
[Bishop of Hippo](#)

[Extract from Augustin's "Retractions,"](#)

[Book II. Chap. 23,](#)

[On the Follwing Treatise,](#)

["De Peccatorum Meritis Et Remissione."](#)

ST. AURELIUS AUGUSTIN

BISHOP OF HIPPO

Extract from Augustin's "Retractions,"

Book II. Chap. 23,

On the Follwing Treatise,

"De Peccatorum Meritis Et Remissione."

A Necessity arose which compelled me to write against the new heresy of Pelagius. Our previous opposition to it was confined to sermons and conversations, as occasions suggested, and according to our respective abilities and duties; but it had not yet assumed the shape of a controversy in writing. Certain questions were then submitted to me [by our brethern] at Carthage, to which I was to send them back answers in writing; I accordingly wrote first of all three books, under the title "On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins," in which I mainly discussed the baptism of infants because of original sin, and the grace of God by which we are justified, that is, made righteous; but [I remarked] no man in this life can so keep the commandments which prescribe holiness of life, as to be beyond the necessity of using this prayer for his sins: "Forgive us our trespasses"¹ It is in direct opposition to these principles that they have devised their new heresy. Now throughout these three books I thought it right not to mention any of their names, hoping and desiring that by such reserve they might the more readily be set right; nay more, in the third book (which is really a letter, but reckoned amongst the books, because I wished to connect it with the two previous ones) I actually quoted Pelagius' name with considerable commendation, because his conduct and life were made a good deal of by many persons; and those statements of his which I refuted, he had himself adduced in his writings, not indeed in his own name, but had quoted them as the words of other persons. However, when he was afterwards confirmed in heresy, he defended them as the words of other persons. However, when he was afterwards confirmed in heresy, he defended them with most persistent animosity. Coelestius, indeed, a disciple of his, had already been excommunicated for similar

opinions at Carthage, in a council of bishops, at which I was not present. In a certain passage of my second book I used these words: "Upon some there will be bestowed this blessing at the last day, that they shall not perceived the actual suffering of death in the suddenness of the change which shall happen to them;"² -reserving the passage for a more careful consideration of the subject; for they will either die, or else by a most rapid transition from this life to death, and then from death to eternal life, as in the twinkling of an eye, they will not undergo the feeling of mortality. This work of mine begins with this sentence: "*However absorbing and intense the anxieties and annoyances.*"

< PAGE ▲ TOP > PAGE

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[Preface to Volume II. Of the Edinburgh Edition.](#)

Preface to Volume II. Of the Edinburgh Edition.

This volume contains a translation of the three following treatises by St. Augustin on the Pelagian controversy:-

De Gratia Christi, et De Peccato originali contra Pelagium et Coelestium, ad Albinam, Pinianum, et Melaniam; libri duo, scripti anno Christi 418.

De Nuptiis et Concupiscentiâ ad Valerium Comitem; libri duo, scriptus alter circiter initium anni 419; alter anno Christi 420.

De Animâ et ejus origine, contra Vincentium Victorem; libri quatuor, scriptus sub finem anni Christi 419.

These, with the contents of our former volume, comprise eight of the fifteen works contributed by the great author to the defence of the Catholic faith against Pelagius and his most conspicuous followers. The prefaces and chapter headings, which have been, as heretofore, transferred to their proper places in this volume from the Benedictine edition of the original, will afford the reader preliminary help enough, and thus render more than a few general prefatory remarks unnecessary here.

