

**SLAVERY AND CONFEDERATE CONNECTIONS**  
**ROBERT OGDEN, PLEASANT J. POTTER, CHARLES J. VANMETER**

Slavery played an important role in the early history of Warren County, Kentucky. In 1860, the county had a total population of 17,320 people of whom 5,318 were enslaved, about 30% of the county's residents. The 1860 Census listed 792 Warren County residents as slaveholders. The county was also home to 203 free Black people. The production of tobacco was by far the largest agricultural enterprise in the county, and river commerce was a growing part of the local economy. Both made extensive use of enslaved labor. The builders of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, which connected those two cities through Bowling Green, also used enslaved labor.

Robert Ogden

Born into an enslaving Virginia family in 1796, Ogden came to Warren County, Kentucky, in 1815. "Robert Ogden's sole aim in life," his step-daughter Agatha Rochester Strange wrote, "was to die rich." Ogden had limited success in reaching that goal until he married Georgianna McDowell Rochester, a wealthy widow, in 1836. The couple had a child who died within a year, and Georgianna herself died in 1839. Although Georgianna had three surviving children from her first marriage, one of them, Agatha Rochester Strange, remembered, "Through kindness, [Ogden] won the confidence of the children, giving him the opportunity of handling unmolested, the property, so he did die rich." Ogden invested successfully in land and horses, and slavery played a major role in his prosperity. Strange estimated that Ogden and the Rochester children collectively enslaved about 200 people. The 1860 Federal Census shows Ogden himself enslaving about 40 people. That same census recorded his personal wealth as \$125,000, including the value of the people he was enslaving. Ogden died in 1873.

The 1870 United States Census described Ogden as a "retired farmer" with a personal wealth of \$70,000. That same year, Ogden prepared a detailed will that

included bequests to several individuals, including \$500 to “my old trusty and tried former slaves Charles and Charlotte his wife,” \$500 in trust “for the use and benefit of a blind colored boy named Beverly son of my former slave Eliza,” five bonds of \$1000 each to be placed in trust “for the use and benefit of my former servant colored woman Ellen mother of Tom and Victoria,” and \$20,000 to be invested by the trustees “for the use and benefit of Tom and Victoria son and daughter of the aforesaid colored woman Ellen . . . .”

Ogden directed that the bulk of his estate go to create a college. Although he expressed a preference for a men’s school, he left the decision about building a school for men or women in the hands of his executors. In either case, the school should be named for him. He further directed that \$50,000 go toward acquiring land and constructing buildings, but he also directed that a portion of his estate be used to provide tuition scholarships for students. Although he insisted that “I do not mean to express any prejudice against any citizen of Kentucky who may be of foreign birth,” Ogden stipulated that the tuition scholarships should only go to “the children of native born white American Citizens.”

Ogden’s will surprised his family and stirred some resentment. “He was a self-made man and took pride in telling he never rubbed against a college wall,” Agatha Strange wrote. “Six weeks numbered the extent of his school days.” Strange clearly resented her step-father’s action: “‘Ogden College’ is endowed to perpetuate his memory, which may be considered an honor, but which we do not enjoy, considering we were robbed to accomplish that honor, so let his name slide.”

Ogden’s decision to use his wealth to start a school may reflect the influence of his friend and attorney, William Voltaire Loving, also an enslaver. As a young man, Loving studied at the University of Virginia and claimed to have been the last person to leave Thomas Jefferson’s grave site after Jefferson’s funeral in 1826. In his history of Ogden College, James Cornette speculates that Loving and his son, Hector V. Loving shaped Robert Ogden’s thinking about financing a school. Ogden’s will

named the Lovings as executors of his estate, and Hector Loving became the first Ogden College Regent.

Ogden College opened in 1877 with about a hundred students. At least two of its most influential and longest-serving faculty members were Confederate Army veterans. William Perry, a Confederate Brigadier, taught English and History at Ogden for eighteen years, and William Obenchain, a junior officer who served as an engineer in the Confederate Army, taught Math for thirty-eight years. Obenchain also served as Ogden's President from 1883 to 1906.

Ogden's enrollment was always small, and its financial situation became increasingly precarious, especially after the state established Western Kentucky State Normal School near the Ogden campus in Bowling Green. By the 1920s, the college also faced serious accreditation issues. In 1927, the boards of the two schools agreed to a merger, and the Ogden trustees leased the land and buildings rent-free to what was by then Western Kentucky State Normal School and Teachers College. Closing the college also led to the creation of the Ogden Foundation with a small endowment enhanced subsequently by the bequests and stewardship of many others besides Robert Ogden, and it continues to provide scholarships for WKU students and research activities in the sciences.

The original twenty-year lease took effect on January 1, 1928, and was renewed in 1947 for another ten years, and another ten in 1956. When Western began planning the construction of a new science building a few years later, however, the institution was cautious about initiating a major construction project on land it did not own, so it sought a longer lease period. A new agreement that took effect on June 1, 1960, established a ninety-nine year lease expiring on May 31, 2059. In connection with the new lease agreement, Ogden Foundation officials sought to clarify the legal status of the will's restrictions regarding "native born white American Citizens." Accordingly, they filed suit in Warren Circuit Court, and Special Judge Parker Duncan ruled that provision was no longer legal.

