

John Kemp (1763 – 1812)

John Kemp was born in Achlossan, a farm near the town of Aboyne, Scotland, on April 10, 1763. In 1783 he graduated from the University of Aberdeen, also in Scotland, with a degree in mathematics. Before immigrating to the United States in 1783 he also became a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh before even being of age to do so. This society is Scotland's National Academy of Science and Letters and it supports talented young scholars. In the U.S. Kemp first settled in Virginia; he moved to New York City in 1785.

On April 4 1785 a committee at Columbia College decided to examine the college funds and look for a proper person to be the Professor of Mathematics. They hired John Kemp as a mathematics tutor, a position he held until 1786, when he was appointed Professor of Mathematics. While not all professors received a salary – even professors of medicine – Kemp was given a set salary in 1787. He received £200 as a mathematics professor and an additional £50 as a temporary instructor of natural philosophy. In 1799 Kemp became a professor of natural philosophy. And as if it was not enough to teach mathematics and philosophy, he was also a professor of geography 1795-1799.

Mathematics started out as a two-year program at Columbia but was extended to three years in 1789. Freshmen studied arithmetic and algebra; sophomores geometry, plane trigonometry, navigation, and surveying; juniors conic sections, spherical trigonometry, advance algebra, and differential calculus. Arithmetic was taught in a scientific manner and algebra included the higher branches, Euclid, the doctrine of chances and annuities, the doctrine of fluxions, and applications of algebra to geometry.

One student called John Kemp “indefatigable in his duties” when referring to his teaching skills. Not only did Kemp teach mathematics courses but he also taught natural philosophy, a program that included mechanics, hydrostatics, hydraulics, pneumatics, optics, and astronomy. It also contained electricity and magnetism, which were subjects that interested many Americans at the time. In the 1780s Kemp influenced Columbia to buy some expensive scientific equipment to use during his classes. This equipment included a reflecting achromatic telescope, a compound microscope, a camera obscura, a “complete apparatus of mechanical powers,” an “electrical machine,” a special compass, and other instruments. He was said to have conducted around 600 experiments a year using the equipment.

John Kemp was a strong influence at Columbia College both among students and the faculty. In the mid-1780s the faculty was strict with maintaining control among the students. Professors were required to take roll during classes and missing students were fined. Among the students Kemp was known as the “chief prop” of discipline. Then, in 1800, Dr. Johnson, then the president of the College, resigned and the position became vacant for a year. During that year John Kemp shared the temporary position with his colleague Professor Wilson.

At some point during this period at Columbia Kemp came across a student by the name of DeWitt Clinton, who would become the Governor of New York and play a large part in the planning and building of the Erie Canal. John Kemp was credited with influencing Clinton with the idea of creating the canal. In fact, this is probably what he is best known for but in most of my searches about the Erie Canal I saw no recognition given to Kemp.

John Kemp continued teaching mathematics and natural philosophy at Columbia College until his death in November 1812 after a long illness. His death was a serious loss to the College, as he played a large part in building up the mathematics and science program.

Sasha Sisser
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Internet Sources:

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