THE THREE AGES OF FURMAN UNIVERSITY

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For over 150 years the history of Furman University has been intertwined with the history of Greenville and the South Carolina Piedmont. But the history of Furman stretches farther back into the American past than the coming of Furman University to Greenville in 1851. Like most colleges of the colonial and early national period Furman did not spring full-blown into an institution of higher learning, but developed from a vision into academies, denominational colleges, and finally into a national liberal arts institution.[1]

There are three distinct ages in the history of Furman: (1) from 1755 to 1850, when the Furman Academy and Theological Institution and the Greenville Female Academy developed as separate schools; (2) from 1851 to 1945, when Furman University and the Greenville Woman's College were South Carolina-based denominational colleges; and (3) after 1945, when Furman became a nationally-ranked liberal arts institution.

The Baptist tradition out of which Furman arose derived from the English Puritan movement in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Among the Puritans who were seeking to reform the Church of England were the radical Baptists who shared a theology derived from the work of John Calvin and a belief in a learned clergy, but who insisted on congregational autonomy, believers' baptism, the separation of church and state, and competency of the individual before God.

Baptists were among the early settlers of South Carolina, but not until 1751 were there enough churches in the Carolina Lowcountry

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to form the Charleston Association. In 1755 Oliver Hart, pastor of the Charleston Baptist Church, led the creation of an education fund for young ministers. At first they studied in the homes of older clergy, as the Puritans had done in New England; later they went to Rhode Island College (now Brown University), the only Baptist college in America.

In 1755 these Regular Baptists were joined in the South Carolina Backcountry by an infusion of revivalist Separate Baptists, who had been influenced by the Great Awakening in Connecticut. Demanding an instantaneous, affective conversion experience, they ridiculed education as a deterrent to the work of the spirit.

The most famous convert of the Separate Baptists was Richard Furman, a New York native and a descendant of New England Puritans, who lived in the High Hills of the Santee (near what is now Sumter). Educated in the classics in the home of his schoolmaster father turned planter, Furman met Regular Baptist Oliver Hart in 1773 and became convinced of the necessity of an educated clergy and the importance of bringing Baptists of diverse traditions together.[2]

As pastor of the Charleston Baptist Church after the American Revolution, Richard Furman became one of the foremost Baptist leaders in America, president of the first national convention of Baptists, and one of the architects of a plan to create a university in the nation's capital (now George Washington University), and a series of regional preparatory academies. In time, these academies might themselves become universities.

To create such an academy in the South Atlantic states, Furman established a convention of South Carolina Baptists in 1821. The convention was only marginally successful at the beginning, and the Regular and Separate Baptists were never easy bedfellows. But the constitution made the academy's purpose clear: "The course of education and government will be conducted with a sacred re[gard] interests of morality and religion, according to the co[mmon] sentiments of the founders; yet on the principles of Christi[anity] [that is, the liberal arts] and in favor of private judgment."

Richard Furman died in 1825, but his successor William Bullein Johnson led the founding of the Furman Academy and Theological Institution in 1826 and the opening of the school in Edgefield in January 1827. The principal was an English Baptist minister Joseph Warne. A man of considerable stature, Warne eventually became pastor of the mother church of Baptists in Providence, Rhode Island. The curriculum included both classical studies through the first two college years and ministerial training for "indigent pious young men particularly."

The Board of Agents did not expect all Furman students to be indigent or pious. The fees ranged from $20 to $32 a year, not an insignificant sum in those days, and the rules forbade "all lying, cursing, swearing, drunkenness, fighting, dueling, dice, card and billiard playing, betting, theft, and fornication."

The Furman Academy was no great success. It changed instructors frequently and never had more than ten to fifteen students. It closed several times and relocated twice - first to the High Hills of Santee and later to Winnsboro.

Economically the plantation South was in deep trouble. Cotton prices plunged dramatically during the Panic of 1819, and except for the decade before the Civil War and a few years before World War I, the history of the South was one long depression from 1820 to the early 1940s. Financial struggle would be a major theme in the history of Furman for a century and a half.

More successful was the Greenville Female Academy, chartered in the village of Greenville in 1820 by local businessmen at the suggestion of Lowcountry rice planters who migrated to the Upcountry in the summer months. The economy of Greenville was not tied to staple crops and was enriched by the embryonic textile industry after the War of 1812. In 1823 William Bullein Johnson, the Baptist minister who steered the Furman Academy through its early years, became principal of the girls' school in Greenville. Soon it enrolled about a hundred students.

