THE GREENVILLE COUNTY COUNCIL FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: FURMAN AND GREENVILLE IN PARTNERSHIP IN THE 1930'S

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Ever since Greenvillians helped finance the move of Furman University to their town in 1850, the relationship between the town and the university has been close. One of the most spectacular episodes in this long and close relationship took place in the mid-1930's during the presidency of Bennette Eugene Geer. Geer took over as president of the college in 1933. He had had a long association with Furman as student, teacher of English, treasurer, fund raiser, and member of the Furman Board of Trustees. He had equally close ties with Greenville through his business ventures in cotton manufacturing. He was president of Judson Mills and president and treasurer of Alice Mills at the time of his election to the presidency. One of the planks in his platform for the university was to strengthen and extend this close relationship between town and college by bringing Furman's academic program to bear on the social betterment of the community. He supported other cooperative plans, such as the Furman-Greenville arboretum at Reedy River waterfalls, the cooperative Furman-Greenville building of Sirrine Stadium, and the putting of students to work at campus and city beautification with funds from the Public Works Administration. But his most important achievement of this sort was his leadership, along with that of Lawrence Peter Hollis of Parker District Schools, in the setting up of the Greenville County Council for Community Development.[1]

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[1]Extensive records, never before written up, have survived on Geer's curriculum experiment: correspondence with the General Education Board, correspondence with Ralph Muse Lyon and Lawrence Peter Hollis, financial ledgers and vouchers. The Greenville County Council for Community Development published four annual reports in pamphlet form. The first is entitled *First Annual Report of the Greenville County Council for Community Development, 1936-1937* (Greenville, 1937), and is subtitled "A five-year program of cooperation and coordination in community development participated in by citizens, organizations, and agencies of Greenville City and County, South Carolina, and by Furman University and the Woman's College of Furman University, and the Greenville Public Library, the schools of Greenville County, the Greenville City Schools, and the Parker District Schools." The final report, *Community Organization and Adult Education: A Five-Year Experiment* (Chapel Hill, 1942), is a book-length study, written by Edmund de S. Brunner with the assistance of Gordon Williams Blackwell, Laura Smith Ebaugh, R. O. Johnson, Clarence B. Loomis, Margaret Chalmers Lyon, Ralph M. Lyon, and Nicholas Pendleton Mitchell. One of the participants, Clarence B. Loomis, published a separate book on the experiment: *An Experience in Community Development and the Principles of Community Organization* (Clayton, Ga. 1944). Gordon Blackwell also wrote up the program in his general survey of similar college-community programs around the country in *Toward Community Understanding* (Washington, D. C., 1943), prepared for the Commission on Teacher Education of the American Council on Education.

What I shall do here today is read some excerpts about this project from the chapter on Geer's administration in the new sesquicentennial history of Furman that will be published in March.[2] The chapter is one of the most complex in the book, even though it covers only five years, because Geer's administration was the most controversial in the history of the college. Geer was not the unanimous choice of the board for the presidency, and his aggressive personality, his initial oppostion to coordination, his spendthrift fiscal policies, his opposition to big-time football, his religious liberalism, and the vocational implications of his educational project kept him in constant strife with the board and with some of his other constituents.

Let me pick up my narration of the project just after I have explained Geer's securing a grant from the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation to recatalogue books and to expand the collections of the Furman and the Greenville Woman's College libraries. That small grant itself was a satisfying achievement for Geer in his educational plans.

Even dearer to Geer's heart was the successful fruition of plans to link Furman with Greenville in a gigantic educational project that combined curriculum experimentation with community development. As Geer described the plan to the board on 22 May 1936, the "Project of Community Development" was to be a cooperative undertaking participated in not only by Furman and the Woman's College but also by the city of Greenville, the schools of Greenville, the schools of Parker School District, the Public Library, and many social and governmental agencies, local, state, and national. It was to be a five-year program funded by an $80,000 grant from the General Education Board and administered by a council made up of representatives of participating organizations. Geer told the Furman board that participation would involve "the enlargement at Furman of the Departments of Education, Sociology, and Political Science." He said that the program would, in effect, turn Greenville County into a vast laboratory. It would get Furman students off the hill over looking Reedy River Falls, get the faculty out of their

[2]Alfred Sandlin Reid, *Furman University: Toward a New Identity, 1925-1975* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1976).

academic ivory towers, and at the same time greatly improve the quality of life in the community. "The activities," he said, "will involve not only educational projects but forestry, the beautification of highways, the creation of recreational parks, and health activities."

