Did Indiana University push for Presbyterianism?

Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

From time to time during the early years of Indiana University, the charge that the professors and president were trying to convert all of the students to Presbyterianism created unwanted disruptions in the young school's life. Even though the public had the repeated assurances of the trustees that Presbyterian doctrine was not in the curriculum, rumors kept circulating among the university's detractors.

It happened again in 1825. Incredibly, Dr. David Maxwell, who was both a legislator and president of the trustees of the Indiana Seminary (IU's name until 1828) was a victim of a new rumor on the subject.

The Bloomington physician was accused of fostering a bill to make Presbyterianism the state religion. Concerned that the rumor might harm the reputation of the young school and wanting to set the record straight, Maxwell sat down to write a letter designed to appear in Indiana newspapers.

The letter was printed in the *Indiana Gazette* of May 28, 1825, and addressed "To the People of Monroe County." Despite his anger, Maxwell calmly recounted that the rumor surfaced the previous February and continued, "Believing that no person with whom I was acquainted could be sufficiently credulous to admit the truth of such a report, I simply contradicted it, and left it to those who through prejudice or ill will thought fit to propagate it to take whatever course they might see proper."

Unfortunately, his ignoring the rumor did not make it go away, as he had hoped. Maxwell discovered to his annoyance that it was still circulating. He commented in his best 19th century style, "Here I had determined to let the subject rest, but I have recently been informed by some of my friends that the report has been bandied about through our county until some of my fellow citizens begin to think there may be some truth in it; and that it is my duty to come out fairly, and give an exposition of the transactions said to have transpired in the House of Representatives last winter from which this report originated."

With his ire bubbling up to the surface, Maxwell wrote, defensively, "For any vote or act, which I have ever given or performed as the Representative of the people of Monroe County, I hold myself bound to answer. . . ."

He further stated that he considered himself answerable to the voters for all of his actions in the Indiana House of Representatives, and "in the present instance it affords me pleasure to give all the information I possibly can in relation to the circumstances from which the report in question originated and leave it to the public to judge me according to my works, whether they be good or bad."

And what was the basis for the rumor? Maxwell went on to explain to the readers of the *Gazette*. "Mr. Noble from the standing committee on the affairs of the town of Indianapolis reported a bill to incorporate the Presbyterian congregation, school and church session, in *Indianapolis*, which we read and ordered to a second reading on next day."

Unfortunately the existing state law governing the purchase of the property by the congregation was vague enough to endanger their ownership at some future time. In other words, all the bill was designed to do was to protect the congregation's right to the property.

Maxwell pointed out that the legislature had passed similar acts to protect the rights of the Catholic Church in Vincennes, Wabash Baptist Church and New Hope Baptist Church in Dearborn County. He posed the question, "Will any person say that these acts of incorporation have made the peculiar tenets held by the churches to which they were granted the *established* religion of Indiana or that they have obtained thereby any exclusive privileges in matters of faith . . ."

It is possible that after the letter appeared in the *Gazette*, any Monroe Countian foolish enough to repeat the rumor would be compelled by someone to sit down and read the lengthy letter to the editor in its entirety.

H-T 7/19/93