

## **"Malignant Spirits" and The Founding of the Greenville Women's College**

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In 1961, when the Women's College of Furman University closed its doors on College Street and its students joined the men of Furman on the Poinsett Highway, a chapter in Greenville history closed. Both boys and girls had attended the Greenville Academies on that campus since 1823, and since 1855 college women had studied there. While over the years the institution's name had changed from Greenville Baptist Female College to Greenville Female College to Greenville Women's College to Women's College of Furman University, by whatever name, the school was woven into the fabric of the community. Yet the details surrounding its establishment and the controversy it once engendered have been long forgotten.

That controversy, though, sheds an interesting light on Greenville in the 1850s. The decade before the Civil War was not a halcyon time in the fractious Upcountry town. It was, rather, a place where old animosities, "malignant spirits," in Benjamin Perry's words, sparked clashes, both verbal and physical, and where principle and politics were intertwined and sometimes confused.

At the South Carolina Baptist Convention in 1853, delegates had appointed a three-man committee to consider whether they should begin a denominational college for women. When rumors circulated in the Greenville community that the committee would recommend doing so, attorney William Choice (an Episcopalian) approached Methodists, who were also considering establishing a female school, about coming to Greenville. In the meanwhile, the Greenville Female Academy continued to operate, although students had abandoned the Male Academy and no teacher had been employed there since Furman University's preparatory classes had begun in 1851.

At a public meeting on May 22, 1854, a "large and respectable" public meeting was held at the courthouse to discuss the desirability of "inviting

and inducing" Baptists to begin a school in Greenville.<sup>1</sup> Charles Elford, Perry Duncan and Col. E.P. Jones were appointed to raise a subscription and to determine the degree of community support for the transfer of the academy lands to the Baptists. Interest was high: all three of Greenville's newspapers published letters and editorials about having a female college in town. The *Southern Patriot*, edited by Unionist attorney Benjamin Perry, was strongly in favor. Editor William Price at the new *Southern Enterprise* was neutral and reported objectively, but he saw the college as an economic plus. George Townes, a secessionist who had fought Perry for more than twenty years, was editing the *Greenville Mountaineer*; he was opposed.

On June 12 local citizens, both men and women, met again. Presbyterian Minister E. T. Buist presided. They heard the committee report that \$5,400 had been subscribed and 126 men in town and 500 in the district had signed a petition supporting a Baptist college. Speaking in favor of the proposal were Duncan, Jones, and Benjamin Perry. William Choice, whom Perry had opposed since the nullification issue twenty years earlier, led the opposition. He denied the power of the trustees to transfer the land, cited a Dartmouth College case,<sup>2</sup> argued that the ladies of the village, who were enthusiastic in support of the college, should follow President Andrew Jackson's advice that their legitimate sphere was "knitting stockings." The merchants who wished to bring more students to Greenville were, he stated, "actuated by the love of money." He presented a petition signed by sixty men against the transfer of lands and trust.<sup>3</sup>

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1 *Southern Enterprise*, May 24, 1854.

2 *Dartmouth College v Woodward* argued by Daniel Webster before the Supreme Court in 1819 helped protect the rights of private property from unreasonable government interference with contracts. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Dartmouth's trustees, who argued that the college's royal charter as a private school was to last "forever" and that New Hampshire could not make it into a state university.

3 *Southern Patriot* (Greenville, SC), June 15, 1854

Benjamin Perry rose "to defend the law and the women." Jackson, he pointed out, had actually said "knitting stockings and nursing children." Ladies had not "transcended their sphere." They were understandably eager to have their daughters educated and made "fit companions for educated men." There was no violation of the charter and the Dartmouth case did not apply. "We want trustees to do their duty. That is all. We wish them, freely and voluntarily, to transfer their lands (which are now valueless, were given for education purposes) to the Baptist Society for a Female College."

Then he attacked Choice personally. Perry pointed out that Choice had not subscribed one dollar to the building of the academies, had no children to send to them, was only interested in "checkmating and neutralizing" the Baptists of the town. The Patriot reported that "the speakers in favor of the transfer were loudly and repeatedly applauded and the utmost respect and attention was given to the argument upon the opposing side."<sup>4</sup> That may have been true, but Choice, who had long opposed Perry politically, was distinctly angered by his remarks.

