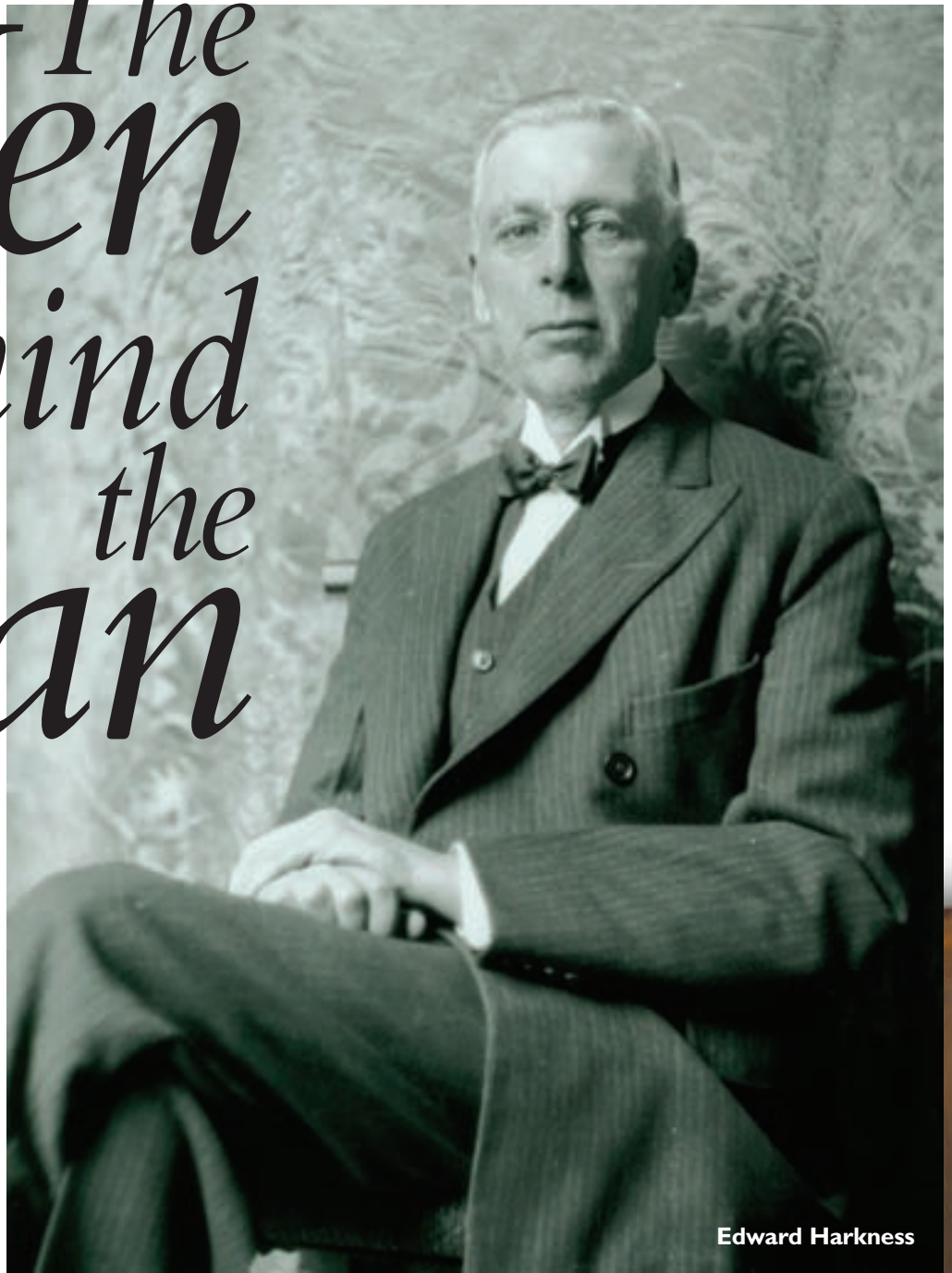


The Men Behind the Plan

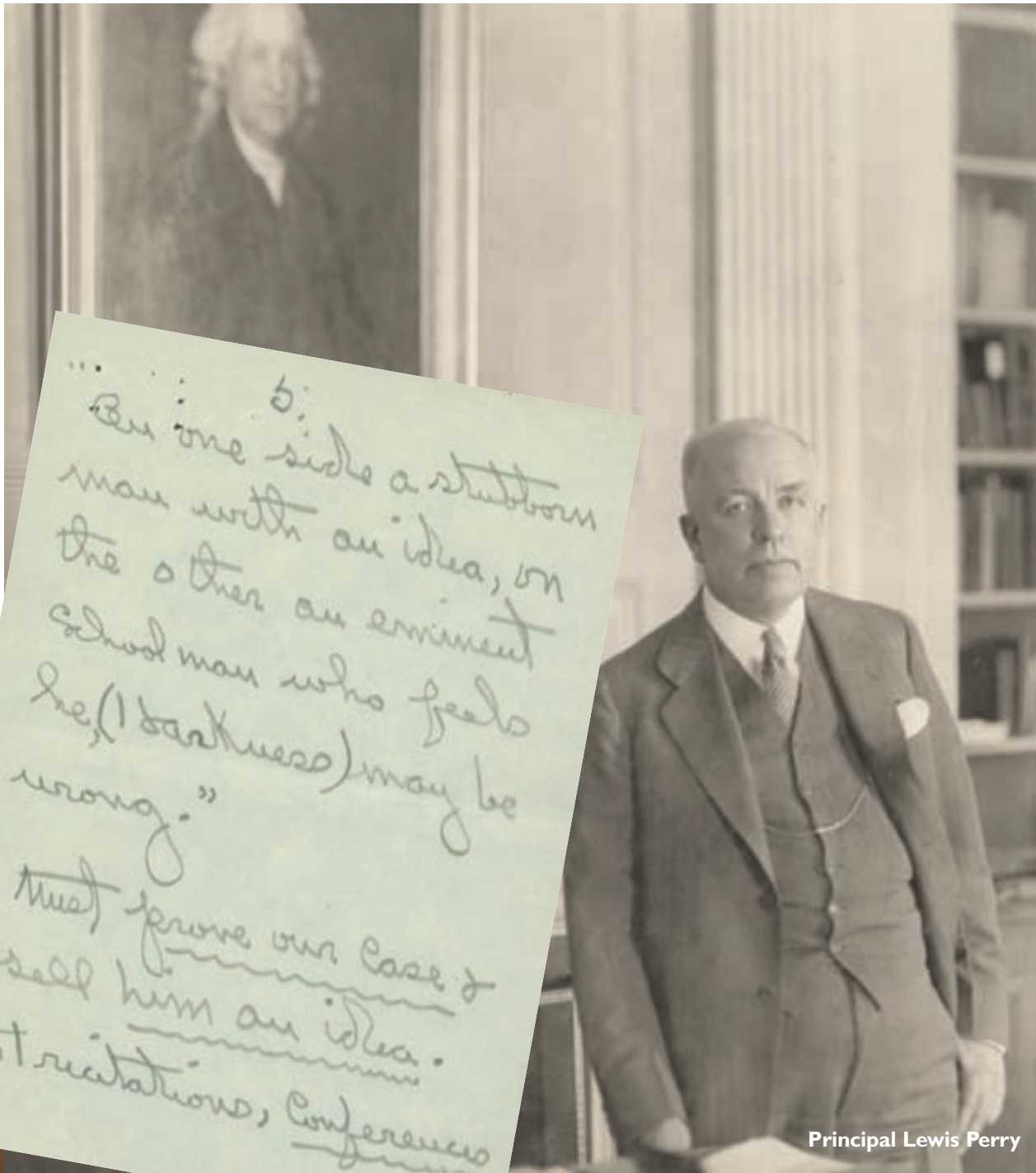


LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Edward Harkness

‘On one side a stubborn man with an idea, on the other an eminent schoolman who feels he may be wrong.’

So wrote Principal Lewis philanthropist Edward Perry and Phillips Exeter “radical” new approach to



Principal Lewis Perry

Their plan revolutionized teaching at Exeter, and 75 years later continues to define an Exeter education in every way.

Article by Katherine Towler

Perry of his close friend, Harkness, who challenged Academy to come up with a secondary school education.



PEA ARCHIVES

IT WAS THE SPRING OF 1930. After months of research and meetings with faculty, Principal Lewis Perry traveled to New York to meet with Edward S. Harkness, his close friend and one of the country’s leading philanthropists. With him, Perry brought an outline of how Exeter planned to use a substantial gift Harkness had proposed to make to Phillips Exeter.

Documents preserved in the Academy Archives make one thing dramatically clear: Harkness was not pleased by Perry’s proposal. “You are thinking of improving an existing institution by building on what you have got now. I am thinking of something much more radical than that,” Harkness told him. Funding small improvements—an expanded advising system, a guest speaker series—did not interest Harkness. He wanted to see a proposal containing ideas “of a fundamental nature that were so sweeping and so different from methods prevailing here that one could see at a glance that were they adopted, the whole educational system in our secondary schools would not only be changed, but changed enormously for the better.”

