

Henry Onderdonk

Henry Onderdonk, president of MAC during the Civil War, kept the college open during turbulent times, but he is most remembered for a Confederate welcome that may never have happened.

Henry Onderdonk was born in New York in 1822 to a prominent Knickerbocker family that included Episcopal bishops among its members. He received his undergraduate degree from Columbia College and attended seminary for a year. In 1846, Rev. Libertus Van Bokkelen, headmaster of St. Timothy's Hall in Catonsville, an Episcopal military school, brought Onderdonk to Maryland. He taught at St. Timothy's until 1853 and then at several other Baltimore schools.

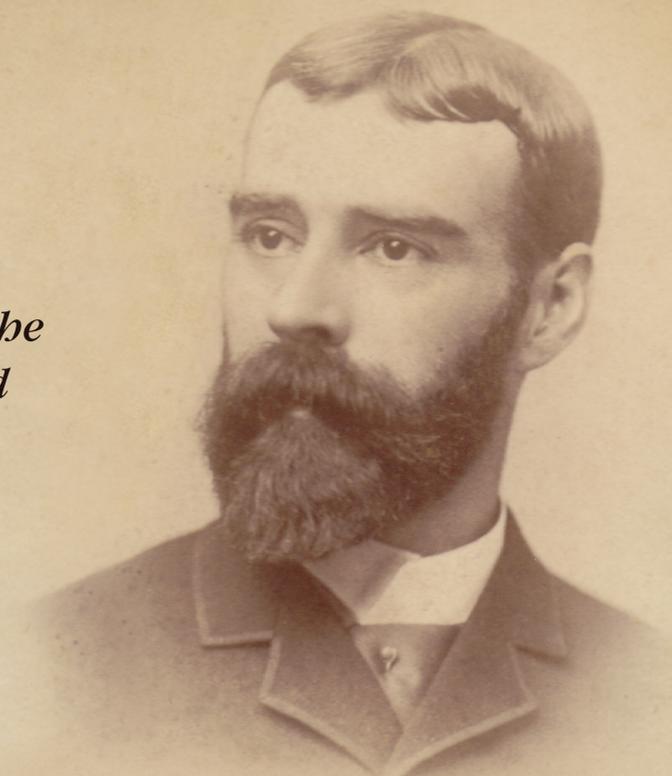
Elected president of MAC in 1861, after war had begun, Onderdonk managed the college during the distractions of wartime news and passing troop movements - from both sides of the conflict. In April 1864, Union General Ambrose E. Burnside's Ninth Army Corps camped on the grounds on their way from Annapolis to Washington, D.C., and, on July 12th of the same year, Confederate troops made an appearance. The length and nature of that visit became a matter of controversy, as witnesses accused Onderdonk and other faculty members of greeting the soldiers, serving them a fine meal, and entertaining them with music, thus creating the legend of the "Old South Ball."

Unsigned insinuations were published in several newspapers, and Onderdonk replied in print, denying that he was even present that day, claiming, "The only truth in the whole thing is that General Johnson's 'band of raiders' passed through the College grounds. I am mentioned by name as having invited them. I did not invite them...and if they had the 'delicacies of the season,' they must have brought them with them..."

MAC Board member William H. Purnell requested a speedy inquiry by federal authorities to determine the truth of the rumors, so that the guilty parties, if any, could be dismissed before the college re-opened. The response was clear:

*Memorandum.
Tell Purnell if he wants a speedy examination to bring his professors in here and let them tell their story.*

Investigators deposed local witnesses and questioned faculty members, in some cases, pitting them against each other. In the end, there was little evidence that a pre-planned or even an impromptu significant gathering had occurred, and no further official action was taken against anyone. The damage, though, was done.



*Henry Onderdonk
Maryland Agricultural College*

Onderdonk did not depart in the immediate aftermath of the investigation, however. His name continued to appear on classified advertisements for MAC into September 1864, and his three sons were enrolled as students in the 1864-1865 academic year.

The faltering financial situation of the college increased the pressure. Charles Benedict Calvert, the college's benefactor, had died a few months earlier, debts were coming due, and the Maryland legislature, with a greater financial stake in the college, was paying close attention to details of its operation. Bowing to these combined forces, Onderdonk resigned in late 1864.

In an attempt to salvage Onderdonk's reputation, his former mentor, now State School Superintendent Rev. Van Bokkelen, having carefully studied the college's situation, delivered an address at the June 1865 commencement, noting that "the success with which [the college] had been maintained under the embarrassing circumstances of the past years, show a degree of vitality which gave assurance of its future growth."

After departing MAC, Onderdonk returned to Baltimore and resumed teaching. He also authored a Maryland history textbook in 1868, omitting any mention of how Confederate troops were received four years earlier. In the 1883 edition of his work, however, Onderdonk admitted "A large proportion of the men of this command were Marylanders, and however cold their reception was in the Western part of the State, it cannot be denied that they were cordially received by the farmers of Prince George's County."

In 1869, Onderdonk was asked to re-open the College of Saint James in Hagerstown, Maryland, as a secondary school. Saint James School flourished under his direction, and he remained there as headmaster until his death in 1895. He is buried in Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore.

