THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF COLUMBUS COLLEGE

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By vote of the Board of Regents on May 14, 1958, Augusta College and Columbus College were conditionally accepted for membership into the University System of Georgia. Though Columbus College does not have the eighteenth-century lineage of Augusta, the founding of Columbus College is nonetheless an interesting story of the interaction of community initative and state need.[1] As the college developed, it was transformed from a "lily-white," liberal arts junior college into the fully integrated, "comprehensive senior institution" which it calls itself today.

In 1958, after one hundred and thirty years of existence, the city of Columbus, unlike many other smaller communities in Georgia, had failed to establish a permanent institution of higher education. Looking cursorily at the city's cultural and economic development, the failure to develop a college, at first glance, does not seem too surprising. Planned and hacked out of the wilderness by the state in 1828, as Georgia's gateway to the Old Southwest, the city, or so some have argued, has always remained something of a frontier town in spirit--only slightly more cultivated than that perennial urban frontier, Phenix City, Alabama, lying a stone's throw across the Chattahoochee. Moreover, one could assume that the life of the mind would not flourish in an ante-bellum mill town in which nearly 40 per cent of the population was enslaved.[2]

But the absence of a large middle class strata notwithstanding, Columbusites like doctor-poet Francis Tichnor, lawyer-politician Absalom Chappell, writer Caroline Lee Hentz, and others maintained a respect for humane learning and the artistic imagination in the community. William Makepeace Thackeray lectured, not only in Savannah and Macon in 1856, but also in Columbus at Seaborn Jones' noble mansion, "Eldorado," the very manse which inspired Columbus-born novelist Augusta Jane Evans. The opening of the Springer Opera House in 1871 broadened the cultural base. That the Springer was not simply an ornament of the wealthy, but had wide appeal and impact is seen in contemporary newspaper accounts and in the reminiscenses of born and bred Columbusites like Nunnally Johnson of later Hollywood fame. Johnson's father was a skilled craftsman for the Central of Georgia Railroad.[3]

Columbus, then, did not lack for cultural resources. Its educators were among the first in the state to develop a local public school system in 1866; they pioneered in state kindergarten education in 1905 and were in the vanguard nationally in making an industrial high school part of the public school system in 1906. Impressively housed female academies were founded in the late nineteenth century, and there was much talk in the 1920s and '30s, in men's civic clubs and the Chamber of Commerce, of establishing a co-ed junior college. But the cultural base was not yet broad enough to sustain higher education in the city. The last of the female academies did not survive into the twentieth century--one of their founders, Absalom's son, J. H. Chappell, went off in 1891 to become the first President of what would become Georgia College; and the junior college discussion of the early century proved to be just so much empty rhetoric in meeting hall and press.[4]

What got the college "idea" moving toward its

actualization in 1958 was the coalescing of key community leaders who would succeed in generating extensive interest. In late 1943, many American cities formed planning groups to prepare for the then discernible approach of peace. Columbus leaders, too, formed such a Planning Association. Since the wartime boom was strongly felt in the city because of nearby Fort Benning, planning for the postwar era was deemed essential in precluding a return to the stagnant 1930s. Among the many sub-committees formed by the Association, one was created to consider educational needs. By early 1945, the Education Committee was placing on its agenda the creation of a junior college.

The "movers and shakers" in the junior college movement in Columbus were individuals such as J. Q. Davidson, a lawyer, John Kinnett, the owner of a local dairy, Walter Richards of Tom's Foods, Simon Schwob, a clothing manufacturer, and Robert Arnold, a thirty-year participant in public school administration. In 1946, they were joined by William Henry Shaw, a North Carolinian, who was hired as Superintendent of Schools and immediately pledged himself to the college effort. As School Board officials and members of the Chamber of Commerce and other civic organizations, Davidson, Kinnett, and Richards launched an impressive solicitation for higher education.[5]

