If there is a theme that runs throughout the history of scholarly publishing in the United States it is the constant tension between fulfilling a mission and finding sufficient resources to do so. Creating a university press at Cornell was a vital part of President A. D. White’s educational ideas. He envisioned a press on the European model—controlled by the university and with the goal of the diffusion of new learning. It was not to be the kind of university press we see today, acquiring and editing scholarly works from around the world. Instead it was to be a print shop, dedicated to printing and distributing texts associated with the university administration, faculty, and students. From the very beginning, however, there was some resistance from the trustees, who did not see running a printing press as a legitimate part of the university’s business. At the seventh board of trustees meeting, in February 1868, a committee comprising three New York politicians and newspaper editors, Erastus Brooks, George H. Andrews, and Horace Greeley, founder of the New-York Tribune, was appointed to determine the “practicability and desirability” of a University Printing House.
It is here that the ideas of the practical Ezra Cornell come in. In keeping with a key part of his famous saying, “I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study,” the founders intended to make higher education accessible to those students who had merit, but lacked the funds to pay tuition. In its earliest years, Cornell University included a labor corps where students helped erect university buildings, worked on the farm or in the machine shop, and constructed roads. Included in this ambitious concept was the university press. The labor corps was not intended as an apprenticeship;
students were expected to have experience and for their labor to benefit the university as well as themselves.

The press is not mentioned again in the trustees’ notes until June 1869 when the board of trustees appointed Daniel Willard Fiske as the first director. White and Fiske had been friends since boyhood, and Fiske was an important adviser to White in the early stages of planning the university. Fiske’s background was well suited to running the press. He had already been appointed the university librarian, held a chair in North European languages, and had been an editor of the Hartford Courant in Connecticut.

In those early days, the press, lacking any substantial monetary support allocated by the trustees, was fortunate to benefit from the goodwill of university supporters. An October 1869 letter from R. Hoe and Company of New York City to A. D. White reveals that a large Hoe printing press, valued at $2,500, had been sent via railway as a gift to the university. George Bruce’s Son and Company sent $400 worth of type. The board of trustees allocated $300 for additional purchases and Willard Fiske ordered more type from White’s New York Type Foundry, including Greek lettering.
Though not yet adequately supplied, the press also needed the people to run it. Willard Fiske oversaw the operation of the press, but the day-to-day work required different skills. It is no coincidence that the press was founded in connection with the College of the Mechanic Arts—this was complex machinery and dirty, ink-stained work. The man found to manage the press was B. Hermon Smith, an experienced printer who had worked for the Syracuse Journal and had his own print shop in Syracuse. An ad in the 1868–69 gazetteer and business directory for Onondaga County describes Smith (or rather, he most likely describes himself) as “a young man of great energy, a thorough mechanic and bred to the printing business . . . a neat and tasty printer.” Smith was dedicated to the success of the university press from the start and offered to borrow $3,000 on his own account for the purchase of a second (Gordon) press and additional material.

The new enterprise was set up in the basement of Morrill Hall, with an attached shed for the steam power to operate the Hoe press. It provided employment for twenty students, many of them in the civil engineering field. Students worked four hours each afternoon, all day on Saturday, and “during the whole available time in vacation,” according to George Lincoln Burr ’81, a Cornell professor and former student employee.
One of the first publications was the Cornell Register, an annual listing of students, faculty, courses, and entrance exam requirements that the press printed for several years. On the back page of the 1869–70 edition is the earliest known advertisement for the press, clearly laying out its alignment with Ezra Cornell's vision of the university: “Its employees are all young men, who are endeavoring, by means of their own labor, to defray the expenses of a University education.”
A later director of the press, Woodford Patterson ’95, related a story in which George Lincoln Burr’s father wrote to A. D. White asking how his son might work his way through school. White advised that he learn the printer’s trade. The younger Burr did just that, working at the Cortland Standard until he was ready for college. Burr then worked at the press from 1877 to 1879, later becoming White’s private secretary, the curator and cataloguer of the historical library White was gathering, and a much-admired professor of ancient and medieval history at Cornell.

Most of the names of early press employees are lost to time, but the students, despite their busy class and work schedules, did manage to form a university press baseball team. The Cornell Era reported that the lineup for 1870 included G. Whitfield Farnham, captain and head of the book department, Charles Spencer Francis, catcher and future ambassador to Austria-Hungary, and Abraham Gridley, third base and a future lawyer in Penn Yan.
The earliest known image of the press. Engraving in *Scribner's Monthly* (May 1873)
In 1871, the press moved to a large, well-lit room in the newly built Sibley College of the Mechanic Arts (the western wing of the present Sibley building). The large Hoe printing press was powered by a turbine wheel far below in Fall Creek and a stereotype foundry was added in the rear of the building around 1874. An article about Cornell University in the May 1873 edition of *Scribner’s Monthly* included an engraving of the new quarters, the earliest known image of the press. The one man wearing a coat, standing on the Hoe press, may well be a depiction of B. Hermon Smith, who had been appointed director in 1871.

The second home of the press in the west wing of Sibley College, 1872
Cornell students in those early years were generally considered well behaved, but were not above occasional mischief. In 1871, Smith wrote a strongly worded letter to the Cornell Era expressing his “detestation of the manner in which some of the students conduct themselves, when visiting the office of the University Press. They seem to hold to the belief that the fixtures and machinery of the office are public property—that every wheel is for them to turn, every page and case of type for them to pi, and worse than all else, every piece of manuscript for them to read.” He welcomed polite visitors but “loungers” must keep out and he hoped that such people would remember “the next thing in order after a hint.”

