

Andrew Dickson White

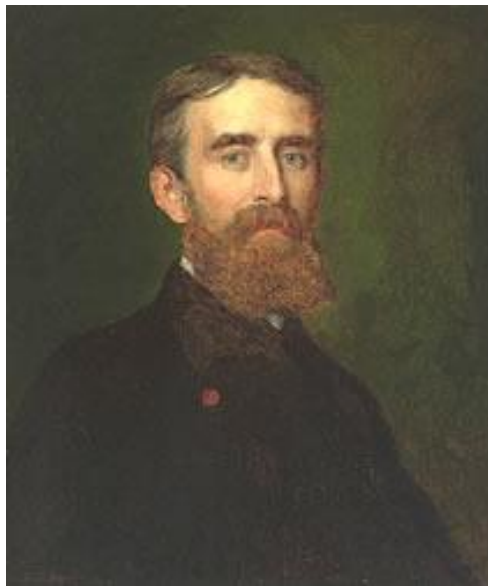
(1832 – 1918)

Today, there is a stately brick home on the north corner of Albany and Main Streets in the historic village of Homer. The steep Mansard roof was added in the 1880s. The building, dating back to 1819, did not look like this in 1832, when, on November 7, it was the birthplace of Andrew Dickson White. White was destined to become an educator, historian, diplomat, and co-founder and first president of Cornell University in nearby Ithaca, NY.

Andrew D. White was baptized in 1835 at the Episcopal Church (still standing) on the Green. He spent his early childhood in Homer, where his maternal grandfather, after whom he was named, was, among other things, President of the Board of Trustees of the Academy on the Green (space now occupied by the Homer Elementary School). He was a boyhood friend of William O. Stoddard, who later served as President Lincoln's assistant private secretary, and he had his portrait painted by Homer's Francis B. Carpenter. His father, Horace White, worked as a clerk in Jedediah Barber's Great Western Store on Main Street until the family moved to Syracuse when Andrew was seven years old.

Andrew White's meteoric academic career included attendance at Yale (age sixteen), where he realized with great frustration how inadequate was the university experience in a rapidly changing industrial world. White earned an undergraduate and graduate degree from Yale, and in October 1858, he accepted a position as a Professor of History and English literature at the University of Michigan. Between 1862 and 1863, he traveled to Europe to convince France and

England not come to the aid of the Confederacy during the Civil War.



Next, he was elected to the New York State Senate, where he became chair of the Committee on Education. There he met Ezra Cornell, chairman of the Agriculture Committee. They teamed up to prevent the federal funds allocated to New York by the Morrill Act (commonly known as the "Land-Grant Act" signed by President Lincoln in 1862) from being divided among twenty or so small colleges in the State. Thus began the significant team effort leading to the founding of Cornell University in

Ithaca, New York. White became the first president of Cornell in 1866, at the age of thirty-two. He resigned in 1885, moving on to a career in the Foreign Service of the United States.

Ezra Cornell had the money (from the early Western Union telegraph business) and land in Ithaca; White had the vision of a multifaceted educational enterprise: the model for the modern university. This included the belief in admitting females to be students of higher learning. White's decision was influenced by the fact that the academy in Homer had successfully permitted females to attend since 1822 and Andrew's mother, who had been among those students, spoke highly of the co-educational experience as did the academy's earliest principal, Samuel Buell Woolworth. In the words of Cornell's late history professor Morris Bishop, White was responsible for "no less than the overturn and rebuilding of the entire system of higher education in America." Clearly, White's upbringing and the academy in Homer influenced his creation of a world-class institution of higher learning.



White died on November 4, 1918, at home in Ithaca. Three days later, on what would have been his 86th birthday, White was interred at Sage Chapel on the Cornell campus. And one hundred years later, imagine the delight of Jan Darr, who lives a few houses south of White's birthplace, when she discovered her great-grandfather's immigration document signed by the American Ambassador to Germany at the time – Andrew D. White.

Over the course of his career, White amassed a sizable book collection. His library was probably best known for its extensive section on architecture; it was then the largest architecture library in the United States. He donated all 4000 books to the Cornell University Library for the purpose of teaching architecture, as well as the remainder of his 30,000-book collection.

Written by Martin Sweeney; sources: "Architecture Clientele." Cornell University Fine Arts Library. Archived from the original on July 7, 2010; *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White* (The Century Co., 1904); Morris Bishop, *A History of Cornell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962, 613).