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AN HISTORICAL MOMENT



Spring Hill College

Jesuit Educational Excellence Since 1830

By Gentry Holbert

Spring Hill College, Alabama's oldest institution of higher learning, was founded in 1830 by Michael Portier, Mobile's first Catholic bishop. Spring Hill is the first Catholic college in the Southeast, the third oldest Jesuit college, and the fifth oldest Catholic college in the United States. In a letter dated February 17, 1830, Bishop Portier requests 400 acres of public land from the city of Mobile to establish an institution that "will be eminently Catholic, yet it will be open to all denominations and no influence is to be exercised on the minds of the pupils for a change of religious principles."

This included a provision to board and instruct one orphan for every "half section" of land given; some of the first students were from the Mobile Orphan Asylum. In the 1930s Spring Hill became one of the first Jesuit colleges in the United States to request permission from Rome to admit women as students full time. That request was denied several times but became reality in 1932. In its tradition of educational excellence to persons of all faiths and backgrounds, the college has remained true to its mission to form students to become responsible leaders in service to others.



Spring Hill College and the Civil War

Spring Hill College remained open throughout the Civil War. In 1861, Fr. Francis Gautrelet, S.J., visited Confederate president Jefferson Davis and asked that recruitment of lay faculty and students be stopped. Many students were too young to enlist and enrollment increased in 1864 with families hoping to keep their sons out of military service. Union soldiers camped on the college grounds, but the college was not harmed. In the tough economic times following the Civil War, students from Cuba, Central America, and Mexico replaced southern boys. In 1866 and 1867, Spring Hill had more Cuban students than Alabamans.

Above: Stan Galle Field "The Pit" – Stan Galle Field is the oldest continuous collegiate baseball field in the United States. Intercollegiate baseball started in 1889, though Spring Hill had unofficial baseball clubs in the mid 1800s.

Inset: In 1924 Babe Ruth visited Stan Galle Field to demonstrate his mighty swing in an exhibition game.

Racial Integration

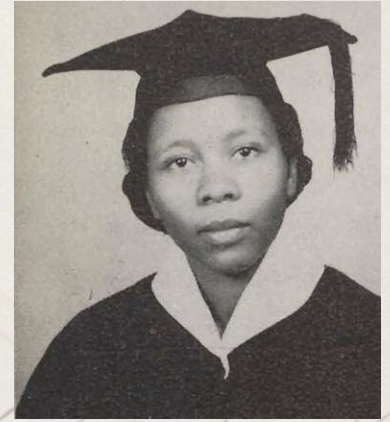
Spring Hill presidents Patrick Donnelly, S.J., and Andrew Smith, S.J., brought landmark changes to the college after World War II. Both viewed racial segregation as an ethical and moral dilemma. "So far I hear only silence. Let Spring Hill College break that silence! Let the College that was the first institution of higher learning to raise the torch of education in Alabama also light and lead the way to full democracy in Alabama and the Southland." So wrote Fr. William Patrick Donnelly, S.J., in *World Citizenship and the Unfinished Business of Democracy*, 1948.

In 1954, Father Smith presided over the enrollment of nine African-American students. For 10 years Spring Hill was the first and only integrated college in the Deep South.

Spring Hill College was the first desegregated college in Alabama and one of the first in the Deep South. Sociology professor Albert Foley, S.J., aggressively op-

posed the Ku Klux Klan in Mobile, using students to infiltrate Klan meetings and record license plate numbers. In 1957 Klan members set up a kerosene-soaked cross in front of a campus dormitory, but students chased the Klansmen out before they could light it.

Father Foley and Martin Luther King met several times between 1955 and 1963 to discuss the civil rights movement, sometimes disagreeing on tactic. Recorded conversations between them from May 4, 1963, were discovered in the school's archives, and transcriptions were made public. In April 1963, Doctor King cited Spring Hill College for its leadership in the civil rights movement in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail": "I commend the



Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago."

In 1956, Ms. Fannie Motley became the first African American graduate of the college. She was one of only two Mobile area students to graduate with honors that year.

Gentry Holbert is the Director of Library & Instructional Resource Services, Burke Memorial Library, Spring Hill College.

THE OAK TRAIL, SPRING HILL COLLEGE, SPRING HILL, ALABAMA



Then and Now

Avenue of The Oaks – This year marks the 166th anniversary of the Avenue of the Oaks that Roger Stewart, a Scottish cotton merchant, planted in 1850 leading to his Greek revival home known as Stewartfield. The college purchased the house and property in 1903 from Stewart's oldest daughter Annie Stewart Field. For more than 65 years, the avenue has been the traditional site for the college's commencement ceremonies, and thousands of graduates have processed under the giant oaks flanked by azaleas.

