



Buchtel College (pictured 1890), the forerunner to the University of Akron. [photo: University of Akron Archival Services]

## [Local history: Let there be Buchtel College](#)

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Akron industrialist John R. Buchtel had more than enough money to help.

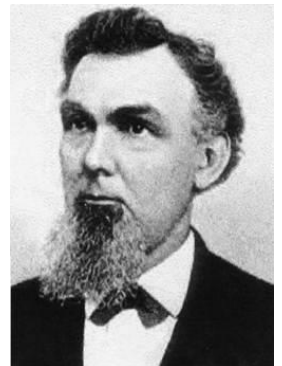
He just wasn't sure what to do with his wealth.

Buchtel (1822-1892), president of the Buckeye Mower and Reaper Works, had vague plans to bequeath his fortune to start a public library in Akron.

Then he got a letter from a friend.

The Rev. George Messenger, a retired Universalist minister, wrote to Buchtel to inquire if he might consider donating funds to help build a school.

A meeting 150 years ago helped change the course of Akron history.



John Richard Buchtel (1822-1892)

Trustees of the Ohio Universalist Convention gathered May 31, 1870, at the Summit County Courthouse to vote on a proposal to establish a school to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Universalist Church of the United States.

The trustees had already ruled out Kent after scouting the Portage County town and learning it had an “unpleasant reputation” of being ridden with malaria and typhoid fever.

The board had been leaning toward Mount Gilead in Morrow County, until the Rev. Henry Canfield, a Universalist trustee, wrote to the Rev. Henry Miller: “Don’t decide upon a location for the school till you have been to Akron again, for I am strongly of the opinion that there is something there worth looking after.”

Upon visiting the canal town of 10,000, trustees decided it would be an ideal site for the “Universalist Centenary School of Ohio.”

But Akron already had a high school. Residents proposed building a college instead.

“A college it shall be, but you must pay for it accordingly,” Miller told townsfolk. “If you desire a college in the city of Akron, Summit County must give \$60,000.”

Buchtel and his wife, Elizabeth, pledged \$31,000 (about \$940,000 today) toward the building and endowment fund. Another 100 Akron residents and 13 businesses combined to match the \$31,000 gift.

Officials selected a 2.6-acre hilltop occupied by Spicer Hill Cemetery. The bodies of pioneers would be exhumed and reburied at Akron Rural Cemetery, better known today as Glendale.

Trustees met at the Summit County Courthouse and named 17 “corporators” of the college: The Rev. H.L. Canfield, the Rev. J.S. Cantwell, the Rev. J.W. Henley, the Rev. Andrew Willson, O.F. Haymaker, the Rev. B.F. Eaton, the Rev. Everett L. Rexford, John R. Buchtel, N.D. Tibbals, E.P. Green, Col. George T. Perkins, James A. Lantz, George Steese, the Rev. Henry F. Miller, the Rev. Willard Spaulding, the Rev. George Messenger and Henry Blandy.

The group still had to decide what to call the school.

“The name ‘Buchtel College’ was proposed, but some strong objections were urged,” Canfield later recalled. “First, the name was not euphonious, and it would probably be called ‘Bucktail College.’ Second, it was to be founded by a religious body, and Mr. Buchtel was not a religious man, but a man of the world, who perhaps sometimes let slip an oath or a cuss word, and who certainly kept wine upon his table and gave it to his guests.”

Trustees asked Buchtel for his opinion.

“Gentlemen, this is to be your college, not mine,” he replied. “I mean to help it financially as I may be able. If I live and am prospered, I intend to give the college someday \$100,000. You may call the college what you please.”

The board voted unanimously to name it Buchtel College.

Canfield dismissed critics who might accuse Buchtel of having bought the name. Anyone making that suggestion had “no just conception of the spirit of the occasion,” he said, and if the board had felt that Buchtel was making a bid, it would have refused.

“John R. Buchtel was a great-hearted man, and while he greatly enjoyed the esteem and the good opinion of others, he was not in the market to purchase applause,” Canfield noted. “Himself denied the privileges of any but most meager education, it was the joy of his life to help in giving the opportunities of education to those who aspired after them, and profited by them.”

The Ohio Universalist Convention met in June 1870 in Kent, apparently no longer concerned about malaria or typhoid fever, and resolved to “appreciate the magnificent gift of our friend and brother” John R. Buchtel and to “gratefully recognize the wisdom which gives the institution his name.”

Boston architect Thomas W. Silloway designed a five-story college 242 feet long and 54 feet wide. The central building would contain classrooms, a dining hall and a chapel and would be flanked by dormitories on both ends.

More than 10,000 people attended the cornerstone-laying ceremony July 4, 1871. New York Tribune Editor Horace Greeley, the guest speaker, delivered a dense oration.

A sampling: “This, then, I apprehend, is the proper work of the college — to appreciate and measure, and undistrustfully accept and commend, the gigantic strides which physical science is making in our day, yet not be swept away by them; to welcome all that is true and beneficent in the impetuous currents of modern thought, but not to exaggerate their breadth and depth, nor accept their direction as authoritative or final; to proffer a genial and gracious hospitality to whatever is nobly new, yet hold fast, and from time to time assert, that no discovery in science, no advances in human knowledge, and no conclusion of philosophy, can ever equal in importance that simple affirmation of the untaught Judean peasant, who long ago perceived and proclaimed that God is Love.”

Buchtel was called to offer brief remarks.

“We don’t intend to pull a shingle from a single church, but will unite in suppressing evil and building up the morals and character of the city,” he told the crowd.

The completed building was dedicated Sept. 20, 1872.

Buchtel College, forerunner of the University of Akron, had arrived.

Its motto in Latin: "Fiat Lux."

"Let There Be Light."

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