgess.

John Burgess was born in 1844 to a well-off Tennessee family with Union loyalties. His first college experience at Cumberland University was cut short by the Civil War, and he narrowly escaped conscription into the Confederate army by enlisting in the Union forces. He later traced his interest in law and political science back to his horrific war experiences, which led him to devote his life to the search for peaceful means of resolving conflict. (Late in life this staunch Republican used the phrase "an institution for genuine pacifist propaganda" for the School of Political Science). After his discharge, he used his accumulated military pay to go to Amherst College, which remained the center of his affections to the end of his life, although in his time it—like almost all colleges—lacked practically all of the subjects to which he was to devote his career. He wanted to follow it with law school at Columbia, attracted by Francis Lieber's courses in public law. However, three months of typhoid caused him to miss the start of the school year, and he did his legal training in a law office instead. After a stint teaching at Knox College, he took all his savings and went off to Germany in 1871 for two years of advanced study, accompanied by his wife, Augusta, and his Amherst friend Elihu Root.

German universities were a revelation to Burgess, as they were to so many young Americans seeking advanced education in the late nineteenth century. His stays in Göttingen, Leipzig, and Berlin gave him opportunities to study Roman law and history, philosophy, European constitutional history and law, and economics and statistics with some of the most eminent scholars of the century, including Wilhelm Roscher, Ernst Curtius, Johann Gustav Droysen, and the great Theodor Mommsen. In these years Burgess formed his ideas not only of what a university should be but also of the connection between university and world. As a protégé of the American ambassador, George Bancroft, he met Bismarck, von Moltke, and other political notables and saw how they formed part of the same social world as the eminent professors—some of whom had political careers of their own. Although Burgess eventually saw that the German model could not be taken over unaltered in a newer, democratic country like the United States, he embraced its main features

and eventually impressed them on graduate study at Columbia. His affection for Germany never diminished, and he was vehemently opposed to American involvement in World War I.

But in 1873 he returned to America with no job in hand. Theodore Dwight soon offered him a part-time position at the Columbia Law School, to replace Lieber, but Burgess used this to spur Amherst to create a regular post for him, and he returned to his beloved alma mater full of dreams of adding a graduate program in historical and political studies. The faculty showed no signs of support for this idea, but a group of exceptional students from the class of 1874 volunteered to stay on with their charismatic teacher (whom they nicknamed *Weltgeist*, "World Spirit") for an additional year, entirely outside the formal structures of the college. Burgess's colleagues, now actively hostile, added to his teaching load to punish him for this sign of independence. The students after their year went off to Germany for graduate study, and Burgess began to think that perhaps Amherst, with its pious hostility to research, was not the ideal spot for his dream school.

Theodore Dwight did not give up easily. Burgess was invited to give a series of lectures at Columbia in January 1876. Samuel Ruggles was in the audience throughout, and at the end, Burgess recorded, Ruggles came up and said, "You are the man we have been looking for ever since Lieber's death. You must come to Columbia." The courtship was protracted and Burgess's agony at leaving Amherst figures prominently in his account, but when the trustees elected him to a professorship both in the College and in Law, at an annual salary of \$7,500 (the equivalent today of some \$125,000 tax-free—what all of the College's professors got in 1876), he accepted.

He recorded in old age his discouragement on arriving at Columbia: "I found the institution to consist of a small old-fashioned college, or rather school, for teaching Latin, Greek, and mathematics and a little metaphysics, and a very little natural science, and called the School of Arts; a School of Mines for teaching a little more natural science and educating mining and civil engineers; and a School of Law of a quasi-proprietary nature." Classes were held only from ten o'clock to one o'clock, all of the students commuted, and the library was a mere 25,000 volumes in a firetrap, kept open about ninety minutes a day by a librarian whose chief pleasure was underspending his acquisitions budget. It was not a promising setting for the creation of a great university on the German model.

