

McCorkle: One Founding Philosopher

BY VICKI CHENG
STAFF WRITER

He was a 6-foot-tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed pastor, and many claimed he looked like Thomas Jefferson.

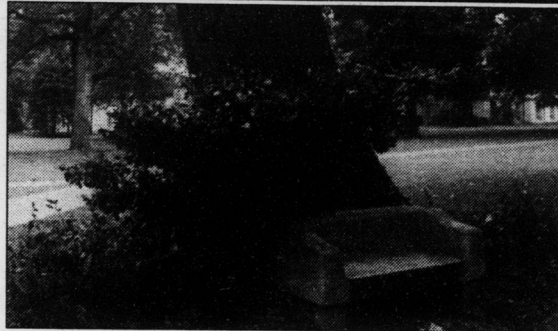
"We this day enjoy the pleasure of seeing the cornerstone of the University, its foundations, its materials and the architect for the building," he said, presiding over the first University Day. "And we hope ere long to see its stately walls and spire ascending to their summit. Ere long we hope to see it adorned with an elegant village, accommodated with all the necessities and conveniences of civilized society."

Two hundred years later, Rev. Samuel Eusebius McCorkle is commemorated by the grassy patch between Franklin Street and Cameron Avenue that bears his name. And much as McCorkle Place lies at the heart of the University, encompassing beloved UNC symbols such as the Old Well, Davie Poplar and Silent Sam, McCorkle played a central role in shaping UNC's curriculum until the end of the Civil War. McCorkle graduated from Princeton University and taught at Zion-Parnassus, a preparatory school near Salisbury, before becoming one of UNC's founding trustees.

"Rev. McCorkle and (William Richardson) Davie together were the leading proponents of the University," said James Leloudis, who teaches a course on UNC history and American higher education. They were the forces behind the bill for the nation's first state University.

But disagreements between McCorkle and Davie, now known as the father of the University, quickly surfaced.

"Davie was a Free Mason, a man of the Enlightenment," Leloudis said. "He believed strongly in the power of human reason. McCorkle was a Presbyterian minister, the conservative opposition to the Enlightenment. Davie's curriculum broke with the longstanding tradition of higher education grounded in classics. It provided for electives, and balanced history, modern languages, literature and science with



The Davie Poplar and McCorkle Place honor two University founders.

the classics. Davie was engaged with issues of the contemporary world, not just about passing on the wisdom of the ancients."

In fact, the University was radical in offering two diplomas: Graduates could choose to major in English instead of just plain Latin, Leloudis said.

McCorkle was a moralist who did not agree with Davie's philosophy. "When Davie's curriculum went into effect, (McCorkle) stormed off," Leloudis said.

Davie's experiment didn't last for long. In 1799, the first campus riot took place when a popular student was expelled for misconduct. Students resorted to pelting their teachers with stones, Leloudis said.

McCorkle was quick to attack, charging that the radical new curriculum was feeding rebellious tendencies. "His concern was that the focus on the contemporary world encouraged disrespect for established authority," Leloudis said. "Unless the curriculum was abandoned, it would cause the beginning of a reign of terror."

The trustees heeded McCorkle's advice. They slashed electives from the curriculum, and students turned away from questioning and enlarging their world to regurgitating Greek classics.

After another student revolt in 1805, many radical students quit the University. But those that were left accepted the narrow focus of the studies. In those days, Leloudis said, a recitation meant reading Cicero and literally reciting passages back to the professor.

McCorkle's moralist philosophy persisted through the Civil War, when students grew increasingly hostile to "free thinking." Members of the Dialectic and

Philanthropic Societies, for example, opposed science courses being taught at UNC.

"Human imaginativeness and inventiveness is okay," Leloudis said. "But it can get out of control. The same powers of imaginativeness and inventiveness unleashed the hellhounds of abolitionism."

"Free thinking" didn't return to the University until after the Civil War.

"After the war, there was a new society," Leloudis said. "The old education couldn't serve this kind of society."

Modern education began with Kemp Plummer Battle, University president from 1876 to 1891, who created a new curriculum in 1875. Teachers began lecturing to their classes for the first time.

McCorkle probably wouldn't recognize the University's diverse curriculum today. But McCorkle Place has remained relatively unchanged for 200 years. It always was set aside as a wooded, grassy park for students to lounge around in.

"May this hill be for religion as the ancient hill of Zion," the pastor said on Oct. 12, 1793.

LEGENDS

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Tar Heel students proudly proclaim that Sam has remained "silent" since the soldier was erected in 1913.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy donated money to have Canadian sculptor John Wilson create Silent Sam, a Confederate memorial honoring the war dead.

Wilson never titled his statue "Silent Sam," and few seem to know where the name came from.

Snider said he heard the legend of Silent Sam and virgins when he attended the University several decades ago but was unsure how the myth started.

"I heard that in my day down there, and that was just before World War II," Snider said.

He also said the story of Silent Sam probably was the most well-known of all the campus legends at the University.

Shack of All Trades

Smith Hall, or Playmakers Theater as it is now known, has served many purposes for the University. It has been one of its most versatile buildings, housing bathing and toilet facilities before the time when indoor plumbing was common and acting

as a ballroom, a library, a law school and a theater since its construction in 1851.

But the building is most famous for acting as a stable for Union horses during the Civil War.

On April 17, 1865, General Atkins and 4,000 Michigan cavalry rolled into Chapel Hill after the Union victory at Appomattox Court House eight days earlier. Troops sent to secure the area were quartered in University buildings, and their mounts were put in Smith Hall.

The irony of the situation was not lost on Gen. William T. Sherman, who found it interesting that Union horses were housed in same building with the majority of the University's books.

Sherman supposedly said his cavalry officers' mounts were "the best educated horses in the Union army, as they spent all their time, during their stay in Chapel Hill, in the University library."

The University's reputation for higher education lives on.



WILLIAM R. DAVIE might not have been involved in selecting a site for UNC.

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