Geer had been planning this community-related program ever since June, 1934, when Jackson Davis of the General Education Board, knowing that Geer would be interested in a plan affecting his own community, showed him a proposal for funds for an expanded adult education program in the Parker District mill villages, drawn up by Ralph Muse Lyon, a graduate student at the Teachers College of Columbia University. Only the month before, both the General Education Board and the American Association for Adult Education had rejected the plan, which Lyon had fashioned out of his interests in curriculum development and a social commitment to improving the lives of mill workers. He had outlined the plan in detail as part of his doctoral dissertation, "The Basis for Construction Curriculum Materials in Adult Education for Cotton Mill Workers." Lyon already had the enthusiastic support of his professors at Columbia, especially Edmund Bruner, and he had the promise of cooperation from Lawrence Peter Hollis, superintendent of Parker District schools, to whom he had proposed the idea not only because Parker District under Hollis's leadership was recognized as the most progressive mill-village school system in the South but also because Hollis had already founded there a "Peoples College for Adult Education." Geer saw Hollis's letter of endorsement in the Richmond office of the General Education Board. He also saw Lyon's plan and immediately saw possibilities for adapting it to a college program under Furman's auspices. Geer wasted no time in wiring Lyon in New York to meet him in Richmond for a preliminary discussion of plans and a talk with Commissioner of Education George Frederick Zook. Although he thought Lyon unnecessarily radical in his ideas and somewhat brash and controversial in his enthusiasm, Geer was instantly attracted to him, wrote to Columbia University for his dossier, and informed Hollis of his desire to bring him to Furman. Lyon was equally attracted to Geer and wrote on 30 June that he would "almost give my right arm to be your professor of education." He was

eager to put his theories into practice and suggested that in addition to Geer's ideas about integrating the program with college education courses, they consider the idea of a "city forum and a rural community enterprise.

It took the rest of the year for Geer to outline a program. He submitted his prospectus to the faculty in December 1934—"A Proposed Plan for a County Adult Education Program and an Adult Community Leadership Project at Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina,"—and invited suggestions in time for his next meeting in January with the General Education Board. Sociologist Elwyn Judson Trueblood expressed interest, as did psychologist Charles Watson Burts. Education professors Edwin McCoy Highsmith and Fred W. Alexander were more enthusiastic. They saw it as a "way to social reform" as well as a means of extending Furman's educational influence. They called the plan a "striking example or weaving in the new patterns and the new textures in the cloth of life--one of the great ideas in your inaugural address." The humanists and scientists were less enthusiastic but expressed their willingness to cooperate. Historian Delbert Harold Gilpatrick questioned the faddishness of the plan but approved of it and suggested giving more attention to rural libraries and to such rural health problems as diet. Classicist Preston Herschel Epps hoped that the program would not fall into the hands of "superficial professors of education" and that college credit would not be given for the work. Physicist Hiden Toy Cox doubted whether Greenville people, especially mill workers, were as eager to be educated or improved as the plan idealistically implied and cautioned against "wild and autocratic experimentation." He approved of the laboratory method of problem solving, however, and pointed out that it was the typical method of the sciences. Dean Robert Norman Daniel, an English professor, urged extreme caution about entering into graduate education before Furman was ready.