By 1949, some two hundred subscribers, in amounts ranging from five to five thousand dollars, had given ninety-two thousand dollars. When donated to the School Board, this sum was used to purchase some one hundred-fifty acres of farm land northeast of the city--the site of the future campus. Davidson would later state that this manner of securing a campus, by subscription rather than by taxation, was unprecedented in the state. As of January 1, 1950, the School Board had been empowered by state constitutional amendment, state law, and local referendum to create and operate a junior college in Muscogee County. Davidson, who spearheaded the fund-raising drive, had wanted a college in Columbus ever since moving to the city from Fort Valley in 1929. In his view, a college would give the city the cultural tone which a collegiate presence gave to Macon and Athens. It would bring higher education to young people who could not afford to attain it elsewhere.[6] As a veteran of previous attempts at college making, however, he knew that the battle for the college was far from over--even with the campus now securely in the hands of the School Board. In a letter of October, 1949, he warned Superintendent Shaw:

> I was on a committee of the Columbus Chamber of Commerce [in 1934] to try to do something. Mr. Columbus Roberts, Sr. and Mr. Simon Schwob were members of this committee and both of them were willing to make substantial contributions if the city or public at large would purchase a college site. . . . If this success had been achieved [in 1934], we would have had the hundreds of thousands of dollars which Mr. Roberts has given to other colleges and would undoubtedly have received substantial contributions from Mr. Schwob, not to mention others who would have undoubtedly become interested.

> Having come this far I sincerely hope that we will not let interest in this project wane. This interest ought to be "whetted" while it is still active. . . . You are going to have to be the guiding spirit if anything substantial is to be accomplished. I believe there are plenty of people who will help but they definitely need an informed and intelligent leader.[7]

By the mid-1950s, roads, water and sewer lines, financed by local bond issues, had been built to the campus. Research sponsored by the School Board showed the potential of a large student body from high school graduates, personnel at Fort Benning, and from older adults. However, the pace of progress appeared so slow that Davidson sensed community skepticism welling up again.[8] A large question remained unanswered: Where would the "big money" come from to construct the college's buildings and pay the salaries of faculty and staff and other sizeable, long-term costs? Two years from its opening, a functioning junior college seemed a far-distant dream, an ever receding mirage on the horizon.

Enter at this crucial moment the state of Georgia. In 1955, advisory committees to the Board of Regents reported that the state's existing universities and colleges would soon become incapable of meeting the demand for post-high school education. These committees recommended new institutions in the state's population centers. In 1957, the state legislature formed a Junior College Committee to consider the question of expanding junior college education. The Committee studied the junior college systems of other states and took testimony in the most interested communities in the state--Savannah, Augusta, and Columbus. In Columbus, Davidson, recovering from pneumonia and newly sick with the Asian flu, spoke at length of local efforts before the Committee. He prefaced his remarks by saying his heart was so close to the college that he was willing "to die for it."[9]

In January, 1958, the Junior College Committee recommended and, in February, the legislature passed Bill 686 which stipulated state tuition support of three hundred dollars for each full-time student enrolled in a newly established junior college. The Committee's efforts in 1957-58 re-energized the campaign for Columbus College. State law required that a junior college be in operation by September 1, 1958, in order to be eligible for state tuition money. Becoming the guiding spirit whom Davidson had called for, Shaw quickly secured a lease on a bankrupt hosiery mill and soon received School Board approval to purchase and renovate the property. In so acting, he created for the diffuse local college campaign something which it had lacked theretofore--a formal deadline with which to crystallize action.[10]

As Shaw moved to convert mill into college, University System Chancellor Harmon Caldwell and the Regents resolved to offer the embryonic college membership in the University System. In testimony before the Junior College Committee the previous year, Caldwell had expressed concern over the danger to academic standards posed by the proliferation of locally owned institutions apart from the System's junior colleges. Thomas Y. Whitley acted as the intermediary between the Chancellor and local backers of the college. After the

passage of Bill 686, Whitley, at the request of Caldwell, had taken a leave of absence as Dean of Southern Georgia College to assist the Chancellor in preparing academic and enrollment criteria with which all new junior colleges in the state would have to comply. On assignment in Columbus in April, 1958, "T. Y.", as he was soon known to the locals, preferred the idea of System membership. However, Shaw, Davidson, and the others needed no persuading, for they had seen its obvious advantages: operating, and ultimately construction, costs paid by the state rather than locally. But in addition, Whitley, speaking for the Chancellor, held out the enticing prospect of becoming a senior college in the not too distant future, for, in his words, "the same Board of Regents which could establish a college could change a college from a junior college to a senior college."[11]

