

Mary McCoy: Athens College's salvation in an age of crisis

By Rebekah Davis

Limestone County Archivist

In 1904, Athens College was in dire straits and ready to take desperate measures to keep the doors open at Alabama's oldest institution of higher learning – even if it meant hiring as president a woman barely out of her 20s.

The Methodist-run college had just lost one president with the resignation of Dr. E. M. Glenn, and when the board offered the job to their top pick, the Rev. J. T. Morris, he turned them down. Their difficulty didn't have to do with the quality of the school as much as it did economics: The Athens College president was personally responsible for the finances of the school, and if any money was left over from the school's operations, then he or she was paid. Most folks, particularly men with mouths to feed, simply could not afford to support both their families and the college out of their own pockets.

Enter Mary Norman Moore, a North Alabama native, a single woman, the secretary and bookkeeper for the Alabama Christian Advocate in Nashville, and a protégé of "Madame" Jane Hamilton Childs, the first female president of Athens College for Women, as it was known at the time. She was perfect for the job, and hopes were high for this energetic 30-year-old. *The Huntsville Democrat* of Sept. 30, 1904, editorialized: "With the proper local encouragement and support, President Miss Moore will place old Athens Female College back on the high plane that Madame Childs once placed it. She will make her mark in the educational field."

Those prophetic words proved to be fulfilled in Moore, who served two separate terms as president of the College. Within just two years, *South Journal* reported that Athens College had had the most successful year in its history. The college was bursting at the seams with 112 boarding and 82 day students, and had had to turn 50 more boarding students away for the lack of accommodations. Moore had spent more than \$7,000 of the receipts of the college on improvements, a tidy sum at the turn of the century, and the Methodist conference recommended that she be given authority to go before churches on a fund-raising mission for the college.

Moore had quite a knack for raising money for Athens College, as shown when the college board nixed her plans to build a music hall. Moore resigned her post over the disagreement, but when the board relented and asked her to stay, she went to Athens businessmen and raised \$12,000 for the music hall in one day.

Many of Moore's accomplishments live on at Athens State University today. For example, Moore is the reason cows no longer graze on the campus. They did until Moore worked with the City of Athens to pass ordinances restricting grazing animals within the city limits. Moore is also the reason Founders Hall installed electric lights, and she was the president who oversaw construction of Brown Hall and McCandless Hall which still serve Athens State University.

Moore's greatest impact, however, was to raise the school's classification within the Methodist board of education from "unclassified" in 1908 to "A-Grade Classification" in 1913.

Moore's tireless devotion to Athens College took its toll on her financially – she donated more than \$60,000 of her own money to the school during her 12-year term – as well as physically. In 1916, Moore, by then engaged to Bishop James H. McCoy, wrote: "Twelve years of work had exhausted me. I was expecting to be married within two years, the time estimate for full admission of the college into the Southern Association. Specialists of repute had told me that this exhaustion, manifested in retarded heart action, while not likely to produce death, was threatening invalidism."

So Moore resigned the presidency, leaving a legacy of growth and achievement during a time when Athens College had anticipated sure failure.

Note: To learn more about Mary McCoy, including details of her life with Bishop McCoy and her second term at Athens College from 1925 to 1930, come to the Athens City Cemetery Walk, Sunday, Sept. 30, 2-5 p.m. I will portray McCoy at the walk as one of dozens of actors portraying former Athens residents now buried in the cemetery. Admission is free, but donations are appreciated. Hope to see you there! - Rebekah

About the Archives:

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