

Taylor University

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2008

### Manuscript: A Brief History of Taylor University

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*Taylor University*

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#### Recommended Citation

Ringenberg, William C., "Manuscript: A Brief History of Taylor University" (2008). *Heritage Books and Booklets*. 2.

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Taylor University began during the most prolific period of college founding in American history, in large part influenced by the religious zeal stemming from the Second Great Awakening (approximately 1800-1835). The traditional authority on college founding in early America identifies 133 permanent colleges as having their origin during the quarter-century following the Second Great Awakening.

Taylor University did not begin as Taylor University. Rather it originally was known as Fort Wayne Female College. The Methodists in America founded very few colleges before 1830 largely because of a fear that a trained mind might hinder rather than help the development of spirituality on the part of ministerial candidates and other students. This attitude began to change during the last part of the Second Great Awakening so that after 1830 there began to appear a large number of Methodist institutions including Indiana Asbury (now DePauw University of Greencastle, Indiana). Indiana Asbury, however, was a school for boys only. This in itself was not unusual as no female students studied on the college level before Oberlin College in Ohio admitted women students to its regular college program in 1837. Once the Methodists overcame the hesitancy to promote higher education at all, it was less difficult to take the second step of providing this opportunity for women as well as for men. Fort Wayne Female College, then, appeared in 1846 to provide the same educational opportunities for the daughters of Indiana Methodist families—and others—as Indiana Asbury had been providing for the sons of the Methodist families of the state.

Fort Wayne Female College did not remain a single-sex institution for long. By 1855, the admission of the first male students led to a modification of the original name to Fort Wayne College. During the next generation (1855-1890) the Fort Wayne school operated as a regular and typical regional Methodist institution.

The major period of change in Taylor's history occurred in the late nineteenth century. In the late 1880s, a desperate search for funds to solve the worst financial crisis in the school's history initiated a chain of events that did not end until the school had the name of Taylor University and a location in Upland, Indiana. The change in name came with a change in ownership. When the National Association of Local Preachers (NALP) of the Methodist Episcopal Church assumed control of the college in an attempt to save it from economic demise, one of the terms of the transfer of the school from the North Indiana Methodist Conference allowed the new owners to rename the institution. Thus, they named the new school in honor of the only man ever to rise from the ranks of the local preachers to the bishopric in the denomination—the aging but indefatigable world-wide traveling missionary, William Taylor.

In addition to the new ownership, the new name, and the new location, the school adopted a new emphasis. Partly because of the influence of the local preacher's organization and partly because of the dynamic leadership of the new president, Thaddeus C. Reade (1891-1902), the school changed from an institution representative of mainline Methodism to one which aligned itself with the more fervent Holiness branch of the church.

The Upland school in the period before World War Two primarily sought to be a religious training school for children from the common-class families; the effort to be a first-rate academic institution with a solid economic foundation was always a secondary goal. The trustees usually selected presidents who could provide religious leadership; they were less concerned about whether their appointees also possessed intellectual influence and business acumen. The result was that the school trained and inspired many future ministers, missionaries, and other Christian youth; but it did not establish solid credentials in areas other than religious training. The failure to seek and obtain regional accreditation not only prevented the strengthening of the academic program, but it also contributed to the economic distress. Many potential benefactors and students hesitated to invest their resources in an unaccredited institution. Its announced goal of helping to subsidize the education of poor Christian boys and girls also contributed to the economic problem. In a sense this aim was highly admirable; however, it sufficiently impoverished the college so that there always was doubt about whether it would survive to educate another generation of poor (or any other type of) students. The decline in interest by the National Association of Local Preachers caused further difficulty. After the first Upland decade, the largely Eastern-based Local Preachers organization began to assume the status of absentee landlords. Their representatives on the board of trustees missed many of the biannual meetings. This neglect by the NALP eventually led to a change in ownership of the school in the 1920s.

The administrative and financial history of the college during this first half century in Upland is full of crises. Three changes in ownership, two receiverships, and talks of relocation worked against stability and almost led to the demise of the school. Part of the difficulty developed from the general economic crisis in America during the 1930s, but some of the problems resulted directly from unenlightened institutional planning. The school continuously operated with indebtedness in varying amounts. When the debt became sufficiently small, the officials often planned the construction of a new building; then the indebtedness again would increase. This situation of permanent indebtedness was not necessarily a bad one; the university always had a large balance of total assets over liabilities. When the creditors pressed for payment in an unusually vigorous manner, however, the school found itself in an embarrassing and sometimes legally dangerous position.

During the administration of President Reade, one of the trustees suggested, "Since every university seeks to become distinguished for some one specific excellence, let Taylor University be distinguished for the piety and religious fervor of her students and faculty." The trustee's wish became a reality. Even before Reade left the presidency, he acknowledged that what attracted people to Taylor (in addition to its low rates) was its "universal religious influence". When the students attending the school during the 1930-31 year expressed in a poll the reasons they chose to attend Taylor, the number who reported that they came because of the "Christian spirit" was three times as large as the number who stated that they enrolled because they were primarily attracted to the academic program. By comparison with its religious emphasis, the college gave only secondary attention to its curricular and extracurricular activities (that is, those not related to religious endeavors). It is true that by the 1930s the university was seeking regional accreditation and it had begun participation in intercollegiate athletics; however, the most significant gains in the academic and recreational programs came after World War Two.

