

## LAGRANGE COLLEGE: A Historical Sketch

By Harry V. Barnard

High on a lonely hilltop, four and one-half miles southwest of Leighton, Alabama, stands a tall granite memorial to Alabama's first college. This monument marks the place, seldom frequented, where once stood one of the South's finest centers of learning. Viewing the marker, amid the grass and bushes which cover the hillside, it is hard to imagine that here once stood one of Alabama's most prosperous educational institutions, LaGrange College.

This institution had great effect on the generations which it touched during its short existence. Many of the graduates of LaGrange became useful men; many of them attained conspicuous stations and were prominent in the affairs of the country. Through this formative period of Alabama history, the influence of discipline and intellect was an outstanding determinant of the future of the State of Alabama.

Some of Alabama's most distinguished leaders of the nineteenth century, including General Edward A. O'Neal, Jeremiah Clemens, David P. Lewis, and Dr. John A. Wyeth, were educated in the halls of LaGrange College. Many went forth into the world to become prominent leaders in medicine, others in politics. Wherever they went, the alumni of LaGrange were influences for the betterment of their state and their country.

On November 28, 1826, the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church met at Nashville and appointed a standing committee to consider the possibility of founding a college which would not be "religious or theological." The Tennessee Conference, which included all of that state and that section of Alabama in the watershed of the Tennessee River, held its annual meeting the following year at Tusculumbia, Alabama, on November 22, 1827. The committee on the founding of a college reported, however, that nothing had matured on the subject. A new committee was then appointed and instructed to keep the subject open and to report the following year on any offers of proposed sites or contributions.

At the next annual meeting, on December 4, 1828, at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the committee reported on a communication from the citizens of LaGrange, Alabama, which outlined the various advantages of founding an institution at that place, including the fact that contributions totaling \$10,000 had already been subscribed. The offer was accepted and it was resolved by the Conference that a Methodist college should be established at LaGrange. A committee of sixteen men was appointed for the purpose of choosing a site and otherwise getting the institution into operation. The Reverend William McMahan, who had served on both of the previous committees, was appointed to meet with the delegates of the Mississippi Conference and ask for their support in the proposed venture.

On December 25, 1828, the Mississippi Conference voted to join in the venture and a year later, on January 10, 1829, committees representing both conferences met at LaGrange with a committee of local citizens, formed a constitution for the government of the college, and prepared an official statement which set forth the purpose of the proposed institution.

Of the many choice plots of land offered, the committee selected a beautiful and commanding eminence called Lawrence's Hill.<sup>1</sup> LaGrange, a predominantly Baptist community of about four-hundred inhabitants, was located in what was then Franklin, now Colbert County. It was located on the top of a mountain, a spur of the Cumberland chain, and named, perhaps, after General LaFayette's Paris estate.<sup>2</sup>

The doors of the college were opened and recitations begun on January 11, 1830, just one year and one day from the time the committee had met and selected a site. Eight days later the General Assembly of Alabama voted to charter the institution and empowered it to grant degrees. Thus did LaGrange become Alabama's first college, ante-dating the University of Alabama by more than a year. The charter of LaGrange stated that instruction should be "purely literary and scientific."<sup>3</sup>

In the original plans for the college the trustees urged that an asylum for the deaf and dumb should be established in connection with it. But this plan failed and LaGrange College was opened with only two departments, an Academic and a Preparatory.<sup>4</sup>

Within two months from the opening of the college, seventy students were enrolled and plans were being made for more than one hundred before the end of the term. However, the total for the year did not exceed eighty. During the school's first year, tuition at LaGrange was \$10 per session of five months, or \$20 annually. Board and room for the ten-month's period was \$80, and incidental expenses approximately \$4. Board included "diet," bedding, washing, and firewood.