The second book in the first of these treatises adds some facts to the historical information contained in our preceding volume; Pelagius is shown to be at one, in the main, with Coelestius, the bolder but less specious heretic. They were condemned everywhere—even at Rome by Pope Zosimus, who had at first shown some favour to them. These authoritative proceedings against them gave a sensible check to their progress in public; there is, however, reason to believe that the opinions, which the Pelagian teachers had with great industry, and with their varied ability, propounded, had created much interest and even anxiety in private society. The early part of the first of the following treatises throws some light on this point, and on the artful methods by which the heretics sought to maintain and extend their opinions; it affords some evidence also of the widespread influence of St. Augustin. The controversy had engaged the attention of a pious family in Palestine; Pelagius was in the neighbourhood; and when frankly questioned by the friends, he strongly protested his adherence to the doctrine of Grace. "I anathematize," he exclaimed with suspicious promptitude, "the man who holds that the grace of God is not necessary for us at every moment and in every act of our lives: and all who endeavour to disannul it, deserve everlasting punishment." It was an act of astonishing duplicity, which Augustin, to whom the case was referred, soon detected and exposed. It is satisfactory to find that the worthy Christians to whom the Saint addressed his loving labour were confirmed in their simple faith; and in one of the last of his extant letters, towards the close of his days on earth, the venerable St. Jerome, in the course of the following year, united the gratitude of Albina, Pinianus, and Melania, with his own to his renowned brother in the west, whom he saluted as "the restorer of the ancient faith." "*Macte virtute*," said the venerable man, "*in orbe celebraris; et, quod signum majoris est gloriæ, omnes heretici detestantur.*" [Go on and prosper; the whole world endows thee with its praise, and all heretics with their hatred.]

In the latter part of the first treatise in this volume, one of the most formidable of the Pelagian objections to the Catholic doctrine of original sin is thrown out against marriage: "Surely that could not be a holy

state, instituted of God, which produced human beings in sin!" Augustin in a few weighty chapters removes the doubts of his perplexed correspondents, and reserves his strength for the full treatment of the subject in the second treatise, here translated, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*. It is a noble monument of his firm grasp of Scripture truth, his loyal adherence to its plain meaning, and his delicate and, at the same time, intrepid handling of a subject, which could only be touched by a man whose mind possessed a deep knowledge of human nature-both in its moral and its physiological aspects, and in its relations to God as affected by its creation, its fall, and its redemption.

This treatise introduces us to a change of circumstances. The preceding one was, as we have seen, addressed to a small group of simple believers in sacred truth, who were not personally known to the author, and, though zealous in the maintenance of the faith, occupied only a private place in society; but the present work was written at the urgent request of a nobleman in high office as a minister of state, and well known to the writer. It is pleasant to trace a similar earnestness, in such dissimilar ranks, in the defence of the assailed faith: and it illustrates the wide stretch of mind and comprehensive love of Augustin, that he could so promptly sympathize with the anxieties of all classes and conditions in the Christian life; and, what is more, so administer comfort and conviction out of the treasures of his wisdom, as to settle their doubts and reassure them in faith. Nor does the change end here. Instead of Pelagius and Coelestius, Augustin has in this work to confute the powerful argument of Julianus, bishop of Celanum, the ablest of his Pelagian opponents. This man was really the mainstay of the heresy; he had greater resources of mind and a firmer character than either of his associates;-more candid and sincere than Pelagius, and less ambitious and impatient than Coelestius, he seemed to contend for truth for its own sake, and this disposition found a complete response in the Church's earnest and accomplished champion. Notwithstanding the difficulty and delicacy of the subject, which removes, no doubt, the treatise *De Nuptiis et Concupisentiâ* out of the category of what is called "general reading," the great author never did a higher service to the faith than when he provided for it this defence of a fundamental point. The venerable Jerome rejoiced at the good service, and longed to embrace his brother Saint from his distant retreat of Bethlehem. "*Testem invoco Deum,*" he wrote to Augustin, and his dear friend and helper Alypius, "*quod si posset fieri, assumptis alis columbae, vestris amplexibus implicarer.*"

In the last and longest work, translated for this volume, we come upon a change, both of subject and circumstances, as complete as that we have just noticed. Vincentius Victor, whose unsafe opinions are reviewed, was a young African of great ability and rhetorical accomplishment. His fluent tongue had fairly bewitched not only crowds of thoughtless hearers, but staid persons, whose faith should have been proof against a seductive influence which was soon shown to be transient and flimsy. The young disputant seems to have been more of a schismatic in the Donatist party, than a heretic with Pelagius; showy, however, and unstable, and hardly weighing the consequence of his own opinions, he began to air his metaphysics, and soon fell into strange errors about the nature and origin of the human soul. In his youthful arrogance he happened to censure Augustin for his cautious teaching on so profound a subject; kindly does the aged bishop receive the criticism, show its unreasonableness, and point out to his rash assailant some serious errors which he was propounding at random. He also reproves one of Victor's friends, who happened to be a presbyter, for allowing himself to be misled by the young man's eloquent sophistry; and in the latter half of his treatise, with fatherly love and earnestness, he advises Victor to renounce his dangerous errors, some of which were rankly Pelagian, and something worse. The result of Augustin's admonitions-adorned as they were with great depth and width of reflection and knowledge (extending this time even to physical science, on some facts of which he playfully comments with the ease of a modern experimenter), with loving consideration for his opponent's inexperience, kindly deference to his undoubted abilities, and a pious desire to win him over to the cause of truth and godliness-was entirely satisfactory. We find from the

