

Part 1: How Tift College was conceived

In just 51 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 be setting up shop at the former campus, the Reporter will look back at the colorful and surprising history of Tift, once one of the oldest women's colleges in the country. In this first week, we look back at the school's inception and how Forsyth came to be home to Tift College.

the school entitled "Yesterday at Tift". Having taught at Tift from 1927-1967, she certainly knew her subject.

Stone found the first recorded discussion of launching a college in Forsyth in the Aug. 12, 1848 issue of the then-local newspaper, The Bee. In the paper, Bee editor James W. Gauling urged townspeople to endorse and cooperate with efforts by the Presbyterian Synod to buy an unfinished building that had been slated to house the Southern Botanico Medical College and open it as a school. The medical school had stopped work after making plans to open its campus

It appears Judge Robert P. Trippe led the citizen effort to found the school. Trippe would later become a Congressman and then a Supreme Court justice.

While the initial offer was rejected, enough people in Forsyth had bought into the idea for a college that it wouldn't die. A year later, on Dec. 21, 1849, the citizens of Forsyth chartered a new school with a mouthful of a name: the Forsyth Female Collegiate Institute. Some have suggested it was the second girls college in the country. But Stone says it was actually the fourth. Stone said Mary Hardin Baylor in Belton, Texas, Judson in Marion, Ala. and Limestone in Gaffney S.C. all predate the Forsyth school.

A board of trustees formed to run the school included three Baptists, three Methodists and one Presbyterian. The infant college convened in the Monroe Railroad Bank building owned by the Masons.

The board hired a man already running a girls school in Forsyth, the Rev. E.C.J. Thomas, as a principal until a suitable president could be found. Thomas brought with him from his former school a group of girls who made up the nucleus of the first

student body. Within about a year, the board secured the services of the Rev. William Clay Wilkes, a South Carolina native and a pastor, as the school's first president.

An 1843 graduate of Mercer at Penfield, Wilkes had been teaching at Pleasant Grove Academy in Eatonton when he was called to head the new college in Forsyth. In addition to leading the college he was also named pastor of Forsyth Baptist Church, and also preached at New Providence and Mt. Zion Baptist churches.

In Stone's book, Wilkes is described as full of vigor and enthusiasm. In financial affairs he was deemed to have utter integrity.

Under Wilkes' energetic leadership, the Forsyth Female Collegiate Institute outgrew its quarters. In 1852, the school finally was able to buy and finish the Southern Botanico building, a three-story structure with a



The Forsyth Female Collegiate Institute moved into this building in 1852 and would later become Tift College. The campus will re-open as the Department of Corrections in about 51 days.

cupola that was located where the administrative building now sits at Tift (see sketch above). The building was big enough to house the teachers and 30 young ladies, and the school developed a library with 500 volumes.

The first graduating class finished in 1854. The next year, local Baptists secured full control of the school, as the three Baptists on the board bought out the three Methodists on the board for \$3,500. In turn, Methodists agreed to start the Hillard Institute for boys in town.

Stone suggests the board got a little carried away

with the school's growth when it renamed the school the Monroe Female University. It was soon changed to the more accurate Monroe Female College, wrote Stone.

And so the burgeoning women's college in Forsyth was established and growing in its early years, flourishing under the leadership of a wise, well-respected educator in Dr. Wilkes. But war clouds were gathering and the destitution of the battle would soon interrupt the placid rhythms of learning at the remote Middle Georgia campus. More on that next week.



in Macon instead. Its goal was to study the use of herbal medicines for improving health. Since it was moving, Gauling reported, the unfinished building could be bought for less than \$10,000.

So where did it all start? How did a small frontier town in Middle Georgia become home to one of the first women's colleges in the country?

Perhaps the best source for this story is a 1969 volume written by Tift alum and long-time Latin teacher and registrar Eugenia Wootton Stone. Stone combed through newspaper records and school archives to piece together a comprehensive history of