Athens College: The First 150 Years

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"It is, Sir, as I have said, only a small college, but there are those that love it."

When Daniel Webster, in his best dramatic style, uttered those concluding remarks before the Supreme Court, the year was 1819 and the college to which he referred was Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. Barely three years after that, in 1822, in the flourishing little village of Athens, Alabama, the foundations were laid for another institution of learning about which some five generations of students, patrons and friends have felt the same as did Webster of his alma mater. Athens College, now beginning its second 150 years of educational service in the same location, has always been small by the simple standards of numbers and dimensions and it has always had those who loved it by every standard.

In 1822, five years after the town of Athens was incorporated and some four years after Alabama became a state, a few residents of this young Tennessee Valley community, concerned over the lack of formal educational opportunities available to their daughters, purchased a five-acre plot of land for the establishment of a female academy—the rough equivalent of a modern secondary level school. From this small beginning as an academic haven for the daughters of a few local citizens, grew one of the
oldest and most reputable private liberal arts institutions in the South, Athens College. Now in its sesquicentennial year, Athens College celebrates a century and a half of unbroken, untarnished service to the youth of the state; and from that small original investment of a few dollars and five acres of land, has evolved an academic and cultural center valued at over five million dollars and comprising more than forty-five acres of land.

Athens Female Academy, as the school was first called, served the community for over twenty years. In 1843 it was incorporated into a more enterprising educational plan which had been launched the year before by the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. At the annual meeting of the conference in 1842, which was held in Athens, a group of influential local Methodists successfully put the motion that the Church sanction the establishment of a female institute in the city. The conference delegates approved the idea but in their resolution made quite clear that the school was not to devolve "any pecuniary obligation upon the conference." Armed with this moral support, however, the backers of the school, including some trustees of Athens Female Academy, obtained a charter from the state in early 1843 and began operation that year as the Female Institute of the Tennessee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Academy property was signed over to the Institute and the trustees of the latter immediately and vigorously set to work to increase the size of the site and to subscribe the $10,000 that the Church had authorized to be raised. The trustees who successfully accomplished the work, the benefactors who made those original, most critical contributions, include among their number some of the most honored names in the history of

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Athens and Limestone County. With the funds quickly raised and another five acres of land accumulated, work was begun on the main academic building. The structure, basically completed in 1844, later came to be known as Founder's Hall and still stands today as the showpiece and focal point of the College. It has been added to and remodeled many times over the years but retains its attractiveness and appeal as a fine example of antebellum Southern Greek Revival architecture.

The first change in Founder's Hall came quite soon, in 1845, as a two-story wing was added on the north side to be used for presidential accommodation and to house boarding students. The trustees had early decided to make the institution a boarding school, and although this gave the Institute a distinctive character -- boarding schools for girls being quite rare at the time in the South -- it was also the cause of many of the financial difficulties the school was forced to meet through the years. Hard times were not in sight, however, as the Institute, under the able leadership of its first president, R. H. Rivers, saw its inaugural class of "nearly 80" come together in July, 1843. From that time to this, and of course stretching back to 1822, the school has never failed to meet its calendar. There have been delays and shifts and there have been times when it seemed unlikely that the doors would open, but unfailingly, as the Academy, the Institute, the Female College, and finally as Athens College, the institution has fulfilled its high obligations of education and service.

A succession of twenty-eight presidents have served as overseers of the evolution of this historic college; from Dr. Rivers in the beginning to Dr. Sidney Sandridge, who presently administers the job.
They have been, by and large, men of great character, talent, devotion to duty, and perseverance. There have been times in the past -- times of financial stress, primarily -- when, with a lesser man in control, the college might easily have failed. It is, of course, misleading to say "men" here for two of the more outstanding presidents were women; the legendary Madame J. Hamilton Childs and Mrs. Mary Moore McCoy. Mrs. Childs managed to shepherd the college safely through the Civil War years (she was a northerner and there are several fascinating but unlikely stories about how she managed to keep raiding Union troops from despoiling school property), and Mrs. Moore served two terms (1904-16 and 1925-30), the first of which was one of the most expansive in the college's history.

There are many interesting episodes in the chronicles of Athens College, stories of good times and bad. Mostly, however, is a story of continuing alteration and adjustments to meet the changing educational needs of its students, while remaining anchored to certain essential principles which have guided its trustees, faculty, and administrators from the outset. Fundamentally, the governing principle has been to provide the best possible liberal arts education without abandoning the philosophical responsibilities of nurturing the moral and spiritual growth of its students. Over the years Athens College has maintained a very close relationship to the Methodist Church which owns it (the owning conference finally assumed actual pecuniary obligation of the school in 1891), and, though there has never been a real seminary atmosphere on the campus, the school has always been heavily committed to cultivating those students desiring to serve the Church in lay or professional capacity.
During the late 1870's and 1880's the school came to be known as the "Female College" though technically it was still the Institute. These were years of physical growth and academic maturation, however, and this was reflected in 1889 in the decision to change the name officially to Athens Female College. The academic aspect of the school during these early years saw heavy emphasis upon music, fine arts, literature, and religion, which were considered proper subjects for refined young ladies. Examinations were in the traditional manner, oral and held before examining committees from the Methodist Church or sister educational institutions. Examination or "Recitation" Day was the highlight of the school year with friends and family coming to witness the progress of the students. All during these years the college also maintained a secondary or preparatory department which was a direct descendant of the original academy. Most of the preparatory students were "day students" or commuters whereas about one third to one half of the college girls were boarders, many coming from other states. The preparatory department, which later was called Rivers Academy, coexisted with the college well into the twentieth century and many alumnae of the college today are also Rivers Academy alumnae.

