

CLINTON, KENTUCKY--THE ATHENS OF THE WEST

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At one time Clinton was called "The Athens of the West," because of its colleges and continuing emphasis on higher education. The earliest such institution of which there is a record was called the CLINTON SEMINARY, built in 1846, believed to be the first high school in Kentucky west of the Tennessee River. It was later called Clinton Academy, a forerunner of Clinton College.

A diary kept between the years of 1852-57 by Dr. George Beeler covered some of his experiences as a student at Clinton Seminary. Living in Jefferson County, and desirous of a more thorough education, he was influenced by a former teacher to enter Clinton Seminary. In 1853, he commenced the study of medicine in Clinton. After advanced studies elsewhere he returned to Clinton to practice and years later became president of the Kentucky Medical Association.

CLINTON COLLEGE

Clinton College operated in Clinton between 1874 and 1913. Located on East Clay Street on the present site of Hickman County Elementary School, the school was sponsored by the Baptist Church. The story of the college cannot be told without telling the story of Father Willis White, pioneer in Hickman County's educational movement.

He served for 23 years as minister of the Clinton Baptist Church and during 13 years as Hickman County's Education Commissioner, led in the creation of over 50 school districts to serve the needs of a people isolated by poor roads. He became the county's first superintendent of schools in his 80s. He rode a huge white horse, his hair was a longish white and he was much loved by the school children. This probably explains why he gained the title of "Father White." He was also the county's first historian.

While serving as commissioner of education, he pursued his dream of an institution of higher learning which was to be a "distinctly Christian school." At that time, 1870, Clinton had a population of about 270. He "buttonholed everyone in sight for donations to help build the school" and was instrumental in raising \$10,000 locally to construct a two-story brick structure. First called Clinton Female College, its name was changed to Clinton College in 1876 when it became coeducational.

Around the turn of the century, east and west wings were constructed and Greek columns were added to the center front. The campus included three-story brick girls' dormitory, two boys' cottages and tennis courts. The A.B., B.S., and B.L. Degrees were awarded. Courses of study included advanced Latin and Greek, calculus, and trigonometry. The faculty included graduates from Eastern universities.

Each day one of the professors led 25-30 of the girls for a walk. "In their blue uniforms and Vassar caps they made a delightful picture and, I imagine brightened up the business block," commented Theresa Benthall Troutman who as a child lived across the street from the college she would later attend.

Amanda Hicks was a "molding influence" in the school, serving as president from 1880 till 1894.

Like similar schools of higher learning throughout the United States, Clinton College served a vital need but was forced to close in 1913 due to the rise of public education supported by taxation.

MARVIN COLLEGE

While the Baptists were getting their school underway on East Clay Street in Clinton, the Methodists were making plans for a school on North Washington Street--all this in a country village of about 1500 souls--but which by then was advantageously located on the main line of the Illinois Central Railroad. Steamboat travel was also the order of the day with a river port only nine miles away at Columbus on the Mississippi River.

By 1883, the cornerstone was being laid for Marvin College, which belonged to the Memphis Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. There were but 76 students when the fledgling school tried its wings in 1885 but by 1889 enrollment had grown to 247. At first there was only one building--a "handsome and commodious" two-story brick home for the college president was constructed and in 1910, a three-story brick boys' dormitory was built. After the college closed in 1922, the dormitory was converted into the Jewell Hotel which operated until the early 1970s. It is now a private residence.

The school reached its zenith around 1906 and was offering three degrees--Bachelors of English, Science and Arts; the latter required two years of Greek and four of Latin. It, like Clinton College, had an impressive faculty.

Alben W. Barkley enrolled in the school in 1892 and would become the school's most famous graduate rising through a long political career to serve as the nation's vice-president under Harry S. Truman (1949-1953). He would be taken into the personal confidence of President Truman and would be known throughout the nation as "The Veep," a name given him by a grandchild.

In 1908 the school was changed from college level to a preparatory school. Its course of study was publicized as "more than meeting the requirements for entrance to Vanderbilt, Princeton, and Yale." It closed in 1922 when the flowering of the public school made it necessary.

The far-reaching influence of the two colleges cannot be measured. Each flourished for nearly four decades. They made Clinton very colorful and enriched its culture with a long term effect.

As late as 1922, Clinton was a contender for the normal school which was established at Murray and is now Murray State University.