

# Doctor chided IU officials over book purchases

One of the more puzzling persons in Monroe County history was a Dr. William C. Foster, who served on the Indiana University Board of Trustees from 1834 to 1838. In a grudge against President Andrew Wylie, the physician took on some formidable opponents besides Wylie — Cornelius Pering and Dr. David Maxwell.

Foster had written a sarcastic letter to the editor of *The (Bloomington) Post*, accusing Wylie of spending too much money on books for the university library. This was in 1838-1839.

Whether Foster chose the name "Knickerbocker" for the purpose of sounding sophisticated or in the hope of remaining anonymous, the choice was a failure. Bloomington was small enough that anyone who was truly interested knew who "Knickerbocker" was.

In his letter to the editor, which was printed in *The Post* on Feb. 16, Foster claimed that what Wylie bought during his trip to Philadelphia could have been had more cheaply. Furthermore, claimed the doctor, Wylie "paid for a parcel of old, worn-out, moth eaten works, many of them no doubt the refuse not only of the book stores of England, but even the book



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

stalls of London, and sent across the Atlantic to speculate upon the credulity of the literati of America."

Continued Foster, "Some of these books, no doubt, have taken the second growth, were we to judge from the quantity of hair on their corners, and would figure much better in a caravan of animals..."

That was too much for Pering, whose presence in Bloomington was a most fortunate turn of events for the community. Foster had claimed to be a lot better read than the average physician and accused Pering of being a "toady" for Wylie.

Foster may have encountered Latin and Greek in his secondary education, but he was no match for Pering. The latter was a graduate of the Royal Academy in London, a member of the London Literary and Scientific Institute and had a Master of Arts degree.

Students of Monroe County history would have encountered Pering's long letter to relatives back in England reprinted in Pop Hall's *Historic Treasures*. As a newcomer to America, Pering's letter shows his keen observation of life here. There is nothing condescending in his comments about his newly adopted country.

To put it in plain English, Pering could out-classics education Foster any day. Pering did so in his letter to the editor of May 4, 1838 and had no qualms about signing his own name to the letter.

Specifically, Pering was well aware of the price of books, since he was principal of the Bloomington Female Seminary and a purchaser of books for a long period of time. He answered each one of Foster's charges, citing the real prices. (Wylie had bought a Latin grammar, works of Milton and an English grammar.)

Foster had referred to a Professor Stowe of Lane Seminary in Ohio, who was supposed to have bought the same books at a cheaper price. In his reply, Pering pointed out a more accurate estimate of the prices and pointed out that Stowe had charged his seminary for

traveling expenses to Philadelphia, while Wylie had not charged IU.

Dr. David Maxwell's strength in defending Wylie at a trustee hearing was his love of the institution he had almost single-handedly created and his faith in the integrity of Wylie. At the hearing Maxwell acted somewhat in the capacity of defense attorney, posing challenging questions to Foster.

The physician's history is somewhat vague. Professor Burton D. Myers, author of *Officers of Indiana University*, did not know where Foster was born, the date or the source of his medical education. He had just appeared in Bloomington some time before 1834.

Later in his life, Foster was told again that he was wrong. That was in a more public forum. During the tensions leading up to the Civil War, there was a meeting held in the Monroe County courthouse. Foster advocated "coercive measures," if necessary, to keep the South in the Union. His resolution was "handled severely" and voted down.

Foster died in 1866. His photograph can be found in Myer's biographies of IU officers.

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