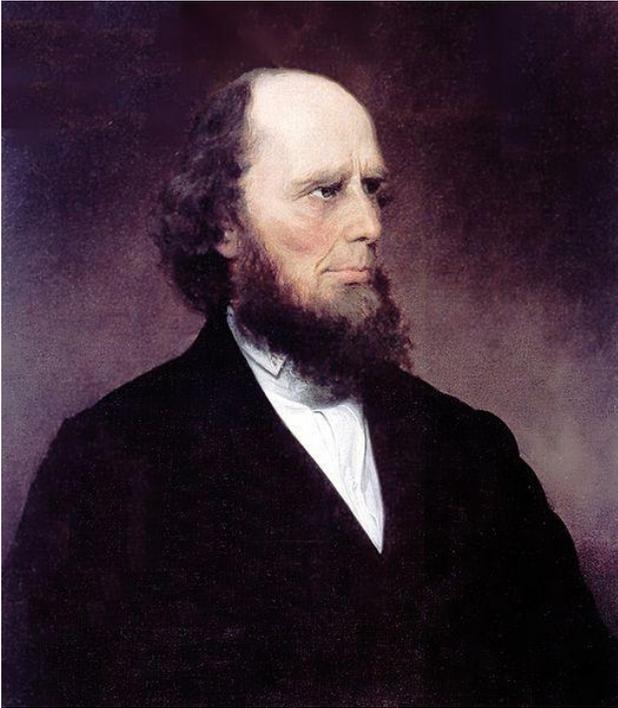


# *Charles Finney in Oberlin*



Born in Warren, Connecticut August 29, 1792, Charles Grandison Finney was the second president of Oberlin College, and the single most influential figure in the Second American Great Awakening. At the age of 29, while working as a lawyer in New York, Finney had a deep and moving revelation and underwent a drastic conversion to Christianity. From that day forth Finney felt that it was his duty to evangelize the world and spread the good news of the gospel to all that he could. A fiery preacher, Finney delivered powerful and convicting messages throughout upstate New York, an area that would later be known as the “burnt-over district” because it had been thoroughly burnt over with the flames of Christian revival. In 1835, shortly after it was published, the evangelist’s book “Finney’s Lectures on Revivals,” had already sold over 12,000 copies, which for the time was no small feat.

Charles Finney came to Oberlin through an arrangement with the Lane Seminary Rebels, students who had broken from the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati due to ideological disputes regarding abolitionism and free speech. The

dissenting students made an agreement with Oberlin that, given certain conditions, they would move to Oberlin. One condition was that they study in Oberlin’s theology department under Charles Finney. The invitation was extended and, after gaining financial backing from abolitionist Arthur Tappan, Charles Finney arrived in the summer of 1835 and began to teach for half of each year. He would leave to tend to his congregation in New York during the wintertime. Oberlin attracted Finney because it was a receptive environment with students who were eager for instruction. Finney became the pride of the college and the town, heading the theological department and serving as pastor of First Congregational Church for nearly 40 years. He also served as the second president of Oberlin College.

## **What Set Finney Apart:**

Finney was revolutionary in the theological community because he championed the Arminian Doctrine of Salvation, or the idea that people choose to accept God in order to go to heaven. The voluntary Arminian way of thought, though more commonplace in the present, was greatly controversial then, particularly to the Church in New England, which believed that only a select few were chosen by God to go to Heaven (Calvinism). This ideology of Finney’s proved stirring and went hand in hand with the contemporary ideas of self-improvement, social mobility, and the widespread societal reform movements occurring during this era. The distinctive Oberlin Colony, formed in 1833, existed as a response to the widespread need for societal reform. Oberlin proved interesting for this revolutionary minister, who reinforced its ideals of nondiscrimination regarding gender and race in education. Finney was known to have women pray publicly during his revival meetings, a very unorthodox practice at the time. Female students continued to push Finney and others even further for equal treatment.