Around the turn of the century the enrollment of the school fluctuated depending upon economic conditions but generally was around 100 to 125 students. Normally about one third of these were Academy girls, including some primary students. After 1909 the academy was restricted entirely to secondary-level pupils.

The year 1909 was a significant one for the college in several ways. Not only was the academy
changed, as noted, but this was also the peak year of enrollment. Some 235 girls registered in 1909 with more than half of them being resident or boarding students. At this moment of apparent prosperity the college was met, however, with one of its most serious disasters. A typhoid epidemic struck the school with sixty-five cases of the dread disease on campus. Four students died in the epidemic but only two of them on campus. One of those deaths was that of Florence Brown, a student-teacher from Illinois. Miss Brown was something of a heroine during the plague and Brown Hall, one of the central buildings on the campus, was named in her honor.

These years, just before the First World War, were boom years for the college. Under the leadership of President Mary Norman Moore (who would serve again later as Mrs. Mary Moore McCoy), there was extensive physical growth and academic change. A number of new buildings were erected and the curriculum was updated to meet the challenges of the twentieth century. In 1914 the Board of Education of the General Conference of the Methodist Church recognized the advances of the college by awarding it an "A" classification which meant that it was a fully accredited degree-granting institution. By that same year the valuation of the physical property of the college had increased to over $200,000. The year 1915 saw the corporate name of the institution changed once more, this time to Athens College for Young Women.

The 1920's were years of continuing progress for the college. The Methodist Church, whose financial role in the life of the school had been nominal to this point, began to become more actively engaged in the funding of the college, at least to the extent of authorizing loans for construction and supporting
fund drives within the conference. With such backing and continued support from local citizens several new buildings were added, including a modern dormitory and a gymnasium. The school was sufficiently funded and organized to attain full accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1927.

The 1930's brought financial hardships to institutions and individuals alike and Athens College was no different. A number of adjustments had to be made to meet the financial crises and the most significant was the decision to become co-educational. In 1931 the doors of the hallowed old girls' school were opened to men. To some it was a sacrilege, but to most students of both sexes it was a delight. Subsequently, of course, the name changed, this time to the still existing Athens College. During these difficult years, the school sustained itself, as did many other small private colleges, by offering whatever assistance it could to students in the matter of tuition and other expenses. Payments in kind were accepted, a variety of work-study plans were adopted, and a number of students were accepted on pure faith. In 1939-40 the college sponsored the construction of a hosiery mill to help provide work for needy students.

The war years of the forties were lean times for Athens College but the influx of veterans after 1945 helped revitalize the school. Evening classes were introduced for the benefit of those studying under the G.I. Bill of Rights and became a mainstay of the curriculum and a financial boon to the school in the 1950s and sixties. Men's intercollegiate sports were added during this period with basketball and even football (which had been played for a brief time in the thirties) becoming a part of the campus life in
the 1950's. With the return of somewhat more flush times some sorely needed refurbishing and construction were undertaken in this decade with a small dormitory and a science building being the main additions. In 1962 a more spacious and modern residence hall for girls was completed which would house fifty students.

Under the leadership of President Virgil McCain and the Board of Trustees, the college saw a "new departure" in 1964 as it launched an era of expansion and active recruitment of students. In the short space of one year the enrollment of the school increased from less than 800 to more than 1300. There were some problems as Athens College went "mod" with its expanded and cosmopolitan student body, a significant part of which now came from the eastern and northern states. It was another period of adjustment for the school but the problems were quickly ameliorated with no sacrifice of academic excellence. A number of new buildings were added, including a modern physical education center, an excellent college union building and four men's dormitories.

As Athens College begins its second 150 years the prospects are quite bright, certainly as much so as they were for those stalwarts who resolved to establish an "institute of high grade" back in 1822. The current problems are being expeditiously met -- as they have always been -- the enrollment has stabilized at about one thousand per semester, the faculty is outstanding, student-faculty ratios are excellent, the endowment is increasing, the administration is progressive and responsive to student needs, and it may be expected that 150 years from now the tri-centennial historian of the college will view this as one more interesting era in a long and
colorful history. And another five generations will have been able to concur with Webster that though it is but a small college, "there are those that love it."

FOUNDERS HALL

Completed in 1844, this building shows clearly the Greek influence which was common to early Southern architecture. The massive outer brick walls are fifteen inches thick and were fashioned by slave labor.