The era of the academies came to an end in the 1850s. The decade of the '50s coincided with an economic recovery and the success of a wave of evangelical revivals which followed the Second Great Awakening. Presbyterian hegemony in the South Carolina Upcountry and Episcopal domination in the low country gave way to the burgeoning Methodist and Baptist churches. As the economic and social status of the new religious majority rose, they focused on liberal arts education - once open only to the aristocracy - as a way to achieve greater respectability. South Carolina College, with a succession of clergy presidents - led by Baptist Jonathan Maxcy, a protégé of Richard Furman and a mentor of William Bullein Johnson---at first served the purpose. But in the 1820s came President Thomas Cooper, an Oxford-educated English radical, who challenged orthodox theology. Evangelical churchmen wanted a safe haven to educate their future leaders, untainted by heretical notions. The Associate Reformed Presbyterians founded Erskine College in1839. The Methodists and Baptists were not far behind.

The leaders of Furman then located in Winnsboro laid plans to transform it into a liberal arts institution. Greenville won the bidding as a more favorable site for the new university. The climate was healthy, costs were reasonable, and Baptists abounded. James Clement Furman, son of the institution's namesake and the first president, called Greenville "the promised land." Educated at the College of Charleston and the Furman Institution, he was tall and wiry. His first and second wives were sisters, the daughters of a devout planter and slaveholder in Winnsboro.

The state Baptist convention secured a charter for The Furman University, as it was styled, and the school opened in Greenville in 1851. It occupied a spacious campus high over the Reedy River on University Ridge. Temporary buildings gave way to an Italian Renaissance main building with a handsome bell tower. A classical curriculum attracted fifty to sixty students. President Furman served up to the students a congenial mixture of orthodox religion, states rights,

and the pro-slavery argument. A controversial figure in unionist Greenville, Furman soon became a leader of the secessionist movement. He refused to sign the diploma of at least one student who espoused the unionist cause.

In 1854 the leaders of the state convention joined the national movement to provide higher education for women. Greenville offered the campus of the academy on College Street to the Furman trustees. The next year they opened the Greenville Baptist Female College with a curriculum embracing "all those branches of a liberal education that are pursued in our colleges for young men."

But such ambitious plans succumbed to the Civil War and Reconstruction. Many Furman students volunteered for Confederate service; a few for the Union army. The university closed, then reopened; the female college struggled on. For three decades the future of the two institutions hung in the balance. James Clement Furman was tempted to abandon ship. "No," he replied in the words of heroic legend; "I have nailed my colors to the mast and if the vessel goes down, I will go down with her."

Gradually the region emerged from the trauma of Reconstruction, committed to the building of a New South. Southern Baptists were caught up in an age of revivalism that soon defined the soul of the denomination. They outstripped the Methodists to become the largest religious group in the region. As the textile industry spread across the Piedmont and increased its wealth, Furman began to emerge from the shadow of poverty. In 1897 A. P. Montague, the first president to hold the new Ph.D. degree, began to raise academic standards. Dr. Edwin McNeill Poteat, whose brother became president of Wake Forest College in North Carolina, began to inject the theology of the social gospel into the Greenville institution as well as the family tradition of intellectual independence. Once chided by a local minister for his liberal ideas in a chapel sermon, he replied: "My name is Poteat, and I'll say what I damn well please." The graduates of those years achieved international recognition---John Mathews Manly, Class of

1883, as a Chaucer scholar, and John Broadus Watson, Class of 1899, as the founder of behavioral psychology.[4]

The woman's college continued to operate under the shadow of Furman, but it had a series of strong administrators---Charles Judson, Alexander Townes, and David Ramsay. The most notable influence on students was the lady principal, Mary Camilla Judson, a native of Connecticut and sister of Charles Judson. She taught a wide variety of subjects from 1874 to 1912, established the college library, introduced elocution and calisthenics to the curriculum, and was an early proponent of women's rights in Greenville.

In the 1920s Furman president William Joseph McGlothlin assembled a faculty of memorable teachers like Delbert Gilpatrick and Francis Pendleton Gaines, fresh from Columbia University, and A. T. Odell with a degree in literature from the Sorbonne. Meanwhile Meta Eppler Gilpatrick began her legendary career as a teacher of creative writing at the Woman's College.

Intercollegiate sports had begun on December 15, 1889, when Furman played a football game against Wofford College, the first in South Carolina. McGlothlin presided over a strong football program led by Coach Billy Laval and later A. P. (Dizzy) McLeod.