### Pleasant J. Potter

Potter was born in Warren County in 1820. His father, Frederick, became an active enslaver in the 1820s, and the boy grew up in an enslaving family. In 1860, Frederick Potter enslaved 22 people, and the 1860 Census estimated his worth at nearly \$100,000. In 1845, Pleasant Potter married Julia Hill, also from an enslaving family. By 1850, at the age of thirty, Pleasant Potter enslaved six people, and he also was enslaving six people in 1860. That year he had an estimated wealth of about \$26,000 according to the census. Potter was a farmer and surveyor, and he also took an active role in public affairs and economic development throughout his life. He served as Warren County Sheriff, as Bowling Green Water Commissioner, and as a member of the General Assembly. A champion of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, he served on the L&N board and invested in Bowling Green Woolen Mills which was managed by his nephew.

Potter opened Potter's Bank in 1869. As he prospered, Potter took on several projects of general interest to the community. Among them, he purchased a downtown theatre in 1887 and renamed it the Potter Opera House, and he supported the construction of a new Methodist Church on State Street. He also made a particularly important investment in a plan to build a women's college in Bowling Green. Through much of the nineteenth century, the city sought to provide educational opportunities for young people, particularly young women. Most of these schools struggled financially and then failed, but many in the community still hoped to establish a women's college even though the newly opened Southern Normal School accepted both women and men as students. Consequently, in the late 1880s, a group of locally prominent men solicited investors for a proposed woman's college by selling subscriptions in the enterprise for \$25 a share. When their fundraising efforts fell short, the group approached Potter about increasing his prior subscription. At that time, Potter also served on the board of Southern Normal School. He agreed to purchase 200 shares in the enterprise for \$5000, an amount that made the project viable. At that time, Potter had several granddaughters, which perhaps made him particularly sympathetic to this project. The other investors

expressed their appreciation by giving the new school Potter's name—The Pleasant J. Potter College, commonly known as Potter College for Young Ladies.

Like many other similar colleges, Potter College struggled with enrollments and finances, and it closed in 1909 only twenty years after its founding. By that time, the President of the newly established state normal school, Henry Hardin Cherry, had decided to move the school away from downtown, and he settled on the Potter College location on Vinegar Hill. The state purchased the Potter College campus including its two buildings—Recitation Hall and the President's Home—as well as some surrounding land in 1909. With the completion of what is now Van Meter Hall, Western Kentucky State Normal School moved to the new location on February 4, 1911.

Potter himself never took an active role in Potter College matters, and by the time the college closed he had relinquished his 200 shares to Benjamin Cabell, the President of the college. No evidence survives about what compensation, if any, Potter received from Cabell for the 200 shares. Potter died in Bowling Green in 1915.

### Charles J. Vanmeter

Vanmeter was born into a Warren County enslaving family in 1826. His father, Jacob Vanmeter, enslaved 21 people in 1860 and operated substantial farming interests. For a time, Charles Vanmeter managed his father's farms, including his enslaved labor force. In 1856, Vanmeter, with his brother and an associate, built a steamboat and developed a very successful river transportation business headquartered in Bowling Green. The 1860 Census recorded his personal wealth as \$13,000. When the Civil War began, Vanmeter served the Confederate Army as a civilian contractor transporting provisions and mail to Confederate forces. Vanmeter's steamboat business flourished after the war, making him wealthy. In 1878, he married Kate Moss Woodall. Her four brothers served in the Confederate Army, one of whom was killed in action. Both Vanmeter and his wife were active in

Lost Cause organizations after the war. Kate Vanmeter served for many years as President of the Bowling Green chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Charles Vanmeter provided financial support to the Jefferson Davis Home Association, an organization seeking to memorialize Davis at his birthplace in Todd County, Kentucky.

Vanmeter provided important financial support that benefited Southern Normal School and Western Kentucky State Normal School, support that earned the gratitude of President Henry Hardin Cherry. When a disastrous fire in 1899 destroyed the school's building, Vanmeter's financial support made possible the construction of a distinctive castle-like structure that housed the school until it moved to the Hill in 1911, a gift that President Cherry said made it possible for the school to survive. When Western Kentucky State Normal School opened in 1906, Vanmeter received the largely honorary title of Chancellor. At a chapel session in 1908, a Western student, Herman L. Donovan, presented Vanmeter with a cane symbolizing how the school had leaned on him. A few years later, the school named the auditorium in the new building on its hilltop campus for him. The building as a whole was named for him in 1968 with the Board of Regents noting in particular a financial gift of \$5000 that Vanmeter had made "at the beginning of Western's life as a public institution." When Vanmeter died in 1913, Henry Hardin Cherry served as a pallbearer.

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University Archivist Suellen Lathrop provided a great deal of information including a copy of Robert Ogden's will, obituaries of Potter and Van Meter, and a letter from Herman Lee Donovan to Kelly Thompson describing the cane presentation. Lynn Niedermeier, Library Special Collections, answered numerous questions about Potter College for Young Ladies.

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