The first faculty of the college was composed of Reverend Robert Paine, a thirty-year old Methodist preacher, superintendent; William Hudson of Yale University, professor of mathematics and modern languages; and Edward D. Sims, who had during 1828-1829 operated a school for boys at LaGrange, was professor of ancient languages. In addition to his services as superintendent, Reverend Paine was also professor of moral science and belles lettres and, if this were not enough to keep him busy, he also taught classes in geography and mineralogy. The attendance rose steadily, and in 1834 an additional professor was employed, making a total of five.<sup>5</sup>

As a rule, the first term of the college year began in July and continued until late November, the second in late January and ended in June. The summer vacation was made short so the students from distant areas would not have to go home during the "sickly season."<sup>6</sup> However, North Alabama was comparatively free from the dangers of fever which often plagued people in other areas of the state--in its first fifteen years the college suffered only one death from the dreaded fever, and this student was taken ill on the day of his arrival at LaGrange.

The first degree awarded by LaGrange College went to J. D. Malone, of Limestone County, Alabama, presumably in 1833. John W. Vinson, of LaGrange, was awarded the second, a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1834. The degree of Master of Arts was conferred on one person in July, 1832, on five in 1833, on seven in 1834, and on seven in 1835.<sup>8</sup>

Student life at LaGrange was strictly supervised, as it was in other colleges of the period. Students were required to attend church once on Sunday and prayers each morning and evening during the week. Despite rules, however, rowdiness often

prevailed. For instance, on the night of November 5, 1834, a student named Sidney M. Smith, from Vicksburg, Mississippi, was shot and killed by a "worthless vagabond." Shortly afterwards, the student body formed an organization called, "The Moral Association of LaGrange," the purpose of which was to discourage immorality and disobedience to the college rules and regulations. It apparently failed to do so, for in the spring of 1837 two students engaged in a moment of violence during which one of them shot and killed the other. Members of the student body were terribly aroused. Only through the prompt and intelligent actions of the faculty and the popularity of Superintendent Paine was a disaster prevented.

During the fall of 1837 another difficulty arose which threatened the very existence of the college. While Reverend Paine was away from the school on business, about a half dozen students were suspended because of acts which had been inspired by a demented LaGrange man who kept the village hotel. Upon the Superintendent's return, he found the suspended students armed and threatening to murder several members of the faculty and to destroy the college. Again, Reverend Paine's ability to deal with individuals was of value. Through his intelligence and courage the rebellion was put down and harmony was once again restored in the college halls.

In 1839 a great religious revival spread among the student body as a result of Reverend Paine's lectures to the Senior Class on the evidences of Christianity. The revival lasted for months, resulting in the production of many of North Alabama's most able ministers.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of the second decade of the school's operation, enrollment was on a steady increase, from seventy in 1830, when the school opened, to ninety in 1841, 106 in 1842, 135 in 1843, and 139 in 1845.<sup>11</sup>

The increase did not better the school's financial condition, however. From the first it had been beset by seemingly insurmountable financial problems. Scarcely a year after its opening, Reverend Paine wrote a letter to the Methodist newspaper, Christian Advocate, making an earnest plea for funds without which, he said, the college would not be able to continue.<sup>12</sup>

Many agents worked for funds for LaGrange. One, the Reverend William McMahon, served as an agent for three years, 1830-1832, working untiringly and with some degree of success. In January, 1833 he met with the Georgia Conference to appeal for their support of LaGrange College, but no appreciable amount was donated.<sup>13</sup>

Numerous means were tried to obtain money for the financially embarrassed college. One of the earliest and least productive schemes was a proposed business venture with two New Orleans merchants. According to the plan, Methodists who raised cotton in the LaGrange area were to sell their product to the firm and the college was to receive a commission on the total sales. It was anticipated that this plan would bring the college not less than \$50,000 within five years, but no record remains to describe the success of this plan. Pledges were made by countless Methodists and the journals of the church were filled with appeals for funds. Officials boasted that, with the help and cooperation of the members, LaGrange College could well be made into the "Yale of the Southwest." In 1836 the Tennessee Conference, in its official organ, the South Western Christian Advocate, offered a plan for an educational trust fund. Money in the fund would be placed

at the disposal of the trustees of LaGrange who, through investments, would get the college a yearly five per cent return. The success or failure of this plan is unknown; indeed, there is no indication that the plan ever progressed any further than the theory stage.

