WOFFORD'S MAIN BUILDING

A Spartanburg landmark since its construction between 1851 and 1854, the Main Building of Wofford College has considerable importance as a national historic site. One of the largest and best preserved examples of Italian villa architecture in the United States, it remains the principal academic building of Wofford College, one of fewer than two hundred operating American colleges founded before the Civil War, and one of an even smaller number still operating on its original campus.

Wofford College was made possible by a legacy of $100,000 left to the Methodist Church of South Carolina by the Reverend Benjamin Wofford “for the purpose of establishing and endowing a college for literary, classical, and scientific education in my native District, Spartanburg.” One of the largest gifts in the history of American higher education up until that time, it was adequate to acquire land for the campus, construct Main Building, and still leave a substantial endowment.

The trustees of the college spared no expense in the construction of Main Building, which was known in those early days as simply “the College.” The noted Charleston architect Edward C. Jones was engaged, and although he is best known for his Gothic revival churches, he selected the Italian villa style which had been popularized nationally by Alexander Jackson Davis. This style was used at various other contemporary South Carolina campuses such as old Furman University and Cokesbury Academy, but the massive building at Wofford and the distinctive twin towers certainly made it the most impressive such structure in the state. It is also historically significant that the college possesses the original architect’s drawings for Main Building, which were donated in 1902 by Julia Chretzberg.

The laying of Main Building’s cornerstone on July 4, 1851, was a cause of much celebration in Spartanburg. Most of the town’s dignitaries were present, including the noted “Author of Southern Harmony,” composer “Singin’ Billy” Walker. The address that day was given by the Reverend (later Bishop) William Wightman, who was to become the first president not only of Wofford but also of Birmingham-Southern College. In accordance with Masonic custom, the cornerstone was placed on the northwestern corner of the building, but the local newspaper made an error in describing the location and the whereabouts of the cornerstone were unknown for many years. Then, as Wofford prepared to celebrate its centennial in 1954, an alert freshman rummaging through the old records in the library found an exact description. The cornerstone was unearthed and opened, but water and decay through the years had destroyed the contents.

Until 1900, Main Building was the center for virtually all the activities of the college. A few students lived on the first floor of the east wing and even took their meals together in a mess club known as Wightman Hall. Around the turn of the century, the construction of the Whitefoord Smith Library, Carlisle Hall, and the John B. Cleveland Science Hall, made it possible to use Main Building for classrooms, offices, and chapel programs exclusively. Shortly afterward, to the horror of purists such as Dean A. Mason DuPre, many students began calling the structure “Old Main.”

Another important chapter in the history of Main Building began in 1960, with a major renovation that made extensive changes in the interior floor plan but which faithfully followed Jones’ drawings of the exterior. Left intact were most of the familiar features of the building. For example, the original college bell, cast in 1854 by the Meneely Bell Company of West Troy, New York, remained in the west tower and continues to be hand rung by students to signal class changes, athletic victories, and events of major importance. Also left in place between the portraits of Benjamin and Anna Todd Wofford on the second floor was a plaque erected in 1900 by trustee Herman Baer. The memorial contains the misspelled word “benificence,” which was lovingly rubbed and shined by many generations of Wofford freshmen.

While touring Main Building, be sure to see two other major points of interest. Leonard Auditorium, where college assemblies have been held for almost 130 years, is lined with portraits of the eight past presidents of Wofford college. Particularly imposing is the extremely large painting of Dr. James H. Carlisle, president of Wofford from 1875 to 1902. One of the leading educators of his day, Dr. Carlisle was a mathematician and astronomer by academic discipline, but was perhaps better known as a philosopher and gifted public speaker. The portrait, painted by the noted artist Albert Guerry, was originally commissioned by the college’s Carlisle Literary Society.

On the first floor of the west wing is located “Dunc’s Globe,” which was constructed just prior to World War I by Professor David Duncan Wallace. More than 60 inches in diameter, the construction of this teaching aid was something of an engineering feat that is described on a wall plaque near the globe. Dr. Wallace, supposedly convinced that political structures are temporary at best, declined to change the world’s 1914 national boundaries after World War I and World War II. In the 1970’s, Dr. Lewis P. Jones asked former Wofford history students to “save the world” by making small contributions toward a restoration of Dunc’s Globe, so today the artifact is housed on a revolving stand in its own well-lighted glass case.

As an imposing historical landmark, Main Building is a vivid symbol of Wofford College to Methodists, alumni, friends, and the general public. In closing, however, it is important to stress that “Old Main” is more than that. As Dr. Lewis Jones wrote several years ago, “The Sandor Teszler Library of the 1960s and the nearby Main Building of the 1850s testify to the continuity and adaptation which have typified an institution whose honors are numerous and whose pride is based not only on the success of its products, but on their character. Its roots are deep, its twin towers high.”