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# Prominent Private Schools - 1908 to 1929

(Including Butler and Wills-Taylor)

by Joberta Wasson

## BUTLER TRAINING SCHOOL

One of Huntsville's finest private schools owed its beginning to a fracas among the public school officials. In 1907 Huntsville had two school boards appointed by rival factions and working at cross purposes. High school principal Professor Samuel Riley Butler resigned in disgust. A month or so later, one J. E. Conder, principal and owner of a small private school on Franklin Street, abruptly departed from Huntsville, leaving behind a stack of unpaid bills and 128 students. Professor Butler was urged to take over the school. He declined, but the following September, in 1908, Butler Training School opened its doors in that same building, the Todd Building at the corner of Franklin and Gates Streets. The school was solely the property of Professor Butler. It offered all grades, primary through high school, was non-denominational and co-educational.

One year later the school moved to Professor Butler's newly constructed building on the tree-shaded grounds of what is now the southwest corner of Andrew Jackson Way and Wells Avenue. Built of brick and concrete, two stories high with a bell tower, it was considered the most magnificent school building the town had ever seen. There were seven classrooms. The assembly hall, on the second floor, was made light and airy with large windows. The building's unique heating system boasted two furnaces, one for moderate weather, the other for extreme cold. A ventilation system changed the air in all rooms every seven to eleven minutes.

For the next twenty years there was always a private school headquartered in this building, though not always with the same headmaster.

The school soon achieved a well-deserved reputation



Designed by Huntsville architect Edgar L. Love and built as Butler Training School in 1908, this building housed five prominent private schools before becoming part of the Huntsville city school system in 1929. Located in the block bounded by Eustis and Wells Avenues, White Street, and the present (later) Andrew Jackson Way, the building was torn down in 1962.

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for excellence. Professor Butler was both a scholar and an outstanding administrator. Portly and authoritative in his invariable frock coat, he maintained perfect discipline.

Of course, where there are children there is mischief, Butler School being no exception. One Halloween a group of boys tried to play a prank on their professor. They decided to steal his buggy and hoist it up on top of the school building.

Since he lived across from the school, they were confident they could succeed. They crept into his stable after dark, but when they reached the buggy they found it occupied -- by Professor Butler. He had anticipated their prank. Their punishment was to walk the "bull ring" -- a circular path around a pole. In all the years the school existed, with all its different principals, the bull ring served the same purpose.



Architect's drawing of the proposed Butler Training School, signed by Edgar L. Love. Although the school as actually constructed appears quite different from the above drawing, note the similarities in the fenestration (windows), the cornice trim, the similar treatments of the entrance, and the decorative brickwork at the ground-floor level.

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Butler School offered strong courses in English, History, Science, Mathematics, Latin, Greek, German, French, and Music. Nor did it neglect athletics. There was already a football team in 1910.

A local newspaper, the **Weekly Democrat**, enthused, "It seems indeed absurd for parents to send their young sons and daughters off to college with a school like the Butler School in their midst." (June 7, 1911.)

Unfortunately, perhaps, for the school, the professor held another position. He was Madison County's Superintendent of Schools. For sev-

eral years, he juggled the two jobs successfully but found this increasingly onerous as the county grew. In 1913 he sold or leased the school to his language teacher, James Goodrich.

#### THE GOODRICH SCHOOL

Mr. Goodrich, a fine Latin and Shakespearean scholar, maintained the school's reputation for academic excellence and good discipline. He was a stern man but with a saving sense of humor.

"We were scared to death of him, but we adored him," an ex-student declared. She went on to tell how, as a



1909 Class Picture, Butler Training School. (This information was noted on the back of the photograph; no identification of individuals was given.)

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saucy co-ed, she slipped away from school one day to joy-ride with a boyfriend on his motorcycle. She was seen and reported to Mr. Goodrich. For punishment he assigned her to write a long paper entitled "Why I Must Not Skip School," and to read it at an assembly attended by the entire student body. The experience gave her enough courage to voluntarily repeat the performance, this time with a parody on his beloved Shakespeare: "We come here not to bury Goodrich but to praise him." He pretended to be unimpressed, but she learned long afterward that he had secretly asked for a copy of her opus.

The Goodrich school was quite small. For instance, a May 1914 newspaper, **The Weekly Times**, describes an elaborate commencement pro-

gram with a music recital, several debates, and a young ladies' social -- but there were only five graduates. Perhaps it is not surprising that he relinquished the school in 1918 to move to Fayetteville, Tennessee. Professor Reuben P. Wills purchased the school.

#### WILLS AND WILLS-TAYLOR SCHOOLS

As Wills and Wills-Taylor, the school reached its apex. The enterprising Mr. Wills, with a number of patrons, organized a stock company. This additional financial foundation enabled the school to grow rapidly.

