

Greene University School may find reincarnation as new Athens Elementary

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

If all goes as the Athens City School system has planned, visitors walking into the planned new Athens Elementary School building may get the eerie sensation that they are stepping into the past instead.

In May, city school officials unveiled preliminary renderings for a proposed new \$10 million Athens Elementary School building to replace the current buildings, which were built in the 1930s and added onto in 1954. The new building's architecture borrows heavily from the building that once stood on AES grounds, Prof. Walter Kirkland Greene's Greene University School.

Greene, a Vanderbilt University graduate, was visiting Athens in 1909 when a group of townspeople approached him with a proposal to build a new school for boys and young men. He agreed to invest \$7,000 of his own money on two conditions: they would raise an additional \$7,000; and he would teach there for 10 years, and then the property would become his. The local people agreed, and support for the new school was so strong that they raised their \$7,000 in two days.

By the 1910 school year, the Greek revival style building was completed in the Fairview neighborhood, between Madison and Houston streets and facing Second Avenue, just like the proposed new AES building.

That first commencement, in May 1911, only one young man graduated – Thomas Izard, who came back to teach at Greene University School in 1916 and later taught at Columbia University in New York. However, by the second year of the school, 70 students were enrolled, and soon young men from all over the city and county – and eventually, from all over North Alabama – came to the school not only to learn, but also to play football on a team that was very competitive with surrounding schools.

In 1917, at the height of Greene University School's success, Greene wrote, "We shall insist upon thorough mastery of textbooks, but we shall always endeavor to keep before the mind of the pupil the thought that the daily performance of duty, the steady application to work, and the habit of accurate thinking are far more essential to his mental and moral development than the mere acquisition of learning."

The performance of duty that Greene instilled, ironically, may have been the school's undoing. After World War I broke out, many of the students and teachers joined the armed forces in 1917, leaving Greene no choice but to close the school at the end of the 1919-1920 school year. The city bought the building and moved classes into it in the fall of 1920, adding wings onto the building to accommodate more students.

In 1922, Kate Hine conducted summer school in the building, and in 1928, Athens Lumber Company overhauled the building, tearing out partitions, repainting woodwork and adding two rooms to the second floor at a grand cost of \$629.

Greene stayed on at the school until 1928, when he accepted a full professorship in the English department of Duke University.

The Greene University building itself was used as Athens Elementary School until 1954, when the east and west wings of the current AES building were completed. Declared unsafe and a possible fire hazard, it finally was torn down in the early 1960s, never to be seen again except in black-and-white photos, hazy memories, and possibly, one day soon, in its reincarnation as the new Athens Elementary School building.

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

Established: 1980

Staff: Archivist Rebekah Davis and Assistant Archivist April Davis

Location: 102 W. Washington St., in the 1905 L&N Passenger Depot

Hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

Phone: 256-233-6404

E-mail: lcarchives@knology.net or lcarchives2@knology.net

Web: www.limestonearchives.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/limestonecountyarchives