By May, 1958, the Regents and the Muscogee County School Board were ready to strike a deal. The School Board would raise one million dollars with which to construct buildings on the permanent college site. Once construction was completed, they would deed the land and the physical plant to the Regents. In return, the Regents agreed, effective September 1, 1958, to make Columbus College the seventeenth member of the system and guaranteed operating funds to the new college at the mill location and then at the permanent campus. Transference of the property was to take place in September, 1960. Delays in construction, owing to the building of a major regional transportation artery across the west side of the campus, prevented the School Board from meeting its share of the bargain until January, 1963. The Regents consented to renewing the original terms of the contract twice. They were so delighted when they finally got the land and four brand new buildings on it that they promised the School Board in a legal agreement of January, 1963, that they would "maintain and operate" Columbus College "in perpetuity on the herein described property." Needless to say, this rash language eventually caught the legal eye of Henry Neal, Executive Secretary to the Chancellor, who found a way to have it abrogated by the School Board in 1969.[12]

Endorsed by Chancellor Caldwell and the local founders, Whitley was named President of Columbus College by the Regents on May 14, 1958, the same day they voted to make Columbus College a member of the System. "T. Y." would remain President for 21 years, during 17 of which the college would experience phenomenal growth. Fueled by relatively high levels of state funding, hundreds of thousands of dollars of post-Sputnik federal aid, the wartime expansion of Fort Benning, and significant continued local financial support, Columbus College grew from 13 faculty, 227 students, and 5 academic programs in 1958, to 225 faculty, 5800 students, and 50 programs, 2 of them at the master's level, in its peak year of 1975-76. Senior college status had been attained early on in 1966.[13]

Through all the years of surging growth, Whitley's sense of the primary mission of Columbus College never altered. That mission was "community service." His Ed.D. work in junior college administration at the University of Texas had taught him that, in his words, "the college and the community are one," a view that fit well with the founders' vision for the institution. If Whitley encouraged the creation and development of the college's outstanding music program, it was

not out of any personal inclination to foster the arts, but rather out of an awareness of community need and desire. His "Dedication to Community Service," the phrase emblazoned on the College's catalogues, subsequently led him to develop nursing, police science, business administration, medical technology, mental health, and continuing education programs. [14]

In spite of Whitley's credo, however, at the mill and for several years on the permanent campus, the college effused the spirit of a genuine liberal arts institution. The first college catalogue, as a matter of fact, stated unequivocably that "Columbus College is fundamentally a liberal institution for arts and sciences."[15] A small, well prepared, highly motivated student body embraced core courses in the arts and sciences en route to senior institutions. Music, drama, art, and scientific clubs were active. Ohioan John E. Anderson, arriving in January, 1963, to assume the post of Academic Dean, was so struck by the success of these early graduates at Georgia and Georgia Tech that he entertained the idea of making the college, "a southern Swarthmore." According to Anderson, however, the rising "egalitarian" ethos of the period, the rigid "body count" funding formula imposed in the mid-'60s, and the rapidly shifting occupational structure converted him to "the college and community are one" doctrine of his boss.[16] (That the Dean's conversion was total was learned the hard way by one faculty whom Anderson terminated for being, or appearing, too provocative and controversial downtown. But this is another story.) Thus "service to the community," the views of a sometimes frustrated arts and sciences faculty northwitstanding, prevailed as the college's primary mission. And such it has firmly remained since 1980, under Whitley's successor Francis Brooke.

