When the sound of the last cannon of the Civil War died away, statesmen, educators, and industrial pioneers marshalled the victorious forces of the North and turned their attention to education. They wanted to increase the number of trained scientists, engineers, and other skilled people so they could transform the vast natural resources of the country into a strong and independent national economy.

Asa Packer was one of the industrial pioneers. He built the Lehigh Valley Railroad and controlled a col mining empire in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania. He knew, as did many others, that a strong national economy depended on more than technical skills. It needed above all people broadly educated in the liberal arts and sciences — people who could combine practical skills with informed judgments and strong moral self-discipline. He kept this in mind when founding and endowing Lehigh University.

The site that Packer chose for his university was a railroad junction across the Lehigh River from Bethlehem, a community founded in 1741 by Moravian missionaries. William Bacon Stevens, Episcopal bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania and the first president of the university’s board of trustees, in 1869 described the origin of the university as follows:

“In the fall of 1864 an interview was requested of me by the Hon. Asa Packer, of Mauch Chunk (now Jim Thorpe), Pa. He came to my house in Philadelphia, and said that he had long contemplated doing something for the benefit of his State, and especially of the Lehigh Valley. From that valley he said he had derived much of the wealth which GOD had given to him, and to the best interests of that valley he wished to devote a portion of it in the founding of some educational institution, for the intellectual and moral improvement of the young men of that region.

“After conversing with him a little while, and drawing out his large and liberal views, I asked him how much money he proposed to set aside for this institution, when he quietly answered that he desired to give $500,000. At the time of this interview no one in this country, it is believed, had offered in a single sum such an endowment for a literary and scientific education. Faculty and students would have an admission policy based on merit. Competitive examinations were held for applicants for admission. From 1871 to 1891 no tuition was charged, but the national financial crisis at the turn of the century decimated the value of the Lehigh Valley Railroad stock that Packer had given to Lehigh, which was the principal source of income.

At first the student body was entirely male. The contemporary ideological climate would permit nothing else. But around 1916, women were admitted to graduate programs. In 1971, the university opened its undergraduate program to them as well. Today men and women applicants are considered on an equal basis.

From the first, the students were serious-minded. In 1924, Catherine Drinker Bowen, daughter of president Drinker and later a famous biographer, published a brief history of Lehigh University, in which she commented:

“Ask any college professor which brand of boy he would prefer to teach, the cigarette brand or the flannel shirt variety. Right here we offer ten to one the flannel shirt variety...Lehigh still holds to the emblem of the flannel shirt—long may it wave! Engineers come to college to work. A writer in the Syracuse Post in 1895 spoke truthfully when he said, ‘From the first, Lehigh’s characteristic has been her earnestness. It is the boast of her graduates, the inspiration of her students. Men go there to learn to take a useful part in the economy of life.’” The university community was constantly infused with new faculty and students determined to renew and rework the original principles in the light of changing times. The students’ ambition and zeal bore fruit; as alumni they carried the university’s educational goals into the work of nation-building. And, having received, they gave to perpetuate Lehigh’s work of service.

Today, Lehigh University still adheres to Asa Packer’s goal of a liberal and scientific education for practical service. Faculty and students work to maintain high quality in instructional programs. Generous support from individuals, foundations, industry, and government help Lehigh to retain high quality of education and faculty while keeping tuition as low as possible. (Tuition covers only a part of the cost of a Lehigh education.)