Retractions (ii. 56), that Victor in time abjured all his errors, and doubtless, like another Apollos, ably employed his best powers in the service of true religion. This was a real trophy, great among the greatest of Augustin's achievements for faith and charity. For so great a soul to stoop to the level of so captious a spirit, and with industrious love and patience to trace out and refute all its ambitious error, was "a labour of love" indeed. He remembered the wise counsel of the apostle: "Count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother;" and he reaped the victory the Saviour promised: "Thou hast gained thy brother."

The translation, as in the former volume of the Anti-Pelagian writings of our author, has been made from the tenth volume of the Antwerp reprint of the Benedictine edition of St. Augustin's works.

Peter Holmes.

[Volume III. of the Edinburgh edition appeared without dedication or preface, in 1876. It contained translations of Augustin's treatises on *Grace and Free-Will*, *Rebuke and Grace*, *The Predestination of the Saints*, *The Gift of Perseverance*, and of his work *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*. Of these, only the first was from the pen of Dr. Holmes, the rest being the work of Dr. Robert Ernest Wallis, whose name has been accordingly placed on the general titlepage of this revision.-W.]

< PAGE ▲ TOP > PAGE

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Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. V

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[Dedication of Volume II. Of the Edinburgh Edition.](#)

[Preface to Volume I. Of the Edinburgh Edition.](#)

[Preface to Volume II. Of the Edinburgh Edition.](#)

St. Aurelius Augustin

[On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants](#)

[Book I.](#)

[Book II.](#)

[Book III.](#)

[On the Spirit and the Letter](#)

[Note on the Following Work.](#)

[On Nature and Grace, Against Pelagius](#)

[Preface to the Treatise on Man's Perfection in Righteousness.](#)

[Concerning Man's Perfection in Righteousness](#)

[Preface to the Book on the Proceedings of Pelagius.](#)

[On the Proceedings of Pelagius,¹](#)

[A Treatise on the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin](#)

[Book I.](#)

[Book II.](#)

[Advertisement to the Reader on the Following Treatise.](#)

[A Letter¹ Addressed to the Count Valerius](#)

[On Marriage and Concupiscence.](#)

[Book I.¹](#)

[Book II.¹](#)

[Advertisement to the Reader of This Treatise.](#)

[On the Soul and Its Origin](#)

[Book I.¹](#)

[Book II.](#)

[Book III.](#)

[Book IV.](#)

[A Treatise Against Two Letters of the Pelagians¹](#)

[Book I.](#)

[Book II.](#)

[Book III.](#)

[Book IV.](#)

[A Treatise on Grace and Free Will.](#)

[Treatise on Rebuke and Grace](#)

[A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints,](#)

[The First Book.¹](#)

[A Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance,¹ Being the Second Book](#)

[On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants](#)

[In Three Books, Addressed to Marcellinus, a.d. 412.](#)

On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants

In Three Books, Addressed to Marcellinus, a.d. 412.

¹ See Matt. vi. 12.

² See Book ii. ch. 50.

¹ This is probably an allusion to the Donatists, who were then fiercely assailing the Catholics; [and over the conference between whom and the Catholics, Marcellinus had presided the previous year (411).-W.]

² [Flavius Marcellinus, a "tribune and notary," a Christian man of high character and devout mind, who was much interested in theological discussions. He was appointed by Honorius to preside over the commission of inquiry into the disputes between the Catholics and Donatists in 411, and held the famous conference between the parties, that met in Carthage on the 1st, 3d, and 8th of June, 411. He discharged this whole business with singular patience, moderation, and good judgment: which appears to have cemented the intimate friendship between him and Augustin. Augustin's treatise on *The Spirit and Letter* is also addressed to him, and he undertook the *City of God* on his suggestion. See below, p. 80.-W.]