Just as Burt W. Ayers had been the leading figure at the college during the first half century in Upland, so also Milo A. Rediger (Dean, 1945-48, 1952-65; President, 1965-75, 1979-81) became the single most influential person at Taylor during the generation following World War Two. Each man was the academic and intellectual leader, and each held a longer tenure than did anyone else during his respective period. The primary characteristics of the changing nature of the institution after 1945 included the following:

1. Growth in size of the student body and physical plant
2. The achievement of financial stability
3. The maturing of the academic program
4. The changing nature of the college constituency

The enrollment of 159 in 1944 grew to 429 in 1946, 613 in 1949, 848 in 1960, 1,050 in 1965, 1,281 in 1967, 1,426 in 1970 and 1582 in 1980. The physical plant also grew to accommodate the increasing size of the student body, faculty and staff. The majority of the 22 major campus buildings in 1980 had been constructed or remodeled since 1965.

The single most important development in the improvement of Taylor's academic program was the acquiring of regional accreditation by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1947. This achievement plus the school's increasing financial stability in the post-war era allowed it to employ an increasingly qualified faculty.

Since the late nineteenth century, Taylor had been known as a school which specialized in offering low-cost training to poor but able students from the lower economic classes. Rediger believed that the school could increase the quality of instruction if it would increase the faculty salaries. He thought that minimum budgets in the past had often made it difficult to hire and retain excellent teachers. He also argued that it was unfair to expect the faculty by their low salaries to subsidize the student's education. Accordingly, the salaries gradually increased. To pay for the higher salaries, the college increased the tuition rates; thus by the 1980s the college was no longer a "poor man's school". Rather most of its students came from the middle to upper-middle classes.

The religious constituency also changed. Gradually after 1945 Taylor became less connected with a specific church (Methodist) and a specific theological system (Arminian) and began to enroll an increasing number of students from independent, Baptist, and small-denomination churches.

The most recent generation in the institution's history has witnessed an increased effort to reach beyond the limits of the rural, residential campus to embrace an enlarged constituency and a broader world vision. This enhanced emphasis featured 1) increasing success in telling the Taylor story nationwide and abroad, 2) the addition of an urban campus in an effort to serve new student populations, and 3) new efforts to provide broadening experiences.

While the improvement in the quality of the Taylor program occurred gradually after World War Two, the general public appreciation of the Taylor experience increased sharply during the late twentieth century presidency of Jay Kesler (1985-2000). Kesler's lengthy tenure as president of Youth for Christ (1973-85), his twenty or so youth-related books, and his syndicated radio program, Family Forum, meant that he became the most widely recognized president in Taylor's history. This visibility combined with his compelling communication skills meant that the institution had a president who attracted a ready hearing with the type of students—and their parents—most likely to be interested in enrolling in a Christian college. Consequently student applications increased, the Admissions Office became increasingly selective in their acceptance decisions, and the turn-of-the-century students enrolling at Taylor came with increasingly high academic records. They also expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their campus experience and nearly all completed their degree program. These factors in combination contributed to the consistently high university rankings in the annual U.S. News and World Report surveys.

When Taylor added a Fort Wayne campus in 1992, one of the major reasons for doing so was provide an opportunity to realize President Kesler's vision that "Taylor education and experience should be made accessible to all worthy and qualified students regardless of socioeconomic background." The plan was that a new urban campus could serve the less advantaged youth as Taylor had done during its earlier years.

The single most significant way in which the early twenty-first century Taylor students differ from the Taylor students of their parents' generation is in their international orientation and international travel/study and service opportunities. President Eugene Habecker, a champion of international and cross-cultural experiences, was able to report in 2008 that approximately one-half of the students studied and/or served abroad during their Taylor experience. Facilitating the international mindedness of the contemporary Taylor have been the many January interterm and semester-long off-campus courses, academic programs, and mission opportunities; the cross-cultural general education requirement; the international studies major; and the presence of a large number of cross-cultural students, including especially the "missionary kids" (MK's) who after the establishment on campus of the founding chapter of the Mu Kappa support groups in 1982 began to enroll at Taylor in increasing numbers.

The twenty-first century university has come a long way since its humble beginnings in Fort Wayne--and even since its modest standing in 1945. The rapid physical changes were perhaps representative of the less visible but equally real evolution in the academic climate of the school and nature of the student body; yet there remained elements of continuity with the past. The identification of the college as an evangelical institution of higher education and the determination of its graduates to use their educational experiences as a means to serve God and man characterized the Taylor of the new century just as it had described the institution in earlier times.

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2008

## *A Constitutional Chronology of Taylor University*

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Ownership</u>	<u>Dates</u>
1	Fort Wayne Female College	Fort Wayne (West Side)	North Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church	1846 - 1855
2	Fort Wayne College		North Indiana Conference	1855 - 1890
3	Taylor University	Fort Wayne	National Association of the Local Preachers (NALP) of Methodism	1890 - 1893
4		relocation to Upland		1893
5	Taylor University	Upland	National Association of the Local Preachers (NALP) of Methodism	1893 - 1922
6	Taylor University	Upland	Alumni Association	1922 - 1924
7	Taylor University	Upland	(Independent) Board of Trustees (known by various names)	1924 - present
8		merger/acquisition with Ft. Wayne Bible College / Summit Christian College		1992
9	Taylor University Ft. Wayne Campus (as the second or urban campus of Taylor University Upland)	Fort Wayne (South Side)		1992 - <del>present</del> <sup>2011</sup>