The following week, Perry editorialized about the importance of a female college to Greenville, appealing to citizens' feelings of pride, progress, and financial gain, and stating that Furman University had destroyed the prosperity and "almost abolished the use" of the male academy. The Patriot argued that instead of having an inferior school there would be a superior one where all classes could educate their daughters at all levels of learning. Tuition would be the same as at the academy, but students from afar would attend. Denominational control would not matter for "they (the Baptists) never teach their peculiar religious tenets whilst teaching grammar and geography and belles letters."<sup>5</sup>

The next day the academy board of trustees met. They considered a resolution, proposed by Perry, that they apply to the Court of Chancery, which dealt with land transfers, for permission to transfer the academy trust and lands for the purpose of endowing a female college, "provided there is an express guarantee that a female college shall always be kept

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4 Ibid., June 22, 1854.

5 Ibid., June 29, 1854. Since the 1850s, the meaning of "peculiar" has changed from particular or individual to odd or bizarre.

up in the village of Greenville."<sup>6</sup> It was, obviously, a speculative plea, since the decision of the Baptists was still pending. His petition was endorsed by a majority of the academy trustees although both Baptist George Townes and Episcopalian Thomas Cox spoke against it.

Their first point was that the academies were still useful. Perry had stated in his resolution that only ten or fifteen pupils were enrolled in one academy and fewer in the other, but Townes and Cox insisted that there was an enrollment of approximately a hundred students. Both sides seem to have been incorrect, since thirty-four girls - probably most of the student body - were listed as participating in the 1854 May Day celebration at the Female Academy. At the same time, Robert McKay was teaching about 30 to 40 small children, both boys and girls to read and write at the vacant female academy residence.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, they complained that Vardry McBee, who had contributed the land for the academies in 1820 and who was strongly promoting the transfer, should not have any more authority than any other citizen. Their major argument, however, was that transferring academy lands and giving the property and charter of a community school to a single denomination would be a breach of trust.<sup>8</sup> The vote on Perry's motion was seven to three in favor. Voting no, in addition to Cox and Townes, was T. S. Arthur, the rector of Christ Church.

In spite of these sharp disagreements, Perry reported in the *Patriot* that the trustees' meeting had been "harmonious and satisfactory," and there was "a hope to reconcile all parties." He also noted that the trustees had applied to the Court of Chancery to make the transfer. Two weeks later, after two days of hearings in Greenville, he announced the Court's decision in their favor. The Board of Trustees, he said, had approved the transfer by a vote of seven to three and the citizens of Greenville supported the transfer four to one. "The people of Greenville have triumphed in this late contest, over all opposition, in Court and out of Court," he wrote. "They have crushed the malignant spirit of faction which actuated some, exposed and driven down the narrow, selfish, sectarian feelings which govern others, and reasoned and argued

<sup>6</sup> Academy Minutes, July 23, 1854

<sup>7</sup> *Southern Patriot*, July 20, 1854.

<sup>8</sup> Academy Minutes, July 25, 1854.

with the right-minded and virtuous, 'til they have been convinced and abandoned their opposition."<sup>9</sup>

By the evening of July 21, delegates from Baptist Associations throughout the state overflowed the town's hotels and boarding houses. "Never has Greenville been so crowded," the *Southern Enterprise* reported.<sup>10</sup> The next day people packed the little Baptist Church on Irvine Street to hear the debate on whether the state convention should sponsor a college for women.

Approaching the subject with considerably more Christian charity than had the opposing sides with the community, delegates first heard the committee's report endorsing a convention-sponsored college. Their reasons were pragmatic. Educating women would bring more attention to the education of men, since an educated mother was a son's first teacher. They also argued that delegates should favor a school under convention auspices because denominational pride was at stake: "Our Methodist brethren have already acted; and at this very time, whilst the question of action is pending with us, it is understood that our Presbyterian brethren have a committee appointed on the subject of a suitable location for a female college . . . our Episcopal brethren also."<sup>11</sup>

When the time came for a vote, there were only a few scattered "nays," although both the Charleston and Welsh Neck delegations had planned to object to the proposal. They had been persuaded, in the words of the *Edgefield Advertiser*, "by the honeyed coaxing of sagacious Greenvillians, the soft suggestions of their dear ladies, and the good dinners of rich laymen."<sup>12</sup> Then delegates (they were not yet called messengers) turned their attention to the question of location for their proposed school. Both Anderson and Greenville were well-prepared to present the claims of their towns.

