

FREEDOM UNDER FIRE

Professor's 1894 trial became a
beacon for academic freedom

PROFESSOR RICHARD T. ELY WAS AN ANARCHIST.

Ely was a socialist, an author of “utopian, impracticable and pernicious doctrines.” He was a pro-union rabble-rouser who preferred “dirty, dissipated, unmarried, unreliable and unskilled” workers.

He was a threat to the American way of life.

So you might believe if you read the scathing charges leveled against the UW economics professor in a national magazine by the outspoken Wisconsin superintendent of public instruction. ►

BY JOSEPH HANNEMAN



Richard T. Ely
Professor Stood Accused



Oliver Wells
Scandalous Accusations



Charles Kendall Adams
UW President



BIG NEWS: Wells' accusations in a letter to the editor of *The Nation* (below) led to Ely's trial, covered by papers around the country (above).

The clash between Ely and former school teacher Oliver E. Wells in 1894 led to a highly publicized trial. The professor was eventually cleared, but what was remembered for generations were the words issued by the Board of Regents after the trial - so powerful and timeless they were cast into bronze.

The words used to clear Ely — which the professor later called “part of the Wisconsin Magna Charta” — were ensconced on a large tablet and eventually bolted to Bascom Hall at UW-Madison.

A ‘Magna Charta’

“Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great State University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found,” the plaque reads.

Those words became more important for UW-Parkside in 1998, when two duplicates of the famed plaques were freed from a 25-year dormancy in the Archives, restored and prepared for installation on campus (see related story).

The plaques are symbols not only linking the university to a proud tradition, but also a modern beacon defending the creation of knowledge that is at the heart of University of Wisconsin education.

“The principles of academic freedom have never found expression in language so beautiful, words so impressive, phrases so inspiring,” said UW President Charles Van Hise at the plaque’s dedication in June 1915.

Theodore Herfurth, a member of the class of 1894 who later wrote a history of the sifting and winnowing story, said the memorial plaque “stands as a sentinel” to guard the progressive spirit of the University.

“The College Anarchist,” published in the July 12, 1894 issue.

Ely, a distinguished political economist, had among his concerns the welfare of the working class and organized labor. He interacted with the labor movement, and even wrote about socialism in his textbooks.

A Covert Socialist?

But Wells’ frontal attack accused Ely of fomenting strikes at the Democratic

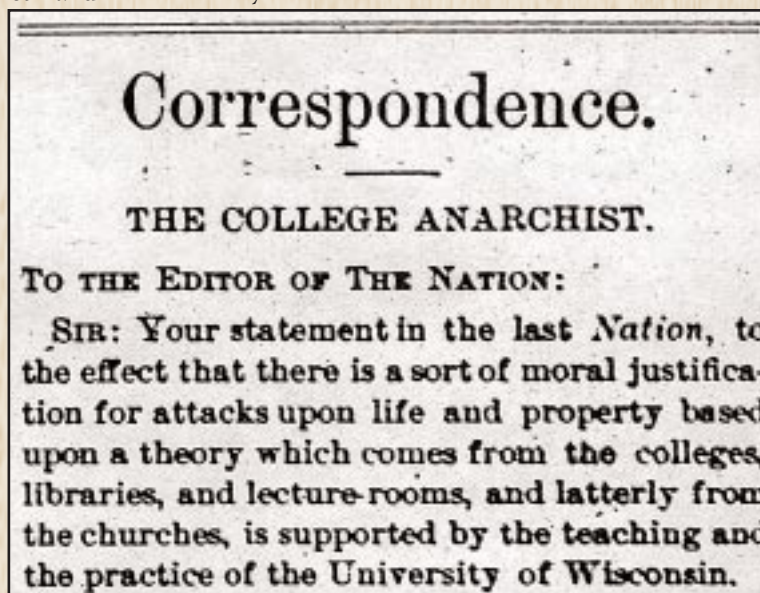
Printing Company and the Tracy-Gibbs Printing Company in Madison, and of boycotting a non-union printing company. Wells said Ely’s writings masked a covert socialism that constituted an “attack on life and property such as this country has already become too familiar with.”

The wide national publicity that followed forced the Board of Regents to appoint a three-member trial panel to investigate Ely. During a three-day hearing that

began Aug. 20, 1894, Wells’ accusations began to unravel as exaggerations, half-truths and misrepresentation.

Testimony showed that Ely did not coerce or direct strikers, boycott non-union shops or promote anarchy. In fact, Ely was hailed as one of America’s foremost minds on political economy.

E. Benjamin Andrews, president of Brown University, wrote that to dismiss



“When time and the elements shall have effaced every resistive letter on the historic bronze tablet, its imperishable spirit shall still ring clear and true,” Herfurth wrote in 1948.

Ely probably couldn’t have imagined such an outcome when Wells, an ex officio member of the UW Board of Regents, attacked him in a 535-word letter to the editor of *The Nation* titled

Ely would “be a great blow at freedom of university teaching.” UW President Charles Kendall Adams, after reviewing Ely’s writings, said not even “a paragraph or sentence ... can be interpreted as an encouragement of lawlessness or disorder.”

The trial board’s report issued to the Board of Regents on Sept. 18, 1894 went beyond an exoneration of Ely. Regents unanimously adopted the report, sending a signal through the ages of its commitment to freedom of inquiry.

“We feel that we would unworthy of the position we hold if we did not believe in progress in all departments of knowledge,” read the report, believed to be written by UW President Adams. “In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead.”

Yet Another Threat

While the poetic words made a statement, they were not resurrected for nearly 20 years when yet another UW professor stood accused of impropriety. Sociology professor Edward A. Ross was accused of consorting with an anarchist

and giving a speaking platform to a man who promoted immorality.

Regents were so incensed with the 1910 allegations against Ross that they approved a statement of censure. Suggestions were made that Ross be fired. UW President Charles Van Hise led a vigorous defense of Ross against what again proved to be somewhat dubious allegations. Regents failed to take action against Ross.

Fearing that academic freedom was again in jeopardy, the class of 1910 decided to have the famed sifting and winnowing statement cast into bronze and presented to the University as a gift.

Using scrap plywood and pattern-maker’s letters, student Hugo Hering created the somewhat crude pattern and had it cast at Madison Brass Works Inc. for \$25.

Feeling the plaque was a political statement and a slap in the face, Regents rejected it in June 1910. The plaque went into dusty storage in a UW basement.

It wasn’t until 1915 when tempers had cooled that the plaque was rescued from storage, bolted to the door post of Bascom Hall and formally dedicated.



Professor E. A. Ross
1910 Accusations Led to Casting of ‘Sift’ Plaque

“It was one of the cases that defined academic freedom in this country,” said W. Lee Hansen, professor emeritus of economics and UW-Madison and editor of *Academic Freedom on Trial*, a new book about the plaque. “I don’t know of any other schools that have statements that are that concise and expressive.”

Plaque Stolen in 1956

The plaque stood as a symbol of freedom for 41 years before pranksters removed it from its hallowed spot on Bascom Hall in 1956.

Just as a fund was being established to recast the plaque, police found the 255-pound plaque near a trail on campus. It was rededicated in 1957.

In 1964, Racine attorney Kenneth Greenquist, a member of the Board of Regents, sponsored a resolution to create duplicates of the famous plaque for the UW Center campuses.

Plaques were installed at the Racine and Kenosha campuses in 1965 and 1966 on what is now Gateway Technical College’s Lake Building and Bradford High School in Kenosha.

UW-Parkside took possession of the plaques at its founding in 1968. ■



INSPIRING WORDS: UW President Charles Van Hise at the original plaque’s dedication in June 1915.