And Old Views

Historic Huntsville Foundation

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Education during the 19th century was largely a private concern conducted by private schools that were segregated by sex and often operated under the auspices of a church.

One of the most successful of these locally was the Huntsville Female College which operated from 1851 until 1895. Loosely connected with the Methodist Church, it was chartered by the state legislature on January 27, 1852, as the Bascom Female Institute, and among the first trustees were Pleasant B. Robinson, Robert S. Brandon, William H. Moore, Irvin Windham and Thomas S. McCalley.

The first session of the Bascom Institute was just concluding when the charter was awarded. Classes were being held in the old Masonic Hall under the direction of Mrs. Jane Childs who was a graduate of Athens College. A notice in the February, 1852, ADVOCATE stated that the second session of the Institute would commence February 2 in the Masonic Hall; "The young ladies of the Institute are permitted and required to attend any church in the town which may be selected by their parents and guardians." Board was available at Mrs. Childs (401 Lincoln) or in other private homes from $50 to $60 per session. A "thorough and finished education" was promised.

Once the charter was received, the trustees began planning for a permanent home for the Institute. A large tract of land extending from Randolph to Clinton and running 234 feet along each street was purchased from George Steele although the deed was not transferred to the Institute until 1855. Steele was also selected as the architect for the design of the school building and his plans were completed by November, 1852.

Daniel Turner, Thomas McCalley, William McCalley and William Moore contracted with the trustees of the Institute to "have constructed, the building for said Bascom Female Institute according to the plans prepared by George Steele, three stories high...and as said building is designed for a boarding as well as day school, (they) also bind themselves to furnish and erect suitable kitchens, smoke house, servants rooms, store rooms, bath rooms, and all other buildings, so as to have every necessary building and improvement to adapt the whole to a complete 'Day and Boarding School'." They also agreed "to procure suitable furniture, for said building, also books, globes, charts, maps, musical instruments, and a philosophical and chemical apparatus to be worth in all not less than $2500 in addition to the amount necessary for the erection and final completion of said building."
"They also obligated themselves to enclose the lot...in a permanent and substantial manner, and at the same time to ornament and beautify the grounds." The school was designed to accommodate one hundred pupils.

The building was erected on the site now occupied by 415 through 421 Randolph and by 420 through 426 Clinton. The ADVOCATE (June, 1853) reported, "It is to be 106' long and 52' wide, three stories high with two fronts and colonnades on the fronts to each story and small portions to the ends."

The school building opened in the fall of 1854. It faced Randolph street and the main portion was two stories high on a full raised basement. Designed in the Greek Revival style, it featured a central, projecting portico of six, two-story Ionic columns raised on a foundation of brick piers. The pediment and low gabled roof rested on a simple entablature. Plain pilasters accented the corners of the facade and connected the portico to the main wall.

The daylight basement was visually separated from the upper wall by a masonry string-course. The narrow windows were grouped in pairs with those on the first floor being tallest to stress the location of the main level. A smaller wing of two floors extended to the east and had a gable on each face.

In 1855 the name of the school was legally changed to the Huntsville Female College. The College operated until the Civil War when it closed to be used as a hospital. Classes were resumed following the war, but it was not until 1878 that money was available to repair it. The College's newspaper, FIRST FRUITS, commented in February, "How glad we are to see..."

The original Randolph street facade of the HUNTSVILLE FEMALE COLLEGE designed by George Steele and completed in 1854.
The HUNTSVILLE FEMALE COLLEGE as it appeared after the 1888 remodeling. The drawing is by H. D. Breeding, an architect who worked in Huntsville during the 1890s.

The steady improvement going on in repairing the College building and renovating the grounds. Very soon the desolation of war will be forgotten and our noble edifice will renew its pristine freshness and beauty."

The College catalogue of 1881 reported that the "rooms are large, well ventilated, suitably furnished, with a dressing room attached to each. The building is furnished with gas throughout, and water from the city waterworks, with a bath-room on each floor."

In 1880 Amos B. Jones was elected president of the College. The property had been in litigation for many years, and the case was finally resolved in 1888 when Jones purchased the building and grounds for $15,000. Two years earlier he had bought the house adjoining the property on the west (413 Randolph) and connected the house and the school with a covered walkway.

By 1885 the College was flourishing and had over 160 pupils of which 64 were boarders. Jones planned to increase the enrollment, and once he owned the property, he embarked on a building campaign. In the summer of 1888, Jones began construction of an additional floor containing twenty more rooms and of a large reading room and library. The grounds were laid off with rustic seats, flower beds and shady arbors, and the whole was enclosed by a modern fence. The building was lit by 100 incandescent lights, and an elevator had been installed to handle luggage.

The additional story was achieved by removing the gabled roof and replacing it with a mansard. The mansard roof had become very popular during the 1860s in the East because it was the latest in fashion, having been imported from Paris, and because it allowed an extra
floor to be tucked under the roof without extending the wall. Light and ventilation were provided by the use of dormer windows placed in the bottom slope of the roof. The roof was covered with patterned tin, and the ridge was accented with delicate metal cresting. Other exterior changes introduced by Jones included placing wooden brackets under the eaves and corbeling the chimney tops.

Jones' improvement program continued on the interior; in 1893 a new chapel was completed. "The ceiling is of steel and the artist, T. Simpson, finished the work in excellent taste. This finished, it is one of the finest auditoriums in the South." New furniture, carpets, and musical instruments were also installed that year as well as additional electric lights, and the interior was repainted.

The following year Jones was contemplating the construction of additional buildings to accommodate the increasing enrollment. But his plans came to an abrupt end on the morning of January 8, 1895, when a fire broke out in the roof of the College building.

"In a very few minutes the engine was at the plug in front of the college building and two lines of hose were run up to the fourth story. A dense smoke was issuing from the roof and also filled the hallways and rooms, but no flames could be seen. Holes were then cut through the ceiling on the inside and through the mansard tin roofing on the outside and the entire sheeting under the roof was discovered to be a mass of flames. The firemen were handicapped in their work on account of the numerous small rooms, while they would be playing a stream in one room the flames would break through in another twenty feet away.

"The wind was blowing a gale and at the first appearance of the flames through the roof, it was seen that the building could not be saved and willing hands went to work to save the furniture and trunks of the boarders.

"The flames continued their course of devastation until only the bleak walls and tall, lonesome chimneys stand today where yesterday stood the pride of Huntsville, the Alma Mater of her daughters and our mothers." (MERCURY, January 9, 1895)

While the ashes were still smoldering, Jones announced grand new plans to rebuild; instead, he purchased a hotel and a mountain near Gadsden where he opened the Jones College for Women. It failed after one year.

The insurance coverage on the Huntsville Female College was insufficient, and in 1897, Jones' Huntsville properties were sold. The president's house went for $3500 and the vacant college lot brought $4,000. The following year Columbus Nolen purchased the college lot, and at the turn of the century built four identical houses facing Clinton street. Nolen died in 1927 and willed one house to each of his four children. ■