Columbus College's move to its permanent campus in January, 1963, was the occasion of a large outpouring of deserved gratitude to its founders. Fifteen hundred people crowded the recently completed gymnasium to hear local dignitaries, President Whitley, Chancellor Caldwell, and Governor-elect Carl Sanders, a member of the 1957 Junior College Committee, congratulate those whose efforts over so many years had now come to fruition. Countless others, including the ailing J. Q. Davidson, heard the proceedings on radio. The only slightly awkward moment in the festivities came when Master of Ceremonies Hiram Stanley declaimed in summation, "and now Columbus College is a fully fledged, an integrated state institution." After a pause he chuckled and remarked, "Don't misunderstand what I've said about integration. . . ." Amid polite laughter, the large gathering commenced to disband.[17]

Accustomed to segregation in education throughout their lives, the College's fathers and Stanley, a Royal Crown Cola executive and important college supporter in the post-1958 period, initially assumed, of course, that their institution would enroll white students exclusively. Governor Marvin Griffin, whom they had witnessed signing Bill 686 in the statehouse, had been a leading figure in the "massive resistance" movement against integration in the public schools. The same Columbus college student body which honored Davidson as the school's principal founder had quickly chosen the "Rebel" as their mascot and "Gold and Grey" for their colors.[18] Although Griffin was out of power and the University of Georgia had admitted black students, Stanley's small

embarrassment indicated that the race issue was by no means resolved at Columbus College in January, 1963.

Yet only six months after Stanley's remark, the college would enroll its first black student. Integration would come to Columbus College smoothly because the founders, and more importantly President Whitley and Dean John Anderson, while not welcoming it, were moderates who in the face of the inevitable would bend to avoid confrontations and possible disruptions. In the summer of 1963, the administration heard rumors of a large "protest registration" being planned by black activists for the coming fall quarter. To deflate the protest, the administration "embraced" (Anderson's word) a "very likeable, low-key, desirable type of black" (Whitley's words) who was also highly qualified. The college publicized its intention to enroll the candidate and then did so. According to Anderson, the confrontation never materialized.[19] From the other side, of course, the threat of protest had achieved its end.

Once committed to his first black enrollee, Whitley took personal control of the student's registration and pledged to do all in his power to make "his enrollment pleasurable." He assured the student that "if you can let the little things bounce off, we'll handle the big things." He proved as good as his word. His attitude in this case (and his doggedness in most cases) can perhaps be explained by his great admiration for Walter D. Cocking, Dean of the University of Georgia School of Education, for whom he had worked as a graduate student in 1940-41. (In retirement, Whitley singled out Cocking as the most important single influence in his administrative career.) He respected Cocking especially for his defiance of Governor Eugene Talmadge over a racial issue--a defiance which led to his firing by the demagogic Talmadge, an action which, in turn, sent the whole University System into turmoil.[20]

Any further doubts about the racial makeup of the Columbus College student body were, of course, removed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and its Title VI. In 1970, after a period of black student protest and pressures from a segment of the faculty, Whitley, over the outspoken opposition of student body leaders, struck down the "Rebel" and the "Gold and the Grey." A later student referendum replaced these symbols with the "Cougar" and the "Red, White and Blue."[21] Community Service now meant "full service" and the college was on its way to becoming the most racially integrated senior unit of the University System.

NOTES

[1]Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, May 14, 1958, pp. 344-348; Edward J. Cashin and Helen Callahan, A History of Augusta College (Augusta: Augusta College Press, 1976), chapter 1.

[2]Nancy Telfair, A History of Columbus, Georgia (Columbus: The Historical Publishing Co., 1929); Etta Blanchard Worsley, Columbus on the Chattahoochee (Columbus: Columbus Office and Supply Co., 1950); John Lupold, Columbus, Georgia, 1828-1978 (Columbus, Columbus Sesquicentennial, Inc., 1978).

[3]Francis Orray Tichnor Collection, Loretto Chappell Collection, "Springer Opera House," Joseph Peddy Collection, Chattahoochee Valley Collections and Columbus College Archives, Columbus College; Columbus Enquirer, 23 February 1856; "Historic

Mansions in Columbus," Columbus Ledger-Enquirer, 7 March 1937; Nora Johnson, Flashback: Nora Johnson on Nunnally Johnson (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1979), pp. 11-12.

