



From the President's Desk, Richard F.
Wilson

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From the President's Desk

This letter appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of the Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

Every February, at the annual Founders' Day Convocation, we have the opportunity to celebrate the vision and foresight of the individuals who founded this institution and to reflect on the legacy they have bequeathed to us.

Most of you are familiar with the story of our founding 158 years ago. It was a time of great challenge. The country was becoming increasingly divided over the issue of slavery, and President Zachary Taylor had died in office, just 16 months into his first term. But it was also a time of great opportunity, as the American frontier pushed farther west and St. Louis, Bloomington and Chicago were linked by the newly-laid tracks of the Illinois Central Railroad.

It was amid this optimism and sense of destiny that Illinois Wesleyan was born.

For more than a year, civic leaders discussed bringing a university to Bloomington. While there were 30 founders who eventually signed our birth certificate, the Rev. John Barger is often credited with being the "father of Illinois Wesleyan," because it was he who persisted in the face of what some believed were insurmountable obstacles.

But beyond those 30 men whose signatures brought the University into being, there are others whose contributions are no less important. The first female student, Hannah Shur, enrolled in 1870. Gus A. Hill became our first African-American graduate, receiving a law degree in 1880. Martha Buck, in whose honor the Buck Memorial Library is named, became our first female trustee in 1892.

From our first days, we were committed to the diversity of people, ideas and experiences - a legacy that has served us well for more than a century-and-a-half. During the past three years we have recommitted ourselves to such longstanding principles as the centrality of the liberal arts for students in all curricula and the enhancement of those students' critical-thinking, writing and communication skills. We have also devoted ourselves to promoting excellence in teaching and scholarship, while maintaining an emphasis on individual attention to students and to the success of our graduates.

Although these commitments are timeless, we recognize that we live in a world that our founders could scarcely have imagined. Thus we have also addressed the issues that will shape the lives and choices of today's students, including social justice, civic leadership and environmental sustainability.

Our mission as a liberal arts institution has some elements that have persisted over time and others that have emerged in response to conditions in the society in which we live today. Finding the right balance is no less a challenge today than it was over a century ago, when the memorial inscription was carved into the Founders' Gate, beginning with these words: "We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility ..."

Richard B. Wilson