



“To Outfit Destitute Young Men for the Ministry”: Thetford’s Response to the Call to Evangelism

An enthusiastic spirit of evangelism permeated many of New England’s educational and local communities. Thetford Congregational Church, seeing the opportunity to affect the transformation of the world from their own small corner, participated in the evangelization effort.

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The state of civilization in the newly settled regions of the American West emerged as an issue of great concern among New Englanders during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Fearing the absence of supporting institutions among a widely dispersed population, and the impact of that void on the development of American society, they explored ways of reaching and influencing individuals and families who had migrated to settle the valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. One principal means of affecting the future of the West was to support itinerant ministers and missionaries who would serve as emissaries of religion and culture. The Missionary Societies of Massachusetts and Connecticut, for example, recruited the Reverends John F. Schermerhorn and Samuel J. Mills, graduates of the Andover Theological Seminary in Andover, Massachusetts, to embark in 1812 upon a year-long tour “of that part of the United States which lies west of the Allegany Mountains.” Their purpose was to investigate the conditions of the emerging society and determine the church’s responsibility for addressing the needs of western residents. The missionaries’ report, published in Hartford in 1814 and distributed widely, concluded that the preservation of the West from evil, undemocratic forces would require energetic voluntary efforts channeled through churches, schools, and tract societies.¹

Two decades later, Lyman Beecher, the renowned clergyman and president of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, noted in his "Plea for the West" that the "religious and political destiny of our nation is to be decided in the West." He argued that the struggle would be "a conflict of institutions for the education of her sons, for purposes of superstition or evangelical light, of despotism or liberty."² Beecher's statement reflected an attitude common among early nineteenth-century New England Protestants who viewed themselves as God's stewards, ones who were called specifically to transplant their religious, cultural, and educational institutions into the frontier regions as a ministry to the newly settled Westerners.

Given this sense of divine mission, an enthusiastic spirit of evangelism permeated many of New England's educational institutions and local communities. Professors, students, merchants, clergy, and townspeople joined in supporting organizations, such as the American Home Missionary Society (established 1826), that would gather resources to fertilize the desolate regions and cause them eventually to flourish like "the garden of the Lord." Communities and congregations, such as Thetford and its Congregational Church, seeing the opportunity to affect the transformation of the world from their own small corner, also participated in the evangelization effort. They did so by designating and outfitting their own young men for the ministry and encouraging them either to remain in service to New England congregations or to transplant religion and culture into the "destitute western regions" or even to foreign lands.

From the beginning of his fifty-seven year tenure as pastor of the First Congregational Church of Thetford in 1779, the Reverend Asa Burton demonstrated a strong interest in the education of youth. This devotion to learning had surfaced during his teen years in Norwich, Vermont, when he witnessed the founding of Dartmouth College across the Connecticut River in Hanover. He quickly fell under the influence of the school's founders, who impressed him with "a sense of the importance of a learned education; [and] of the necessity of religion." With his subsequent attendance at Dartmouth, Burton vowed to "obtain a college education, become a good man, and a minister of the gospel."³

Called to serve the Thetford church, Burton soon reported that the town was poorly fitted for schools and religion. He described the local youth as loose and uncivil, "living as their corrupt lusts dictated, free from the restraints of parental government, and the checks of an enlightened conscience."⁴ To address these concerns, Burton introduced weekly conferences with the youth during which he emphasized scripture reading and the discussion of religious issues. He visited regularly with local teachers to review instructional methods and helped to organize a

library and town lyceum. Burton even convinced a Thetford female benevolent society to send contributions to a newly established academy in Meriden, New Hampshire.⁵ Most importantly, he believed that a thorough theological education required personal mentoring. So, for thirty years, Burton housed students of divinity in his Thetford home and assisted them in preparing for the ministry.⁶

Manifesting his support for education, Burton joined with other members of his congregation and the Thetford community in founding the Thetford Academy in 1818. Attorney Simeon Short, Judges Jedidiah F. Buckingham and Joseph Reed, local merchants William Latham and Thomas Kendrick, and Burton all approved of the venture and subscribed funds for the project.⁷ The founders recruited the Reverend John Fitch, a 1790 graduate of Brown University and pastor of the Congregational Church in Danville, to be the academy's first preceptor. Over the years, Fitch had engaged in the preparation of numerous young men for college and eventually for a life in the ministry.