[4]Nancy Telfair, History of Public Schools in Columbus, Georgia (Columbus: Columbus Enquirer-Sun, 1927); William I. Hair, "Chappell, Joseph Harris," Dictionary of Georgia Biography (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1983), pp. 183-184; Columbus Enquirer-Sun, Columbus Ledger, March-April, 1927.

[5]William Henry Shaw, "Historical Development of Columbus College," Columbus College Archives; Transcript of interview with William Henry Shaw conducted by John S. Lupold 18 January 1978, Columbus College Archives.

[6]William Henry Shaw, "Historical Development of Columbus College," Columbus College Archives; Transcript of interview with William Henry Shaw conducted by John S. Lupold 18 January 1978, Columbus College Archives; Clason Kyle, "Dedicated to Community Service," Columbus Ledger-Enquirer Sunday Magazine, 21 Nov. 1965; Transcript of "Hearing of Junior College Committee Meeting at Muscogee County School District Office," 11 Nov. 1957, Box 1-Loc 176-09, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia.

[7]Letter from J. Q. Davidson to William Henry Shaw, 27 October 1949, Muscogee County School District Office Files, Columbus, Georgia.

[8]"Public Schools of Muscogee County, Georgia: A Survey Report," Division of Surveys and Field Services, George Peabody College for Teachers (Nashville, 1957), pp. 135-140, Box 1-Loc 176-09, Georgia Dept. of Archives and History; Transcript of "Hearing of Junior College Committee Meeting at MCSD Office," 11 Nov. 1957.

[9]"Expansion and Control of Public Junior Colleges in Georgia," May 1955, Advisory Council Committee [to Board of Regents, University System of Georgia]; Transcript of "Hearing of Junior College Committee Meeting at the MCSD Office," 11 Nov. 1957.

[10]"Report of Junior College Study Committee," 2 January 1958, Box 1, Loc 176-09, Georgia Dept. of Archives and History; Minutes of Meetings of Board of Education, Muscogee County School District, 10 and 27 Feb. 1958, MCSD Office, Columbus, GA.

[11]Transcript of "Hearing of Junior College Committee Meeting at Muscogee County School District Office," 11 November 1957; Interview with Thomas Y. Whitley conducted by Craig Lloyd, 19 Nov. and 6 Dec. 1982, at Columbus College.

[12]Minutes of Meetings of Board of Education, MCSD Office, 28 April, 5 May, 6 June 1958, 12 Sept. 1960, 10 Sept. 1962, 20 October 1969.

[13]Kyle, "Dedicated to Community Service:; Interview with T. Y. Whitley, 19 Nov. 1982; "CC to Celebrate Its 20th Birthday," Columbus Ledger, 20 April 1978; Enrollment graphs prepared by Columbus College Registrar, Mary Livengood, May 1982, Columbus College Archives.

[14]Interview with T. Y.Whitley, 10 November 1982.

[15]Bulletin: Columbus College, 1958-1959, p. 16.

[16]Interview with John E. Anderson conducted by Craig Lloyd, 1 March 1985, at Columbus College.

[17]Tape Recordings of "Formal Opening of Columbus College," 6 January 1963, Columbus College Archives.

[18]Numan V. Bartley, The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), pp. 68-69, 71-72; "CC Colors and

Name Chosen," Columbus College Saber, 14 Nov. 1958, p. 1; "Columbus College Yearbook Salutes People of the City," Columbus Enquirer, 2 June 1959.

[19]Interview with T. Y. Whitley, 19 Nov. 1982, and John E. Anderson, 1 March 1985.

[20]Interview with T. Y. Whitley, 19 Nov. 1982; Kenneth Coleman, et al, A History of Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), pp. 378-379.

[21]Interview with T. Y. Whitley, 6 Dec. 1982; "'Rebel' Banished by CC,"Columbus Ledger, 3 March 1970.