

Mr. Culver Finds His Man – Colonel Fleet Finds His School

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The story is oft told about the difficulties Henry Harrison Culver had opening his Academy in 1894. He and the first head of schools, The Reverend J.H. McKenzie, were at sword's point even before the first students arrived and this association lasted but one year. McKenzie's successor, Major Clinton Tebbets, proved inadequate as a recruiter and administrator and he barely survived into his second year before he, too, departed.

The catalyst which precipitated his departure occurred 388 miles to the west when the Missouri Military Academy burned to the ground on September 24, 1896. Colonel Alexander Frederick Fleet, its superintendent, was faced with financial devastation. He had no buildings, 75 students whose tuition had been paid, and a small faculty with contracts outstanding for the school year

Mr. Culver's problems were no less grave. He owned a school with a student body of 29, residing in a new three-story brick barrack capable of housing over 90. His overall investment of \$70,000 was severely stressed and he could not survive a third year of losses. Unless there was a transfusion of money and boys – and quickly – he would be forced to abandon his dream of a school on Lake Maxinkuckee.

Fleet had invested heavily in the Missouri school and was desperate for a way to preserve what remained of his life savings. His obligations to parents, students, and faculty weighed heavily when Dame Fortune appeared. Four days later an educational proposal

was made when Henry Harrison Culver telegraphed Fleet: "You have the boys and I have the buildings. Let's get together."

Neither man had room for maneuver. On October 5, Fleet, 72 cadets, and four faculty arrived at Main Barrack. The Corps of Cadets had, in the matter of a few minutes, increased from 29 boys to 101! By the end of the school year an additional 22 boys were enrolled. The bond of friendship, in what

was honorable and right was evident when the two men signed a formal agreement four days later.

Opening legalese aside, it set forth the following: Mr. Culver would receive five percent interest from the first year's gross annual income in consideration for his investment of \$70,000. Fleet's return would be predicated upon his managerial successes. It was to be paid from the net income *after* Culver's share and all other expenses were paid. Tuition was set at \$375.

Fleet would receive all net profits up to \$5,000, after which he and Mr. Culver would divide any excess equally. Improvements to facilities, new construction, etc., which were borne by the owner would be subject to the same five percent conditions noted above.

Parenthetically, Fleet was offered an equity position in all new construction, but consistently rejected such entreaties. Perhaps his memories of that tragic fire had left an indelible imprint and ownership was no longer an attraction. At 49 years of age, future risk taking apparently had little attraction.

The agreement provided for a "board of managers" to include H.H. Culver, W.L. Culver, H.H. Culver Jr., Colonel Fleet, and F.T. Neal, a valued employee of the Wrought Iron Range Company in St. Louis, who also served as the business manager for the Academy. Clearly, the founder intended to maintain final authority and was not going to be out-voted.

Fleet, for the months of October, November, and December in 1896, was to receive a monthly compensation of \$100. Thereafter, and for the remainder of the contract, he would receive \$300 per month, provided earnings justified such an allowance. Culver also provided, at no cost, a dwelling and meals for Fleet and his family in the Mess Hall, and authorized \$300 for "beds, bedding, carpets and other necessary furnishings." The dwelling specified in the contract was a large, white, clapboard structure that stood between Main Barrack and the lake.

Finally, it was agreed that both principals to the contract "be allowed to put into the Academy three boys free of expense, as to board and tuition." This provision was applied to Fleet's sons: John Sedden, William Frederick, and Reginald. Culver's son, Knight K., a nephew Wallace C., and grandson Edwin R. Jr., fulfilled the founder's rights.

Almost immediately construction on West Barrack began. When Major Leigh Gignilliat arrived to assume his duties as commandant of cadets in January of 1897, Fleet and Culver were pushing completion to accommodate more cadets and provide space for a new Science Department.

As Fleet drew to the end of his second year as superintendent, his success was evident. Main Barrack was filled to capacity as were the second and third floors of West (the Science Department occupied the ground floor) and enrollment stood at 151.