The Thetford Academy commenced in February 1819 with approximately fifty students in attendance. Both boys and girls were admitted, paying \$2 per quarter for English studies and \$3 per quarter for classical language studies. Believing that education should be accessible to all regardless of economic standing, Burton and the school's founders established the "Charitable funds of Thetford Academy." Overseen by the school's treasurer, Judge Buckingham, this special fund provided financial assistance to students who were unable to afford the cost of the academy's tuition. For those students choosing to continue their studies at college, support was also available.⁸ The first credit to the Thetford charity account, in the amount of \$8.25, came from Dr. Burton who, by his actions, demonstrated the importance of homegrown charity. By August 1825, the account totaled \$112.20, although \$232.00 had already been paid out for meritorious and needy students.⁹

During his years as pastor, Burton was mindful of those young men who demonstrated great promise to be ministers and personally provided that mentoring experience. In addition, concurrent with the founding of the Academy, Burton convened his congregation to discuss an important financial matter. On December 7, 1818, inspired by their pastor's commitment to education, the Thetford church voted to collect money on alternate Sundays "for the education of pious, indigent young men at the Academy in Thetford while fitting for college for the gospel ministry."¹⁰ For the next three years, the church renewed its commitment to this education fund, though no records exist to specify how much they actually collected.

In the years prior to the founding of the Academy, one boy, Edmund

Otis Hovey, son of Thetford farmer and blacksmith Roger Hovey, had come to the attention of Dr. Burton, most likely during the minister's regular meetings with the Thetford youth. Edmund was an avid reader of ancient history, biographies, travel narratives, and other works of the day. When the *American Journal of Science and Art* began in 1818, Edmund at age seventeen became an interested follower, something that would inspire his later work in geology. This commitment to learning, however, clashed with his father's priority for work on the farm. Recognizing the importance that education had played in her own family's life, Edmund's mother Martha, a member of the influential New England Otis family,¹¹ encouraged her son to pursue his studies. At the age of eighteen, Edmund, not knowing what his future profession would be, began his preparatory studies at Thetford Academy under the tutelage of Reverend Fitch. Soon encountering a shortage of funds to support his education, Edmund spent the next year teaching in nearby Norwich and the subsequent year in Thetford.¹² Judge Joseph Reed, affiliated with the Academy from its founding, also took a special interest in Edmund. Over the years, Reed, though not a "professor of religion," had helped many young men through college, some of whom had continued on into the ministry. Recognizing the young Hovey's potential, Reed extended an offer of financial assistance to the blacksmith's son.

Dr. Burton also was well acquainted with Hovey who, around 1809, had moved with his family from Hanover Center to Thetford. Amidst a religious revival that swept Thetford and the surrounding communities in 1821, the church elders, while visiting the Hovey household, found Edmund particularly receptive to the gospel message. Burton was so impressed by the young man's desire for religion and interest in education that he selected Edmund to lead theological discussions among young converts in the congregation. With his new position in the Thetford church and community, Hovey developed a closer relationship with Burton's stepson Charles White, who was six years older than Edmund. White graduated from Dartmouth later in 1821, attended Andover Seminary and graduated in 1824, and returned to Thetford to become the associate pastor at his stepfather's church. In so doing, he became a role model for Edmund and remained a close acquaintance for years to come.