In 1919 a boys' dormitory was constructed on the east side of the campus. Still standing, it is now a dwelling, the third house



**TOP:** The boys' dormitory, built in 1919, was later used as a science laboratory. Now a dwelling, it is the third house east of Andrew Jackson Way on the south side of Wells Avenue.  
**BOTTOM:** The president's home on the north side of Eustis Avenue, also east of Andrew Jackson Way, is situated directly behind the boys' dormitory and is still used as a dwelling.





Taliaferro Hall was constructed around 1919 as a two-room building for the primary grades; the rear wing was added later. Still standing, it is located at the southeast corner of White Street and Wells Avenue. Note Butler Hall in left background.

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east of Andrew Jackson Way on the south side of Wells Avenue. The Principal's home, situated directly behind it (on Eustis Avenue), is likewise still there. Added on the west side of the campus was a primary building, Taliaferro Hall, a two-room, one-story brick bungalow. It is now headquarters for Fantasy Playhouse.

In 1920 Mr. Edward Ira Taylor entered into a partnership with Mr. Wills, and the school became known as the Wills-Taylor School.

Serving on the first Board of Directors were Samuel O. Holmes, E. I. Taylor, Judge Paul Speake, Judge

Thomas Jones, William F. Esslinger, Dr. Inzer B. Wyatt, Almon Milton Booth, James H. Pride, and R. P. Wills.

The school continued to be co-educational with all grades. The curriculum remained much the same as before. Mr. Wills stressed literature, with special emphasis on all the nineteenth century romantic poets except one -- Lord Byron. Impressionable youths must not be sullied by Byron's shockingly immoral attitude, according to Mr. Wills. So the textbook selections from his works were omitted. No doubt, Byron's banned works became more familiar to the youths than all the rest -- but in their leisure time.

The professors fostered a competitive spirit. The school body was divided into four groups which competed against one another. Every Friday afternoon there were debates, declamations, and spelling bees.

Mr. Wills boasted the school would provide a thorough education, correct faults in character, and develop any special talents students might have.

The school's music department was outstanding, with Miss Bessie Pettus as director. Music was taught in every grade and could even be taken as a major in high school. One pupil, Orville Lee Erwin, became a nationally known organist.

Wills-Taylor's football and baseball teams won championships in the early years. A playing field had been opened between Randolph and Clinton Avenues in the 1300 block. Some form of athletics was required of all, but it was made to be a fun thing. School spirit ran high.

"Wills-Taylor was a happy school," recalls an ex-student. The harsh discipline

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Three of the faculty members of the Wills-Taylor School-Huntsville College, from the yearbook "The Montesanon 1925." **TOP TO BOTTOM:** Reuben P. Wills, Headmaster; Edward Ira Taylor, Mathematics and Science professor, also Coach and Athletic Director; Albert H. Clemens, English professor and Head Coach.







Wills-Taylor professors A. B. Miles (left), Latin and French, and Dwight M. Wilhelm (right), History and Economics.

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of former years no longer prevailed. There were many young teachers, among them the future Senator John Sparkman. He taught French and some other subjects. Dwight Wilhelm, the History teacher, had worked his way around the world on a freighter. Miss Dorothy Speake, the sixth grade teacher, jumped up from her desk one day in mid-term and announced, "I'm sick of teaching. Good-bye." She marched out of the classroom, never to return.

Many men and women who were children in the 1920's remember Wills-Taylor fondly. They might recall eating Hokie Pokies (ice cream bars with chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry flavors) at recess, Nannie Pierce belting out jazz on the piano at noon, Annie Wade Street debating "Against Smoking," the boys' secret cloakroom society, or Mr. Wills' foot protruding through the studyhall ceiling when he stepped off a beam in the attic.

Certainly they remember, but not fondly, Mr. Wills' invention. This was a device by which side-arm desk chairs could be clamped together in a row. Thus, the children could not walk around the chairs or shift their positions. Eventually Mr. Wills manufactured his device in his Series Desk Factory for sale to other schools and reportedly did well.