The grant from the General Education Board came through in the early spring of 1936, effective 1 July, and Geer and Hollis quickly invited twenty-four persons from twenty-three agencies and organizations to the campus to form the Greenville County Council for Community Development and to begin mapping out an extensive program for action. Geer was elected chairman

of the council, and Hollis was elected chairman of the executive committee. Geer provided an old fraternity house at 209 University Ridge as council headquarters and expanded his faculty to help make up the professional staff. As experts in education, he brought in Ralph Lyon, Margaret Charters Lyon, Marcus Cicero Stephen Noble, Jr., and Ellison Matthew Smith; in government, Nicholas Pendleton Mitchell; and in health, Mayo Tolman. He found an additional sociologist so that Laura Smith Ebaugh could devote some of her time to direction the projects in social welfare. In the second year, a new full time sociologist joined the staff, Gordon Williams Blackwell. The grant paid the salaries of these persons in whole or in part. Geer told the executive committee of .the Furman board on 6 November, after the staff had been assembled and the work begun, that Furman had gained from the grant the equivalent of two fulltime teachers. Additional staff members, not members of the Furman faculty, included Russell D. Bailey of the National Park Service; Michael Seymour, director of arts and crafts; Cora Chapman, nurse; and Alfred Moore, musician. College courses planned for the summer and fall included community organization, community leadership, recreation leadership, social problems, family problems, government, vital statistics, child hygiene, and problems in community development. Teaching methods stressed team teaching, problem solving, practical analysis of existing conditions in the Greenville area, field work, and case studies; and data were turned over to social agencies. In anticipation of the project, Ellison M. Smith, new director of the summer school, announced a summer forum for superintendents and principals and a curriculum laboratory to give in-service teachers "direct assistance . . . in working out their problems."

Additional curriculum developments in the spring of 1936 indicated wide-spread eagerness to move in a utilitarian, community-related direction. The Woman's College began a five-year course of study leading to a degree in nursing in cooperation with the Greenville General Hospital. Women students planned extracurricular work in buying and retailing in cooperation with downtown department stores. The drama department of the Woman's College cooperated with the Greenville Little Theatre, and the music department, always a leader

in community music, soon helped organize the Greenville Symphony Orchestra when Lennie Lusby, professor of violin, and Guy Hutchins, director of music at Greenville High School, united their student ensembles with community performers under the direction of Hutchins in 1938. In the fall of 1936 John Laney Plyler returned to teach a course in business law, and Charles N. Wyatt, college physician, headed the department of physical education and taught physiology and hygiene.

The board was not excited as Geer was about educational innovation and expansion. It was concerned about finances, and justifiably so. Audit reports at the end of April continued to reflect deficits. The combined indebtedness by 30 June exceeded $300,000. Yet Geer was launching a program of considerable magnitude. Geer blamed subsidized athletics, coordination costs, student defaults on payments, and unavoidable economic conditions. Some members of the board blamed Geer's own policies of fee concessions to students collections, investments, and expenses. Deeply committed to leading Furman in its most progressive educational program ever and conscious of the pressure building up against him, Geer proposed on 22 May 1936, that he be relieved of the task of overseeing the finances. He argued that he should now "devote my time entirely to . . . the development and enlargement of academic standards and usefulness." He therefore proposed that the board handle the budget or that a new financial officer or treasurer replace the ailing Alfred G. Taylor and be responsible for the business management and maintenance. On 14 July the board agreed to this reorganization. At the same meeting it listened to Geer's request for a full investigation of his fiscal policies to learn to what extent he should be held responsible for unsatisfactory conditions.

In my book, the chapter continues with the controversy over finances and with the special investigation committees' report. It then goes on to additional controversies over athletics and religion before returning to summarize the activities of the Greenville County Council for Community Development.

Meanwhile, the first year of the community-development curriculum had been a splendid success. Geer called it "stimulating" in his report on 27 May 1937. About a dozen new courses had been offered in education, government, health, and