Following their earlier decision to establish a charity fund, the Thetford congregation in December 1821 authorized the creation of a committee, consisting of Reverend Fitch from the academy, deacons David Kinney, Abijah Howard, and William Thayer, and Judge Buckingham to "concoct a plan for this [church] to support a beneficiary while preparing for the ministry."¹³ At a meeting of January 12, 1822, the congregation approved the committee's proposal and agreed to subscribe grain,

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clothing, board, and/or money to support their candidate for one year. They also appointed Dr. Burton, Reverend Fitch, and Mr. Thayer to select the intended beneficiary. One week later, on January 19, the committee recommended, and the church approved, that "Otis Hovey" would be their beneficiary.¹⁴

From the beginning of the Thetford church's educational initiative in 1818, Burton clearly had his eye on Edmund as the intended beneficiary. Over his forty years in the clergy, Burton had prepared and mentored many young men for the ministry, and he very obviously recognized Edmund's talents and potential to become a minister of the gospel. Furthermore, Burton saw much of himself in Edmund, most notably his strong commitment to learning, the financial status of his family, and the desire of a father for his son to forego an advanced education in order to maintain the family farm. Another clear indication of Burton's intentions for Hovey was that despite the numerous young men in Thetford, no other individual received the church's pledge for financial assistance; Edmund Otis Hovey was the only one so designated.

By the fall of 1822, "at the advanced age of 21," Edmund commenced "the acquisition of a liberal education" at the Academy with an eye toward college. He explained in a letter to his sister Nancy that he had willingly accepted "the hand of Charity for support" from various members of the church who provided board and paid for his textbooks. The ladies "cent society" gathered clothing for him, and his Uncle Otis gave him a calf, which Edmund promptly sold and applied the proceeds toward his tuition. He found his situation "as pleasant as might be expected" and vowed to "improve every moment" in order to "render my life useful and answer the expectations of my Patrons."¹⁵

The winter of 1822–1823 brought a sudden end to Edmund's short-lived studies. A serious respiratory illness forced the young man to put his books aside for several months and to seek the recuperative seashore environment of Sandwich, where his mother's family resided. The Thetford church, obviously fearing the loss of its investment, briefly withdrew its support of Edmund. But by the fall of 1823, Edmund had recovered and resumed his studies at Thetford Academy, focusing heavily on the Greek language, clearly with an eye toward attending college. The church again extended its financial support, designating Dr. Kendrick, Judge Buckingham, and Thomas Merrill "to procure subscriptions, & lay them out in supporting Mr. Hovey the chh Beneficiary in fitting for College."¹⁶ Throughout the course of Edmund's three years of study at the Academy, the education society of the Thetford church paid \$13.75 toward his total bill of \$16.75; preceptor Fitch, who was preparing Edmund for college, paid the balance.¹⁷

Upon completion of his studies at Thetford Academy, Edmund applied for admission to Dartmouth College in the fall of 1824. He was familiar with the school, having lived his early life in Hanover Center and taking pride that his father had crafted much of the iron for the early college buildings. His Freeman relatives also had been involved with the college since its move to Hanover. But the principal influences for Edmund attending Dartmouth were Dr. Asa Burton, himself a 1777 graduate, and the Reverend Charles White, a graduate in the class of 1821. After passing his oral entrance examinations, Edmund entered the freshman class of Dartmouth in January 1825 at the age of 23½.

Hovey was able to pursue his studies at Dartmouth because of the continued generosity of his benefactors at home. The Thetford congregation met annually to reconsider support for their “church beneficiary.” Subscriptions raised went directly into the college’s charity fund, which President Bennet Tyler had established to assist those students preparing for the ministry who had demonstrated financial need.¹⁸ During his four years of study, Edmund received at least \$108 of his \$147 tuition bill from charity subscriptions, the exact amount pledged by his benefactors back in Thetford.¹⁹ And, given the influence of Dr. Burton with the Dartmouth administration, Edmund received more assistance on an annual basis than any other student in his class. While the standard student appropriation was \$15, Edmund received \$27.²⁰

Demonstrating his penchant for religious matters, Edmund quickly affiliated with the Theological Society at Dartmouth. Established in 1808, this student society monitored the state of religion in the nation, maintained contact with the newly founded Andover Theological Seminary, and corresponded with ministers in western settlements and missionaries in foreign lands, as well as nurturing the religious life of its members.²¹ Through the society’s regular exposure to missionary literature, Edmund and his fellow classmates became intrigued by work in the mission fields, an interest that would affect their course of studies and their future commitments.