When not dealing with the hijinks of students, Smith initiated a change at the press that reflected the innovative nature of the university—hiring women to set type. An October 1872 note in the Daily Journal of Ithaca mentions that Smith had hired “lady compositors” and had also written an article for the Syracuse Typo on the topic.

In 1874, Smith added to his duties by teaching a class in typography as part of a new journalism course. Fiske saw a need for well-educated and well-trained journalists who also had experience in typesetting and proofreading. The journalism course was offered for only four years and just one student was awarded the “licentiate in Journalism,” in 1876.

Throughout these years, the press produced an impressive number of publications. Not all of these are known due to their ephemeral nature—syllabi, lecture notes, short-lived student publications, and the like. There were few books of a learned nature, although that was one of A. D. White’s initial goals. Instead, the press served primarily as a printing office for the routine publication needs of faculty and students, in addition to taking on work for outside publishers.
The press did endeavor to publish works of scholarship by Cornell faculty. They began a series (that ultimately consisted of only two volumes) titled *Bulletin of the Cornell University: Science*. These two pamphlets, published in 1874, dealt with a scientific expedition to Brazil by two instructors. In 1872, the press also published *The Cornell University: What It Is and What It Is Not*, A. D. White’s proud defense of Cornell University against criticisms for being nondenominational and allowing students to choose their own course of study.

In addition to printing the annual editions of the *Cornell Register* from 1869 to 1875, the press published an account of the 1869 university inauguration, various laws and documents of the university, outlines for lectures by White and other professors, and, in 1878, the *Ten-Year Book of the Cornell University*—an alumni directory.

Student publications included the weekly newspaper the *Cornell Era*, printed by the press from 1869 to 1873, the *Aurora Brasilierea*, a monthly published by the Brazilian students in 1873 and 1874, and *Cocagne*, an early attempt at collegiate humor that had six issues in 1878. The press also did work for outside publishers and printed one or more books on North American ethnology by the noted anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan for Henry Holt & Co. of New York. Ithaca’s *Daily Journal* reported in July 1877 that eight compositors were working to make the forms for plates to be cast in the stereotype foundry, up to 162 plates in a single day. They were doing work for Henry Holt and for William F. Gill & Co. of Boston, who had ordered a large, heavily illustrated volume of Tennyson’s complete works.

Despite the number of publications, it seems that the press was never financially successful. *Landmarks of Tompkins County*, published in 1894, indicated a yearly deficit that had to be made good by the university treasury. According
to Woodford Patterson, all of the university’s official printing had been promised to the press in consideration of B. Hermon Smith’s personal investment in the business, but the volume of work appeared to have exceeded the capacity of the shop. The press had the potential to be profitable if it could but obtain more investment from the trustees. By the late 1870s, however, the university was undergoing difficulties of its own, in part from the absence of its leader’s guiding hand. President White had taken a two-year European sabbatical for his health and upon his return in 1879 was offered the position of American minister to Germany. When his resignation from the university was refused, he took another leave of absence in order to accept the position. In addition, money was tight due to a dwindling endowment, and enrollment dropped from 542 in 1876 to 384 in 1881 as tuition rose and opportunities to be self-supporting through the labor corps declined. The travails of the university press were not the highest priority for the trustees.

White returned to Ithaca and the presidency in 1881, but despite his efforts it was by then too late for the press. In 1882, the board of trustees resolved that the press be abolished, though the matter was tabled at the time. President White’s annual report in 1883 asked for additional investment in the press and bemoaned that while it had done much work “and has done it well; . . . it cannot with its present means and accommodations render the service that we might easily secure from it.” After the death of Ezra Cornell in 1874, the student labor corps, never particularly successful, no longer had a champion to promote it and faded away. The most successful aspect of the labor corps, as well as the best way to honor that part of the founder’s vision, asserted White, was the university press, which had produced a “considerable number of the best students we have ever had . . . support[ing] themselves
mainly or entirely” by working at the press. (White was likely thinking of George Lincoln Burr, whom White described as one of the two geniuses who attended Cornell during his presidency.)

President White’s next report, issued in June 1884, lamented that the press had been discontinued the previous term, costing the university the ability to securely print examination papers or complex projects that local printers in Ithaca could not manage. The director, Smith, had left the press and taken the equipment he had provided with him, as the executive committee was unwilling to purchase it. White expressed his hope that the press would be reestablished “at some day not distant.”

White did make an attempt to keep the press going, mentioning in the same report and one the following year that an unnamed head of a college printing house, who sought more opportunity, was willing to invest his own capital if the university would match the amount and pay him a fair salary. The candidate, Gustave Weinschenk of Harvard, whose name was revealed in the local paper, came to town to discuss the possibility, but the university trustees were apparently unwilling to meet his demands as nothing came of the proposal.

Over the next few years, no great efforts were made to revive the press and White had already acknowledged in 1885 that providing for Sibley College and the veterinary clinic took priority. In 1887, the trustees approved a contract with Walter G. Smith & Co. to rent part of Sibley and use the presses, but it must have fallen through as there is no record of income. According to Woodford Patterson, equipment was moved into storage, some of it was sold, and some rusted and was discarded. The type and type cases went to a local printer, Andrus & Church, to be used only for Cornell work.
After a short fifteen years, the first run of Cornell University Press had come to an end. A line in *Landmarks of Tompkins County* attempted to put a full stop to the story, stating flatly that “this experiment demonstrated . . . that material profit was impossible in philanthropy.” The absence of a press did not, however, erase the existence of President White’s mission—there was still a desire and a need for meritorious scholarship to be published and disseminated to students, to academics, and to the broader public. What happened next is perhaps the most remarkable part of the story of Cornell University Press. Over the next four and a half decades, it was the dedicated efforts of faculty, students, and alumni who kept the idea of a university press at Cornell alive, and who gradually laid the groundwork for its rebirth.