Henry Carver in Bloomsburg

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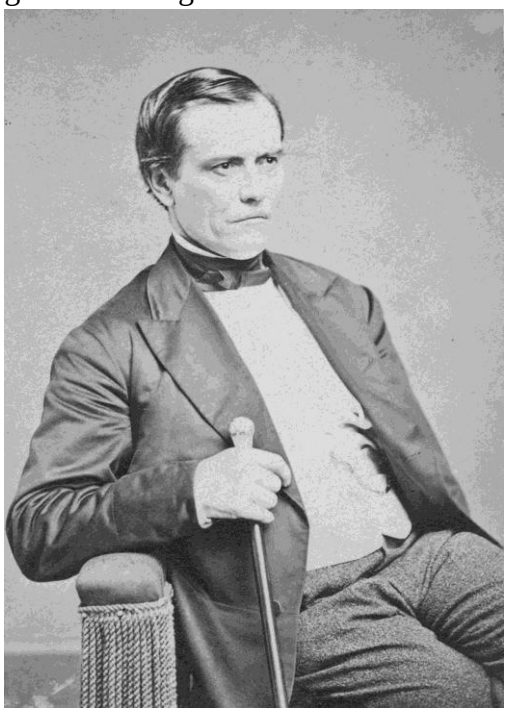
The following is adapted by the author in large part from chapters 5 and 6 of his 2021 publication: *The Life and Legacy of Henry Carver: Bloomsburg University's First President*.

December 2021 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of an individual who quite possibly has had the single greatest impact on the course of Bloomsburg's history. This was New York native Henry Carver. Born in Greene County, New York, he was the grandson of a Hessian soldier, Johannes Kerber, who while on garrison duty around New York City deserted from the British military in 1779.

Moving up the Hudson River, Kerber married and became a farmer, as did his son Heinrich, who would anglicize his name to Henry Carver. His fourth son, also Henry, was born on December 23, 1821. Little is known of Henry Junior's upbringing, other than the fact he was primarily self-taught. In 1843 he married his first cousin, once removed, Elizabeth Lown, and the couple moved east from Binghamton to Valatie, New York, in Columbia County, where Henry's father was born and raised. There the younger Carver began his career as a schoolteacher.



The only portrait of Henry Carver left behind in Bloomsburg, c.1870

He taught in New York state for 20 years, first in Columbia County, then in Binghamton and finally at the Cortlandville academy where Carver served as principal. He enjoyed great success as an educator, known for the quality of the instruction his students received and the discipline he instilled to enable them to succeed at their studies.

In late 1864 he resigned at Cortlandville and crossed the country to teach in Oakland, California. Carver was there less than a year, however, when in October 1865 he suffered a severe hunting

accident that resulted in the loss of his left hand. Returning to New York, as part of his recovery he took a pleasure trip down the Susquehanna River, which is where Bloomsburg comes into the story. He ended up here, at a time when it was a small community of approximately 3,000 inhabitants.

The first hint that something was up came from a March 21, 1866, newspaper account of a meeting where local school leaders decided to begin looking for contributors to help erect a new academy building. This Academy would not be a part of the public school system but continue in the tradition of the type of private school that had first been established in 1839 (called the Bloomsburg Academy) to provide local children with a more advanced education.

In the 27 years since then the Academy had operated sporadically, in different locations under various names and under many teachers, but was in no sense permanent. This was what the community needed and Carver was the right person in the right place at the right time to provide stability and permanence. He received encouragement from leading members of the community and one week after Carver met with the public on March 28 at the Lutheran Church, a newspaper notice appeared announcing the opening of a select school, called the Bloomsburg Literary Institute.

