



## **Bennett College for Women: A Brief History to 1945**

by James Stewart, UNCG 2014

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Bennett College for Women is the second oldest college in Greensboro, North Carolina and the first in our city for African-Americans. In the 141 years since its foundation, Bennett is also one of only two historically black colleges or universities in the nation that exclusively educates women.

### **Foundations: From a Warnersville Basement to Bennett Seminary**

The foundations of a school for newly emancipated slaves began in the summer of 1873 with a new parochial school for seventy African American men and women, all former slaves.<sup>1</sup> The initial sessions of the Freedmen's Aid Society Day School were held in the basement of the Warnersville Methodist Episcopal Church North, currently the site of St. Matthew's United Methodist Church. The growth of the school required more teachers, so soon after its opening the idea of a school designed to train African American teachers was conceived in Greensboro. The school served both elementary and secondary level students. In 1874, the Freedman's Aid and Southern Education Society of the Methodist Church, with W. J. Parkinson as principal, began supporting the school and continued to oversee the programs at the school for the next fifty years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett College, *A Beacon for Womanhood*.

<sup>2</sup> Barton, C.M. *Barton's Legislative Handbook and Manual of the State of Washington*. Many contemporary sources incorrectly list Parkinson as "W. J. Parker". Parkinson was born of Irish immigrants in 1844. He was a graduate of Columbia Law School, and was enlisted in the Forty-Fourth Ellsworth regiment of New York Volunteers in 1861. Brooks-Buck, *Encyclopedia of African American Education*.

Previously enslaved African Americans gradually purchased more land in order for the school to grow and reach its current size. Assistance came from outside the city when, in 1877, Lyman Bennett, a cotton linen businessman and philanthropist of Troy, NY, contributed \$10,000 dollars to purchase land and to erect the first building.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Bennett died while trying to raise funds for a school bell, which later became one of the main symbols of the school. Following his death, the new institution was named in his memory.

Under the administration of President Rev. Edward O. Thayer, the first buildings of the new school were completed. Bennett Seminary educated high school and college level students. A co-educational college, it had four departments, which included English courses, music, normal for the training of teachers, and the main seminary.

In 1881, Rev. Wilbur Fletcher Steele became the third president and believed that Bennett Seminary would develop beyond a training school.<sup>4</sup> The college continued to grow in size and numbers. With funds contributed by Mrs. Anna Kent of New York City and the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Kent Industrial Home was built next to the seminary.<sup>5</sup> The Kent Industrial Home served as the Home Economics School, a dormitory and an industrial workplace for young women.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Little biographical information is available on Lyman Bennett (1801-1879). This information comes from this site on Troy, NY History. <http://marlajabbour.com/who-was-lyman-bennett.html>

<sup>4</sup> In 1886 Steele had a son named Wilbur Daniel Steele (1886 – 1970) who became one of America's most popular short story authors between World War I and the Great Depression.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett College, *A Beacon for Womanhood*. Note: Anna Kent was involved with the Woman's Home Missionary Society, and it is unclear whether she gave a separate contribution or if the WHMS gift was from her.

<sup>6</sup> *African American Registry: A Nonprofit Education Organization*.

[http://www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/bennett-college-concentrated-educating-black-women](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/bennett-college-concentrated-educating-black-women)

## **Bennett College For Women**

In 1889, Rev. Charles Grandison became not only the first black president of the school, but also the first black president of any of the colleges created under the Freedman's Bureau.<sup>7</sup> Under the leadership of Rev. Grandison, Bennett received its charter as a four-year college from the state of North Carolina, with the name changed to Bennett College.

Following Rev. Grandison as president were Rev. Jordan Chavis (1892-1905), [Rev. Silas A. Peeler](#) (1905 – 1913), Professor James E. Wallace (1913-1915), and Rev. Frank Trigg (1915-1926). Under each man's leadership, the college continued to increase in size and curriculum.

World War I removed many male students from the college campus. At the same time, the war increased the opportunities and the need for women to have a college education. The Women's Home Missionary Society supported the idea to create an all-female academy, which finally occurred in 1926.

## **Dr. David Dallas Jones**

The same year Bennett was reorganized into an all-female institution, the high school campus closed and Bennett became a senior college with nine buildings on 38 acres of land, with over 150 students. The first four graduates finished in 1930. Dr. David Dallas Jones, A.B, M. A., LL.D. (1887-1956), became the next president.<sup>8</sup> Jones was a Greensboro-born businessman who was active in the Methodist Church, worked as a

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<sup>7</sup> *African American Registry: A Nonprofit Education Organization.*

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<sup>8</sup> This information comes from Dr. Jones's obituary in *The Journal of Negro History* 41.2 (Apr. 1956):179-181.

traveling secretary for the Y.M.C.A, and had been an insurance salesman in the Atlanta area.<sup>9</sup> As president, Dr. Jones's leadership and fundraising skills were substantial and, despite the Great Depression, the school continued to grow. In 1930, the General Education Board offered a conditional grant of \$250,000 if Bennett College could raise an equal amount to expand the campus. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Pfeiffer of New York City contributed \$247,000 between 1934 and 1937 for the construction of Pfeiffer Hall, the Merner-Pfeiffer Heating Plant, and the Henry Pfeiffer Science Hall.<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Anna K. Rowe of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the New York Conference donated \$3,000. An additional \$7,000 was contributed by other sources.

### **The Vassar of the South**

Bennett College came to be held in high academic esteem, providing its students with a great education and earning the name "Vassar College of the South" or "of Negro Schools." Dr. Jones's friendship with Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse College, was legendary and to this day Bennett College is the official sister school of Morehouse.<sup>11</sup> Bennett, which was admitted into the American Association of Colleges in 1934, was given "A" ratings by the Association of College and Secondary Schools and the Board of Education.<sup>12</sup> In the new college, there was an emphasis on teacher education and homemaking. Beginning in 1926, Bennett's Home-Making Institutes

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<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest graduates from Bennett as a four-year college was Bishop Robert Elijah Jones, brother of David Dallas Jones.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Pfeiffer (1857-1939) was a president of the William R. Warner Co., which manufactured pharmaceuticals. He was also the founder of the Pfeiffer Chemical Company in 1901. The information regarding the new science hall can be found in "New Science Hall Dedicated at Bennett College." *The New York Age*. (April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1937): 3. This building is now the Ethel F. Black Hall, not Pfeiffer Science Hall, which was constructed in 1968.

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Mays was the mentor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during his study at Morehouse College. Both men along with the Rev. Howard Thurman would visit Bennett in 1959, a visit which inspired the "Sit-In" movement.

<sup>12</sup> Bennett College. *A Beacon For Womanhood*.

were held for several years. They attracted national attention with speakers like Nannie Helen Burroughs and Dr. Channing H. Tobias.

## **World War II**

Bennett College was very active during World War II and even as early as 1940; Bennett Belles were encouraged to pray for soldiers of countries involved in the world conflict during chapel.<sup>13</sup> General Benjamin Oliver Davis Jr., later commander of the 99<sup>th</sup> and 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group of the United States Air Force (the famous Tuskegee Airmen), visited the campus with his wife in 1940.<sup>14</sup> After America entered the war, Bennett hosted recreational programs of dances, special events, and vesper services for African American soldiers who did not have other options for recreation in segregated Greensboro.<sup>15</sup> Bennett, well known for their educational and musical radio broadcasts, created radio programs on CBS affiliate WBIG (now WWBG 1470 AM) related to war topics.<sup>16</sup> One of these original radio series was called "The Negro Goes to War."<sup>17</sup>

## **A Continuing Legacy**

Following the retirement of Dr. Jones in 1955, Willa B. Player became the first female president of Bennett College. With that, Bennett once again made history as Dr. Player became the first black female president of a historically black female college. This was the beginning of many important moments to come for the school. Bennett students participated actively in the birth of the Greensboro Sit-In demonstrations in 1960.

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<sup>13</sup> "Bennett Students Pray For Soldiers." *Greensboro Daily News*. (Oct. 2, 1941): 7.

<sup>14</sup> "Seen And Heard on Bennett Campus." *The Pittsburgh Courier*. (Dec. 14, 1940): 2.

<sup>15</sup> "Recreation Request Rejected For City" *The Greensboro Record*. (March 20, 1944): 4.

<sup>16</sup> Bennett Belles and faculty created numerous programs that were broadcast from WBIG (now WWBG 1470) nationally over the CBS network. These programs ranged from selections of the Bennett College Choir to a tribute to Abraham Lincoln broadcast on February 12<sup>th</sup> 1946. Also many Bennett College events were broadcast locally over WBIG including the dedication of Pfeiffer Science Hall in 1939.

<sup>17</sup> "Bennett Series on Radio Changes." *Bennett Banner* XII.4 (Jan. 1943).

Following the presidency of Dr. Isaac H. Miller Jr. (1966-1987), six women have served as president and Bennett College, which has continued to be a school of women led by women. Over the last 50 years, well over 5,000 Bennett Belles have become doctors, executives, CEOs, mayors, teachers, and leaders in education, the social sciences, the natural and behavioral sciences, mathematics and the humanities.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Yvonne Jeffries Johnson became the first African American mayor of Greensboro in 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Note: All Greensboro area newspapers were accessed from the *Greensboro News and Record* Archives through the Readex America's Historical Newspapers database. All historically African-American periodicals were accessed through Fulton History, the world's largest free online newspaper database. [www.fultonhistory.com](http://www.fultonhistory.com)

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