The panic of 1837 struck at LaGrange with a crippling blow. Many pledges were wiped out, and as a result the Reverend Paine in 1844 resorted to law for the first time in the history of the college. People who had not paid their subscriptions were told by a letter published in the South Western Christian Advocate that, unless payment was made or notes given, they would be prosecuted. The threat was futile, however, as it failed to produce either a noticeable amount of money or a single lawsuit.<sup>14</sup>

Once, in order to relieve part of the financial strain on the college, Reverend Paine gave \$1,000 of his \$1,800 annual salary back to the college. Other members of the faculty followed his example. Without this generosity on the part of the superintendent and his faculty, LaGrange would probably have been forced to close its doors.<sup>15</sup>

In 1841 the trustees of LaGrange College boasted that in the eleven years since its founding the institution had educated annually more students than any other college or university in Alabama or any of the adjoining states. Students were plentiful, but money was scarce! So embarrassing was the financial situation that a plea for \$10 subscriptions was published in the church newspaper. As a result \$900 was collected. At the time debts against the college were so numerous that, on the day after the amount was turned over to the college, it was divided among a half-dozen creditors.<sup>16</sup>

In 1843-1844 the tuition was raised to \$25 per session, \$30 more a year than it had been in 1830. Board and washing in 1843-1844 was \$10 per month, in advance. In addition, students were required to furnish their own firewood and candles, the cost of which was estimated to run about \$10 annually. Each student was also required to furnish his own bed and furniture. Damages done to the rooms were charged to the occupants and damage to public rooms was paid for by an assessment on the entire student body.<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Edward Wadsworth, who succeeded the Reverend Paine in 1846, immediately launched a program for raising funds by the sale of scholarships. Perpetual scholarships were offered for \$500 each; eight and four year scholarships, for \$300 and \$150 respectively. In all cases the purchaser was permitted to choose the student who was to receive the scholarships.

During the school year 1848-1849 the enrollment at LaGrange dropped to sixty students, but the efforts to raise money became increasingly productive. Because of the increase financial support, it was optimistically reported to the conference that LaGrange would soon be able to take her stand among the financially fit institutions of the country. In April, 1851, eight-year scholarships were offered for the ridiculously low price of \$125. Later that year, however, the college was embarrassed because of lack of funds to pay for repair on the dilapidated buildings. Unless the amount needed<sup>18</sup> could be obtained, officials said they feared for the future of LaGrange College.

When Dr. Wadsworth resigned to re-enter the ministry in 1852, he was succeeded by Professor James W. Hardy, a member of the faculty. The school's

financial condition was not improved during his administration nor during that of Reverend Smith W. Moore, who acted as president from the time of Reverend Hardy's death, August 15, 1853, until the beginning of the administration of Dr. Richard W. Rivers in January, 1854.<sup>19</sup> No sooner had Dr. Rivers entered into his duties than he announced his plan of paying off the college's debts, repairing buildings, and increasing endowment to \$10,000 by means of a gigantic program of selling scholarships. But the plan was soon admitted to be a failure and gifts of as little as \$10 were solicited from friends of the college. Seeing no hope for getting money for the college at LaGrange, Dr. Rivers and the Board of Trustees, after much deliberation,<sup>20</sup> accepted an offer of better buildings and a larger endowment and in January, 1855, began anew the strenuous work of keeping the college alive in nearby Florence, Alabama.

Admission to LaGrange College was difficult, even when judged by the academic standards of that era. It was necessary for a beginning student to have an "acquaintance" with English grammar, arithmetic, geography, Latin and Greek Grammars, and be able to translate four books of Ceasar's Gallic Wars, six books of Virgil's Aeneid, Jacob's or Felton's Greek Reader, and one of Xenophon's Anabasis. In order to obtain advanced standing, a student had to pass an examination on all studies of the class or classes below the one he wished to join. Students were admitted to different departments of the school as special students, also. In all cases character references were required. If the applicant had ever attended another college or university, he was<sup>21</sup> required to present a certificate showing that he was withdrawn in good standing.