Despite his position as a leader of the community and college, Finney disagreed with some of the townspeople’s attitudes stemming from the Oberlin Colony’s Covenant, which Finney himself never signed. Namely, Finney disagreed with Oberlin’s extreme austerity for the sake of piety. When one of his daughters was scrutinized for dressing too extravagantly on one occasion by some of the townspeople, Finney met this criticism unfazed, saying to Helen, “your dress is black and plain, and I think you are all right.” He also eventually abandoned the restrictive Graham Diet. Developed in 1829, this diet called for strict vegetarianism, no seasonings, and consumption of only whole grains (such as “graham” crackers) on the grounds that such nutrition would keep the body and mind functioning well, both physically and morally. After running its course in Oberlin throughout the 1830s and early 1840s, Finney and most others eventually decided that sensible moderation in diet was both healthier and moral.

Many in early Oberlin also felt that instrumental music was a worldly extravagance, yet Finney himself sang, played the cello, and had an organ in his home on which he played simple melodies. Being “passionately fond of music,” in the words of James Fairchild, Finney was known to have “brought music to Oberlin,” hiring the first music professor in an American university to teach at Oberlin. Finney’s fondness of music passed on to his daughter Julia Finney, who also enjoyed music and would sometimes join her father in singing operatic duets.

Yet despite his seemingly lax views on the supposedly evil extravagances that many Oberlinian people avoided, Finney did publicly censure those whom he saw as self-indulgent and too proud of their own luxuries, stating that they took part in “the most delusive form of sin.” On the whole, Finney held a very moderate perspective regarding the delicate balance between innocent enjoyment and self-indulgence – he believed that everything had a place, yet that “everything could be sinful when it fell out of place.”



Finney’s home in Oberlin circa 1860  
(Photo courtesy of the Oberlin Heritage Center)

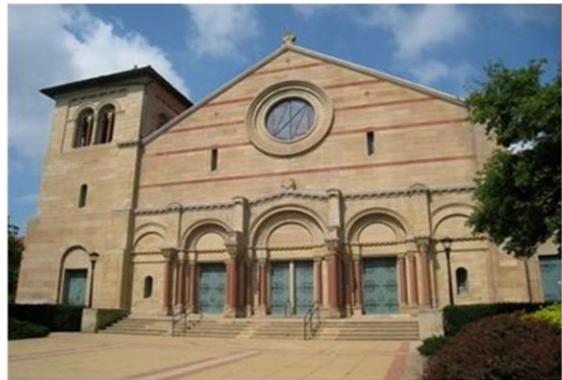
### **Finney’s Legacy:**

Having come to Oberlin two short years after its founding, Charles Finney was one of the most significant figures to impact Oberlin in its starting years, bringing to the new colony and school his dedication and renown, which would subsequently attract numerous students and notable faculty, without whom Oberlin might not have survived. It was his strong sense of resolve and fervent devotion to his causes, both religious and social, that encouraged Oberlin to grow and develop as a town and a noteworthy institution of higher learning. After his retirement from the revival circuit in 1868, Finney stayed in Oberlin as a lecturer in the college and pastor of First Church until his death on August 16, 1875. First Church still stands today and is one of the oldest buildings in Oberlin. In 1908, years after his death, Finney Memorial Chapel was built on the site where Finney’s home once stood and honors his groundbreaking ministry and his love for music. Finney is also remembered through tours of the Monroe House, the home of his daughter Julia and her husband, Congressman James Monroe. It is now home to the Oberlin Heritage Center.

### **Finney-Related Sites in Oberlin:**

\*Please be sure to check for availability before visiting\*

- 1.) Finney Chapel - intersection of West Lorain and North Professor Streets
- 2.) First Church - 106 N. Main Street (parking off of Lorain)
- 3.) Finney’s grave - West on Morgan St. to Westwood Cemetery, Section C under a large pine tree
- 4.) The Monroe House - Part of the Oberlin Heritage Center, 73 1/2 South Professor St. (parking off of Vine St.)



Present day view of Finney Memorial Chapel in Oberlin  
(Photo courtesy of the Oberlin Heritage Center)

### **Further Reading:**

- 1.) Blodgett, Geoffrey. *Oberlin History: Essays and Impressions*. Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 2006.
- 2.) Chamberlain, Ernest B. *The Music of Oberlin and Some Who Made It*. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization, 1967.
- 3.) Finney, Charles G. *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*. Edited by Garth Rosell and Richard Dupuis. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989. (Different annotated versions are available by these authors)
- 4.) Fletcher, Robert Samuel. *A History of Oberlin College; from Its Foundation through the Civil War*. Vol. 1 & 2. New York: Arno, 1971.
- 5.) Hardman, Keith. *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990.

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