

# Textiles, Teachers, and Troops

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA 1880-1945

## **The University of North Carolina at Greensboro: A Brief history to 1945**

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### **The Growing Education Movement and the Foundations of a New School**

Following the American Civil War, several political and social movements developed which greatly favored the education of women by a state-based institution in North Carolina. The women's movement for education and political empowerment, the Southern Reconstruction, and the growth of compulsory public education for male, female, white and black pupils were all established to rebuild the nation on a foundation of education.

It was also generally agreed that illiteracy as well as the need for more teachers was a substantial problem nationwide and particularly in North Carolina, which had an illiteracy rate of 1 out of 3 citizens.<sup>1</sup> The creation of a new state normal college, or a college for the training of teachers, was proposed by education professionals at the North Carolina Teacher's Assembly in 1886. Of these individuals, the most outspoken was Charles Duncan McIver. McIver, born in 1860, was the son of Sanford, N.C. area farmers of Scottish descent and a 1881 graduate of the University of North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> His desire for the education of women was very personal; his sister desired to attend college and his wife, the former [Lula Martin](#), was a graduate of Salem Academy.

The education of women was a strong focus of McIver and his colleagues Edwin Alderman, Marcus Cicero Stephens Noble and James Y. Joyner, all graduates of the University of North Carolina who later became a teacher and an administrator.<sup>3</sup> McIver was aware of the low literacy rate of young women in the South and believed it to be a direct threat to the future of Southern women and children. He famously stated, "Educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman and you educate a family." As of 1887 there were only three

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<sup>1</sup> Trelease 3.

<sup>2</sup> Trelease 4.

<sup>3</sup> Trelease 4.

state-supported schools in North Carolina; one for the African-Americans was co-educational, and the other two were for white males.<sup>4</sup> All college options for white females in North Carolina at the time were denominational colleges. McIver and his colleagues believed that in order for overall education in the state to advance, that a state college for young white females was needed to train more women teachers.

A bill from the North Carolina state legislature for the construction of such a school was defeated twice. However, during the second defeat in 1889, institutes for the education of teachers in all counties were established. These teacher institutions made the 96 counties at the time a giant North Carolina classroom for the “gospel of public education.”<sup>5</sup> McIver and Alderman were selected to conduct the institutes, which required many trips across the state. Alderman was the tall, mustached, refined speaker. McIver was the slightly burly, folksy presenter with a good sense of humor.<sup>6</sup> The two men attracted large crowds and on several occasions, they lectured on the subjects of women’s education and illiteracy, as well as the need for a state normal college. Alderman and McIver became well known to education and government professionals throughout the nation; some who would later contribute financially to the proposed normal school, especially George Foster Peabody.<sup>7</sup>

### **An Act to Establish A New School and Where It Should Be Located**

Many groups throughout the state petitioned for the creation of an industrial school for girls. Such a school for young ladies at that time would specialize in the teaching of bookkeeping, stenography, typewriting and home economics. These groups passed resolutions for the state to aid in the higher education of women. As a result, on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1891, the General Assembly passed “An Act to Establish a Normal and Industrial School for White Girls” under the corporate name “The Normal and Industrial School.” This created the first public institution in North Carolina with the sole purpose of higher education of women.

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<sup>4</sup> These colleges today are respectively Fayetteville State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Trelease, 4-7.

<sup>7</sup> Peabody contributed \$5,000 to develop a park on the north section of campus now known as Peabody Park.

After much debate and searching the city of Greensboro was chosen as the site for the school, based on its central location and the more than \$30,000 in bonds pledged by the city. State superintendent Major Sidney M. Finger predicted that one day the school would be a learning center for both men and women.<sup>8</sup> The site consisted of over 10 acres of cornfields purchased from R.S. Pullen and R.T. Gray of Raleigh. A board of directors was selected and Dr. McIver was appointed to be the institution's first president. His duties also included instruction on the principles and art of teaching.

### **The McIver Years, 1892 - 1906**

On October 5<sup>th</sup> 1892, the State Normal and Industrial School opened its doors to 176 students. The first registered student was Miss Mary Dail of Snow Hill, North Carolina. Miss Dail, like most of those young ladies arrived by locomotive or coach, was greeted by Dr. McIver at the train station and arrived onto a newly constructed campus. There were three departments organized for academic study: the Normal Department for the profession of teaching, the Commercial Department that developed the skills of stenography, typewriting, telegraphy and bookkeeping, and the Domestic Science Department.<sup>9</sup>

The original three academic departments grew to become a large college campus of several disciplines and courses within a decade. By 1896, the school was called the State Normal and Industrial College. There were [publications of yearbooks and newsletters](#), camera clubs, the Athletic Association, literary societies, and campus regalia by 1902.<sup>10</sup> The Young Women's Christian Association also had a strong presence on the campus for decades. Within its first quarter century The State Normal and Industrial College created significant landmarks for North Carolina women and education in general. Dr. Miriam Bitting and Dr. Anna M. Gove, the first college physicians, were two of the first women to practice medicine in the state.<sup>11</sup> Annie Petty, who operated the original college library, became the

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<sup>8</sup> Bowles 7. This would happen in 1964.

