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Beneath the Surface

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Revisiting the Huntsville Female College

The Huntsville Female College was a significant place in Huntsville, Alabama during the late 1800s. The school, originally called the Bascom Institute for Women, was established in 1845 by Mrs. J. Hamilton Childs under the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Dickson, “Huntsville Female College” 2). It taught the daughters of some of Huntsville’s most prominent men—including John Slaughter and John Wynn, both which had roads named after them that still exist today (“Catalog” 18). Though the school no longer exists, the Huntsville Female College still remains an interesting aspect of Huntsville’s history.



Fig. 1. Portrait of Mrs. J. Hamilton Childs from "Community-Backed Project" 8.

The Huntsville Female College had always represented ambition to the highest degree. Originally, the school operated out of the Masonic Temple. In February of 1851, a committee tasked with constructing an independent school building claimed they would raise \$10,000 and complete construction in time for classes to begin the following September. By May of the same year, \$9,000 in funds had been raised (“Community-Backed Project” 9). Later, in 1853, about \$35,000 were raised for a new building that would house both the students and their classes (Dickson, “Huntsville Female College” 1, 4).



Fig. 2. Huntsville Female College main building from "Catalog" 2.

The Huntsville Female College’s ambitions did not end there. The college offered the best educational opportunity for women in the area and was proudly known as “woman’s [sic] work for women.” Uniquely, the college offered strictly secular classes, despite being established under the Church (Dickson, “History of the Huntsville Female College” 1). The students took classes over the course of five years (freshman, sophomore, junior, sub-senior, and senior) in a wide range of areas, including but not limited to literature, history, mathematics, science, and ancient languages. The opportunities the Huntsville Female College offered attracted students

not only from Alabama, but Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas, too (“Catalog” 6, 11-12).

<p>I. SCHOOL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE. <i>Topics:</i> Grammar, Analysis, Composition, Reading, Dictation, Penmanship, Rhetoric, Elocution and Literature.</p> <p>II. SCHOOL OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY. <i>Topics:</i> Special Histories of Greece, Rome, England, France, United States, General Outlines of Ancient, Medieval and Modern History, with Geography and Map-Drawing.</p> <p>III. SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS. <i>Topics:</i> Arithmetic—Mental and Written, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry and Mensuration.</p> <p>IV. SCHOOL OF NATURAL SCIENCES. <i>Topics:</i> Botany, Philosophy, Chemistry, Physiology, Geology, Physical Geography and Astronomy.</p> <p>V. SCHOOL OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY. <i>Topics:</i> Mental Philosophy, Logic, Ethics, Christian Evidences and Butler's Analogy.</p>	<p>VI. SCHOOL OF ANCIENT LANGUAGES. <i>Topics:</i> Latin—through Grammar, Cæsar, Virgil and Horace, Elements of Greek.</p> <p>VII. SCHOOL OF MODERN LANGUAGES. <i>Topics:</i> French—Reading and Composition, German—Reading and Writing.</p> <p>VIII. SCHOOL OF POETRY AND CRITICISM. <i>Topics:</i> Poetical Reading and Criticism, Rhetorical Praxis, Study of Thomson, Milton and other Standard Authors.</p> <p>IX. SCHOOL OF MUSIC. <i>Topics:</i> Instruction on Piano, Reed and Pipe Organ, Violin, Zithern; in Vocal Culture, Class Singing, Thorough Bass and Harmony.</p> <p>X. SCHOOL OF ART AND FANCY WORK. <i>Topics:</i> Drawing, Painting, Fancy Needle-Work, Wax and Leather Work.</p>
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Fig. 3. Huntsville Female College areas of study from "Catalog" 11.

While the students' coursework was strictly secular, the standards to which they were held reflected the moral values of the Church. The school was to be like a “well-ordered Christian family” and the students were monitored almost constantly. This included room inspections for neatness each morning and each night, as well as a room check after lights-out to ensure all students were in bed. Students were also prohibited from leaving campus without an escort, congregating in hallways, interacting with “young gentlemen,” taking lessons outside of the school, or reading any unapproved materials. The college enforced a strict daily schedule which dictated the times students woke, ate, took classes, studied, and slept (“Catalog” 13-15). The nature of the school's rules and prohibitions were well known—a local newspaper referred to the rules as “spartan” (“Community-Backed Project” 9).

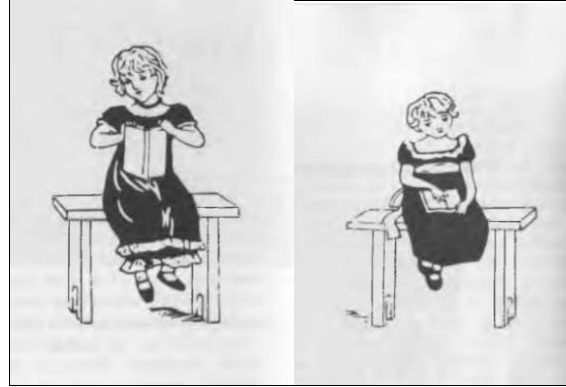


Fig. 3. Huntsville Female College areas of study from "Catalog" 11.

The Huntsville

Female College had been facing hardship following closures during the Civil War and monetary issues with the Church before, finally closing its doors in 1895 after a fire destroyed the main building ("Community-Backed Project" 10). The cause of the fire is unknown. Notably, much of the material referenced in this research project was published in response to the fire as a means of preserving the school in public memory. The way the Huntsville Female College was run has many striking similarities to the way colleges are run today: the vast variety of topics to study, the styles of the buildings, and especially the drive and motivation of both students and staff to achieve academic excellence. More than anything else, the Huntsville Female College fought for the elevation and betterment of womankind in a time where a woman's options were limited, and in that way, the college was truly ahead of its time.

Works Cited

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