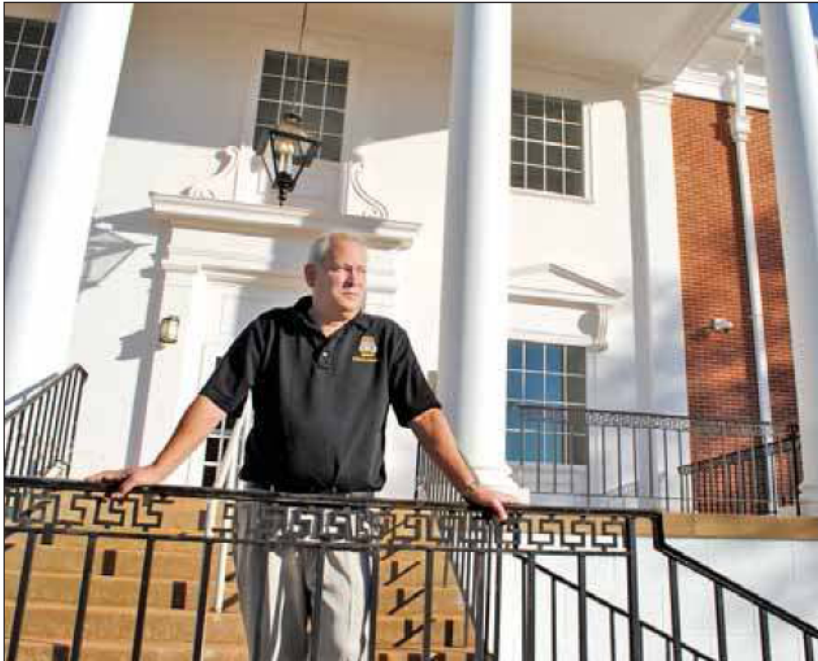




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At Tift, at last

Friday, Oct. 1 was a big day for the Georgia Department of Corrections and its imminent move to Tift College. That's because Brian Owens, commissioner of the DOC, moved into his new office in the renovated administrative building (in rear). Owens said the commute from his Forsyth home was much easier than his customary trip to downtown Atlanta. Other DOC staffers will be trickling in over the next few weeks and a dedication ceremony with Gov. Sonny Perdue is tentatively set for Wednesday, Nov. 10. Inmate labor did most of the work to renovate the administrative building. Inmates also built handsome, mahogany desks for top staff, including hand-crafted seals of the Department of Corrections and State of Georgia. See another chapter in our Tift history page 4A.

College survived war, to face fire

In just 35 days, long-dormant Tift College will open its doors in its newest incarnation as the headquarters for the Georgia Department of Corrections. As Monroe County and Forsyth prepare for 400 new DOC employees who will fill offices at the former campus, the Reporter is looking back at Tift's colorful history. Our source is "Yesterday at Tift", the 1969 volume written by long-time Tift teacher and registrar Eugenia Wootton Stone.

The Civil War had devastated Monroe Female College, but the Forsyth businessmen on its board and the president, the Rev. William Wilkes, were determined to re-open it. Besides, the college's 1849 charter forbade them from selling it. So they pitched in what was left of their own personal wealth to retire some of their debt and get the school re-opened in January 1866.

But Wilkes was likely exhausted from trying to keep the small women's college afloat. He submitted his resignation that spring after 16 years as the school's founding president. Wilkes would go on to launch two more girl's colleges in the state, one in Montezuma called Spalding Seminary and one in Gainesville named Georgia Baptist Seminary, now known as Brenau University.

The board found a replacement conveniently enough in its 1866 commencement speaker, Dr. Shaler Hillyer, a preacher and teacher from Mitchell County near Albany. Hillyer did his part to boost school enrollment, as four of his five daughters attended the college. While Wilkes had been an

energetic risk taker, Hillyer was more conservative, and sought to enrich rather than expand. The college continued to face financial troubles. In 1871 the city of Forsyth floated bonds to help the college. Hillyer resigned in 1872 to devote more time to the church, but remained on the faculty. And a year after leaving the presidency he made a prophetic proposal to the Georgia Baptist Convention in Rome. In 1873, Hillyer proposed a resolution that "the Baptists of Georgia need an institution for the higher education of our daughters," and wanted a committee appointed to look into it. It set in motion a courtship

between the convention and the college that would later be consummated.

Next, the school turned to one of its long-time professors, Richard Thomas Asbury, to lead as president. Asbury had taught math at the school since 1856.

It was during Asbury's tenure that Bessie Willingham, a Connecticut native who had moved to a plantation near Albany, arrived on campus as a transfer student from Wesleyan in Macon. She graduated from Monroe Female College in 1878. No one knew at the time how big of a role she would play in the school's future.

A year later, the college would face the greatest threat to its survival since the Civil War. On Oct. 18, 1879, fire destroyed the college and everything in it -- the library, musical instruments and laboratory equipment. It was devastating. Asbury left for Madison to run a small school there. Hillyer took

over again but had no building, no teachers and no students.



Ponder Hall was built in 1895.

The school remained defunct for four years, but the board continued meeting and raising money for a new facility. Finally they pooled enough for a new building to go on the same foundation as the original college building, the one that had been used as a Confederate hospital in 1865. They dedicated three-story Wiggs Hall (now Ponder Hall) amidst great fanfare in September 1883. Monroe Female College was in business once again.

In 1895, Capt. J.M. Ponder, the chairman of the board of the Monroe Female College, donated \$2,000 to begin work on an adjacent building to include a dorm, dining hall and extra classroom. It was later combined with Wiggs Hall and called Ponder Hall. But financial troubles continued to bedevil the school. In 1897 the trustees offered the college to Mercer University. Mercer trustees said that while they sympathized with the school's plight, taking it over was beyond their jurisdiction. Next, the trustees turned to the Georgia Baptist Convention. And on April 2, 1898, the Convention agreed to take over the fledgling college. The Convention invested more money in the school, including a \$2,000 presidential salary to attract a

top-shelf leader. Toward that end, Dr. Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Jackson was hired as president in 1900 and the school indeed surged. Enrollment grew from 150 in 1900 to 387 in 1908. The growth required hiring more faculty and erecting more buildings, and that meant more debt.

At the Georgia Baptist Convention in 1905, president Jackson stepped forward

to make an urgent plea for \$37,000 in funds for Monroe Female College, saying the survival of the college was at stake. In the audience was the former Bessie Willingham, class of 1878, with her husband, Henry Harding Tift, the wealthy founder of Tifton, Ga. Hearing the urgent plea, he scribbled a note to his wife, "Bessie, you may give the \$37,000." So she tore a small piece of paper from a notebook and passed it to the presiding officer, which read, "Mr. Tift says he will pay the \$37,000 the building costs, Thank God."

That scrap of paper remained a prized artifact in the Tift College library for years. The Tifts would go on to give more than \$125,000 to the school over her lifetime, and as she loved the college, it loved her back. When she would walk into the dining hall every girl would rise in respect, and her opening words were always the same, "Girls I love every one of you."

As the savior and prime benefactor of the college, the trustees voted on May 11, 1907 to change the school's name from Monroe Female College to Bessie Tift College, a name that stuck and is still familiar to women around the state of Georgia some 84 years after her death.