LaGrange offered no courses in the New or Old Testament, under terms of its original charter. However, students enrolled in the regular courses were required to do work in "Moral Science" and "Evidences of Christianity" during their junior year.

LaGrange was furnished with adequate chemical and instructional apparatus soon after her founding. An important addition to the visual aids was announced by the Nashville and Louisville Christian Advocate on November 11, 1852, when an article appeared stating that thereafter anatomy and physiology would be "illustrated by human skeleton." In 1852 another innovation was introduced at LaGrange--a course in civil engineering, taught with "practical observation on the railroad." <sup>22</sup>

During LaGrange's first eighteen years a system of oral examinations lasting from four to six days, then common in college education, was used. Visiting committees were invited to attend the examinations. Any member of the faculty of the visiting committees could question the student. Dr. Edward Wadsworth introduced a new system of testing in May, 1848. He and the other professors would read a section from one of the books the student had taken and the student was then required to give an analysis of the material read. At the close of the 1853-1854 school year oral examinations were abolished, the students being graded on written tests given by members of the faculty. <sup>23</sup>

The week-long Commencement exercises at LaGrange were full of activity for the entire student body. It was also a gala occasion for the inhabitants of the surrounding area. Usually, visitors came from Decatur, Tuscumbia, Florence, Huntsville, and often from places more distant. From the surrounding valleys the people came in buggies, carriages, wagons, and "on foot." The services included oral examinations (open to the public) speeches by representatives of the literary

societies, a meeting of the Society of the Alumni, and a "mighty oration" by each member of the graduating class. On at least one occasion, in 1845, music was furnished by the Athens (Alabama) Brass Band.

Over 140 degrees were conferred by LaGrange College between 1838 and 1854. For fifteen of these seventeen years, records are available. During this time LaGrange College conferred sixty-four Master of Arts degrees, fifteen of which were "honorary" and forty-nine earned. During this period the Doctor of Divinity degree was conferred upon eight persons and the LL.D upon two--Bishop Joshua Soule of the Methodist Church, and Dr. Henry B. Bascom, president of Transylvania University.

No accurate picture of the social life at LaGrange can be ascertained from the existing records and publications. Numerous instances of mischief have been noted by historians, but in emphasizing this phase of the student life they failed to give any idea of the everyday affairs of the students.

The "Event of the Week" at LaGrange seems to have been the debate held each Saturday night by members of the college's two literary societies--the Lafayettes and Dialecticals. Every student belonged to one or the other of the societies. When the student entered the college for the first time, he was permitted to make his choice of organizations, although each society "rushed" the students, the "rushing" often resulting in minor acts of violence.

The literary societies were encouraged by the faculty, and professors were elected as honorary members. Often they attended meetings and sometimes took part in the debates. However, the organizations were controlled by students who elected their officers, a president, vice-president, secretary, and librarian.<sup>26</sup> Monthly, every member was expected to take part in the activities and failure to do so resulted in a fine. The two societies were great rivals, and meetings were eagerly attended by their respective adherents.

Besides the two literary societies, there were four secret societies--Amae, Kuklos Adelphon, Philomathian, and the "B." These orders, or fraternities as they are now called, were very selective in their membership and may be compared to the secret fraternities found on many modern campuses. Admission to them was by invitation only. Before a student was elected to membership, he was required to take pledges of fidelity and pledge obedience.

The Amae, Kuklos Adelphon, and Philomathian were all founded before 1849. Their members were generally chosen from among the most studious and best behaved students. The membership of the "B" society, organized in 1852, was made up of the most mischievous students at LaGrange--the letter given the society is believed to come from "Bad Boy." Members of the four groups were attached to each other by<sup>27</sup> close fraternal ties and were of mutual help in the preparation of lessons.

In general a religious atmosphere prevailed at all times at LaGrange College. Numerous religious revivals took place during the school's existence, and certainly the fact that many of the students were preparing for the ministry must have also influenced the behavior of the entire student body. Only isolated cases may be pointed out where students became unruly.