<sup>9</sup> State Normal and Industrial School Annual Catalogue, 1892.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 14.

first trained librarian in North Carolina following a one-year leave of absence in 1898.<sup>12</sup> In addition, many of the women employed on the campus in those early years, including Gertrude Mendenhall, Laura M. Coit, and Harriet Elliott, made lasting impacts and are the namesakes for many of the buildings currently on campus.

### **Early Tragedies to the State Normal and Industrial College**

The greatest setbacks to the college during those early times were the typhoid epidemic of 1899, which claimed the lives of 13 students and one staff members, and the Brick Dormitory fire of 1904.<sup>13</sup> In each instance, the support of the students by the community was unceasing. Dr. McIver and the growing campus continued their dedication to the development of the state public schools and women's education throughout the South. Just a year after the epidemic, the Women's Association for the Betterment of Public School Houses, the first such organization in the state, was founded in order to interest parents in the welfare of the schools.<sup>14</sup> Graduates from State Normal were in demand by county superintendents to fill teaching positions.

Growth of the college continued, but in 1906, State Normal met another unexpected tragedy. On September 17<sup>th</sup>, while on a train ride with William Jennings Bryan from Raleigh on route to Greensboro, Dr. McIver died from complication of an apoplexy, or what now is referred to as a stroke.<sup>15</sup> He was ten days shy of his 46<sup>th</sup> birthday. Within hours of his death, the news was conveyed to the campus, and Dr. Julius I. Foust was eventually appointed to be the new president.

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<sup>12</sup> Trelease 24, also Timeline of UNCG History. Annie Petty studied at the Drexel Institute Library in Philadelphia during her leave of absence. Miss Petty was also a pioneer in the state's library association and later the state library commission.

<sup>13</sup> This dormitory was replaced by Spencer Hall, which has been hailed through the decades as the finest looking building on campus.

<sup>14</sup> Lathrop.

<sup>15</sup> William Jennings Bryan had been the commencement speaker for the State and Normal College in 1894, and had returned for a campaign trip.

## Continued Growth, World War I, "Farmerettes", "Carpenterettes" and Suffragettes. 1906-1918

Following McIver's death, Dr. Julius I. Foust served as the president until 1934. He is remembered for increasing the appropriations to the school, and the physical campus grew tremendously under his leadership. The student body also grew, from 784 women in 1920 to 1,880 by 1930.<sup>16</sup> Many new buildings, including the McIver Memorial Building, were constructed.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the State Normal campus contributed to the war effort. In the hot summer of 1918 the "Farmerettes," a group of students who chose to work the campus farm during their summer break, harvested 3,000 gallons of beans, 2,000 bushels of corn and enough tomatoes to can 4,000 gallons for the war efforts.<sup>17</sup> Students were trained in Red Cross work and canning, and many took classes in nutrition and studied world affairs.<sup>18</sup> There were campus wide rationing and the State Normal students supported Greensboro loan drives. Left-right militaristic drills were practiced on the Curry athletic field. In 1918, the overalls-clad "Carpenterettes," another voluntary student group working over summer break, constructed the fondly-remembered [YWCA Hut](#), which would serve the student body for the next thirty years.

During the war, an entirely different battle fought by the girls at on campus was the right of women to vote. Many national leaders on the subject of women's suffrage came to the campus as early as 1913. One of the women would come stayed for over thirty years. Harriet Elliott, a recent graduate of Columbia University, was appointed to teach political science. At Columbia she had associated with many people in the movement for the women's vote. One of Elliott's protégées at her new position in Greensboro was Gladys Avery Tillett, who, as student, started the first women's suffrage group in the American South.<sup>19</sup> A year after the war ended in 1919, the school, now renamed the North Carolina

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<sup>16</sup> Lathrop 64.

<sup>17</sup> Lathrop 55 and Bowles 130.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>19</sup> Tillett interview 1974. Gladys Avery Tillett '15 organized the Guilford county chapter of the League of Women Voters. She served as president and later as president of a state organization. She later became the

College for Women, faced the progressive 1920s.

## **The Roaring Twenties, The Great Depression, Walter Clinton Jackson and World War II.**

### **1919-1945**

Following the Great War, opportunities for young women on the campus continued to grow and many of the now-standing buildings were erected. In 1921, the N.C.C.W. became accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.<sup>20</sup> The Schools of Music and the School of Education were founded that same year.<sup>21</sup> Miss May Minerva Meador earned the school's first master's degree. The Bailey, Coit, Cotten, Mary Foust, and Jamison Residence Halls were constructed. The Aycock Auditorium opened in 1928 and the landmark Library Science program, the first in North Carolina, began that same year.<sup>22</sup>

Development of the college slowed somewhat during the Great Depression, although while enrollment increased. And in 1932, for a single year, men were admitted to college for the first time as day students to help with costs for the University.<sup>23</sup> That same year the college became the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina or "WC." Dr. Walter Clinton Jackson became president of the college in 1934, and enrollment continued to increase to over 3,000 students by the end of the decade.