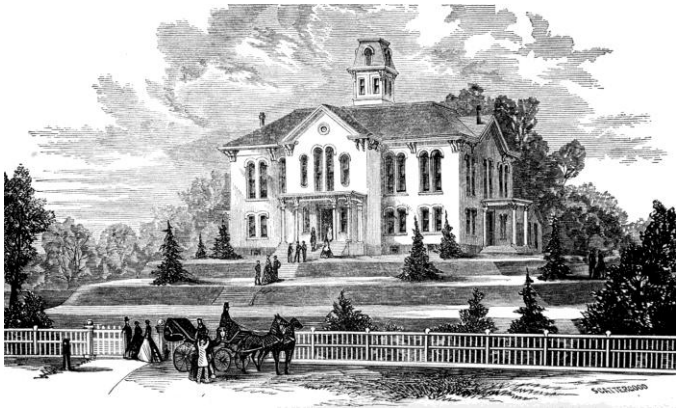
As will be seen, Carver was never one to sit still and just four days later, the Institute opened in the existing Academy building, located at the northwest corner of West Third and Jefferson Streets. Knowing it was woefully inadequate for the type of school he envisioned, Carver became the primary mover in seeing that a new facility worthy of a first-class school was built. His Institute opened with 40 pupils and it immediately became apparent that Bloomsburg finally had the teacher it needed to keep and grow an institution of higher learning in the community.

Events continued to move quickly. Just three weeks later in early May, the trustees who in 1856 had originally chartered the first Bloomsburg Literary Institute—which never opened—reactivated its charter under the leadership of the pastor of the Presbyterian Church, the Rev. David J. Waller, Sr. On the 25th of the month, a motion was adopted "to inform Prof. Henry Carver of Binghamton, New York, officially of his election as Principal of the Bloomsburg Literary Institute."

With Carver secured as their principal, the trustees began to plan in earnest to erect a building, paid for by selling subscriptions for shares of stock. Within a month a total of 596 shares had been sold for $11,920. On June 22, the shareholders voted to accept the purchase of a parcel of land for the new building, which the trustees quickly approved. It was located on the hill at the east end of Second Street.

Carver himself provided the architectural plans and, when a suitable contractor could not be found, he took on the job himself, with construction beginning in late July. The cost was to be $15,000, but it ended up $24,000 once the building was completed and furnished. By late November he was at the site fulltime, with the other members of the faculty running the Institute, and work on the new building was completed in March. The dedication of Institute Hall was filled with speeches and student essays over a two-day period, April 3 and 4, 1867.

Seventy-two years later during a 1939 interview, former student David Waller, Jr. (then 92), recalled the start of the celebration, “It was a great day when we marched from the old academy up the middle of the street—trustees, faculty, and student body, headed by the Bloomsburg Band—to the new building on the hill. Even then we all recognized Professor Carver as the spark-plug of the undertaking.” The first term in the new building, which began on April 15, saw 180 students attend and it continued to grow, being called “*the* school of the County.”



The first engraving made of Institute Hall, 1867

Once Institute Hall was complete, Carver must have felt more settled and secure in his position in Bloomsburg. The sense of stability led, in July 1867, to his membership, along with the memberships of his wife Elizabeth and eldest daughters Sarah and Alice, being transferred to the Presbyterian Church in town from the one in Cortlandville. Carver's younger children (there were four) became active in Sunday School and youth groups, one of the older ones taught classes and, in January 1869, he was elected a trustee.

How much time his wife Elizabeth actually spent in Bloomsburg is unknown. Although she was a member of the church and is mentioned in a few contemporary accounts, she seems to have remained for the most part with her parents back in the Binghamton area. Later reminiscences by two of Carver’s students, David Waller, Jr. and John Bittenbender, referred to him as a widower, so Elizabeth must have had a low profile during her stays in Bloomsburg. The family members who did support Carver at school events were daughters and Institute faculty members Sarah and Alice.

One way the Carver family became involved in the community was by competing for prizes at the Bloomsburg Fair. At the exhibition in October 1867, Sarah, who was quite creative, won one dollar apiece for her first-place entries in the fancy articles and flowers category for four items made of wax: generic flowers, a water lily, a cross, and roses. The following year, Carver had a winner in the best vehicle class for his buggy, won second-place for his colt in the three or four-year-old horse category, and gave an address on agriculture. As late as the 1871 Fair, Alice was a judge for the category of best piano, organ, and sewing machine.