There were two saving graces, to Burgess's eyes. One was the group of trustees led by Ruggles; the other was President Barnard. They figure as the other agents for good in the saga of the founding. Burgess may not have known just how committed Barnard was to the creation of a real university. Already in his 1866 report, a year

after arriving, the president had argued that Columbia had a duty to become a university and to raise money for this purpose. But the path hardly ran smoothly, and the years from 1876 to 1880 were a period of complex maneuvering that would take many pages to recount. Burgess's main goal was to get a required third year in Law devoted to public law and political science, which all LL.B. students would take. Dwight was opposed to this plan, believing that the extra year would cause him to lose students (and thus, as Burgess pointed out, income). He wanted it to be an optional postbaccalaureate year, leading to a master's degree. But Burgess, who saw Dwight teaching hundreds while he had a few dozen for his electives, found that proposal unacceptable. In his

account, Dwight's unwillingness to make Roman law, administrative law, and constitutional law and history required parts of the legal curriculum—and to hire candidates of Burgess's choice to teach them, one might add—was the determining cause of the founding of the new school.

What Burgess did not know, apparently, was that it was not Dwight but the treasurer, Gouverneur Morris Ogden, who made the decisive move to put aside the plans for a third year at the Law School. Indeed, the reminiscences show that Burgess thought that his attentions had won the treasurer to his way of thinking. But there had been bad blood between the frugal Ogden and the visionary Ruggles for a quarter-century, with public pamphleteering on both sides as early as 1854. The young professor was simply deceiving himself if he thought anything fundamental had changed. Ogden was opposed to both the additional year for the bachelor of laws and the optional master's year. Either would have cost money, and to the treasurer's mind the College was a zero-sum game. There was widespread hostility to Barnard's idea of fund-raising, and tuition was still comparatively cheap: even after a rise from \$100 to \$150, it took fifty students to pay Burgess's salary. Today it would take five.



John W. Burgess became Columbia's first graduate dean and one of the best known figures in American social science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Samuel Ruggles (1800–1884) was a strong trustee supporter of Columbia's transformation into a university.

These four years between Burgess's arrival and the vote of 1880 were not without progress. In 1877 he got the trustees to hire Richmond Mayo-Smith (Amherst 1875) as his assistant for teaching history and economics in the College. And the Faculty of Arts moved during 1879–80 to add M.A. courses in a number of subjects, a development of which Burgess, with his low opinion of his collegiate colleagues, thought little. He formulated instead a proposal for a separate "department," ostensibly aimed at the formation of civil servants, to embrace his courses, those of Mayo-Smith, and Roman and administrative law in addition. In its original formulation, the plan sounds far more like the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) of today than like a graduate school of arts and sciences. But President Barnard recognized (or redi-

rected) what was really at stake, transformed the proposed unit from department to school, and the trustee resolution called it a "School of Political Science." (Barnard was usually ahead of everyone; in 1879 he expressed the view that Columbia College would eventually admit women, and even though in the short term this goal was diverted—against his wishes but in line with Burgess's preference—to a separate women's college named after him, he saw the future more clearly even than Burgess.)

There was opposition from the College faculty, and—more importantly—from many trustees who were graduates in Arts and saw the project as a threat to the institution as they had always known it. The emblematic figure is undoubtedly Hamilton Fish, chair of the trustees and former secretary of state. Burgess always saw him as an ally, but his position was complicated. Unable to bring himself either to support the proposal that would so radically change the College he loved or to oppose what he knew was demanded by the times, when at last the time came for the question to be debated, he dramatically handed the gavel to another trustee, Morgan Dix, and

left the room and the trustees. Ruggles, Barnard, and their supporters carried the day.

Much more was to follow in the next decade, and Burgess was at the center of it all. "The ten years from 1880 to 1890 were filled with committees, conferences, boards, reports," he said in 1930. Within five years Columbia developed the largest graduate program in the country, and the late 1880s and 1890s saw it radically reorganized under Seth Low's leadership, with the founding of faculties in philosophy (the humanities) and pure science, the creation of more professional schools, the institution of deanships—Burgess was the first dean of political science (1890) and later of the unified Graduate Faculties (1909)—the renaming of the institution itself as Columbia University, and the move to Morningside Heights. Burgess's genius as a teacher served him in good stead, for one of his earliest undergraduate pupils at Columbia was Nicholas Murray Butler, who was as faculty member, dean, and president a forceful exponent of the kind of university Burgess sought. Butler described Burgess as "the most brilliant and interesting teacher it has ever been my good fortune to hear." Their mutual admiration society is unmistakable.