³ Gen. ii. 17.

⁴ Matt. viii. 22; Luke ix. 60.

⁵ Gen. iii. 19.

⁶ 1 Cor. xv. 52, 53.

⁷ 2 Cor. v. 2-4.

⁸ Deut. xxix. 5.

⁹ Gen. v. 24; 2 Kings ii. 11.

¹⁰ 1 Kings xix. 8.

¹¹ [Flavius Marcellinus, a "tribune and notary," a Christian man of high character and devout mind, who was much interested in theological discussions. He was appointed by Honorius to preside over the commission of inquiry into the disputes between the Catholics and Donatists in 411, and held the famous conference between the parties, that met in Carthage on the 1st, 3d, and 8th of June, 411. He discharged this whole business with singular patience, moderation, and good judgment: which appears to have cemented the intimate friendship between him and Augustin. Augustin's treatise on *The Spirit and Letter* is also addressed to him, and he undertook the *City of God* on his suggestion. See below, p. 80.-W.]

¹² Rom. viii. 10, 11.



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Author Index

Non-Fiction

Anonymous (14th c. Germany)

[Theologia Germanica](#)

Anonymous (14th c. English)

[The Cloud of Unknowing](#)

A

St. Alphonsus (1696-1787)

[Uniformity with God's Will](#)

[St. Thomas Aquinas](#) (1225-1274)

[Summa Theologica](#)

[St. Athanasius](#) (c. 295-373)

[On the Incarnation](#)

[St. Augustine](#) (345-430)

[The Confessions of St. Augustine](#)

[City of God](#)

On Christian Doctrine, [html](#), [text](#)

[Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love](#)

B

[Richard Baxter](#) (1615-1691)

[The Saints' Everlasting Rest](#)

[St. Bernard of Clairvaux](#) (1090?-1153)

[On Loving God](#)

[Jacob Boehme](#) (1575-1624)

[The Way to Christ](#)

Horatius Bonar

[God's Way of Peace](#)

Edward M. Bounds (1835-1913)

[Power Through Prayer](#)

[The Necessity of Prayer](#)

[The Possibilities of Prayer](#)

John Bunyan (1628-1688)

[Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners](#)

The Holy War [text](#), 536k

[Pilgrim's Progress](#)

C

[John Calvin](#) (1509-1564)

[Commentaries](#)

[Calvin: Commentaries](#), tr. and ed. by Joseph Haroutunian

On the Christian Life, [HTML](#), [RTF](#), [text](#)

Institutes of the Christian Religion, [Book 1](#) [Book 2](#) [Book 3](#) [Book 4](#)

[Of Prayer](#)

John Cassian

[Conferences](#)

St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

[Dialog of Catherine of Siena](#)

St. Catherine of Genoa

[The Life and Doctrine of Saint Catherine of Genoa](#)

G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

[Orthodoxy](#)

[Heretics](#)

D

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) (tr. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

[Inferno](#)

[Purgatorio](#)

[Paradiso](#)

Philip Doddridge

[The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul](#)

John Donne (1572-1631)

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, [HTML](#), [RTF](#)

Death's Duel, [HTML](#)

Sermon Preached to the Lords upon Easter-day, at the Communion [HTML](#), [text](#)

E

[Jonathan Edwards](#) (1703-1758)

[Religious Affections](#)

[Select Sermons](#)

[Treatise on Grace](#)

[An Unpublished Essay on the Trinity](#)

St. Ephraim of Syria (c. 306-373)

[The Pearl](#)

Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536)

[In Praise of Folly](#) [203k]

St. Eucherius of Lyons

De Contemptu Mundi, [html](#)

F

Francois Fenelon (1651-1715)

[Spiritual Progress](#)

Charles G. Finney (1792-1875)

Lectures on Revival [text files](#)

Lectures to Professing Christians [text files](#)

Systematic Theology, [text files](#)

[John Flavel](#) (c. 1630-1691)

The Fountain of Life opened up: or, A Display of Christ in his essential and mediatorial glory, [text](#) [1.4 MB]

