BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William C. Cattell was born in Salem, New Jersey, on 30 August 1827 to merchant and banker, Thomas Ware Cattell, and Keziah Gilmore Cattell. He had five brothers, one of whom became a United States senator from New Jersey, and two sisters. He attended local schools, studied for two years in Virginia under his brother’s care, then returned to Salem to take a course under Rev. James I. Helm. In 1844, he enrolled at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and graduated in 1848 with high honors. After teaching in Goochland County, Virginia for one year, he entered the Princeton Theological Seminary, graduating in 1852.

After completing an additional year of study in Oriental Studies, Cattell accepted the post of associate principal of the Edgehill Preparatory School, in Princeton. Two years later, in 1855, he began his professorship at Lafayette College in ancient languages. He taught Latin and Greek successfully for five years at which point he resigned to answer a call to be pastor at the Pine Street Presbyterian Church, in Harrisburg. During his three years at the Pine Street Church, Cattell developed a great rapport with his congregation and was successful at providing sanctuary for wounded, sick, and dying soldiers of the Civil War.

The Civil War had a disastrous effect on Lafayette College, which saw its enrollment and financial resources depleted as its students went to fight. Although the college very nearly closed its doors in 1863, the Board of Trustees resolved to give it one more try and asked William C. Cattell to return and take the helm as Lafayette’s president. Against the wishes of his congregation, Cattell was inaugurated as President of Lafayette College in July 1864 after spending nine months performing duties as president. Cattell was thirty-six years old when he became president and he kept this position for twenty years. Cattell’s initial duties were to travel and solicit money from potential benefactors. The first and most important large gift was $20,000, given by Ario Pardee, a coal baron from Hazleton, PA, in 1864. Other gifts soon followed and Lafayette College finally gained a firm financial foundation. In 1869, Cattell took a one-year sabbatical to tour Europe with a small group, including his wife, his two sons, and two children of Ario Pardee. The purpose of Cattell’s trip was to examine the methods of instruction employed at European polytechnical schools, hoping to bring these methods back to Lafayette. For more information on this trip, see the Israel Platt Pardee diaries in Special Collections.

While at Lafayette, Cattell instituted a series of courses on the Bible that each student was required to complete. Cattell was well respected and loved by the students and they were often invited to receptions at the president’s house. Cattell also taught during his years as president, serving as Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy from 1863-1883. In addition, he dealt with the literary, social, and ecclesiastical demands of the campus. The many tasks of the office took their toll after twenty years and Cattell retired in 1883, remaining on the Board of Trustees until his death in 1898.

During Cattell’s retirement, he remained active, traveling to Europe and educating himself on the European Presbyterian Church. In 1884, Cattell took a new post as Secretary of the Board of Ministerial Relief of the Presbyterian Church, preaching throughout the United States to raise money for suffering brethren, widows, and orphans. During his twelve years with the Board of Ministerial Relief, Cattell raised three million dollars. The hard work proved debilitating to his health and a heart condition caused him
to retire in 1896. Despite his continuing health problems, Cattell accepted a position as President of the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. He set two goals: one to secure a fire-proof repository for the records of the Presbyterian Church and the second to build an adequate endowment to conserve the history of the Presbyterian Church in America. Cattell lived to see the Presbyterian records move to a newer, safer building, but he died on February 11, 1898, before the endowment could be raised.

Cattell was married in 1859 to Elizabeth McKeen, daughter of Lafayette Board of Trustees member, James McKeen. They had two sons, James McKeen Cattell, noted professor of psychology at Columbia University, and Henry Ware Cattell, and four grandchildren.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This small collection is a mix of personal belongings of William C. Cattell and material relating to William C. Cattell (10 linear inches). Box 1 includes ten diaries and notebooks kept by Cattell between the years 1856 and 1881. These diaries contain very brief entries about trips that Cattell took locally in the Lehigh Valley and abroad in Europe and Cuba. Also included in these diaries are schedules for various Lafayette College activities, for sermons on campus and in the area, and notes on the weather. An entry in the 1864 diary is of particular interest, Cattell writes, “Monday, September 26th, 1864: ‘Hazelton, one of the happiest days of my life; Mr. A. Pardee subscribed twenty thousand dollars to the College! God bless him.”

Box 2 includes 5 prints of William C. Cattell, dated 1873. There is one daguerreotype that is possibly the older sons of the Page family, with whom Cattell stayed in Bentivoglio, VA in 1842. There are two memorial volumes containing tributes from the Philadelphia Association of Lafayette College Alumni and from the Lafayette College Board of Trustees. There is also a published memorial, Memoir of William C. Cattell, D.D., LL.D. 1827-1898 (J.B. Lippincott Company: Philadelphia, 1899), that includes a frontispiece of William C. Cattell, a biographical sketch, a record of his funeral and other memorial services, minutes and resolutions, press articles and letters of sympathy. (A catalogued copy can be found in the Lafayette Collection).

The Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia holds papers of William Cattell, consisting of letters, sermons, records, speeches, lectures, and addresses spanning the years 1855-1997. Selected microfilm from this collection is available in the Earl A. Pope Papers, Box 2.

NOTE ON PROVENANCE AND ACCESS

The diaries and notebooks in Box 1 were donated by Dr. McKeen Cattell. The materials in Box 2 were given by Elly Cattell Robinson in October 1990. Access to the papers by qualified researchers is without restriction. Photocopying and publishing from the collection are allowed, subject to the guidelines of the repository and the laws of copyright.
INVENTORY

Box 1: Diaries and Notebooks
Folders
1  1856: trip to Cuba (Jan.-Feb), college activities, preaching schedule, class meetings
   1857: faculty meetings, weather, chapel sermons, college activities
2  1858: travels and preaching schedules
   1861: travels
3  1864: travels, 9/25 and 9/26—Cattell secures $20,000 from Ario Pardee for the college
   1865: travels
4  1866: travels
   1869: European Sabbatical schedule
5  1872: few pages on trips to NY, weather, and college activities
   1881: Notebook of W.C. Cattell: Trip to Germany, Prague, research on European Presbyterian Church

Box 2: Miscellaneous
Folders
1  5 engravings of W.C. Cattell, 1873
2  Engraved plate (used to make the engraving in folder 1)
3  1 daguerreotype of Page boys, ca. 1842
4  Memorial Volume re Rev. W.C. Cattell from Philadelphia Association of Lafayette College Alumni
5  Memorial Volume re Rev. W.C. Cattell, D.D., LL.D. from the Lafayette College Board of Trustees