The early founding and independence of the School of Political Science gave Columbia an extraordinary lead in the development of research and graduate education in the social sciences. Burgess founded not merely a school, but most of the infrastructure of a profession, as he had planned from the start. The early graduates of the School included some of the most distinguished social scientists of the next generation. From being behind the times, Columbia rocketed to a dominant position. But the School was not purely academic in character, and in 1893 Burgess pointed out that Harvard and Hopkins, with more fellowship money available, dominated the market for prospective university teachers. Columbia, by contrast, kept the practical goal of professional service in mind, stressing "the philosophical development of professional study." The relationship with the School of Law, in particular, turned out to be close and lasting, leading to a fruitful connection of pure and applied scholarship over many decades and helping to make Law a far more academic institution than it was in the 1870s. Munroe Smith, whom Burgess hired to teach the Roman law he valued so much in his German education, was to play an important role in the Law School for more than four decades.

The founding of the School of Political Science transformed Columbia as well, and not only by starting its development into a research university. Burgess's strong international bent—the closest model for the school was in fact not the German university but the *École Libre des Sciences Politiques* in Paris—helped to make the university part of a transatlantic scholarly community from the start. Burgess was

also the first great advocate of creating an important library at Columbia, and it was he who brought his former student Melvil Dewey (Amherst 1874) to New York as chief librarian in 1883. The libraries exploded in size under Dewey and his successors, and Burgess devoted considerable energy to buying books in history, law, and the social sciences to help create a collection that would sustain research and graduate education.

Heroic deeds are rarely accomplished without significant cost. From the perspective of Columbia in the year 2005, it is hard to not to notice two ways in which the process that led to the foundation of the School of Political Science bequeathed a more mixed legacy to the university than has usually been recognized. First is the fact that it was done in the teeth of opposition from the School of Arts—Columbia College, as we would call it now. Although Columbia did not go as far as Johns Hopkins (newly founded in 1876) in becoming a graduate institution, neither did it follow the path of Harvard and Yale in making graduate study an organic part of the existing departments in the undergraduate schools. The separatist path was at the root of much of the College's opposition to Burgess's proposals. It is not obvious that the "university party" of the trustees had much choice in the matter; Burgess's path was probably the only way open to them of avoiding Columbia's decline into irrelevancy in an era of rapid change in higher education. That was certainly Nicholas Murray Butler's view, expressed publicly at the festivities at the fiftieth anniversary of the founding in 1930. But this path left a legacy of College alienation from the Graduate Faculties, as shown in a later reference by Burgess to "the idea that the university was hostile to the interests of the School of Arts." As Burgess indeed remarked in 1913, President Seth Low knew that a private university depended on the alumni of the College for its financial support, not on those of the graduate school. But only in the 1990s did the old divisions truly start to fade and the graduate and undergraduate schools begin to see and pursue their common interest.

What is equally striking from a modern perspective is the activist role of the trustees and president. Columbia was exceptional even by the standards of the 1870s in this respect. Today, the majority of the faculty have probably never met a trustee, let alone witnessed the trustees choosing new members of the teaching staff. And the president's time is to a large degree consumed with development and other external roles. But the fact that a university could be created and run from the top down was surely not lost on the young Nicholas Murray Butler, who was to become by far the most dominant president Columbia has ever known. The submersion of the wishes of the faculty in 1880 has in this way, I believe, contributed to Columbia's comparatively weak traditions in faculty governance, especially in the arts and sciences.

But hindsight is easy. What Columbia's best minds saw in the late 1870s was a combination of opportunity and obstacles, and they seized the one by steamrolling the other. From the remarkable partnership of professor, president, and trustee, Columbia gained a leading role in the remaking of American higher education and an incomparable distinction in the nascent social sciences. That legacy, along with some of its costs, is still very much part of today's university.