ON DECEMBER 19, 1781 Joseph Willard was inaugurated President of Harvard College. (1) The post had been vacant for more than a year ever since Samuel Langdon’s sudden resignation in August 1780. In the intervening months the Corporation had tried and failed to find a successor. Finally after considerable persuasion Willard, who had been serving as the pastor of the First Church in Beverly, agreed to come to Cambridge. (2)

The greatest problem facing the new President was a simple one—money. The Revolution was raising havoc with the economy. Inflation was out of control and the college found itself facing rising expenditures with decreasing revenue.

The faculty too was feeling the pinch of hard times and shortly after his arrival Willard was presented with a petition from the Professor of Mathematics Samuel Williams. Williams wanted a raise. (3)

Willard realized that the issue was far more serious than the pay of one professor for to adjust only his salary would leave the rest of the faculty highly indignant. Instead he made a detailed study of the history of salaries at Harvard since 1750. In particular he examined the ratios of salaries between faculty members and the President. Although there is no record of their reaction the faculty could not have been pleased at President Willard’s conclusions. (4)