The principal author of the brief history of Lehigh University that follows, Dr. W. Ross Yates, held the bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees from the University of Oregon, his native state. He received the doctor of philosophy degree from Yale University and studied in France on a Fulbright Scholarship. He joined the Lehigh staff in 1955 and served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1963 to 1972. Dr. Yates passed away in 2017.

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 individuals so they could transform the vast natural resources of the country into a strong and independent national economy.

Asa Packer was one of those industrial pioneers. He built the Lehigh Valley Railroad and controlled a coal mining empire in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania. He knew 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. It was the noblest offering which an American had ever laid on the altar of learning, and more than equaled many royal donations which have carried down the names of kings as patrons of European universities.

"Filled with profound emotions at the mention of such a gift for such an object, I asked the noble donor what specific plans he had dreamed in his own mind in reference to it. His reply was, 'I am not much acquainted with these matters, but you are, and I want you if you will to devise a plan which I can put into effective operation.' I told him that I would make the attempt. I did so. I drew up the outline sketch of such an institution as I thought would give the largest results for the means used, and submitted it in a few weeks to his inspection.

"He examined it with the practical judgment and business habits with which he deals with all great questions, and adopted the scheme as the basis of his future university.

"The first meeting of the Board of Trustees, selected by Judge Packer, met at the Sun Hotel in Bethlehem, July 27, 1865, and began to organize the work before them."

The trustees followed several principles in setting up the university. One was that of combining scientific and classical education. They considered both to be practical. The principle carried forward an ideal of the great 17th century Moravian educator John Amos Comenius. A motto taken from the works of Francis Bacon was used to summarize this principle, namely, Homo minister et interpres naturae — man, the servant and interpreter of nature, to use a free translation. That motto lives on at Lehigh, being an element in the university seal.