Sadly, 57-year-old Henry Harrison Culver had become ill during a sojourn at his Lake Maxinkuckee home in the late summer of 1897. He was ferried from the Homestead to the train depot and taken to St. Louis, where his condition declined rapidly. He died on September 28.

Colonel Fleet had lost his principal supporter. The friendship the two men enjoyed, though brief, was one of mutual trust. “You have the boys and I have the buildings” brought financial salvation to both men. Only the most fundamental legal agreement had sealed their deal and now Fleet was faced with new challenges.

Mr. Culver left a widow, Emily Jane, and six children – five sons and a daughter. The funeral had barely concluded when Mrs. Culver began to assume a more visible place in school affairs. She joined in a close alliance with sons Edwin and Bertram and, collectively, set out to ensure the school’s financial future.

As the enrollment increased, it was apparent that further growth demanded another barrack. Discussions between Fleet and Mrs. Culver proved testy. With the school’s enrollment increasing and its administration strong, she likely did not feel the same pressures her husband endured in 1896. Handshakes and loosely worded agreements were now longer suitable.

In 1899 she reconfirmed all financial provisions of Fleet’s old contract and raised his salary to \$5,000. She proposed, however, that Fleet become a party to any future construction and set out a schedule for reimbursement for improvements made to the campus. The proposal was full of clauses like “party of the first part (Fleet) and parties of the second part (the Culvers)” and called for Fleet to reimburse the family half of further investments including the proposed East Barrack.

“Whereas, if this is done, the cost and expense of erection of said new building, the furnishing of the same, and connecting it with the heating apparatus and water supply, etc., will have to be paid in the first instance, by the Estate of H.H. Culver, deceased, and whereas, it is conceded by party of first part that if this is done the

said estate of H.H. Culver should be reimbursed to the extent of one half of all each costs by him, the said party of the first part and all such net profits, thereafter earned shall be applied each succeeding year until the whole sum is to be advanced by party of second part shall have been liquidated and paid to her or the heirs of H.H. Culver deceased, it being distinctly understood and agreed by and between the party of the first part and party of the second part that each is in said manner to pay one half of the entire expenses of the cost of such new building the furnishing, and equipping of the same building, etc. etc.”

This proposal of legal boiler-plate, except for the salary increase, was rejected by Fleet immediately. He responded rather abruptly:

“Yours 28th just received and contents noted. I do not wish, of course, to hold any equity in the proposed barracks and equipment, and I appreciate as you do, the importance of a perfect understanding before beginning the new building . . . I feel the absolute necessity of a forward move at once [on East Barrack]. I hope you will not delay matters a day as the building should be finished not later than September 1st so that it may be perfectly dried out and safe for occupancy when school opens. You will have to come up and select the site.”

Fleet’s position was clear. He wanted nothing to do with a partnership. The school belonged to the Culver family and he was the chosen administrator. Thereafter, there was no further discussion of an equity position.

In 1902, the Culvers incorporated the school and valued its property, buildings, and equipment at \$240,000. Each of the six children received 400 shares of stock. Mrs. Culver agreed to surrender further control in return for a lifetime stipend and title to the family home in St. Louis.

Edwin and Bertram were uncertain of their siblings’ loyalty and feared they might attempt to sell to outsiders. Therefore, they included a provision in the corporate by-laws giving them first refusal to any sale. When H.H.

Culver Jr. died in 1912, Edwin and Bertram purchased his shares and effectively gained control of the school. In 1928, they brought an end to internecine warfare by paying \$2 million to the surviving siblings for their outstanding shares.

Almost immediately they set in motion plans to create a non-profit foundation. Edwin's death in 1930 postponed their arrangements, but during Commencement of 1932, Edward and Bertram signed the Culver Covenant announcing the transfer of private ownership of the school, its properties, and monies to the newly formed non-profit Culver Educational Foundation, the value of which was estimated at \$ million. On March 9, 1933, the legal transfer was completed.