sociology, the purpose of which was to train community leaders and solve social problems. Enrollments were high--105 in social problems (three sections), 100 in introductory sociology (three sections), 49 in state and local governments, 46 in tests and measurements, 45 in community organization, and 44 in comparative governments. The first annual report of the Community Development Council in 1937 listed studies of traffic and zoning problems, the work of twenty-seven social agencies, surveys of rural black school plants and recreational facilities in the county, and the results of intelligence and achievement tests to be used as a basis for improving instruction. The findings were turned over to the appropriate social agencies. In addition to formal course work, the Furman faculty on the professional staff of the council provided many other services. Ebaugh served as a consultant for social welfare agencies. Tolman conducted school sanitation surveys. Margaret Lyon gave a Parent Teachers' Association training course for studygroup leaders in rural areas and conducted a recreational institute for black playground workers. Ralph Lyon worked with rural vocational-agricultural teachers, helped organize and develop the program of "Fountain Inn Negro College," advised leaders at Phillis Wheatley Center, and conducted an institute on teaching methods at the Associated Reform Presbyterian Sabbath School of Greenville.

One of the striking features of the program was its emphasis on interracial cooperation, including the formation of an interracial committee. In the second year of the program, on 10 November 1937, Ralph Lyon expanded his work at the Phillis Wheatley Center by directing a two-day conference for 150 black teachers. The interracial committee itself requested sociology teachers Blackwell and Ebaugh to study various phases of black life, and one of these surveys of housing and economic status under Blackwell's supervision, "assisted by students from Sterling High School," was incorporated into a request by the local Housing Authority for funds from the United States Housing Authority. The Authority granted the funds, but the Greenville City Council refused to match them. At the end of the first year of the program's operation Dean Daniel said that there were not only significant educational values to using the county as a "unique social science laboratory" but equally significant social values. Dean Virginia

Evelyn Thomas echoed the sentiment. The program, she said, was achieving its purpose of enlarging students' social awareness and providing an opportunity for achieving Christian goals of service to humanity.

As a result of the program, moreover, the graduate studies plan that Geer had envisioned in 1934 made possible the restoration on a limited basis of Furman's graduate program which had been abandoned during World War I. In addition to five fellowships at $500 each Geer offered five scholarships at $250 each to develop community leaders, broaden the student body, relieve the staff of certain nonteaching duties, and prepare prospective teachers for returning to Furman, as professors. The program had thirty students in its first year and graduated its first M.A. in many years, Miriam Fulbright of Augusta, Georgia, in 1937. Eight others, including Claude Hicks, Sumner A. Ives, Jr., and Theodosia Evelyn Wells, completed their degrees in 1938. Their thesis grew out of careful studies of community problems.

The program also gave renewed impetus to scholarly publication by faculty members. Under the editorship of William Preston Warren, *Furman Studies* entered its most active phase yet with a regular series of thematic numbers to which the faculty members on the staff contributed. In the first such issue under the title "Community Development Program," Lyon described the inception of the project and presented the original plan submitted to the General Education Board. In subsequent issues Ebaugh, Blackwell, and Mitchell reported on aspects of their work. Other faculty members also contributed articles—Sampey on chemistry, Warren on politics, Arthur Coe Gray on drama, Wendell Keeney on music, Catherine Boyd Calhoun on art, and E. E. Gardner and Daniel on literature. Not since the mid-1920's had there been such a surge of enthusiasm and a quickening of the intellectual life and social awareness throughout the institution.

For the first time in its history, the educational program at Furman attracted national attention. In May 1938 Geer reported that many people were coming to Greenville and Furman "to study our methods and note our progress in the direction of adjusting education to a changed and changing social order." Daniel reported the same thing. He and Alfred T. Odell

visited about twenty colleges in the East in 1937-38 to study curricula. Everywhere they went, Daniel said, north to Sarah Lawrence and Williams, south to Florida State College for Women, they found keen interest. At Hendrix College in Arkansas, their hosts drove them around the community so that they could point out exactly how the Furman program could be applied to the Hendrix community. Daniel told the board in May, 1938 that Furman was definitely in the "progressive tradition" in its curriculum modification, divisional organization, and guidance program. In his report, Geer was not smug, however. He recognized serious weaknesses. The prevailing narrow departmental attitude needed to give way to more concern for students and to a broader institutional outlook; the curriculum needed further liberalization to include more guidance and more art and music for men.