Harkness sent Perry and his committee back to the drawing board. Six months later they returned with a plan that Harkness agreed to fund. The gift Harkness made to Exeter—the munificent sum of \$5.8 million, the equivalent of \$69 million in today’s dollars—seemed to fall from the sky at a time of great need at the Academy. Harkness was not a graduate of Exeter and had no formal ties to the school. His unprecedented generosity revolutionized teaching at Exeter and continues to define an Exeter education in every way 75 years later. This much is commonly known to those associated with the Academy.

In the years before the Harkness gift, lives of Exeter students were radically different from those of today. Classes were taught recitation style, with the teacher lecturing to 25 to 35 students seated in rows. When students wanted to get the teacher’s attention they did so not by raising their hands, but by snapping their fingers.

Exactly who Harkness was and why he chose to make such a gift is less widely known. It is a remarkable tale involving one of the wealthiest people in America in his time, who gave away his fortune with little fanfare. It is the tale of a friendship between Harkness and Perry, two very different men. It is the tale, too, of Harkness’ tenacious vision for

educational reform, born of his own lackluster career as a student, a vision that shaped not just Exeter but Harvard and Yale, creating a blueprint for modern-day colleges and boarding schools.

Today Harkness is invoked hundreds of times a day at Exeter, though often without any thought of the man himself, who remains one of the Academy’s most significant benefactors. Harkness has become a philosophy; an approach to teaching and learning; a concept that shapes everything on the Academy campus from meetings of dormitory proctors to a scrimmage in basketball practice. Harkness tables form the center of just about every classroom. The classrooms themselves are known as Harkness classrooms. Casual conversations and formal debates are termed Harkness discussions. New faculty are introduced to the Harkness method of teaching.

