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THE BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL¹

It is appropriate, upon this occasion, that reference should be made to the condition of scientific education in this country at the time of the foundation of the institute and that an outline of its early history should be given.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the study of the physical sciences in the United States was in its infancy. Scarcely any provision was made for scientific instruction in any of the colleges of the country. Astronomy, physics, chemistry and botany had indeed been taught, during the preceding century, in a few institutions of learning, a department of mathematics and natural philosophy having been created in Harvard College as early as 1727, a professorship of botany in Columbia in 1792 and a class of chemistry at Princeton in 1795. Instruction had also been given in physics and chemistry in the University of Pennsylvania and Dartmouth College and in physics in Union College. This short list, however, includes all the colleges which had given the physical sciences more than an insignificant place in their curriculums. Even in these the instruction was given by lectures, supplemented, at times, by experiments which the teachers performed. Anything approaching laboratory work by the student was almost wholly unknown. When Professor Silliman was elected, in 1801, to the chair of chemistry, geology and mineralogy in Yale College, he visited Dr. McLean, who was professor of chemistry at Princeton, and there for the first time saw experiments in chemistry performed. Considering the state of scientific knowledge at this period and the general lack of opportunity for the study of science, even in Europe, it is not remarkable that this should have been the case in a new country, the total population of which, in 1800, was less than that of the city of New York to-day.

With the general awakening to the value of a knowledge of the natural sciences, during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, came provision for their study in other of the academic schools of the country. Within that time courses in various branches were inaugurated at Yale, Williams, Bowdoin, Dickinson, William and Mary and Hobart Colleges, and in the universities of Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. Facilities for practical

¹ Address of the president at the centennial celebration of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Friday, October 3, 1924.