The Method of Grace in the Gospel Redemption, [text](#) [1.3 MB], [zip](#) [450 KB],

[Christ Altogether Lovely](#)

George Fox (1624-1691)

[Autobiography of George Fox](#)

John Foxe (1516-1587)

[Book of Martyrs](#)

G

Edmund G. Gardner

[The Cell of Self-Knowledge: Seven Early English Mystical Treatises](#)

William Guthrie (1620-1665)

The Christian's Great Interest, [text](#) [321k]

Madame Guyon (1647-1717)

[Autobiography of Madame Guyon](#), [HTML](#) [536k], [RTF](#) [550k]

H

Walter Hilton (?-1396)

[The Scale \(or Ladder\) of Perfection](#), [RTF](#)

[Treatise Written to a Devout Man](#)

[The Song of Angels](#)

I

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)

[The Spiritual Exercises](#)

W. R. Inge (1860-1954)

Light, Life and Love (Selections from German Mystics),

[RTF](#)

J

[St. John of the Cross](#) (1542-1591)

[Ascent of Mount Carmel](#)

[Dark Night of the Soul](#)

[A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ](#)

J. H. Jowett

[The School of Calvary](#)

Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-c. 1413)

[Revelations of Divine Love](#)

K

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

[The Imitation of Christ](#)

L

William Law (1686-1761)

[A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life](#)

An Humble, Earnest, and Affectionate Address to the Clergy, [text](#) [274k]

An Appeal to all that Doubt the Truths of the Gospel, [text](#) [266k]

The Nature and Extent of the Lord's Supper and Redemption, [text](#) [356k]

The Way to Divine Knowledge, [text](#) [315k]

Of Justification by Faith and Works, [text](#) [96k]

A Collection of Letters on Several Occasions, [text](#) [271k]

The Grounds and Reasons of Christian Regeneration, [text](#) [125k]

The Spirit of Love, [HTML](#) [373k], [text](#) [342k]

The Spirit of Prayer, [HTML](#) [392k], [text](#) [373k]

Brother Lawrence (c. 1605-1691)

[The Practice of the Presence of God](#)

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

[The Large Catechism](#), tr. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau

[Preface to Romans](#)

[Table Talk](#)

M

F. B. Meyer

[The Way Into the Holiest](#)

John Milton (1608-1674)

Paradise Lost, [html](#) [text](#)

Paradise Regained, [text](#)

Andrew Murray

[The Deeper Christian Life](#)

[The True Vine: Meditations for a Month on John 15:1-16](#)

O

[John Owen](#)(1616-1683)

Christologia, [html](#), [text](#) [776k]

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, [text](#) [1221k]

A brief Declaration and Vindication of The Doctrine of the Trinity, [text](#) [242k]

Evidences of the Faith of God's Elect, [text](#) [158k]

Introduction to the Worship of God, [text](#) [250k]

Of Communion with God, [text](#) [760K], [zip](#) [267K]

A Vindication of some Passages in a Discourse concerning Communion with God, [text](#) [262k], [zip](#) [92k]

Two short Catechisms, [text](#) [93k], [zip](#) [30k],

P

Blaise Pascal

[Pensees](#)

St. Patrick (c. 390-c. 461)

[The Confession of St. Patrick](#)

A. W. Pink (1886-1952)

[The Doctrine of Justification](#)

[The Law and the Saint](#)

[The Godhood of God](#)

[Why Four Gospels?](#)

R

Richard Rolle of Hampole (c.1290-1349)

[The Fire of Love and the Mending of Life](#)

Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661)

A Selection from his Letters, [text](#) [240k]

St. John of Ruysbroeck (1293-1381)

The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage and other works,
[RTF](#), [text](#)

S

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)

Catholic Tales and Christian Songs, [HTML](#) [57k]

Sadhu Sundar Singh, tr. Ref. Arthur and Mrs. Parker

[At the Masters Feet](#)

Hannah Whitall Smith

[The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life](#)

Henry Suso

[A Little Book of Eternal Wisdom](#)

C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

All of Grace, [text](#) [183k], [RTF](#) 197k], [postscript](#) [515k]

[Morning and Evening](#)

[Till He Come](#)

T

John Tauler

[The Inner Way](#)