Still unsure about his future profession, though in need of additional pocket money, Edmund used his college vacations to teach in local schools. The winter of 1827–1828 found him again in Hanover Center, the village of his youth. There, for three and one-half months, he taught more than sixty “very interesting scholars” and instituted a weekly Bible class to provide “religious instruction which they ought to receive.” Through his increasingly frequent work in schools, Edmund began to appreciate the immense responsibilities that educators possessed in shaping the minds and lives of their students. “The more I have to do with the instruction of children,” Hovey noted in a letter to his parents,

“the greater appears the importance of their having *good* instruction.” Influenced by those who had watched over his own education and guided him through his own course of study, Edmund resolved likewise to “do my scholars all the good I can.”²²

Upon graduating from Dartmouth in August 1828, Edmund began at long last to confront his own future and the expectations of his benefactors. Steered from an early age toward the ministry, shaped by Dr. Burton and his stepson/assistant minister Rev. White, and influenced by the work of Dartmouth’s Theological Society, Edmund eventually acknowledged the call of the ministry, recognizing the “wide field opening at the West for the exertions of the Philanthropist and Christian.”²³ On November 12, 1828, Edmund closed his school in Hanover Center, visited his family and friends in Thetford, and on November 17 departed for Andover Theological Seminary to pursue his theological studies.²⁴

Andover Seminary was the nation’s leading theological school that defended the orthodox Calvinist tradition. Founded in 1808 by Massachusetts Calvinists who viewed the growing Unitarian influences at Harvard and Yale as a threat to the proper training of ministers, the seminary became a stronghold of Trinitarian orthodoxy for the Congregational churches of New England. It trained men for the ministry and, in so doing, emphasized the “importance of the church in the secular world.”²⁵ As a result, Andover students were filled with a sense of divine and civic mission. They became involved in revivals and protracted meetings in their communities, active in education as teachers and professors, and instrumental in the operations of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the American Home Missionary Society to advance God’s kingdom.

Edmund’s arrival at Andover proved to be a life-altering experience, and ultimately a fulfillment of the desires of his long-time benefactors. During his three years of schooling, Hovey became more convinced of the need to work as a minister in “the vineyards” where, he noted, the laborers were few. He continuously recognized that he was “under great obligations to many excellent friends and patrons in Thetford” who had supported and nurtured him from his days at Thetford Academy. He also felt that he had “entered upon hallowed ground” at Andover and, finding that “responsibility is every day increasing,” was assured that God had guided him “to this consecrated Seminary” in order to pursue a life in the ministry. With the sacred ministry clearly in view, he began his studies in order to “be prepared for usefulness in life.”²⁶

During Edmund’s years at Andover, many of his classmates developed a strong interest in foreign missions. Edmund, however, demonstrated an interest in the “desolate regions of the West,” especially after

hearing from two classmates who labored as agents of the Sunday School Union in Indiana.²⁷ Interest became commitment when the Reverend Absalom Peters, Corresponding Secretary of the American Home Missionary Society, visited the Andover students in the summer of 1831 to present the needs of the “western man.” After hearing Peters’s plea, Edmund decided, with the advice of his seminary professors, “*to devote my life to the labors of a Missionary in the Valley of the Mississippi.*”²⁸ Peters initially proposed that Edmund accept an assignment at the military post at the Falls of St. Mary’s, some one hundred miles north of Mackinaw in the Michigan Territory, but Edmund, demonstrating a degree of uncertainty about the appointment, concluded that Fort Wayne in the young state of Indiana would prove to be “the more promising.”²⁹

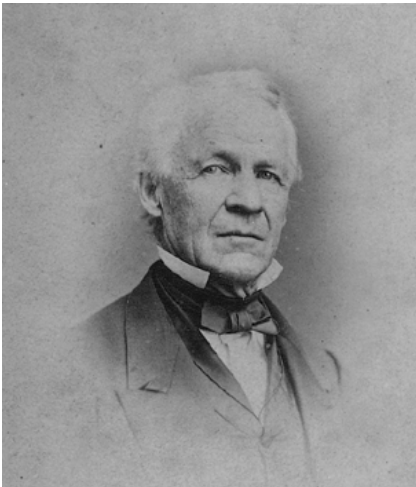
Following Edmund’s marriage to Mary Carter of Peacham in October 1831, the couple proceeded to the missionary grounds of Indiana under the auspices of the American Home Missionary Society. There, Edmund assumed the pastorate of a small congregation on the banks of Coal Creek in Fountain County, located in western Indiana. He observed that some residents were Presbyterians (or at least receptive to the Presbyterian message), but that there was also a “*Diversity of Sectarian bigotry— as it appears in Methodism, Campbellism New Lightism Dunkardism &c &c.*” Despite these initial obstacles, Hovey did “not regret that I am not snugly lodged in a fine N.E. village—The foundations must be laid.”³⁰ Within a short time of their arrival, the Hoveys moved to “awaken” their congregation by establishing a Sabbath school in their small community. By July 1832, they had recruited thirty-two regular scholars and developed a library of some forty volumes. Despite this progress, Mary reported in a letter to her sister in Cazenovia, New York, that “western towns are notoriously wicked places.”³¹ To her mother back in Peacham, Mary wrote, “the Lord has some thing for us to do here; . . . I hope we have both made up our minds to *labor & suffer & die* in the service of Christ.”³²

During the fall of 1832, Edmund joined an initiative that would realize the ambitious goals for which he had prepared at Andover. Several Presbyterian missionaries and clergy, including the Reverend James Thomson, a graduate of Miami University and pastor of the Crawfordsville Presbyterian Church, and the Reverend John M. Ellis, a graduate of Andover and founder of Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois, met to discuss the creation of a manual labor school in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Citing the “lamentably low state of common schools” in the West, the need for “supplying a suitable number of competent teachers and exciting a taste for education,” and “training young men in sufficient numbers for the ministry,” these men joined to establish a “high Classi-

cal & English school” with a system of manual labor, “rising into a College as the wants of the country demand.”³³ In early 1833, the trustees, including Hovey, voted to erect a building for their school. They also appointed, at Edmund’s recommendation, Caleb Mills, a fellow graduate of Dartmouth and Andover and a strong proponent of education, to be the principal of the preparatory department and teacher’s seminary.³⁴ The following winter the trustees applied to the state of Indiana for a charter for “The Wabash Teachers’ Seminary and Manual Labor College.”

As his second year of labor in Indiana drew to a close, Edmund found himself involved increasingly in the operations of the new school. He notified the Home Missionary Society in New York City that he intended to leave his mission post and to join the new western school as its financial agent. In the spring of 1834, Edmund left his congregations to devote his time fully to Wabash College. Over the ensuing months, Hovey embarked upon an “agency” or fundraising tour for the college, which led him throughout New England for some eighteen months.³⁵ This task soon included recruiting “some man suitable for President, enlisted who shall help me to get funds.”³⁶

Over the course of the next forty-three years, Edmund Hovey served Wabash College in many capacities. In addition to acting as the college’s chief financial agent, he was professor of natural and moral science, rhetoric and oratory, chemistry, and Latin. He was secretary of the faculty, and overseer of the construction of the college’s first buildings.



*Edmund Otis Hovey
(1801–1877). Photograph
ca. 1850. Courtesy of
Robert T. Ramsay, Jr.
Archival Center, Lilly
Library, Wabash College,
Crawfordsville, Indiana.*

Most significantly, he recruited the first three presidents of the college, including the former associate pastor at the Thetford church (and now his brother-in-law) Charles White, all of whom provided the strong leadership that brought credibility to this new institution of higher learning in the West.

Rather than return to the comforts of a quiet parish life in the hills of New England as his friends and family had often encouraged him to do,³⁷ Edmund maintained his commitment to Wabash until his death in 1877. Through the mentoring of his Presbyterian and Congregationalist colleagues, the support of the American Home Missionary Society, and his education at Dartmouth, Andover, and the Thetford Academy, Edmund realized that Wabash College was his calling in the West—his “work in the vineyards of the Lord”—and that he could best meet the needs of the emerging western society by cultivating the minds of young men in the classroom. Clearly, the support and nurturing that Hovey received from the Thetford Congregational Church proved to be an important factor in shaping his later life. However, little did Edmund’s benefactors in the Thetford church realize that their years of support would extend beyond the hills of New England and have such far-reaching consequences on evangelism and the promotion of higher education in the rapidly developing American West.

NOTES

¹ Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier* (The Caxton Printers, 1939; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 139ff.

² Lyman Beecher, “Plea for the West” (Cincinnati, 1835), as quoted in Edwin Scott Gaustad, ed., *Religious Issues in American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 149ff.

³ Charles Latham, ed., *The Life of Asa Burton Written by Himself* (Thetford: The First Congregational Church, 1973), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ General John Eaton, *Thetford Academy, Thetford, Vermont. Seventy-Fifth Anniversary and Reunion, Thursday, June 28, 1894* (Concord, N.H.: The Republican Press Association, 1895), 21.

⁶ Latham, *Life of Asa Burton*, 29.

⁷ *Thetford Academy 75th Anniversary*, 22–23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26; Thetford Academy, *Here is Thetford* (Thetford, Vt., 1937), 4–5.

⁹ *Thetford Academy 75th Anniversary*, 26–27.

¹⁰ Records of the Church of Christ, Thetford, Vermont, 1773–1832, Thetford Historical Society, Thetford Library.

¹¹ Martha Freeman Hovey was a descendant of the Otis family, influential colonial and Revolutionary leaders. Her grandfather was a member of the Massachusetts colonial council at his death.

¹² Horace C. Hovey, “Prof. Hovey’s Ancestry and Early Days,” *The Wabash*, Vol. 23, No. 3, January 1899, 145–156.

¹³ Records of the Church of Christ, Thetford Historical Society, Thetford Library.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Edmund O. Hovey (EOH) to Nancy Dewey, 30 November 1822, Robert T. Ramsay Jr. Archival Center, Lilly Library, Wabash College.

¹⁶ Records of the Church of Christ, Thetford, 30 April 1824, Thetford Historical Society, Thetford Library.

¹⁷ Thetford Academy Treasurer Book, Thetford Historical Society, Thetford Library.

¹⁸ Subscriptions for Charity Fund, 1824, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College.

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¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Treasurer's Account Book, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College.

²¹ Records of the Theological Society, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College.

²² EOH to parents, 6 January 1828, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Robert T. Ramsay, Jr., Archival Center, Lilly Library, Wabash College; EOH to Israel Dewey, 23 March 1828, personal collection of Philip Zea.

²³ EOH to Israel Dewey, 30 November 1828, personal collection of Philip Zea.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ David Day Williams, *The Andover Liberals: A Study in American Theology* (Caxton Printers, 1941; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 11.

²⁶ EOH, 30 November 1828, personal collection of Philip Zea; EOH to Charles White, 7 December 1828, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Indiana Division, Indiana State Library.

²⁷ EOH to parents, 24 July 1829, Robert T. Ramsay, Jr. Archival Center, Lilly Library, Wabash College.

²⁸ EOH to Mary Carter, 16 July 1831, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Indiana Division, Indiana State Library.

²⁹ EOH to Mary Carter, 29 July 1831, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Indiana Division, Indiana State Library.

³⁰ EOH to Committee on Domestic Missions, 16 March 1832, Special Collections, Franklin-Trask Library, Andover-Newton Seminary; EOH to American Home Missionary Society, 29 March 1832, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Robert T. Ramsay, Jr., Archival Center, Lilly Library, Wabash College.

³¹ Mary Carter Hovey to Martha White, 16 January 1832, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Indiana Division, Indiana State Library.

³² Mary Carter Hovey to Martha Carter, 11 February 1832, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Indiana Division, Indiana State Library.

³³ James Thomson to Williamson Dunn, 22 November 1832, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Robert T. Ramsay, Jr., Archival Center, Lilly Library, Wabash College.

³⁴ Edmund O. Hovey, "History of Wabash College," *The Wabash Magazine* 1 (1857): 194-195.

³⁵ Ibid., 199.

³⁶ EOH to Fred Hovey, 24 November 1834, Edmund Otis Hovey Collection, Robert T. Ramsay, Jr., Archival Center, Wabash College.

³⁷ Hovey, "History of Wabash College," 200.