Nevertheless Furman was riding a crest of popular progressivism. Edmund de S. Bruner, professor of education at Teachers College of Columbia University, became the adviser to the community-development project in 1938 and wrote up a complete five-year report in 1942. In 1939 and 1940 Columbia University, having modified its program of European study to include field study in the United States, selected Greenville as the site of a field course to study at first hand Southern conditions in "agriculture, labor, health, education, and race relations." Sociologist Gordon Blackwell coordinated the program as a member of the Teachers College summer faculty. As Bruner said, one of the "most interesting results had been changes in point of view" among southerners and northerners as a result of new knowledge. In 1940 the Commission on Teacher Education of the America Council on Education selected the Furman campus as the setting for workshops for high school teachers. In 1941 the Southeastern Workshop in Community Development convened during the summer school under the joint auspices of the council, Furman, and the General Education Board, which brought fifty outstanding people from the southeastern states to study and evaluate the community development projects. Bruner surveyed their findings.

At this point the chapter returns to the climax of the other controversies during these years, controversies so intense over finances, athletics, and religion that they finally culminated in

Geer's resignation. I end the chapter with an evaluation of the Greenville County Council for Community Development as part of a general evaluation of Geer's presidency.

The Geer years were the most turbulent in the history of Furman. They began under a cloud of debt and declining enrollments and ended under a bigger cloud of suspicion, recrimination, and violation of academic freedom and due process. Obviously the depression led to the crisis of finances. Just a few years after Geer's resignation coordination would prove to be a big blessing, but in the 1930s the increases in indebtedness and in maintenance and operating costs had been a difficult burden to bear, as Geer had warned. Nevertheless, Geer had sympathetically presided over coordination and solicited money from the General Education Board for all sorts of educational needs for both schools: library, curriculum, maintenance, faculty salaries, travel, and study. Without this money and that of the Duke Endowment, Furman probably would not have survived the depression or consummated coordination. When Geer left office, coordination was complete, indebtedness had been reduced from its 1936 high, and Furman had been operating in the black for two years. Perhaps no one who tried to introduce progressive ideas about education and social development in a conservative environment in a time of depression could have kept the peace.

Geer was ahead of his time by being a man of his times. He was clearly not a scholar, but he recognized an idea when he saw it, and he proceeded to implement the most ambitious, forward-looking program ever tried at Furman up to that time. Underlying the ingenious idea of turning the community into a laboratory in which students contributed to the improvement of a community were two even more basic ideas. First, the South—both the mill South or rising industrial South and the rural South—needed leaders, and education should provide those leaders by placing them in a training ground to locate the problems and learn how to solve them. Second, the liberal education of young men and women is doomed to failure if the educational level of their communities is so impoverished or illiberal that they will revert to that level upon graduation. Hence the stress on adult education, on community relations, or interracial cooperation, on liberalizing attitudes of religion and

mind, in short, on adapting education to the workaday world. If Geer was ahead of his time for Furman and Greenville, he was in tune with the most progressive thinking of the Institute for Research in Social Science at Chapel Hill under Howard W. Odum, Rupert Vance, and later Gordon Blackwell, one of Geer's own staff members. Geer was also in tune with the most progressive pedagogical thinking at Teachers College, Columbia University, led by John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick, and with the most advanced thinking of the social gospel of the 1920s and 1930. Undoubtedly these progressive ideas were as much responsible for Geer's undoing as were his fiscal policies and his personality, as evidenced in the religious blowup of his final months. Not for another thirty years would Furman rise to such educational prominence as it had under Geer.

In the next chapter—the early years of President John L. Plyler's administration, 1939 to 1945—I return briefly to the program to explain why it was not renewed. Even if the school had applied for a renewal, there is doubt that the application would have been successful. The General Education Board had shifted its own interests. So in a few years all members of the staff except one had entered military service or had departed for other activities. Gordon Blackwell, for instance, had left to teach at the University of North Carolina. Only Laura Ebaugh remained -- until her retirement in 1963 -- to continue the idea of the program in her teaching.

The program was an exciting partnership in Furman-Greenville relations, one that both Furman and Greenville can look back to with pride.