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The Pleasant J. Potter College

Planning a College

A committee of Bowling Green, Kentucky citizens met in early 1884 to discuss opening a new college in response to the closure of the Bowling Green Female College. They found that \$15,000 would be needed for the construction of a state of the art women's college. The committee believed a project of that nature would be impractical. The Glasgow Normal School was invited by the committee to use the old Bowling Green Female College Campus. Two hundred students and faculty moved from Glasgow, Kentucky to Bowling Green and formed the Southern Normal School and Bowling Green Business College.

Despite the committee's decision, the Bowling Green community found that it still preferred a women's-only institution.¹ Citizens resurrected the project and elected Benjamin Francis Cabell, who had recently taught at Cedar Bluff College in Woodburn, Kentucky until the building was destroyed by fire. Cabell became the female college's president and began fundraising for the construction of the state of the art building.

Fundraising and Building the Women's School

The committee and Cabell solicited stock shares of \$25 apiece to the citizens of Bowling Green. After asking the entire community to purchase shares, they had accumulated \$17,000; this was not enough to ensure the completion of a school building. Just when the community believed the project was in vain, Pleasant J. Potter donated a total of \$5000 to ensure the future of the women's college. Potter was a 68-year old businessman and partner of the P.J. Potter & Company banking forum.

On February 9th, 1889, Pleasant J. Potter College was incorporated with \$21,160 set aside for the main building.² Otis Wood, contractor and builder of Potter College, quickly arrived from Louisiana to begin preliminary work on the site while Harry McDonald, a Louisville, KY architect, designed the main school building. Workers were paid with shares of stock of that building.¹ Cabell and the committee decided that Potter College should rest on the summit of Vinegar Hill, where Albert Sidney Johnston Fort (a Confederate Civil War fort) once stood. This site provided safeguards against potential hazards such as floods, outbreaks of disease in the city, and unwanted visitors. In addition, the position of the college on top of the hill prominently displayed the campus as the pride of Bowling Green. The college began its first term on September 9th, 1889 at 9a.m., despite the school building not being completed until December of the same year. The women were housed out of town until completion of the school building.

Living at the School

Potter College's catalog advertised itself as having "one hundred bed-rooms, elegantly furnished. Bathrooms attached, with hot and cold water. Heated by steam and lighted with gas."² Each of the one hundred bedrooms housed two women. The rooms were located on the second and third floors. Bedrooms came furnished with all necessary

furniture including mirrors, drapes, and washstands. The steam heating kept the building just above freezing in the winter, and hot water was rare. Other rooms in the building contained lavish furnishings such as armchairs, rockers, thick carpets, artwork, and pianos. ¹

Courses of Study

Cabell created a starting curriculum for Potter College which focused primarily on mathematics, English studies, and science. English studies included classical writings of Virgil, Cicero, Caesar as well as more recent writings of Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and Chaucer. Science classes taught botanical and zoological classes and chemistry and physics. The school also offered required classes including logic, various history classes, and political economy. Electives, such as music, language, and art, were also offered. Elocution, political geography, spelling, and religious studies were subsequently added during the College's lifetime. ²

Potter College touted itself as "a non-sectarian school of high order for young ladies." Despite its non-sectarian stance, it also stated the courses would seek to promote Christian principles. In addition to required chapel everyday, parents also assigned their daughters a church for service and Sunday school. Bible Study classes were added into the curriculum as well. A Young Women's Christian Association established itself early in Potter College's history and became one of its most popular clubs. ²

Clubs

Students involved themselves with many clubs. Clubs based on state residence emerged: Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi State and a North-South-Western Club, which developed to satisfy those that did not come from the previous six states. The Hypatian and Ossolian literature clubs, which met regularly to discuss literary topics, were the older and more respected clubs on campus. Greek sororities formed and took up rooms in the school building, with the oldest probably being Delta Phi. Delta Phi first emerged in the 1898 yearbook, while other sororities started reporting themselves in the 1905 yearbook. One-time, situational clubs, like the "Obe," "Knockers," and "23 Skidoo" clubs were formed by students. The "23 Skidoo" club formed when teachers had caught twenty-three students preparing a "midnight feast." The women caught formed this club. Other, more traditional clubs, such as French, German, and Shakespeare, formed as well. ²

Athletics

The women took interest in sports, also, forming up to four basketball teams that played against each other in intramurals. Bowling and tennis also piqued the student body's interests. Other leisure activities, like field trips and socials, kept the students' lives interesting. ¹ Perhaps the most well-known "leisure" activity came on the night of March 30th, 1901. This incident involved five men "escorting" five women to a dinner in the form of a "Duck Supper." ² The college attempted to cover-up the scandal, which caused as much controversy as the event itself and made national headlines.

Interaction with Ogden College

Potter women frequently had chances to mingle, under supervision, with the men of Ogden College. A football game between Ogden and Vanderbilt University, located in Nashville, Tennessee, is one notable gathering. Ogden men sometimes serenaded the Potter women late at night, but, afraid of the teachers' disapproval, the women did not get out of bed to watch their admirers. The administration strongly opposed serenades because of the lack of decorum associated with them. ¹

Graduation

A Potter College graduate's four or five year efforts resulted in a Bachelor of the Arts degree, Mistress of the English Language degree, or a Certificate of Proficiency; although, a Mistress of the English Language degree lacked the Latin portion of a Bachelor of the Arts degree. A Certificate of Proficiency consisted of "satisfactory completion" of English, science, math, elocution, Latin, French, German, and music. ¹

The End of an Era

By the end of the 1909 spring term, President Cabell's health seriously declined. Financial difficulty because of rising competition from other colleges ate away at the student body, and Pleasant J. Potter College closed its doors at the end of the spring 1909 term. Western Kentucky State Normal School purchased the land and buildings of the campus for \$102,000. The main building, renamed Recitation Hall, was renovated and housed many of the Normal School's departments. Cabell Hall, B. F. Cabell's old residence, became the site for the music department. In late 1935, the Board of Regents approved funds to demolish the Recitation Hall and build another classroom building in its place, and Henry Hardin Cherry Hall now stands at this site. It is widely assumed that the current Potter College of Arts and Humanities of Western Kentucky University was named in commemoration of Pleasant J. Potter College. Other buildings, such as Potter Hall, are most likely named after Potter's relatives. ¹

Potter College developed from a small community project into a leading institute in the South for higher women's education. A June 1963 newspaper article commented that "the college lighted the torch of education on the 'Hill' a tradition carried forward by Western State College." In the final "The Green and the Gold," a quarterly publication written by Potter's women, the women wrote a tribute to the school entitled "The Passing of Pleasant Potter College." The men of Ogden College wrote a letter to President Cabell to be placed in the publication. At the end of the letter, it stated "I ask you to drink with me to the passing of that institution, which will soon be as a dead friend whose virtues we will ever remember, whose faults we will have no recollection of, for there were none." ²

¹ Niediermeier, Lynn. *That Mighty Band of Maidens: A History of Potter College for Young Ladies, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 1889-1909*. Bowling Green: Landmark Association, 2001

² Western Kentucky University Archives. Kentucky Building. Related Vertical Files. Bowling Green, Kentucky.



POTTER COLLEGE

School for girls founded 1877 as Cedar Bluff Female College near Woodburn. Part of the staff moved to Bowling Green in 1899 and began Potter College. Located on Vinegar Hill, now part of the campus of Western Kentucky University. School closed in 1909. Name perpetuated in Potter College of Arts and Humanities of Western Kentucky University.

1971

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