### **World War II 1940 – 1945: Harriet Elliott, "Greensboro's First Lady"**

*"For the first time in history women are today equally responsible with men, not only in a crisis, but in all the affairs of the nation"* – Dean Harriet Elliot, shortly after her .. mentioned appointment by President Franklin Roosevelt.

A year before the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Harriet Elliott, the dean of women at the Woman's College, was summoned to Washington, D.C. There, on

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U.S. Representative to United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women.

<sup>20</sup> Timeline of UNCG History

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Tuesday, May 28<sup>th</sup>, she was appointed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt<sup>24</sup> to be the only female member of the Advisory Commission to the National Defense Council. As head of the council's consumer division, Elliott led the creation of a pre-war defense program on campus in the fall of that year.<sup>25</sup>

At the time, this appointment was considered the highest honor ever bestowed upon a woman from Greensboro, and the local papers christened her "Greensboro's First Lady."<sup>26</sup> By the time her appointment ended in January of 1942, the United States was at war again and academic and non-academic training groups on the Woman's College campus went to work for the war effort. Elliott continued to serve her country and in 1942 became an advisor in the formation of the WAVES, "the women's naval auxiliary."

### **The Woman's College Campus in an Army Town**

Nationwide many science, industrial and agricultural departments at college campuses joined the war effort, and the biology department at the W.C. was no exception, becoming a testing group for the Home Line of Defense. Young women were trained to work in munitions plants, as laboratory technicians and other defense industries. The home economics department instructed students in home nursing and childcare courses under the home line of defense.<sup>27</sup>

When B.T.C. #10 (Basic Training Center) was constructed off of Summit Avenue in 1942, Greensboro suddenly had thousands of additional all-male guests. The visitor's guides for the soldiers promoted Greensboro's college campuses. For an all-female institute just a few miles from the B.T.C., there was an initial alarm about these young men visiting the campus. Fears eventually subsided and the War Service League was established on campus giving students opportunities to serve visiting troops; tightly chaperoned by male faculty

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<sup>24</sup> Harriet Elliott was also a delegate-at-large for the Roosevelt Administration since 1932 and had attended several Democratic National Conventions prior to her appointment. Miss Elliott also served during this time as the national chairman of the legislation of the American Association of University Women. The title was "chairman" at the time.

<sup>25</sup> Lathrop 107.

<sup>26</sup> Craig, Neil. "Miss Elliott's Appointment As Advisor Her Major Honor". *The Greensboro Record*. May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

<sup>27</sup> Lathrop 108.

members. There were dances and other recreational on-campus events. Some of the students in the league visited the O.R.D. base hospitals to encourage and support ill and wounded servicemen. Money was raised for war bonds, and overseas support and causes in Britain and Japan.<sup>28</sup> Items of clothing were knitted, bandages were rolled and the girls undertook extra duties because of the war labor shortage. By November of 1943, more than 300 girls in the League had contributed over 5,700 hours of service to the war effort.<sup>29</sup>

### **Textiles, Teachers, and..... More Textiles**

The Woman's College was also a leader in post-war preparedness for the textile industry. Prior to the war, the Woman's College included more liberal arts programs. Those disciplines began to have a stronger role outside the campus to support the war effort. The newly formed Weatherspoon Art Gallery sponsored the first international textile exhibition to encourage textile design in 1944.<sup>30</sup> Over 225 textile designers from around the world were enrolled that first year.<sup>31</sup> The exhibition was needed according to the sponsors because of the perceived unprecedented changes and demand the textile industry would have following the war.<sup>32</sup> International textile exhibitions were also held at the W.C. in 1945, 1946 and 1948.

### **A Continuing Legacy**

There was much more ahead for the Woman's College, which by 1949 had become the largest college for women in the United States. It had moved far beyond its original intention of training young women in teaching and business courses. In the coming decades, the vision of Dr. McIver and early supporters of women's education in North Carolina continued to expand and evolve with the school's growth. With new academic programs, development of facilities, and university status (granted in 1963), The University of North Carolina at Greensboro today continues to build upon its strong foundations.

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<sup>28</sup> Trelease 196-197.

<sup>29</sup> "Janice Hooke Heads..." *The Greensboro Record*. November 16, 1943.

<sup>30</sup> Timeline of UNCG History.

<sup>31</sup> "Over 200 Entries Made For Textile Exhibition Here". *Greensboro Daily News*, Vol. LXV., No. 34., February 20, 1944., Page 30.

<sup>32</sup> "Exhibition of Textile Designing is Announced". *The Greensboro Record*. Vol. LII., No. 273., November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Page 4.



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