On at least one occasion Carver had to deal with a problem child. In June 1867, his seven-year-old son George, looking for something to do, decided to use a match he had found to start a fire. This was in the stable along the alley at the rear of the house his father was renting. It appears to have been downtown on Main Street, at the southeast corner with Iron. The fire grew rapidly and George

got frightened, but thankfully gave an alarm so that neighbors came to extinguish it. He was very lucky they were available, because at this time Bloomsburg had little in the way of fire-fighting equipment and wooden buildings filled with flammable material were only feet away across Iron Street.

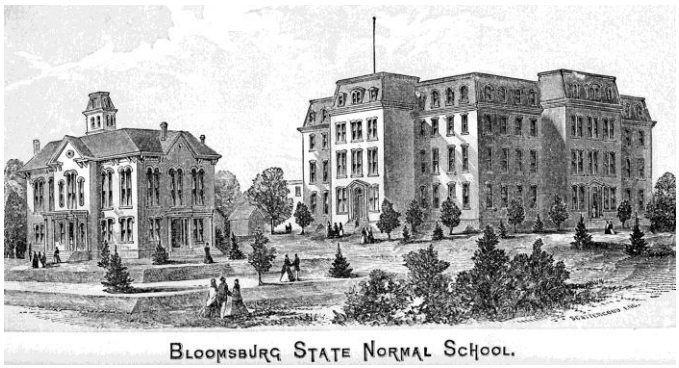
With the Institute doing well, events continued to move rapidly. Carver's school would not be a small local institution for long, thanks to the encouragement of the State Superintendent of Common Schools, James P. Wickersham. He first saw Institute Hall from a train in the fall of 1867 and felt it would be an excellent location for a State Normal School. On November 25, he spoke at the Columbia County Teachers' Institute held in Bloomsburg and suggested the trustees apply to become one. The normal school system for teacher training began in Pennsylvania in 1857, with Millersville becoming the first to open. At that time, the state was divided into 12 districts, each of which would have its own school.

Columbia County was in the Sixth District, along with eight other central Pennsylvania counties. A location for the district school had yet to be decided and to Wickersham, it should be in Bloomsburg. To this Henry Carver was in complete agreement. Planning soon began to establish the Institute as a state normal school, with a resolution to that effect adopted by the trustees on March 9, 1868. One of the requirements for a normal school was the ability to board students on campus, so land was needed and a dormitory had to be built.

Seven acres located just to the east of Institute Hall were purchased in April for the new building. On the 18th, Carver's plans for the dormitory were accepted. Always in a hurry, just two days after that, the land was being marked off and surveyed. While the dormitory was again planned and built by Carver, this time he had help from an advisory architect, Philadelphia's Samuel Sloan. On June 25, at the close of the Institute's commencement exercises, an elaborate ceremony was held to lay the cornerstone.

Carver never lacked confidence and felt sure the Literary Institute would be named a normal school. So confident, in fact, that when the fall term opened in August, a class was organized for the professional training of teachers. It extended into the winter term beginning in November, when Carver renamed the school the Bloomsburg Normal School and Literary Institute, leaving out "state" until official recognition came.

Construction went rapidly and by February 1869 major work had been completed, with the final cost coming in at $36,000. A committee from the state inspected the building and the school as a whole on February 19 and gave a favorable report. Three days later, the Bloomsburg Literary Institute was officially recognized as the normal school for Pennsylvania's Sixth District.



The Normal School campus, with Institute Hall and the first dormitory, 1871

After three years of nonstop effort by Carver, Bloomsburg had gone from an old, inadequate school facility and no higher educational opportunity to two brand-new buildings and a solid and respected literary institute. It would now begin accepting students for teacher training as a newly-minted, state-affiliated normal school.