### THE JUNIOR COLLEGE

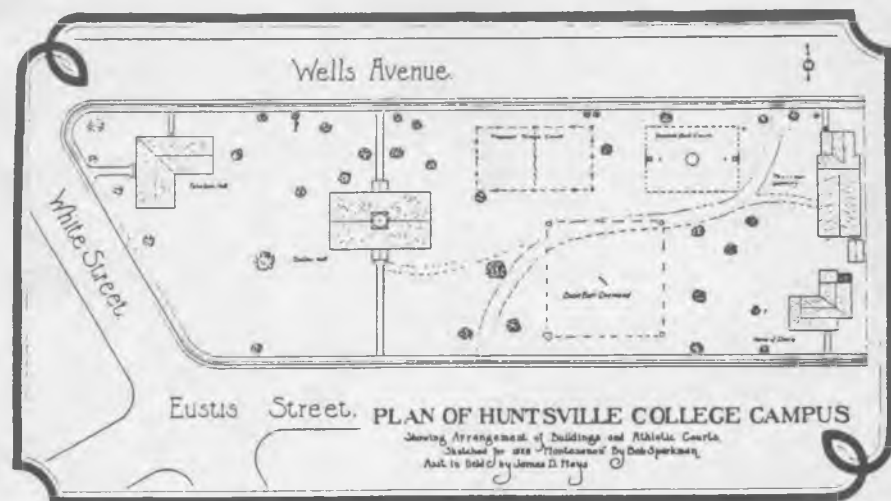
In the meantime, the school was prospering. In 1923 the Board felt sure Wills-Taylor could add a two year junior college successfully. A new stock company was organized and incorporated under the name "Huntsville College." Eighty enthusiastic citizens purchased certificates, and this new corporation replaced the

original Wills-Taylor company.

Thomas Tyler Terry, C. Edgar Baxter, E. I. Taylor, Ashford Todd, R. P. Wills, Almon Milton Booth, William Penn Dilworth, Walter M. Wellman, and Jacob E. Pierce were the first directors.

School opened under the new regime that September. The high school was now called the preparatory department. Incidentally, it ranked fifth among Alabama's twenty-seven preparatory schools. The college offered courses in mechanical drawing and accounting as well as the usual academics. It was co-educational. The music department continued to be outstanding. Athletics were given prominence; the football coach, Albert H. Clemens, had been a star

Plan of Huntsville College Campus from "The Montesanon 1926." Clockwise from top left: Taliaferro Hall, Butler Hall, proposed tennis court, basketball court, Laboratory (former boys' dormitory), home of Dean (President), baseball diamond.





Group of Wills-Taylor students and teachers circa 1920's. Handwritten list on back of picture identifies the girls as (left to right): "Nancy Pierce, Louise Butler Marsh, Annie Wade Street Hays, Ruth Elizabeth Pettus Spragins (?), Annie Beryl Fancett (?)." The others were not identified.

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player at the University of Alabama, and it is interesting to note that he was an Indian. The college awarded a degree called "Associate of the Arts."

A new men's dormitory was built opposite the athletic field, but it burned only a few years later. The old dorm was turned into a science lab.

The school did well at first. In 1924 the college section introduced a unique co-operative plan, thanks to Mr. Wills' Series Desk Company. Boys who elected to co-op were divided into two groups. One boy in each section was paired with one in the other group. The two

boys would alternate working in the factory and attending class. In theory, this may sound like a fine scheme. In practice, it simply did not work. Any time one of the partners missed a session, both were in trouble.

Furthermore, the school was not accredited. Students going on to institutions of higher learning discovered that the credits they had received from Huntsville College would not be accepted.

Naturally, enrollment dropped. Debts piled up. Even the football team did poorly because Mr. Clemens could not recruit enough good players.

Mr. Wills resigned under a cloud and moved to Birmingham, leaving Mr. Taylor as acting principal in 1926. The school struggled on until 1928. Graduation festivities that year seemed quite special, with a banquet, a freshman-sophomore prom, and a music recital. But the freshmen never had their turn. This was the last year.

At a meeting held July 17, 1928, the directors resolved that the school could not be operated further without continuing great loss. The building and contents were sold to one of the professors, Dwight Wilhelm, for \$700.00 on November 8, 1928. On or about this same date, records show the property being sold at public auction to one of the school's own directors, J. E. Pierce. It is probable that this sale consisted of only the remaining portion of the property.

Sales records are not clear at this point and the description of one transaction is missing. Somehow, the school portion of the

property seems to have reverted to its original owners, possibly through some scheme fostered by Mr. Pierce, though there is no proof of this. Albeit a community leader and the editor of the **Huntsville Daily Times**, he was allegedly a scoundrel. For example, it is alleged that through legal shenanigans, he avoided paying the mortgages on his fine home and his Times Building. On the other hand, Mr. Wilhelm, by all accounts an honest, upright man, would never have taken part in any wrongdoing. The deed to his school property was filed years later, on May 22, 1932. Did he sell his property or did he lose it?

At any rate, the school was sold again "at public outcry," this time to the Huntsville public school board in June 1929.

It was used as a junior high school until 1955. Several years later the beautiful building was torn down, a sad loss.

"Dear Wills-Taylor, Alma Mater,  
We come to say good-by;  
With reverence for your honored name,  
We leave you with a sigh."



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