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# The University of Michigan

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## Introduction

Founded in 1817 on the Michigan frontier as the Catholepistemiad, or University of Michigania, the University of Michigan has grown to become one of America's leading public research universities. Through two centuries of transformation, U-M has stood as both a beacon of academic excellence and a mirror to broader social changes in the United States. Its story is one of ambition, resilience, invention, and community—a story that is not only Michigan's but also deeply tied to the evolution of higher education across the nation.

Ann Arbor, with its leafy streets and vibrant arts culture, has long been more than a backdrop; it has been a partner in the university's journey. From its earliest days with a handful of students and professors, the university has anchored itself at the intersection of tradition and renewal. It has witnessed and shaped generations of scientific breakthroughs, cultural milestones, and pivotal moments in American history, establishing itself as a crucible of ideas and discovery.

The University of Michigan has embraced an ethos of innovation. It became a pioneer in building new academic disciplines and research laboratories, adapting the German model of higher education and embracing secular, merit-based approaches ahead of its time. This spirit of experimentation produced not only the nation's first chemical laboratory for education but opened its doors to the advancement of women, underrepresented minorities, and students from across the world. Its graduates have gone on to lead in politics, science, the arts, public service, and business—leaving their mark on every corner of society.

But Michigan's influence is not confined to classrooms or laboratories. The university's athletic traditions, its renowned marching band and football Saturdays, and its activism on civil rights and social justice issues have helped define the campus and its people. Student organizations and the unique vibrancy of Ann Arbor contribute to the distinctive character of the "Michigan experience," forging lifelong connections and a passionate global alumni network.

As the challenges of the 21st century continue to unfold, the University of Michigan remains at the forefront—investing in groundbreaking research, championing diversity and inclusion, and reaffirming its commitment to serve both the state of Michigan and the world beyond. With an endowment among the largest for public universities, a legacy of leadership, and forward-focused vision, U-M stands poised to write the next storied chapter of its history.

This book traces the journey of the University of Michigan from its audacious

beginnings to its present status as a powerhouse of learning and discovery. Along the way, it explores not only institutional milestones but the values, people, and places that have shaped its singular legacy. Through triumphs and trials, in times of rapid change and quiet persistence, Michigan's story is the story of American higher education—and of the enduring pursuit of knowledge, leadership, and public good.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Catholepistemiad: U-M's Unusual Beginnings

The story of the University of Michigan, a globally recognized powerhouse of academia and research, begins not with the familiar maize and blue of Ann Arbor, but in the nascent Michigan Territory, under a name that would undoubtedly raise eyebrows today: the "Catholepistemiad or University of Michigania." This unwieldy moniker, bestowed on August 26, 1817, was the brainchild of Chief Justice Augustus B. Woodward, a man whose intellectual ambition evidently outstripped his sense of practical nomenclature. Woodward, who had even discussed his grand educational vision with none other than Thomas Jefferson in 1814, aimed to create an institution that would categorize and encompass the entirety of human knowledge. It was an audacious concept for a frontier territory, a testament to the boundless optimism that often characterized American expansion.

The initial act establishing this curious institution was signed by acting governor William Woodbridge, Woodward himself, and Judge John Griffin. This foundational document laid out a structure comprising thirteen "professorships," or "didaxiim," as Woodward preferred to call them, each representing a branch of knowledge. To lead this ambitious endeavor, John Monteith was appointed as the first president, with Gabriel Richard serving as vice president. One can only imagine the initial meetings of this fledgling academic body, grappling with the vastness of Woodward's vision and the inherent challenges of establishing a comprehensive university in a largely undeveloped territory.

Despite its lofty aspirations, the Catholepistemiad quickly became a source of amusement, or perhaps more accurately, bewilderment. The name itself was a mouthful, and its unconventional nature made it a target for gentle mockery. Governor Lewis Cass, a prominent figure in the Michigan Territory, reportedly found the name utterly ridiculous, famously referring to it as the "Cathole-what's its name," finding it "pedantic and uncouth." This sentiment was likely shared by many, as the institution struggled to gain traction and widespread understanding under its cumbersome title. It was a name that, despite Woodward's erudition, simply failed to resonate with the practical spirit of the frontier.

Recognizing the practical limitations of such an esoteric name, a new legislative enactment in 1821 brought about a much-needed change. The "Catholepistemiad or University of Michigania" was officially renamed the University of Michigan, a straightforward and enduring title that solidified its corporate status and set the stage for its future growth. This renaming marked a crucial step in the university's early

development, shedding an intellectual conceit for a more accessible identity. It was a subtle yet significant shift, paving the way for the institution to be taken more seriously and to integrate itself more effectively into the developing landscape of the territory.

While the name change was vital, the university's physical location remained fluid in its earliest years. The vision of a grand institution of learning required a stable home, and that home would eventually be found in Ann Arbor. The decision to relocate the university to Ann Arbor in 1837 was driven by a legislative act and a generous gift of 40 acres of land from local developers. This land, which would eventually become the iconic Diag, provided the nascent university with the space it needed to establish a permanent campus. This move was a pivotal moment, signaling a serious commitment to the university's future and providing a tangible foundation for its growth. It was no longer merely a concept on paper; it now had a designated place.

The actual commencement of classes in Ann Arbor in 1841 marked another significant milestone. The initial enrollment was modest, a humble beginning for what would become a massive institution: six freshmen and a single sophomore. These pioneering students were taught by two dedicated professors, laying the groundwork for the academic programs that would flourish in the decades to come. The first commencement ceremony, held in 1845, saw eleven men proudly receive their degrees, a small but symbolically important cohort of graduates who represented the first fruits of the University of Michigan's educational endeavors. These early years in Ann Arbor, characterized by small classes and dedicated instruction, fostered an intimate learning environment that would gradually expand and diversify.

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