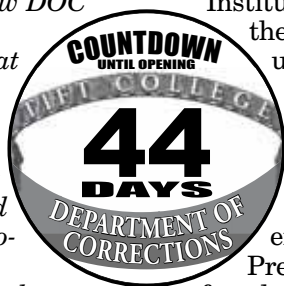


Civil War closed the college, but not for long

In just 44 days, long-dormant Tift College will rise once again, opening 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 the colorful and surprising history of Tift. Our source is "Yesterday at Tift", the 1969 volume

written by Tift teacher and registrar Eugenia Wootton Stone.

Chartered in 1849, the Forsyth Female Collegiate Institute flourished in the 1850s, growing under the leadership of the Rev. William Clay Wilkes. It was going so well that the energetic President Wilkes found time in 1857 to organize in Forsyth a



regional Teachers' Convention, the forerunner to the Georgia Educators Association. With the convention he launched the companion Georgia Educational Journal from Forsyth in the 1850s.

In 1854 the new college celebrated its first graduating class. A year later, local Baptists bought out the remaining Methodists on the board of trustees and school changed its name to Monroe Female University (MFU), perhaps suggesting Rev. Wilkes' ambitions for his new school.

But far away from the sleepy Forsyth campus, the nation was dividing between north and south, giving way to all-out war in 1861.

The women of the college went to work supporting their beloved Southland. An unidentified 1863 alumna recalled the war-time atmosphere in an article in the campus magazine, the Monroe College Monthly, in 1903.

"We were very patriotic in those days--sang Southern war songs, and no others, had our sunrise prayer meetings for the 'boys in gray', and even knitted a few rounds of war socks and mittens."

But the students were most excited about a Bonnie Blue flag they had made for a band of Southern soldiers, ages 14 and 15, who had been faithfully drilling on the campus for the past few months. She describes the scene where they presented the flag one Sunday in 1861 as if they were doing something scandalous.

"Now was our time. 'When the cat's away the mice will play.' Scarcely had Professor and Mrs. Asbury disappeared down the red hills back of the

college when our brave soldier boy brigade, according to agreement, came marching boldly down from the big campus gate to the music of fife and drum, and ranged themselves in single file in front of the verandah where we stood.

"There they were, 30 or 40 of them, having drilled faithfully day by day, ever expecting to be called to the front. Their weapons were old guns, sticks--anything they could pick up. Rather ludicrous now to look back upon, but wonderfully in earnest they were then."

The scene at the campus was much more depressing three years later when the college was turned into military hospitals for the Confederate wounded as Sherman made his way through Georgia. They even set up make-shift hospital tents under the trees. Ella Palmer, a Confederate army nurse, described the scene in the book "History of Education in Monroe County."

"The kind people of Forsyth met the train in a body and welcomed the stranger with all kinds of edibles, which were more acceptable as there had been no breakfast that morning except for the wounded."

No sooner had the hospital been set up than the Battle of Stone Mountain occurred, and the next morning trains were arriving with the wounded. The outdoor hospital had tents for 1,200 men and already had 800 under its care. Another 1,000 men came off the trains, and they were hauled to the campus in wagons and ambulances and laid under the trees. The people of Forsyth employed their wagons and carriages to help



In its early years the college planted crops like sweet potatoes on campus.

deliver the wounded to the hospital.

"Those good people tore up their sheets and tablecloths to make bandages and brought bedding..to the hospital. The physicians of the town came and offered their services, which were gratefully accepted.

The merchants of Forsyth took the negro men of the hospital and others from town and gathered limbs from the trees and built substantial bowers and drove down stakes and improvised cots of leafy branches on which to lay the wounded."

Outside the hospital limits there were crowds of the women and children of Forsyth who had done all they were permitted to do, silently waiting to see if there would be any more need for their services.

Dr. Wilkes' wife, the First Lady of the college, was seen delivering herbs, ministering to the suffering and helping the doctors.

The following March, one of the school's first alumna, Fernanda Jacinta Hatcher "Jessie" Oliver, wrote her husband while visiting Forsyth, and described the wreckage that war had

wrought. "Everything is going to ruin," wrote Mrs. Oliver. "Two or three refugee families are living there. We walked over the vacated rooms in which I spent so many happy hours, but ruin is marked on the face of everything."

In addition to the campus being in ruins, the college was saddled by \$6,500 in debt. The South was wrecked economically and there seemed to be no hope. The board probably would have sold the school except that its 1849 charter prevented it. President Wilkes chipped in \$5,000 of his own estate, an astounding sum in 1865, to reaplace of now-worthless donation of Confederate money, and other board members pitched in their personal finances as well.

Because of their generosity, the college, having closed in the spring of 1864, was able to re-open in January 1866. Through the faith and sacrifice of its leaders, the infant school had survived the Civil War. More challenges would lie ahead, but Providence apparently had more in mind for the little college in Forsyth.

Next week: The college digs out of its post-war devastation.

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The Monroe County Reporter Inc.
Will Davis, president
Robert M. Williams Jr., vice president
Cheryl S. Williams, secretary-treasurer

OUR STAFF

Will Davis
Publisher/Editor
publisher@mymcr.net



Trellis Grant
Business Manager
business@mymcr.net

Gina Herring
News Editor
news@mymcr.net



Carolyn Martel
Advertising Manager
ads@mymcr.net

Richard Dumas
Reporter
forsyth@mymcr.net



Gini Seitz
Advertising Representative
sales@mymcr.net

Adam Ham
Webmaster
webmaster@mymcr.net



Amy Haisten
Graphic Artist
graphics@mymcr.net

50 N. Jackson St., Forsyth, GA 31029
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