

Mark Hopkins Biography

Mark Hopkins

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Biography

American educator Mark Hopkins (1802-1887) was president of Williams College and a defender of orthodox Protestant religious ideas.

Mark Hopkins was born in Stockbridge, Mass., on Feb. 4, 1802. He entered Williams College in 1822 and graduated 2 years later. After receiving a medical degree from the Berkshire Medical Institute, he alternated medical practice with teaching. In 1830 he became a professor at Williams, and in 1833 he was licensed to preach by the Congregational Church, an event that doubtless eased his election to the presidency of Williams in 1836.

Hopkins came to symbolize Williams College during his 36 years as president. Despite his administrative duties, he continued teaching moral philosophy, an admixture of various subjects connected by a theme of Christian piety and manliness. The course, a commonplace in American higher education of the day, was intended to give graduates a sound character as well as a disciplined mind. For generations of Williams students it was their most memorable experience at the college; it was the basis of Hopkins's fame.

Hopkins was not a sophisticated philosopher. He relied largely on a steadfast and uncritical acceptance of orthodox theology, tempered by common sense and humanity. By his own admission he was unacquainted with the scholarship of his day. He knew the Bible and he knew his students, and this he believed sufficient to achieve the college's purpose.

Although Hopkins's message was received with less enthusiasm as time passed, he was warmly regarded as a great teacher who had humor, compassion, and genuine affection for his pupils. His classes thrived on dispute, provoked by carefully formulated questions that almost invariably led students to the gentle conclusion admired by their professor. Hopkins's willingness to illustrate difficult points with diagrams and models, a novelty at this time, added to his popularity. However, the criticism leveled at the college for its slow response to educational changes after the Civil War led Hopkins to retire in 1872, "that it may not be asked why I do not resign."

Hopkins spent the remainder of his life lecturing, teaching, and writing. His books, generally collections of lectures and baccalaureate sermons, assert an undistinguished but elaborate system of harmony in man and nature under the sovereignty of God. He died at Williamstown on June 17, 1887. His marriage to Mary Hubbell of Williamstown in 1832 had produced 10 children, one of whom, Henry, eventually became president of Williams.