

Shady tree, mint juleps affect University's site

University Day commemorates UNC's founding

by Elizabeth Leland
Staff Writer

The celebration of University Day Sunday commemorated the laying of the cornerstone of "East Building" (now Old East) and the sale of 29 village lots that were the rough beginnings of the town of Chapel Hill.

On Oct. 12 in 1793, 182 years ago, William Richardson Davie, North Carolina's governor and a university trustee, led a procession of dignitaries from the home of the building's contractor, James Patterson, to the site of Old East. Old East is not only the first building erected on this campus but also the first building built on any state university campus.

After the cornerstone was laid, Dr. Samuel McCorkle gave the invocation, saying, "This hill be for religion as the ancient hill of Zion; and for literature and the muses, may it surpass the ancient Parnassus!"

Twenty-four lots of two acres each and five lots of four acres each then were sold publicly. Another lot was reserved for the president's house.

As the construction of Old East got under way, the town of Chapel Hill also began to develop. The two simultaneously expanded, and on Jan. 15, 1795, the University was officially opened.

Dr. David Ker was the only professor, and he had nobody to teach for a month. Finally, on Feb. 12, Hinton James arrived on foot from Wilmington and became the first student to enter the first state-supported university in the nation.

But James was not alone for long. Old East, originally constructed to house 50 students, actually housed 84 students in its 14 bedrooms for 13 years until South Building was completed. It served for many years as the entire University: dormitory,



In 1897, the Old Well was rebuilt from a wooden structure (left, 1890's) to a Greek temple design (middle, 1901). After two other renovations, its basic design is similar today.

classroom and administrative office.

The Old Well, dug before 1800, was the only source of water for the University for over a century. Students and faculty attached messages to its posts and handle, since anyone on campus was bound to appear for water sooner or later.

The laying of the cornerstone of Old East marks the official founding of the University, but its origins came some years earlier.

Planning for the University began as early as December 1776, when the Bill of Rights of the North Carolina Constitution provided

for the establishment of one or more universities in the state.

Lack of funds prevented the state from implementing the bill for 13 years, but on Dec. 11, 1789, Davie successfully introduced a measure encouraging the establishment of the University.

Three years later, when funds became available for the purchase of land and the erection of buildings, the University trustees started searching for a suitable site.

A shady tree, a picnic and a few mint juleps caused Chapel Hill to be chosen, or so the legend goes.

This apocryphal story suggests that on a hot, summer day in 1792 Davie led a group

of trustees in search of possible sites for the proposed University. The group relaxed on a cool, grassy spot in the shade of a giant tree. After indulging heartily in food and drink, they were easily persuaded by Davie to choose the spot as the site for the University.

Historians discount the validity of the tale, but Mrs. Cornelia Phillips Spencer, who was largely responsible for the reopening of UNC after the Civil War, supposedly pronounced the tree "Davie Poplar" to commemorate the episode. (Actually, Davie Poplar is a misnomer; the tree is a member of the magnolia family.) Battered for over 200 years by wind, rain and ice, the ivy-covered landmark still stands in McCorkle Place,

filled with cement in several sections and wired to the younger trees around it.

Although Davie was not actually on the selection committee, records show that he favored Chapel Hill.

He said that Chapel Hill "excelled by few places in the world either for beauty of situation or salubrity of air, promises with all moral certainty to be a place of growing and permanent importance."

The trustees probably chose the site because of its proximity to the crossing of the state's major roads, its central location in the

state and, most importantly, because local citizens offered to donate 1,290 acres of land and 768 pounds for the University.

The area was called Chapel Hill after a chapel of the Anglican Church. The New Hope Chapel stood on a hill at the northwest corner of the crossroads.

The trustees agreed on Dec. 5, 1792, that New Hope Chapel Hill would be the seat of the University. They appointed seven commissioners "to erect the buildings of the University and lay of the town adjacent thereto."

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