Anderson offered the twenty-acre property of the Johnson Female University (the largest women's college in the state), a promise of \$25,000 in subscriptions, and a location far enough away from

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9 *Southern Patriot*, July 20, 1854.

10 July 27, 1854.

11 South Carolina Baptist Convention minutes, July 25, 1854.

12 *Edgefield Advertiser* (Edgefield, SC) August 3, 1854.

Greenville and Furman so that university students would not be tempted by female charms. Judge J. P. Reid wound up his plea for Anderson by stating, "Gentleman may say what they please, but you cannot lock up the chambers of the human heart!"<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin Perry argued for Greenville. In spite of its proximity to Furman, the village would provide the academy land and buildings, \$5,000 cash on hand and a pledge to raise a total of \$20,000 for the new school. Greenville's cash, promise, and concentration of Baptists (and, indeed, the convenience of having Furman nearby) made the difference. After another day and a half of discussion, the committee formally proposed that "the convention establish a female college of high order which would embrace all branches of liberal education that are pursued in our colleges for young men: with such modifications and differences as experience and sound judgment may dictate, and that the standard of attainment in these branches be high."<sup>14</sup>

The resolution passed with the understanding that the college (it was officially named the Greenville Baptist Female College, although some delegates argued against the "Greenville" in the title) would be governed by Furman's Board of Trustees, which would appoint the principal or president, who in turn would select the teachers. Delegates added that the Board should "charge enough rent to make repairs and carry on improvements."<sup>15</sup> The Convention thus provided no financial support, as it had for Furman. In the same resolution delegates accepted the donation of academy lands and vested them in Furman's Board of Trustees, who were instructed to put the college into operation on or before January 1, 1855. Then, as the church newspaper pointed out, the Convention could turn its attention to more important things, like increasing Furman's \$75,000 endowment "without distraction."<sup>16</sup> While there were some mumbled complaints about the "invidious discrimination"<sup>17</sup> in favoring Greenville, most Baptists left town pleased with their accomplishment.

13 S. S. Crittenden, *The Century Book* (Greenville, 1903) p.46.

14 SCBC Minutes July 25, 1854. College catalogues for many years repeated this statement although the qualifying phrase ("with such modifications . . .") was omitted after 1870.

15 Ibid.

16 Letter to the Editor, *Southern Baptist* (Greenville, SC) August 30, 1854.

17 *Edgefield Advertiser*, August 3, 1854.

The "malignant spirits" in the community were not so happy. Immediately following the Convention, opposition in the community mounted, led by the "overscrupulous"<sup>18</sup> George Townes. He appealed the Court of Chancery's decision to the Court of Errors, the highest appeals court in the state, arguing, among other points, that the school had been established for the community and the transfer to a single denomination would be "contrary to equity and good conscience."<sup>19</sup> A week later, Benjamin Perry fumed that "certain individuals are determined to throw every obstacle they can in the way of the proposed Female College. The community have decided this matter, the board of trustees have decided, and the Court of Chancery have decided at after a full hearing, and their opposition does not cease!"

The sixty men opposing the transfer would "rejoice," Perry sarcastically commented, if they could "prevent the people of Greenville from sending their daughters to school at home and have them brought up in ignorance."<sup>20</sup> The men involved in the appeal besides Townes were Episcopalians William Choice, Thomas Cox, and T. S. Arthur. Arthur, the co-proprietor of a "Female Institute" at Glenn Springs in Spartanburg County, had proposed moving his school to Greenville. Perry criticized him directly for having a personal interest in stopping the transfer of Academy lands to Baptists and suggested that there was a conflict of interest (in modern terms) in his being an Academy trustee. "Already the seeds of dissension have been sowed in the Episcopal Church and they are likely to ripen into fruit by this effort to keep up strife and litigation,"<sup>21</sup> Perry warned.

