
The University of Chicago
Founded by John D. Rockefeller

In 1856, Senator Stephen A. Douglas offered a grant of ten acres of land to Presbyterians "for a site for a University in the City of Chicago." The Presbyterians declined the offer, which the first Baptist church of Chicago immediately accepted. The first part of the building--the South wing--was completed in February 1859, while the first students had been enrolled in the fall of 1858 (they attended class in St Paul's Universalist church). In 1863, the board of trustees decided to start the construction of the main building, Douglas Hall, as well as that of Dearborn tower that would accommodate an observatory. The trustees relied on the subscriptions of wealthy Chicagoans to finance the building of the University; however, the great fire of 1871 and the panic of 1873 rendered worthless a large proportion of the subscriptions which had been secured without conditions. These calamities left the University heavily in debt, which it never achieved to pay back and the commencement of June 16, 1886 marked the end of the first University of Chicago.

A few trustees tried to keep the University alive and decided to ask John D. Rockefeller, a wealthy well-known Baptist, for his financial support. At the time, John D. was willing to create a great Baptist University in New York. After harsh negotiations between the upholders of a school in New York (Dr Strong) and the ones of a school in Chicago (Dr Goodspeed) through the intermediary of Frederic Gates and William Harper, John D. opted for Chicago. In all likelihood, one of the major reasons for this choice was that in the atmosphere of the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and of the coming of the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, John D. wanted to convince the public that he was not trying to create a "corporate" school. Chicago had the advantage to be relatively far from Wall Street and would prevent people from seeing a relationship between the latter and the University.

In 1899, John D. agreed to partly finance the building of a college in Chicago. Nonetheless, Harper (the first president of the University) foresaw a prestigious future for the University, which would rival with Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, Cornell, etc, and he convinced John D. to give more. Harper opened the new University of Chicago on October 1, 1892, without ceremony. Five buildings were completed in 1892, and another five in 1893, year of the Columbian Exposition, during which the grounds of the new school were used by Standard Oil to exhibit a miniature refinery. John D. made his first visit to the University in 1897 for the first class quinquennial celebration. Until then, he had declined any previous invitations, for he cherished so much his privacy and hated so much public occasions.