Edward Harkness would probably not be happy to discover the frequent mentions of his name. A supremely modest man, he



shunned publicity of any sort. But the rest is exactly what he intended when he made his gift to the Academy in 1930. He had in mind nothing less than changing the face of education.

A FAMILY OF PHILANTHROPISTS

Edward Stephen Harkness was born on January 22, 1874, in Cleveland, OH, the youngest of three children. His father, Stephen Harkness, came to Ohio as a young man and worked as a harness-maker before expanding his business interests in livestock, grain and distilling, and banking. A few years before the birth of his youngest son, he became a silent partner in the fledgling oil refining business established by John D. Rockefeller, later incorporated as the Standard Oil Company. Along with his other businesses, this shrewd investment made Stephen Harkness a multimillionaire by the time of his death in 1888, when Edward was just 14.

Edward's brother, Charles, who was then 27, took over management of the family fortune in consultation with their mother. Following his father's wishes, Charles continued to invest in Standard Oil, even when returns on the stock were low. The family's loyalty to Rockefeller and his company paid off with the invention of the automobile, sending profits in oil skyrocketing and creating a Harkness fortune worth more than \$100 million.

Today, Harkness tables form the center of just about every classroom at Exeter, and the Harkness philosophy of collaborative learning shapes everything from meetings of dormitory proctors to a scrimmage in basketball practice.

Edward's siblings both died young, and without heirs. When his mother died in 1926, Edward became the sole inheritor of what was then one of the largest fortunes in America. Harkness married, but had no children. With his wife, Mary, he devoted his life to a systematic dispersal of his wealth, managing his assets with the intention of giving away everything in his lifetime. From the early 1920s to his death in 1940 at the age of 66, Harkness made charitable gifts totaling more than \$129 million, the equivalent of nearly \$2 billion in today's dollars. Though his giving was not on the scale of Rockefeller and Carnegie (who gave away \$550 million and \$350 million, respectively, over the course of their lives), Harkness ranks as a major American philanthropist.

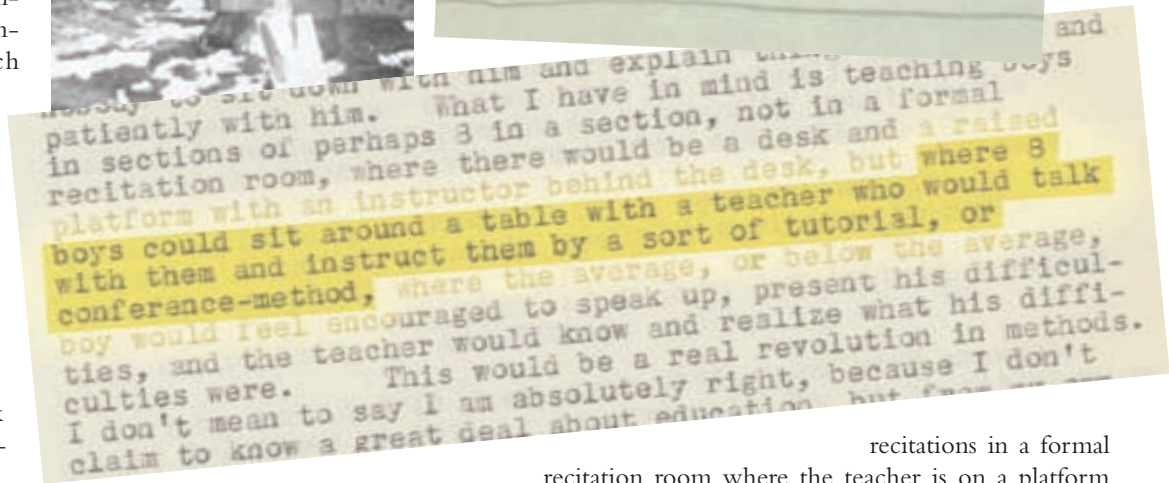
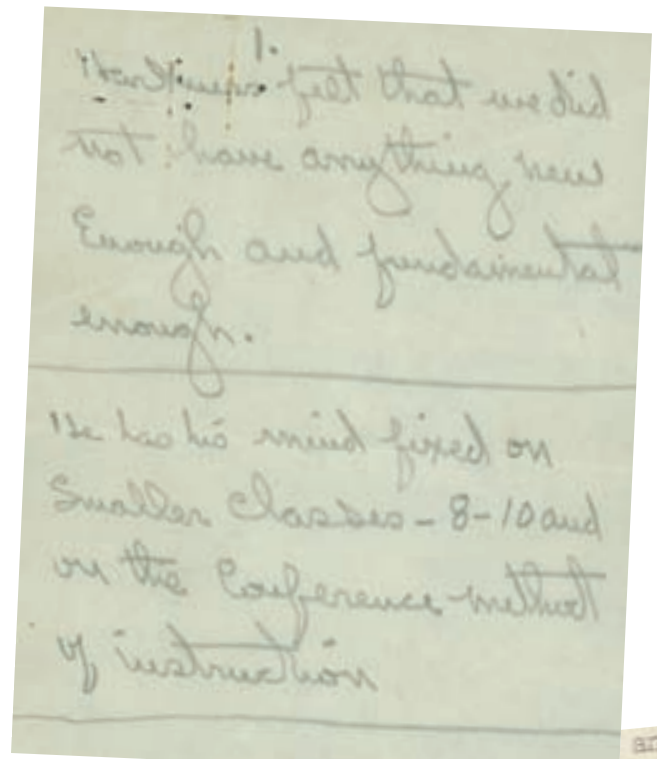
His sister-in-law once reportedly said to Harkness, "You really would prefer to be under the sofa than anywhere else, wouldn't you?" She described him as someone with "never a thought of publicity, or acclaim, truly a Christian." Harkness did not attach his name to the many gifts he made in the areas of health care, education and the arts, and he often stipulated that there be little or no