At the time of the opening of the State Normal School at Bloomsburg—the official date being Monday, April 19—the faculty on the Board of Instruction numbered ten. The sizeable faculty not only ensured stability and that the school would go on even if the principal departed—which had been the case before Carver's arrival—but also allowed for a more diverse and thorough curriculum and education. Henry Carver was at the head as Principal and Professor of Intellectual and Moral Science and Theory and Practice of Teaching. Sarah was Preceptress and teacher of French, Botany, and Ornamental Branches, while Alice was teacher of music on the piano and melodeon.

According to Waller's 1939 interview, after opening as a Normal School, the institution continued to prosper. Carver was called both an excellent disciplinarian and a fine organizer—an 1869 letter to a Luzerne County newspaper aptly described him as energetic and Napoleonic—and he worked well with young people, which was true his entire life. He maintained the discipline that was necessary for learning because he inspired confidence and respect.

Waller remembered how Carver loved fine horses and had a team he would drive rapidly through town and out in the country, up and down the hillsides, possibly trying to release his excess energy and tensions. Because he had lost his left hand, he wore an iron hook at the end of his arm. In order to control the horses he had a loop on the reins which he held with the hook, and with his right hand he drove them on while wielding a whip. This reference to a hook is the only one yet found. All other sources of information available for his later positions make no mention of an amputated hand, let alone a hook, so it may not have been an uncommon situation.

In late July Carver and his family took up residence in the dormitory apartments prepared especially for the faculty. This was another benefit of being required to keep students on campus as a condition for Normal School status. After having to rent rooms in town for three years, the large family now had a rent-free place to stay.

During the first full academic year of 1869-1870 as both a literary institute and normal school, a total of 361 students were in attendance, 210 male and 151 female. This was double the total when

Institute Hall first opened. They were taught in seven classrooms on the first floor of Institute Hall, while two grades of the model school for elementary-age pupils were instructed in the dormitory. The building had separate wings, entrances, and stairs for male and female students.

Carver's working arrangement was a little unusual in that the Trustees owned the school, but he functioned as a general manager over all its activities. These included boarding the students, maintenance, hiring the faculty, and applying for state appropriations. The trustee minutes refer to him as a leaseholder, so he leased the facility and collected all the money from tuition and room and board. Numerous advertisements called him the school's proprietor. Carver gave part of this income back to the trustees to pay off debts and kept the rest for school expenses, including his own financial needs.

It was not all serious study and discipline at the Normal School however, and there was a sense of camaraderie among classmates. One example of this was a picnic organized in May 1870, held in Eyer's Grove. The students enjoyed themselves with games and a dinner, followed by lemonade, ice cream, cakes, and singing. Toasts were made, including one by Carver to "The health, prosperity, and success of the Normal School!"

A landmark event, the first Normal School commencement ceremony, occurred on June 23, 1870. The exercises lasted from morning to evening and each of the graduates—in addition to underclassmen—read their own compositions and essays, interspersed with performances of instrumental and vocal music. A class of eight, four men and four women, were issued certificates for having completed the normal school curriculum.

Although the school was prospering, the strain of working nonstop on construction projects, administration, travel, promotion, and of course teaching, finally caught up with Carver, and at the end of January 1871 he became ill. The sickness was documented in the diary of Jerome Ailman, a student from Juniata County (then part of the Sixth District), who enrolled at the Normal School in the fall of 1869.

In mid-January, Carver began teaching his course on Mental Philosophy, one of the first topics being the mysteries of the spirit. Then, ten days later, he fell ill, with the following record from the diary.

> January 25 – Mr. Best heard the Mental Philosophy on account of Mr. Carver feeling indisposed.
> January 29 – Mr. Carver is very sick this evening and has been for several days.
> January 30 – Heard this morning that Prof. Carver had not been expected to live. Thought how important one man can become. He is better this evening.
> February 1 – Prof. Carver was in chapel today but is looking very haggard.
> February 6 – Mr. Carver returned from Philadelphia today looking pretty well and appearing cheerful.