The financial survival of Furman was secured in 1924 when it became a beneficiary of The Duke Endowment, established by James Buchanan Duke, who had made a fortune in tobacco and electric power. Bennette E. Geer, alumnus, professor, mill executive and later president of the university, had urged Duke's support of Furman. A cherished legend has it that when Mr. Duke was drawing up the indenture he turned to his attorney with the query: "What's the name of that little college in Greenville that Ben Geer is so crazy about?" The Woman's College was saved from closing by coordinating with Furman between 1932 and 1938. Its administration was consolidated with the men's college, but it maintained its identity as the Woman's College of Furman University. Students knew it more familiarly as "the Zoo" after an animal theme party in the 1930s.

With the nationwide growth of fundamentalism in the 1920s and 30s, the university's academic integrity was severely tested. A half century of tension between the college and the denomination began. Descendants of the Separate Baptist tradition within the state convention leveled charges of heresy against members of the faculty - Odell in English, Preston Epps in classics, Frank Pool in religion, and former president Edwin McNeill Poteat, who had returned to Furman to teach. Charges reached a climax in 1938 after a Religious Emphasis Week when the speaker Gordon Poteat, son of the former president, was challenged by a group of local ministers. Several faculty members who defended Poteat were dismissed. President Geer, who was already under fire for issues related to management, resigned.

When John L. Plyler became president in 1938, Furman had reached a low point in its history. The effects of the Depression were far from over, and the critics of Furman had a taste for blood. But the Furman trustees courageously endorsed the 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom of the Association of American Colleges and the American Association of University Professors. Heresy hunting at Furman was over. Then World War II broke out. Many men faculty and most men students went into the armed forces. Army Air Force trainees kept the men's campus operating. When peace returned, the two campuses bustled with returning veterans. Buses operated regularly between "the Hill" and "the Zoo." But few in the early post-war years could foresee the great changes that were about to engulf Furman and transform her from a denominational college into a national liberal arts institution.

The end of World War II signaled the beginning of a new age in the American South. The wartime economy had transformed Southern agriculture, and textile mills operated around the clock. But economic leaders such as Charles E. Daniel foresaw the necessity of diversifying the economy. Massive movements of population had created a more cosmopolitan society, and there were already stirrings of a revolution in race relations.

The first step in Furman's transformation was the building of a new, unified campus. The two downtown campuses had little room for expansion, and the buildings needed major reconstruction. President Plyler and trustees Alester G. Furman, Jr. and J. Dean Crain began to dream of an entirely new campus. In 1950 the university purchased 973 acres near Paris Mountain. The architectural firm that rebuilt Colonial Williamsburg - Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, Kehoe and Dean - designed the campus and the new buildings. The formal groundbreaking occurred on October 6, 1953. Not until 1961 did both men and women students occupy the campus, and Furman became truly coeducational. The present campus is a monument to the dreams and planning of President Plyler and Alester Furman, Jr.

The second element in the transformation of Furman was national recognition. In 1954 the sports spotlight focused on Furman when Frank Selvey scored 100 points in a basketball game against Newberry College; a decade later Charles H. Townes, a descendant of William Bullein Johnson, brought honor to his alma mater when he won the Nobel Prize in Physics for his work on the maser and the laser.

When Gordon W. Blackwell assumed the presidency in 1965, he brought a national reputation as a strong defender of academic freedom at Florida State University. He supported the efforts at voluntary racial integration at Furman led by Dean Francis W. Bonner, and the first black students enrolled during Blackwell's first day as president. The thrust of his presidency was "greatness by national standards." He built a modern university administration, and attracted a multimillion dollar gift from the Ford Foundation to jumpstart a major financial campaign. While the Baptist convention balked at the gift of federal funds, it began to under gird the university with adequate funding for the first time in its history.

As new construction continued, Dean Bonner led the faculty to adopt a new, more demanding curriculum and created a diverse study abroad program. A National Science Foundation grant pushed the chemistry department toward recognition as one of the best

undergraduate programs in the country. The Collegiate Educational Service Corps, led by student center director Betty Alverson and since named in honor of Greenville mayor and trustee Max Heller and his wife Trude, became a national model for volunteer service. Planned growth of the university to 2500 students made the rocky economy of the 1970s bearable. On December 5, 1973, Furman's efforts reached a milestone when Phi Beta Kappa, the nation's oldest and premier academic honor society, presented a charter for a chapter at the university. Fittingly, the president of Phi Beta Kappa, African American scholar John Hope Franklin, who presented the charter, held the John Matthews Manly Service Chair at the University of Chicago, named in memory of one of Furman's most distinguished alumni.