public notice made of them. His mother, Anna, gave funds for construction of the Harkness Tower in the Memorial Quadrangle at Yale in memory of her son, Charles, and for the Harkness Pavilion at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in memory of her husband. The great generosity of Edward Harkness went largely unmarked, a fact that in today's world is perhaps more notable than the sums he gave away and the many causes he supported.

With an initial endowment of \$10 million, Anna Harkness established one of the family's major philanthropic efforts, the Commonwealth Fund, which continues to support access to health care and improvement of health care systems to this day. Edward served as the president of the fund throughout his life. Together mother and son gave \$25 million for the construction of the medical center in New York now known as Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital.

After his mother's death, Harkness established the Pilgrim Trust in Great Britain, which is still in existence, funding conservation and historic preservation projects as well as prison reform and programs for drug and alcohol treatment. Harkness was a major benefactor of the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in addition to his wide-ranging support for secondary schools and colleges. He made gifts to Yale, Harvard, Columbia, Cornell and numerous other colleges, and was a supporter of colleges for women and African Americans, including Vassar, Wellesley, Tuskegee Institute and Fisk University.

Harkness' experiences at St. Paul's and at Yale shaped his thinking about education. Not a natural student, he struggled to maintain his grades and to adjust to the competitive environments at both institutions. When considering his gift to Exeter, he told Lewis Perry, "I want to see somebody try teaching—not by



Edward Harkness, whose father was an early investor in Standard Oil, gave away more than \$129 million, much of it to colleges and secondary schools. Committed to reforming American education, he pushed Exeter to come up with a "real revolution in [its] methods."

recitations in a formal recitation room where the teacher is on a platform raised above the pupils and there is a class of 20 or more boys who recite lessons. . . . I think the bright boys get along all right by that method, but I am thinking of a boy who isn't a bright boy—not necessarily a dull boy, but diffident, and not being equal doesn't speak up in class and admit his difficulties."

Although Harkness made gifts of up to a quarter-million dollars to Phillips Andover, Lawrenceville, St. Paul's, Taft, Deerfield Academy and the Hill School, his gift to Phillips Exeter was his largest to a secondary school. It was also the gift that most clearly reflected his concept of a new approach to education and the one calculated by Harkness himself to have the greatest impact.

EXETER BEFORE HARKNESS

A century ago, in the years before the Harkness gift, lives of Exeter students were radically different from those of today. Classes were large (with 25 to 35 students in a section) and were taught recitation style, with the teacher lecturing to students who sat in rows. Teachers called boys by their last names, and when students wanted to get the teacher's attention they did so not by raising their hands, but by snapping their fingers. In his 1923 history of Exeter, Lawrence M. Crosbie noted: "The casual visitor to a recitation in the Academy is always startled and some-

times shocked by the old Exeter custom of snapping the fingers. If the boy hesitates in his recitation, a fusillade of snaps from those who know or think that they know rings out. It is often disconcerting to a new boy, but he soon learns to stand his guns, no matter how fast the musketry rattles about him." Students who did well in this environment were known as "sharks."

Principal Harlan Page Amen, who led the Academy in the years before Lewis Perry took the helm, captured the prevailing spirit of Exeter in a reflection published in *The Exeter Bulletin* in 1906. "Too much intellectual and moral flabbiness is found in the students in our secondary schools," Amen asserted. "The Academy's demand for earnest study and manly conduct must, of course, be enforced by the designation of a penalty. The ultimate, if not immediate, fruit of idleness or misconduct is separation from the school." Amen summarized his principles with the motto *disce aut discede*—learn or get out.

Also contributing to this stern atmosphere was the lack of a centralized residential or social life. Because there were not enough dormitory rooms on campus, most students lived in rooming houses in town. It was possible for students to attend classes and return to their rooming houses, having little interaction with the instructor or fellow students. For many students, the Exeter community consisted of the boarders with whom they shared their rooming houses.

This was the world Lewis Perry entered when he became the eighth principal of Phillips Exeter in 1914, leaving behind a position on the faculty at Williams College as an instructor in English and elocution. Principal Amen had overseen the addition of a number of new buildings and the expansion of the campus, but the need for dormitory space remained a serious problem, and the Academy was in precarious shape financially. Two weeks after Perry's election as principal, the Academy Building (the main classroom building on campus) burned to the ground. Perry immediately took on the task of rebuilding. Throughout the 1920s, he spearheaded fund-raising drives to reduce the Academy's debt and make improvements to the physical plant.

A FATEFUL FRIENDSHIP

When Phillips Andover received a substantial gift from a benefactor in the late 1920s, English instructor Frank Cushwa reportedly said to Lewis Perry, "We're beaten. Exeter can never catch up."