Perry's words had the desired effect: the following week he reported that the Episcopalians had abandoned the appeal and that Baptist George Townes stood alone in its continuance.<sup>22</sup> In his appeal, Townes charged the academy trustees, the community, and the Baptist Convention with

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<sup>18</sup> The term is Perry's, used to describe those who had appealed the Court of Chancery's decision, but since Townes was alone in the appeal, it clearly applied to him.

<sup>19</sup> *Ex Parte the Trustees of the Greenville Academies*, 7 Rich. Eq. 471, 28 S.C.

<sup>20</sup> *Southern Patriot*, July 31, 1854.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Southern Patriot*, August 6, 1854.

piracy. In the pages of the *Greenville Mountaineer*, he also charged Perry with "atrocious and unprecedented libel" and "malicious perversions" of Townes words, and argued that he was doing those supporting the college a favor by having the high court make a ruling.<sup>23</sup> The confrontational words of his brief and his newspaper articles sparked an "altercation" on Main Street with Perry, who also had a hot temper. The two men were only reconciled (and the libel suit dropped) through the tact and persuasion of Vardry McBee.<sup>24</sup>

In November, after two full days of hearings in Greenville, the appellate court judges unanimously confirmed the transfer of the lands and buildings of the academy, although they voted four to two against transferring the trust. That transfer, they declared, needed legislative sanction. The Court noted that the trust should be reassigned, not to the South Carolina Baptist Convention, a possibility raised by the Court of Chancery, but to the trustees of Furman. In his concurring opinion, Chancellor F. W. Wardlaw specifically addressed the issue of transferring a community school to a single denomination.

"I frankly avow, that under the proofs given of the advantages of the substitution, I should, under the circumstances, have directed a substitution to the College of Jesuits, sisters of Mercy, the Abolitionists of Slavery or any other person, natural or artificial, capable of executing the trust. A school under the patronage of a particular denomination of Christians is not necessarily sectarian. Teachers of different faiths are frequently employed, and students of all classes are earnestly invited."<sup>25</sup>

The community leaders in favor of the new college went to the General Assembly in December for legislative approval of the transfer of the academies' franchise and charter to Furman's board. Perry, one of Greenville's four representatives in the Assembly, later recalled that the special act "was introduced late in the session and late at night. The bill passed the House sub silentio. It was a march stolen on the enemy. But in the Senate their agents met it, and it was nobly fought through by one

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23 *Greenville Mountaineer*, August 3, 1854.

24 Roy McBee Smith, *Vardry McBee: Man of Reason in an Age of Extremes* (Columbia, SC, 1992) 228.

25 *Ex Parte the Trustees of the Greenville Academies*, 7 Rich. Eq. 471, 28 S.C.Eq.



ssenator, Col. Brockman, about 12 o'clock, who then retired to sleep on this laurels."<sup>26</sup>

It was indeed done in silence. Included in a bill to charter a dozen charitable and civil organizations throughout the state, the transfer of the trust of the Greenville academies to Furman University's trustees was sandwiched between the charters of an Orangeburg fire engine company and the Hamburg Savings and Loan Society. Perry, Duncan, and Pinkney McBee, all unionists, as was Brockman, obviously wanted no attention focused on the still divisive issue. The legislation was signed on December 21, 1854. On Christmas Day Furman's trustees met, but, lacking a quorum, the meeting was adjourned to the next day, when they officially received the deeds to the academy and lands and trust from the Academies' trustees. They then announced that the Greenville Baptist Female College "will go into full operation, the first of February next, under a full corps of competent instructors, and at the usual rate of tuition."<sup>27</sup>

The Greenville Female Academy closed its doors. While it had become, in Perry's words, "a paltry school," it had nevertheless created a tradition that paved the way for higher education for women in Greenville and at Furman University. And the men who fought so vigorously over its beginnings? After the Civil War began, Perry and Townes were reconciled. Townes' son, Alexander, served as president of the Female College. And in 1886, when Perry died, it was George Townes who wrote the tribute of the Greenville Bar in his honor, praising his former enemy as "a man, a citizen, public servant and true patriot."<sup>28</sup>

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26 Perry, "Greenville in the Long Ago: The Origin of the Greenville Female College," *Baptist Courier* (Greenville SC), April 1887.

27 *Southern Patriot*, January 7, 1885.

28 Lillian Kibler, Benjamin F. Perry: *South Carolina Unionist* (Durham, N.C.) 520.