

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA OVER TWO CENTURIES*

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Chartered in 1785 as the first state university in America, the University of Georgia began classes in 1801. For a century it remained a small, liberal arts college for white males only. The curriculum stressed Greek and Latin, reinforced primarily with courses in English, literature, history, mathematics and the basic sciences. For almost the entire nineteenth century every president (or chancellor after 1859) was a Protestant minister, and the University of Georgia remained very similar to private, denominational colleges like Mercer, Emory and Oglethorpe.¹

The Civil War forced the University to close for a few years, and in 1872 it became a land-grant college eligible for desperately-needed federal financial support. However, very limited change occurred until 1899 when Walter B. Hill, an alumnus but not a minister, took over the leadership of the little school which still had less than three hundred students. He won larger appropriations from the legislature, and greatly increased private support from benefactors like New York banker George Foster Peabody, a native Georgian but not an alumnus of the school. New buildings began to fill in the old campus, and new courses and majors broadened the old curriculum. The number of students and faculty members increased slowly but steadily. Graduate work began in earnest, and a real College of Agriculture developed on the new south campus under Dean Andrew M. Soule, who arrived after Hill's death in 1905.²

Hill's short administration began the struggle to make Georgia a major American university. Immediately after World War I white women were admitted as undergraduates, and enrollment topped a thousand for the first time. At first the handful of coeds clustered in traditional female fields like education and home economics, but soon their growing numbers spread out into many other majors and specialties.³

Formation of the University System of Georgia under a single Board of Regents in 1931 streamlined higher education in Georgia, but the University and other public colleges continued to operate with limited financial support from the state. During the depression P.W.A. and other federal funds triggered a building boom on the campus which held less than four thousand students when World War II erupted in 1941.⁴

During the war regular male enrollment plummeted, but the U. S. Navy took up the slack by establishing an intensive preflight training program which cycled thousands of cadets through the campus for the duration. After the war returning veterans swelled enrollment almost to eight thousand, but by the 1950s it had dropped several thousand.⁵

Then, following the shock of Sputnik in 1957, higher education surged all over the nation. Private, state and federal funds poured into colleges and especially into universities, which grew rapidly, and the University of Georgia participated fully in the bonanza. The admission of black students to the University in 1961 removed the last barrier from the past, and in the last quarter of a century Georgia has surged forward to become a major American university with a growing international reputation.⁶

*Synopsis provided by Prof. Boney.

¹F. N. Boney, A Pictorial History of the University of Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), pp. 2-41. To better appreciate the size of the University in the first century see the illustrations on pages 25, 27, 34, and 51. For other histories of the University see Robert Preston Brooks, The University of Georgia Under Sixteen Administrations: 1785-1955 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1956) and especially Thomas G. Dyer, The University of Georgia: A Bicentennial History, 1785-1985 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

²Boney, University of Georgia, pp. 44-65, 94-106. For photographs of Chancellor Hill see page 95. The dynamic Hill was conscious of the importance of public relations and imagery, but in 1903 a fire on campus destroyed the new Science Hall which housed many of his papers and records. Thus his crucial administration lacks the numerous visual records of many of the other chancellors and presidents.

³Boney, University of Georgia, pp. 106-109. For photographs of the early women students see pages 92-93, 109, 116, 124-25, 130, 134, and 136.

⁴Boney, University of Georgia, pp. 154-60. For photographs of the building boom see pages 180-81. See also Dyer, University, pp. 200-21.

⁵Boney, University of Georgia, pp. 160-65. For photographs of the navy on campus during the war see pages 184-85. For a summary of enrollment at the University over the years see Brooks, The University of Georgia, pp. 232-34.

⁶Boney, University of Georgia, pp. 165-70. For the integration of the University on January 9, 1961 see the photograph on page 167.