An article in *The Atlantic Monthly* published after the receipt of the Harkness gift reports Perry's response: " 'Don't be too sure,' said Dr. Perry, in that calm, deliberate tone of his, bland and sanguine, which Young Men in a Hurry find so exasperating. 'Don't be too sure. Wait and see.' " The article goes on to comment: "Then came the 150th anniversary of Andover (1928) and Perry was invited to speak . . . What he said was that Exeter was little sister Cinderella, and that she was pleased to be asked to Andover's grand party . . . unbeknownst to anybody, there was a catch in that speech . . . For little sister's coach-and-four was waiting just around the corner of the next three years."



Endowment for 25 teachers.....	\$3,000,000
This is the cost of 25 additional teachers at an average salary of \$6000 a year, capitalized at 5%	
Endowment for board of above and families.....	400,000
This is the cost of board for 80 additional people, as instructors will have wives and children who would eat in the Academy dining halls	
Retirement leave for 3 teachers annually, at \$2000 yearly capitalized.....	300,000
	\$3,700,000
It will not be necessary to pay the average salary of \$6000 per year in order to supply the places of instructors on temporary leave of absence	
Cost of necessary buildings	
1. Reconstruction of 4 dormitories (Abbott, Soule, Hoyt, Peabody).....	\$280,000
2. Removal and re-erecting wooden houses now owned.....	30,000
3. Alteration of 4 other dormitories (Lamb, Cillyer, Wentworth, Webster).....	30,000
This is to provide more suitable quarters for teachers resident in these buildings	
4. Construction of 4 new houses (including dining halls).....	325,000
5. Construction of wings of present Academy Building.....	150,000
6. Reconstruction and furnishing of recitation rooms in Academy Building.....	30,000
7. New conference building.....	215,000
8. Maintenance fund for new buildings.....	300,000
	\$2,030,000
To cover additional taxes and increased maintenance, \$15,000 annually	
	\$2,045,000

Although not an Exeter alumnus, Harkness gave the Academy \$5.8 million dollars (the equivalent of \$69 million today) to implement the "conference method of instruction" because he trusted Principal Lewis Perry's judgment and ability to make good use of the money.

Perry served as principal through June of 1946, a remarkable tenure of 32 years that spanned two world wars and the Depression. A beloved and revered leader, he shepherded Exeter through difficult times and oversaw a period of substantial expansion to the physical facilities and curriculum. Of all his achievements, however, none has been more enduring than his role in obtaining and implementing the Harkness gift, which shaped the physical dimensions of the Exeter campus as it is known today and insti-

papers which created the Commonwealth Fund were signed. "He was very happy that night and welcomed the thought of what the Commonwealth Fund might accomplish," Perry wrote, "but he was never overly optimistic about what his gifts would bring to pass. His was a wise and realistic attitude on the subject of giving. The road of a philanthropist is not always smooth, but Mr. Harkness always had in mind the good of humanity, and this consistent attitude made him the great humanitarian he was . . . Both [Edward and Mary Harkness] helped an infinite number of individuals, the type whom organizations do not assist, and they always helped in a quiet way unknown to any but the beneficiary."



tuted a teaching method that continues to influence educators.

The Harkness gift financed the construction of a new classroom building (Phillips Hall, above) and four new dormitories (including Wheelwright, right).

Harkness might have been expected to make a major gift to St. Paul's, his alma mater, but he chose Exeter in part because of his friendship with Perry. The men met at a wedding in St. Paul, MN, in 1902. Academy English instructor Richard F. Niebling, in an article for *The Exeter Bulletin* published in 1982, described theirs as "a lifelong friendship between two quite divergent personalities (perhaps the best after-dinner speaker in America, and a man who hardly ever spoke in public)." The Perrys often visited the Harknesses at their vacation homes in Connecticut and Charlestown, SC. Sharing a love for the theater, Perry and Harkness regularly met in New York to take in the latest productions on Broadway. Harkness recruited Perry to serve on the board of the Commonwealth Fund, further cementing their mutual respect.

Remembering Harkness after his death, Lewis Perry wrote: "I had never known in the early days that Ned Harkness was such a rich man. At this period I was an instructor at Williams, and whenever I came to New York Ned Harkness and I dined together and went to the theater. I always insisted that if Ned got the tickets, I paid for the dinner. Years after, out of the clear sky, Ned said: 'You know, Lewis, that there is no man in the world I care for more than you. Do you want to know why? . . . Because you were such a damn fool that you did not know I had money.'"

Perry also recalled dining with Harkness the same night that the

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CHANGE AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL

In addressing the needs of secondary schools, Harkness was taking a logical next step, building on gifts he had earlier made to Harvard and Yale. Both independent secondary schools and colleges had seen steady growth in the early 1900s, without making many accommodations for the larger enrollments. Harkness wanted to address the problem of classes that were too big and based on a rote approach to learning and the problem of inadequate housing and a decentralized—or nonexistent—campus life, problems he saw as inextricably linked. He was particularly concerned about the segregation that occurred between the full-paying students and scholarship students, based on the housing they were able to afford off campus. A residential campus with



housing for all would promote greater equity, encourage a closer relationship between teachers and students, and establish a cohesive social life allowing students of all backgrounds to interact on a regular basis.

In 1928, Harkness approached Yale with a proposal to fund a “College System” that would reorganize teaching and living arrangements through the construction of more classrooms and dormitories on campus, dividing the student body into smaller units for social and residential purposes and allowing for smaller class sizes.

When Yale could not come to agreement about accepting the gift in the time frame Harkness specified, he then approached President Lowell of Harvard, where a similar “House Plan” was already under consideration. Harkness readily agreed to fund the Harvard House Plan with a gift of \$11 million. He “rightly believed that the way to improve such institutions was not to give small sums to many of them but enough to one or two to complete the object he had in mind,” President Lowell later wrote of Harkness. “[Harkness] offered no advice on details, which showed both his wisdom and his modesty; his wisdom, because seeing that his plan was fully understood, he left the execution of it to the experts; his modesty, because he never desired credit for his philanthropies, or the thought that he had put into them.”

As further proof of that modesty, Lowell described a walk he took with Harkness to inspect the first of the two Harvard Houses then under construction. “[He] took me by the arm and said he wanted to ask me a favor, probably the only one he would

What came to be known as the Harkness plan transformed life inside the classroom and out, defining much of the school as we know it today. When the last of the Harkness construction was completed in 1935, Exeter had become a campus of over 400 acres with 60 buildings—and, for the first time in its history, was able to house all its boarding students.

quadrangles and the refurbishment of three existing quadrangles, creating distinct residential colleges with their own dining halls and providing housing on campus for every undergraduate. In addition, Harkness funded a work-study plan to allow students unable to afford tuition to earn scholarships by working on campus. He also made a major gift establishing the Yale School of Drama and funding construction of the theater. His giving to Yale came to \$12 million.

‘THE BIG IDEA’

Harkness had already made three gifts to Exeter during the 1920s, totaling \$445,000, initiating each of these gifts himself by asking Perry if Exeter was in need of money. It was. The first gift

ever ask, that I would allow one of the houses to be named after me,” Lowell wrote. “Quickly I answered, ‘Certainly, if you will allow another to be named after you.’ He dropped my arm and moved away almost as if I had suggested a crime. His autobiography in *Who’s Who* is ten lines.”

In 1930, Harkness reached an agreement with Yale to fund the College System, enabling the construction of five new

of \$100,000, made to support teachers' salaries, eventually went to funding the construction of Amen Hall when the faculty voted to divert the money for this purpose.

It was in 1929, when Perry and Harkness were at the theater in New York one night, that Harkness proposed making a more substantial gift to Exeter. According to Perry, he said, "Lewis, I want to do for Exeter what I have done for Harvard and Yale, and if you will get up a scheme, I'll give you all the money you need to put it into operation."

As Perry noted in a subsequent report to the trustees, "The possibilities of Mr. Harkness' proposal were so staggering that it was difficult at first to either get or give a clear idea as to what we wanted. . . ." At Harkness' suggestion, Perry and Director of Studies George B. Rogers embarked on a study tour of British

notes, made on scraps of paper. "Harkness . . . has his mind fixed on smaller classes 8-10 and on the conference method of instruction . . . His whole idea is the dull boy, like himself, who was in large class in mathematics and did not know what was going on. Remember the *conference* system of teaching that is the big idea! On one side a stubborn man with an idea, on the other an eminent schoolman who feels he may be wrong. Must *prove our case* and *sell him an idea*. Not recitations, *conferences*."

Whatever Perry's doubts about the "conference" approach to teaching, he and his committee returned to Harkness the following fall with a plan proposing class sizes of 12 students taught on the "conference or tutorial method of instruction." A House System was also proposed, requiring the construction of new dormitories that would allow students to live on campus in

smaller groups and faculty to be housed in Academy dormitories. Each teacher would act as adviser to about 12 students, and students would remain in residence in one dormitory throughout the last three years of their time at the Academy, having the same adviser each of these years. The plan, estimated to cost \$5 million, was unanimously approved by Exeter's trustees.

"We want you to understand that if we receive this gift we are going into the plan wholeheartedly," Perry wrote to Harkness on October 30, 1930. "It is a plan in which we believe and one which we think will be of primary importance to American secondary education. No school

has ever had the chance for constructive work which will be ours if you will give us this grant."

Harkness accepted the proposal a week later, in a brief letter that began: "I have been greatly interested in reading your letter of October 30th. The plan discussed therein for changing the method of teaching and housing at Exeter coincides with my ideas and the offer I am about to make is based on this plan as described. . . . When this gift is made public, will you be kind enough to see that no mention is made of the amount thereof?"

On November 17, 1930, the announcement of a generous gift from Harkness was made to the press. Perry wrote to Harkness on November 21: "Letters have been coming in all day by the score in regard to your magnificent



Among the new 25 new Harkness instructors hired was William Saltonstall '24 (third from left), who would later succeed Lewis Perry as principal.

schools, visiting 21 secondary schools in between January and March of 1930. Rogers wrote up a report on their findings, and Perry appointed a committee to make recommendations to Harkness. The proposal presented to Harkness in March of 1930 included a larger and more active advisory system, more dormitories, the creation of honors sections, funding for a visiting lecturers series and the construction of a student union building— plans that would require \$1 to \$2 million to fund.

Harkness' unfavorable reaction is preserved in Perry's handwritten

It is a rare privilege to have the opportunity of teaching in such surroundings as Phillips Hall affords. A few rooms cannot help but challenge the teacher to live up to his physical equipment. Most boys take real pride in the appearance of a pleasant room, learn to handle books with more respect and to examine maps and pictures with greater care. Discipline is never a problem. If better teaching is not done in Phillips Hall it is entirely the teacher's fault.
W. F. Saltonstall

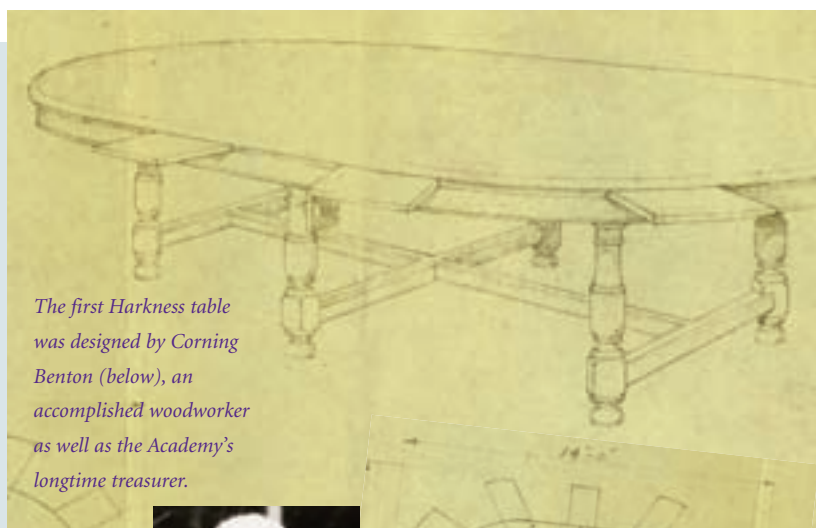
The Man Behind the Table

The design for the Harkness table was the brainchild of Corning Benton, who joined the Exeter faculty in 1911 as an instructor in English and history and who served as the Academy's treasurer from 1922 until his retirement in 1951. As treasurer, Benton also played a significant supervisory role in the massive building program undertaken as part of the Harkness plan.

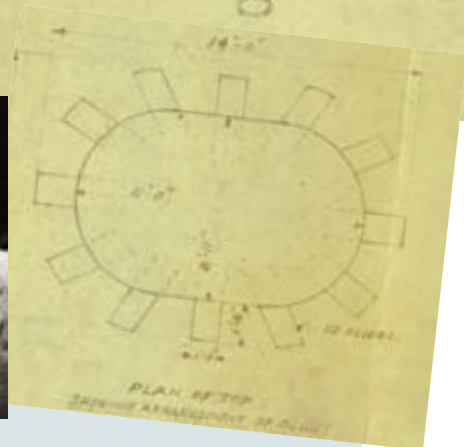
Benton experimented with three basic shapes: a perfectly round table, a long oval and the "pregnant" oval that was finally deemed the best choice. Benton later said that the prototype for the Harkness table was chosen primarily because it could fit through a seven-foot door with inches to spare.

The most unique feature of the Harkness table may be the "slides," which can be pulled out from underneath the table and used as a writing surface by individual students. The slides were Benton's ingenious solution to a problem posed by the design of the new Harkness classrooms and tables: how could students take tests without looking at each other's papers? With the slides pulled out and chairs rotated, students are seated facing each other's backs. Exeter purchased 45 of these tables for the newly completed Phillips Hall, at a cost of \$165 apiece.

—K.T.



The first Harkness table was designed by Corning Benton (below), an accomplished woodworker as well as the Academy's longtime treasurer.



gift. I got all the faculty together Tuesday night and with much applause, and every man on his feet, they pledged themselves to carry this on."

THE PLAN COMES TO LIFE

As the plan evolved in the months that followed, it called for hiring 25 additional teachers; building four new dormitories and remodeling existing ones; constructing a new classroom building, Phillips Hall, and adding new classroom wings to the Academy Building—the result of which was that each teacher would now have his own classroom. A fund for sabbatical leaves for teachers was also included. Roughly one-third of the funding for the final proposal went to buildings; two-thirds went to teachers' salaries and such benefits as the sabbatical fund.

Initially, the plan included another classroom innovation new to Exeter: a tracking system that grouped students by ability, with separate sections for "advanced" and "slower" students. Heralded at the time as a significant feature of the new system, one that might better address the needs of the overlooked students Harkness hoped to reach, this aspect of the Harkness method was not to last.

Implementation of the Harkness plan was phased in over the next three years, with a third of the 25 new faculty members hired each year. By 1935, the faculty consisted of 80 men, and enrollment had increased from 600 to 700 students. A report on the hiring of the new faculty in *The Exeter Bulletin* noted: "This work has been done according to the principle that the men should be young enough in years or spirit to carry out the conference idea of instruction, and old enough to have a sufficient background and experience to give substance and authority to their instruction. The belief holds here that this method of instruction will make greater demands on the teachers than the former method . . ." Most of the new hires were in their late 20s or early 30s, apparently

deemed the age best suited for the blend of energy and experience the Harkness teaching method required.

Classics and mathematics classes were the first to adopt the Harkness method in 1931 because they were taught in the Academy Building, the only building in which renovated rooms were ready by the start of the school year. English, history and French adopted the smaller class sizes and conference style with the completion of Phillips Hall the following year. In addition to Phillips Hall and the new wings in the Academy Building, the Harkness gift funded the construction of Bancroft, Langdell, Merrill and Wheelwright halls, giving the Academy a total of 13 large dormitories, housing between 35 and 70 students each, and eight house dorms, with three to 14 students each. For the first time, there were accommodations for instructors with families.