Many interesting events marked the last four years of the institution's existence. Less than three months after opening of the forty-first session of the school in January, 1850, a smallpox epidemic broke out and the student body of eighty was dismissed for a month. No record is available to tell whether they all returned after the epidemic, but only six were graduated with the Bachelor of Arts degree at the end of the session. A year later 130 students were enrolled, a noticeable increase over the preceding year. Nine persons were graduated with baccalaureate degrees at the end of the year, one with the honorary Master of Arts, and two with the Doctor of Divinity.<sup>28</sup>

After the transfer of the college from LaGrange to Florence, a legal test of the right of property belonging to the school was decided in favor of the school at LaGrange. This decision came about as a result of an expedition made from the new campus in Florence by some members of the Lafayette Literary Society who went to LaGrange one night and loaded into a wagon the books, carpet, and furniture which had been used by their society at LaGrange. The citizens of LaGrange formed a posse and apprehended the materials, returning them to the old college.

The General Assembly of Alabama refused to grant the college at Florence a charter under the name of LaGrange College. They did, however, over Governor Anthony Winston's veto, on February 14, 1855, pass an act of incorporation, renaming the institution as Florence Wesleyan University.<sup>29</sup> This institution was later taken over by the state. Ultimately, it developed into the present Florence State College.

The buildings of LaGrange College (at LaGrange) were taken over by the state of Alabama in 1857 and the name was changed to LaGrange College and Military Academy. In 1860, the institution became LaGrange Military Academy. The buildings of the old and honored institution were burned by members of the Seventh Kansas Cavalry Regiment, U. S. Army, under the command of Colonel Florence N. Cornyn, on April 28, 1863.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Anson West, A History of Methodism in Alabama (Nashville, 1893), 429-432.
2. John A. Wyeth, History of LaGrange College and the Cadet Corps, 1857-1862 (New York, 1901), 9; Albert A. McGregor, History of LaGrange College (n.p., n.d.), 2; and Walter B. Posey, "LaGrange, Alabama's Earliest College," Birmingham Southern College Bulletin, XXVI (November, 1933), 4.
3. McGregor, 80-83. 4. West, 433. 5. Posey, 11.
6. Catalogue of the Officers and Students of LaGrange College, North Alabama, Session 1843-1844 (Tuscumbia, 1844), 9.
7. Posey, 11. 8. Ibid., 16; West, 622.
9. Posey, 12; Catalogue of Officers and Students of LaGrange College, North Alabama, for the Collegiate Year, 1851-1852, 11.
10. Richard H. Rivers, The Life of Robert Paine, D.D. (Nashville, 1884), 51-53, 59-60. Rivers states that not more than six students remained unconverted.
11. Posey, 8. 12. Ibid., 17. 13. West, 443. 14. Posey, 18-19.
15. Rivers, 66-67. 16. Posey, 19.
17. Catalogue . . . 1851-1852, 10. Sons of itinerant Methodist ministers of the two conferences paid no fees.
18. Posey, 21. 19. McGregor, 14. 20. Ibid., 14-16; Posey, 22 ff.

21. Catalogue . . . 1851-1852, 9. The curriculum of LaGrange College was the customary "classical" one of the period.
22. Posey, 9. 23. Ibid., 14. 24. McGregor, 83-84; Posey, 15-16.
25. These comments are based upon McGregor, passim, unless otherwise noted.
26. Each society had a library of between 1,500 and 1,600 volumes.
27. Years after the closing of LaGrange College and the War Between the States, rumors were circulated in North Alabama that the Ku Klux Klan had been organized by alumni of LaGrange College. This writer could find no proof of this assertion. See Florence (Ala.) Times, November 13, 1932.
28. West, 624-625.
29. Alabama, Acts, 1885 (Montgomery, 1856), 208.



WESLEYAN HALL, BUILT IN THE 1850s, HOUSED THE FLORENCE WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY.