North Alabama College, 1858-1864, The Non-Existent School

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On April 5, 1858, the Moderator of the North Alabama Prebytery called a meeting of this body in the city of Knoxville, Tennessee, for the purpose of electing a board of trustees for the North Alabama College, a school for boys which had been in the planning of the Huntsville Presbyterian Church since 1852. (1)

The trustees elected at this time were: the Rev. Mr. F. A. Ross, minister of the Huntsville Church, Mr. L. B. Sheffey, and Mr. Isaiah Dill. The Rev. Mr. Ross was to serve on the board until the spring of 1859, Mr. Sheffey's term of office expired in the spring of 1860 and Mr. Dill's in 1861.

The school was incorporated under the laws of the state of Alabama on May 14, 1858. (2) In July of that year, the church purchased 140 acres of land in the southeast section of Huntsville from George Horton for the sum of $7,000. (3) This property included what became known as the College Hill Addition.

Matthew W. Steele, son of architect George Steele received the contract to build a three story brick school which was begun in the early part of 1859. The building was approximately 125 feet in length by 65 feet in width. It faced what is now Governors Drive and extended for about twenty feet into the west side of Bassett Street. (4)
This picture is taken from a sketch made by a member of Gen. O.M. Mitchell's army while the Federal troops were encamped in Huntsville. The sketch accompanied an article which appeared in the August 4, 1862, issue of Harper's Weekly. The school was demolished in 1864 on orders of Brig. Gen. D. H. Stanley, and the brick was used to build chimneys for tents of the soldiers.
Construction was discontinued in April of 1862 when Huntsville was occupied by Federal troops under the command of General O.M. Mitchell. By this time the exterior had been completed, the tin roof was in place protecting the partially completed interior, and all of the materials for finishing the school were stored within the building.

During the winter of 1863-1864, the weather was extremely cold; in fact it was one of the most severe winters ever experienced in Huntsville. Brigadier General D. H. Stanley, who was in charge of the Federal troops at this time, ordered that the North Alabama College be demolished. His testimony, contained in a letter of December 1, 1891, pointed out that the "weather was inclement," in 1864 and for this reason the brick was needed to build chimneys "for tents for the use and comfort of the United States Army."

On November 3, 1891, a meeting was held at the Presbyterian Church to "solicit the facts bearing upon the destruction of the North Alabama College by the Federal Army Corps while stationed in Huntsville."(5)

Sometime during 1893, the trustees filed a claim against the United States government for the sum of $23,000, the estimated value placed upon the school building by Matthew W. Steele. Serving as trustees at this time were: Sidney J. Mayhew, John M. Bright, Robert Fearn, and John H. Zivley.

A bill to investigate this claim was introduced by General Joe Wheeler before the first session of the 53d Congress on September 12, 1893. From time to time between 1893 and December 3, 1901, when it
was again introduced by Congressman William Richardson to the first session of the 57th Congress, this bill was brought to the attention of the Congressmen. At this time it was referred to the committee on War Claims.

Testimony of different witnesses brought out the facts that the money for the building of the school was raised by contributions from the citizens of Huntsville, that the trustees were a non-partisan corporation and had nothing to do with "Politics, political discussions, or affiliations."

Augustus Pryor, who was 75 years old when his testimony was taken in 1906, said he saw the building being torn down in 1864, and that after the Federal troops left Huntsville, he saw at least a thousand chimneys left standing at the place of encampment, about a quarter of a mile from the location of the school building.

Alexander E. Mastin testified that as far as he knew, the church had received no compensation for the brick or any of the materials used in building the school. The truth of this statement is borne out by the fact that on August 25, 1866, the property with all buildings and materials on it was sold at public auction to James J. Donegan. This was done to satisfy a mortgage of $3,300.

On February 25, 1907, the Court of Claims found in favor of the church for $7,600. The net amount the church received was $5,320. The trustees of the North Alabama College at the time the settlement was made were: Sidney J. Mayhew, Alexander E. Mastin, A. S. Fletcher, Willard I. Wellman,
Malcom R. Murray, Henry B. Chase, and Paul Speake.

These funds went into the treasury of the First Presbyterian Church and no further plans were made to rebuild the school.

THE END

(Source of information other than those designated is a microfilm record of the Court of Claims in the case of the North Alabama College vs. The United States Government. This record is filed in the National Archives, Washington, D.C. under Congressional Case #12408.)

1 Record Book, First Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Alabama.
2 Deed Book BB, p. 444, Madison County Court House, Huntsville, Alabama.
3 Deed Book BB, p. 484, Madison County Court House, Huntsville, Alabama.
4 Spot Survey of Lots 2 and 3, Block C, College Hill Addition, Office of Ralph H. Ford, Attorney, Huntsville, Alabama.
5 Record Book, First Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Alabama.
6 Deed Book FF, p. 136, Madison County Court House, Huntsville, Alabama.