In just a week, Carver had gone from being on his deathbed to looking well and cheerful, even though full recovery turned out to be a gradual process. He would suffer more of these attacks, possibly severe bouts of depression, as the years went on, usually during the winter. An attempt to

diagnose his illness today could lead to one of Bipolar Disorder or what had previously been termed Manic Depression. Carver had these incredible bursts of sustained energy when he could accomplish nearly anything, then from 1871 to the end of his life suffered severe depressive episodes.

The Ailman diary also revealed how Carver interacted with his students. He used a number of venues, in and out of the classroom, to propose ideas for them to ponder and expand their horizons. In chapel exercises he talked about the uncertainty of life. At the tea table he spoke about the "blues" or depression, touching closely on the ordeal he had recently gone through.

As for teaching the Mental Philosophy course, in just one 90-minute class Carver lectured on theology, political economy, physiology, and chemistry. These sessions moved Ailman deeply, who after one class wrote, "He stirred within me the desire to do something in the world."

The Normal School's second commencement was held on June 22 and once again included graduates, numbering 12, reciting their compositions and essays and performing music. In addition, returning alumni from the first class joined with those of the second to form an alumni association, whose work continues to the present day.

Unfortunately for Carver, even after recovering from a serious illness, his troubles continued. Issues arose with the Board of Trustees, and during the summer of 1871 it engaged with Carver in rounds of negotiations as it sought to be paid more money. The students were charged $4.50 per week for board, room, and laundry and $1 for tuition. Of this amount the trustees decided—on June 22 with Carver present—that 50 cents per week per boarding student be set aside for them to pay down the school's debt. The debt had been growing and individual members of the Board were personally financing interest payments from their own income.

After weeks of discussions it was not until the beginning of August that an agreement was reached. The existing terms under which Carver ran the Normal School would remain in place—and the Board would pay for some repairs—until June 1872. At that point all mutual claims would be cancelled and the entire property, as well as responsibility for the school's operations, would revert to the Board.

At this point the trustees considered the matter closed and the fall term began on August 21. But it appears it was not closed in Carver's mind. Although he had committed to continue as principal until the following June, he felt his work in Bloomsburg had come to an end and now was the time to move on, not later. Carver left town in search of a new position and almost certainly never taught during the fall term, leaving Sarah in charge of the school.

He headed west to Colorado, where he had applied to become the first superintendent of the East Denver school district. His date of hire cannot be exactly determined, but according to histories of Colorado and Denver—written 25 and 30 years later—it was right before the start of the school year, which in 1871 began on September 11.

Carver wrote to the trustees in mid-October with an offer to resign, which the Board could say was due to ill health. For some reason, it took no action at that time and still seemed as if it believed he

would return to Bloomsburg. When reality sank in, the trustees decided to use Sarah as an intermediary, requesting she write to her father and ask him to fulfill the agreement reached in August, or else settle matters relating to his lease.

Henry's eldest daughter Sarah Carver, who loved being an educator as much as her father, 1871

At the end of November, Carver informed the trustees, through Sarah, that he wished to be released from any claims on his lease of the school, but be allowed to keep all subscriptions that had been made since August. To end the matter, this proposal was accepted. Henry Carver's responsibilities to and his association with the institution he had built literally from the ground up were at an end. His family then went west to join him in Denver.

Henry Carver would go on to teach—fighting through various trials, tribulations, and illnesses—until 1885. He died at age 67 in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, on February 20, 1889, and was buried four days later in Denver. In the obituary published in the *Columbian* newspaper the following month, his former pupil, George E. Elwell, had this to say of Carver, "He was a man of indomitable will, and his equals as a disciplinarian are few and far between. … Though he had his faults, as a teacher he will never be forgotten by any who were his pupils."