J. Hudson Taylor

[Union and Communion](#)

Jeremy Taylor

[Holy Living](#)

[Holy Dying](#)

[St. Teresa of Avila](#) (1515-1582)

The Way of Perfection, [html](#), [RTF](#)

The Life of Teresa of Avila, [html](#), [RTF](#)

Interior Castle, [html](#) [437k] [RTF](#) [488k]

U

Brother Ugolino

[The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi](#)

Evelyn Underhill

[Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness](#), [RTF](#) [1889K]

W

Thomas Watson

The Lord's Prayer, [text](#) [960k], [zip](#) [359k],

The Ten Commandments, [text](#) [695k], [zip](#) [263k],

John Wesley (1703-1791)

[Sermons on Several Occasions](#)

A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, [text](#), [unwrapped text](#)

[Wesley's Notes on the Bible](#)

George Whitefield

[Sermons](#)

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[The Club of Queer Trades](#)

[The Innocence of Father Brown](#)

[The Man Who Was Thursday](#)

[The Wisdom of Father Brown](#)

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

The Brothers Karamazov, [text](#) [2.0 MB]

Crime and Punishment, [text](#) [1.4 MB]

Notes from the Underground [text](#) [242k]

George MacDonald (1824-1905)

[At the Back of the North Wind](#)

[The Light Princess](#)

The Day Boy and the Night Girl, [text](#) [87k], [html](#) [91k]

[Lilith](#), [text](#) [522k]

Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828-1910)

Twenty-Three Tales, [html](#), [RTF](#)

Anna Karenina, [text](#) [2018k]

A Confession, [text](#) [148k]

The Devil, [text](#) [106k]

Family Happiness, [text files](#)

Hadji Murad, [text files](#)

The Death of Ivan Ilych, [text](#) [131k]

The Kreutzer sonata, [text](#) [179k]

Master and Man, [text](#) [110k]

Epilog to the Kreutzer Sonata, [text](#) [32k]

The Works of Guy de Maupassant, [text](#) [51k]

Father Sergius, [text](#) [101k]

Hymns

Frances Bevan

[Hymns of Ter Steegen, Suso, and Others](#)

Hymnal of The Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA, 1916,

[text](#) [576K], [RTF](#) [1054k]

William Walker

[Southern Harmony](#), 1853

John Wesley (1703-1791)

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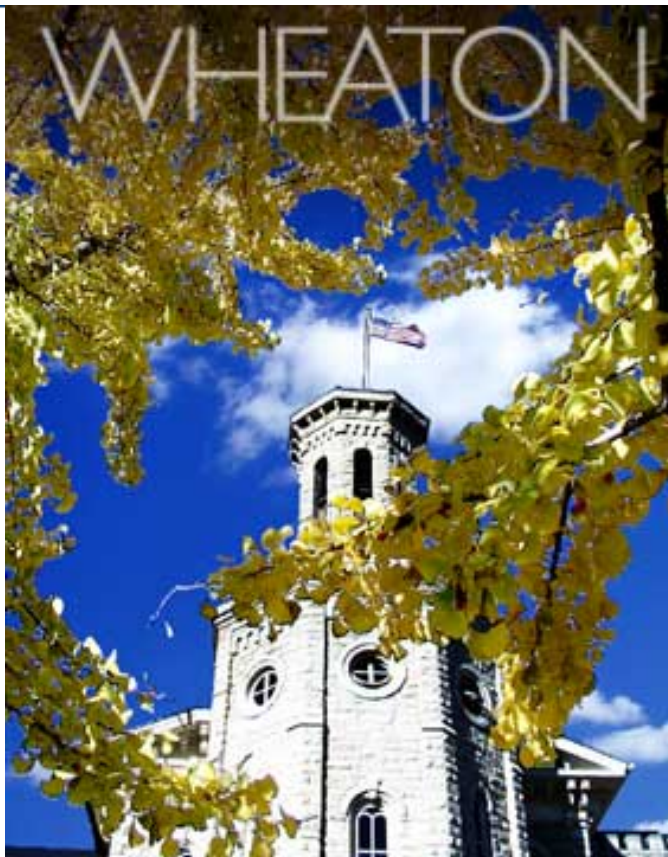
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