In 1976, after eleven years, Blackwell handed the presidential mace to John Edwin Johns, Class of 1947 and president of Stetson University since 1970. No one could foresee that Johns would preside over the third major factor in propelling Furman toward a new identity, independence from the South Carolina Baptist Convention.[5]

After 1945, skirmishes with the convention over the direction of the university continued intermittently. They ranged from rhetorical attacks on the floor of the convention aimed at Furman's "country club board" of trustees to a legal showdown over national Greek letter fraternities and the selection of the board itself. But a greater threat was looming on the horizon. In the 1970s fundamentalists formulated a strategy to seize control of the Southern Baptist Convention from the moderate leaders who had long held sway. Beginning in 1979 and each year thereafter, fundamentalists elected one of their number as president of the convention. They were committed to reshaping it into a denomination that was pledged to a creedal affirmation of biblical inerrancy and to the social and political program of the Religious Right. Concepts such as "Christian liberality and the right of private judgment," which had been at the heart of Furman's existence from the beginning, meant little.

The university weathered the initial blasts of the controversy because the seminaries and boards of the denomination were the early targets. Gradually, the battle lines moved to the institutions of the state conventions. In 1986 Wake Forest University moved to alter its relationship to the North Carolina convention. That same year President Johns and the Executive Committee of the Furman trustees reviewed the university charter to seek relief: they found it "ironclad."

In 1988 the South Carolina convention selected a slate of fundamentalists for three of the five vacancies on the Furman board. The next year two more fundamentalists were elected. In the summer of 1990 a group of Furman alumni, many of them attorneys, became fearful that the university would be taken over by the fundamentalists, and the character of the institution changed. David Ellison, president of the alumni association, appointed Neil Rabon of Greenville to chair a task force to work on the issue. A team of alumni attorneys discovered that Furman's 1850 charter was subsumed under the state's non-profit corporation statute of 1900. Under that legislation non-profit corporations could amend their own charters and adopt bylaws. The alumni task force urged President Johns and trustees to amend the charter to allow the trustees to choose their successors.

At first Johns seemed an unlikely person to lead the university through a long battle to establish its independence of the convention. At age 66, he had spent his entire career in Baptist higher education. But at Furman he had devoted himself to the preservation of academic freedom and the enhancement of the university as a national liberal arts institution. A choice between the denomination, even one racked by factional warfare, and the university would be painful. But Johns's ultimate commitment was never in doubt; once he made up his mind, he would not waver.

On October 8, 1990, the Executive Committee of the trustees unanimously adopted the motion of Alester G. Furman III to recommend that the charter and bylaws be amended. On October 15, the full board under the leadership of Minor H. Mickel, first woman to

chair the board, concurred. The following day the trustees affirmed their intention to maintain the heritage of the university and proceeded to elect the slate of trustees previously selected by the convention's nominating committee. As expected, the fundamentalist trustees voted against the amendments.

Two years of turmoil followed during which the convention threatened a lawsuit. Johns reiterated his determination to the faculty: "They want to destroy the university as we know it now, and turn it into a place where academic freedom takes a backseat to indoctrination. But I assure you we are not going to let them do it." A grass roots movement among the churches of the convention resisted legal action as unchristian, and at a called meeting on May 15, 1992, the convention easily passed resolutions cutting all legal and financial ties with Furman University.

The loss of support did not cripple the institution. Alumni and friends rallied to her aid. In the summer of 1992 Mrs. Charles E. Daniel, a long time supporter of the university, bequeathed $24 million to Furman. President Johns had piloted Furman through perilous waters, and he indicated his intention to retire the following year. David Emory Shi, a 1972 alumnus and vice president for academic affairs and dean, was elected Furman's tenth president with the avowed intention of bringing Furman into the top rank of American liberal arts institutions.

End Notes

[1] The standard histories of Furman University include William J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Beginnings in Education in South Carolina: A History of Furman University* (Nashville, TN, 1926), Robert N. Daniel, *Furman University: A History* (Greenville, SC, 1951), and Alfred Sandlin Reid, *Furman University: Toward A New Identity, 1925-1975* (Durham, NC, 1976). The history of women's education is traced in

Judith T. Bainbridge. *Academy and College: The History of the Woman's College of Furman University* (Macon, GA. 2001).

[2] The standard biography of Richard Furman is James A. Rogers. *Richard Furman, Life and Legacy* (Macon, GA. 1985).

[3] Shelley S. Williams, Jr. to Furman University, February 27, 1996. Special Collections, James B. Duke Library, Furman University, Greenville SC.

[4] Interview with Schaefer Kendrick.

[5] Archie Vernon Huff, Jr., "The Road to Independence," pp. 6-12. in *The Johns Era, 1976-1994: A Time of Achievement, Change, and Renewal* (Greenville, SC 1994).