The new construction made possible by the Harkness gift complemented the building projects undertaken in the 1920s, which included completion of Lamont Infirmary and Cilley, Wentworth, and Amen dormitories, and the acquisition of Phillips Church. In 1930, William Boyce Thompson, a member of the class of 1890, gave \$1 million to Exeter to fund the construction of Jeremiah Smith Hall and the Thompson Science Building. Together the gifts from Thompson and Harkness created the upper quadrangle, defining much of the Exeter campus as it is known today. In 1935, when the last of the Harkness buildings had been completed, Exeter had become a campus of over 400 acres with 60 buildings.

NOT A SCHOOL, BUT A FAITH

Although there was reportedly some resistance to the new teaching method from existing faculty (and an ongoing discussion of what constituted the ideal class size and how students should be tracked in sections at different

(continued on page 103)

Men Behind the Plan

(continued from page 33)

levels), the response to the changes brought about by the Harkness plan was largely enthusiastic.

“I had not suspected that a merely physical change in the classroom could so influence our work as it has done,” observed instructor Henry S. Couse in a letter to Lewis Perry written during the first term of Harkness teaching. “Sitting in a group about a table instead of in formal rows of seats has abolished almost completely the stiff duality which used to obtain between instructor and class, when, I am afraid, his elevation on a platform tended to hedge him about with too much dignity and make him somewhat unapproachable, even to the fearless curious student; and which certainly did tend to make the student still less articulate. The very naturalness of the new arrangement, besides being more comfortable, has in good part wiped out that class-consciousness. Now, there is a freedom of discussion, an eagerness to participate, that I never saw before, the value of which to both student and instructor is incalculable. And it comes mostly from sitting about a table.”

“It is a rare privilege to have the opportunity of teaching in such surroundings as Phillips Hall affords,” noted William G. Saltonstall, one of the newly hired Harkness teachers who went on to become principal on Perry’s retirement. “A fine room cannot help but challenge the teacher to live up to his physical equipment. Most boys take real pride in the appearance of a pleasant room—learn to handle books with more respect and to examine maps and pictures with greater care. Discipline is never a problem. If better teaching is not

done in Phillips Hall it is entirely the teacher’s fault.”

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. ’33, who attended Exeter during the implementation of the Harkness plan, recalled: “We sat around tables and talked back to the master; education became, not a performance, but a process. Also the standards were high. I barely passed in my first term and thereafter set to work. I had never worked so hard in my life. When I went on to Harvard later, everything was easy. So far as the training of my mind was con-



cerned, Exeter could hardly have been more effective for me.”

One of the greatest hopes of Edward Harkness, that the new approach to teaching he helped to shape and funded at Phillips Exeter would spread to schools across the country, did not fully come to pass. The influence of the Harkness method was clearly felt at other preparatory schools, notably Lawrenceville, which instituted a similar plan with funding from Harkness. Many other schools saw the wisdom in holding smaller classes focused on discussion; a number adopted the use of seminar tables in the Harkness style. But the plan Harkness insisted on seeing realized at Exeter was not taken up by public secondary schools or most colleges, at least in part because of the expense.

Nonetheless, through his

gifts to Harvard, Yale, Exeter and other schools, Harkness had an undeniable impact on educational methods, as over the years small classes and personal exchange between student and teacher have come to be seen as the ideal to which many secondary schools and colleges at least aspire. Exeter has spread the Harkness gospel both directly and indirectly. Every summer, the Academy’s



Harkness and Perry were motivated by a simple but profound notion: that a small group of students, seated around a table and guided by an instructor, could best be engaged in learning by voicing their own ideas and questions and listening to those of others.

teaching conferences—the Exeter Humanities Institute; the Anja Greer Conference on Secondary School Mathematics, Science and Technology; the Rex McGuinn Conference on Shakespeare; and the Exeter Math Institute—bring hundreds of teachers to Exeter for a weeklong immersion in Harkness learning. And many alumni/ae educators have incorporated Harkness principles into their own schools.

In the January 1931 issue of *The Exeter Bulletin*, Lewis Perry explained the plan for the Harkness gift in detail. “There can be no doubt that colleges are entering upon an intellectual renaissance. The preparatory school now must

prepare its students for a vital intellectual life at college. To stir a boy’s intellectual curiosity and to extend his intellectual interest, then, is the function of the school of the present and the future. This may be quite a different matter from preparing a boy for College Board examinations, which can often be done by endless drill without necessarily stimulating a boy’s intellectual life. . . . Mr. Harkness, who has done so much to aid the colleges of our time to realize their ideals, understands that the preparatory school is affected by the colleges and vice versa; that both school and college are partners in a great educational enterprise. . . . Constantly in our minds, then, is the thought that Exeter is not merely a school but a faith. And we mean to keep the faith—to our founder, to the boys of the present, and to the generations yet to come.”

At Exeter, there is no question about the far-reaching effects of Harkness’ generosity and vision. His gift created the residential campus we now know, a place rich in the social and intellectual interchange that is a hallmark of the Exeter experience for today’s students and faculty, and one which continues to shape the lives of thousands of alumni/ae. A simple but profound notion defined his thinking about education: that a small group of students, seated around a table and guided by an instructor, could best be engaged in learning by voicing their own ideas and questions and listening to those of others. It was a powerful concept whose power has not waned. ●

Katherine Towler is author of the novels Snow Island and Evening Ferry and a frequent contributor to the Bulletin.