



Fall 8-23-2010

History Professor Recalls Early Days Facing Winthrop

Winthrop University

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Recommended Citation

Winthrop University, "History Professor Recalls Early Days Facing Winthrop" (2010). *Winthrop News 2010*. 118.

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08/23/2010

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History Professor Recalls Early Days Facing Winthrop

Quick Facts

- Lee said that the visionaries – not the reactionaries – won the battle between the Old South and the New South. "Our institution's founders embarked 125 years ago in the right direction."
- He concluded: "And so, in our 125th year, we begin and we begin right now."



Edward Lee

Below is the keynote Convocation address, "Winthrop and the New South," by Dr. Edward Lee (an audio excerpt can be heard [here](#)):

"Please join me for the next few minutes on this August afternoon as we travel back in time. I've entitled my comments today, 'Winthrop and the New South.'

When Winthrop was born in Columbia 125 years ago, Atlanta journalist Henry W. Grady proclaimed the rise of the New South. Out of the ashes of the Civil War and Reconstruction, this regional resurrection would be guided by visionaries who wanted to triumph over the division and conflict of the past, a painful time which had cost Grady his own father in the war's final months.

Speaking before the New England Club in New York in 1886, Henry Grady told his audience, 'There was a South of slavery and secession – that South is dead. There is a South of union and freedom – that South, thank God, is living, breathing, growing every hour.' The War Between the States had ended; history's verdict had been rendered. It was time to move forward.

Grady proceeded to stress, 'The New South is enamored of her new work. Her soul is stirred with the breath of a new life. The light of a grander day is falling fair on her face. She is thrilling with the consciousness of growing power and prosperity.' He announced proudly that the New South "stands upright, full-statured and equal among the people of the earth, breathing the keen air and looking out upon the expanded horizon....'

Only two decades had elapsed since General William T. Sherman had vowed, 'South Carolina must be destroyed.' The Union commander had made true on his promise. The unfinished state house lay in ruins. Columbia had been set ablaze. The clouds of destruction could be seen as far north as the Town of Chester, fifty-five miles from the capital city. The cotton economy had been trampled. The political system had been violently upended. Our state could have, in 1886, slid further into the abyss of disorder. But it chose to be part of the New South, wiping the smoke and tears from its eyes and following the lead of visionaries like Henry Grady.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, South Carolina stood at a crossroads. One path looked backward. It pointed toward the Old South of worn out land, lost causes, and depressed cotton prices. The ghosts of the Confederacy lined that road. The other route heralded progressive communities, shining factories, and a productive and well-educated population.

I'm pleased to report to you this afternoon that the visionaries – not the reactionaries – won the battle between the Old South and the New South. Our institution's founders embarked 125 years ago in the right direction. They marched in a Blue Line toward the 'expanded horizon.'

Winthrop would demonstrate the potential of the generation which would re-build cities like Atlanta and Columbia. These energetic people had not been scarred by the war, or its dark causes, and their

fresh vision would transform the New South with its optimism and hope.

Thirty-year-old David Bancroft Johnson, opening Winthrop's doors in 1886, was typical of the visionaries who shaped the region. They looked beyond the quarrels of the past; the future, Grady's 'expanded horizon,' would inspire students who would, ultimately, sweep the globe with their enthusiastic spirit.

The New South of 1886 had no limits, and the talented hands of President D.B. Johnson and Bostonian Mary Hall Leonard, Winthrop's first instructor (recommended by our first benefactor, former United States Senator Robert C. Winthrop), confidently trained the nineteen students who met in a small Columbia building which we call the Little Chapel. Winthrop College was Johnson's and Leonard's academic child. It was a gifted child, and it made its presence known across the country. As Johnson reminded us and my mother, Class of 1932, repeated often these wise words, 'the sun never sets on Winthrop graduates.' We span the globe.

Those 19 pupils blossomed into 100, then 250, and later a thousand. They were everywhere, just as Johnson had told us, and they demonstrated their prowess in schools, businesses, homes, farms, industries, laboratories, the corridors of government, on performing stages and art studios, in pulpits, hospitals, the military, athletic arenas, community service organizations and courtrooms across America. The vision of David Bancroft Johnson and Mary Hall Leonard was not restricted to a region; it has become recognized worldwide.

I had the good fortune of knowing the late Bill Culp, assistant vice president for facilities and a legend on this campus. Bill Culp and I had attended the same undergraduate institution and despite the difference in our ages, we became friends.

Bill Culp had been born here. He grew up here. His father worked here before him. The Culp Chiller Plant, dedicated in 1995, is named for him. Bill spent most of his life right here – except for his service in World War II. Bill used to call me up, and I would stop by his office in Margaret Nance Hall for a visit. One morning, he talked about David Bancroft Johnson, who Bill, as a child, had known.

Bill said that our founder strolled around campus each day, surveying the expansion of the institution, the growth of the student body, challenging everyone to reach higher, to go further, to look forward.

It was a two-mile walk that Dr. Johnson took, and one morning Bill Culp and I followed in D.B. Johnson's footsteps, beginning at Tillman Hall (which in Dr. Johnson's time was called Main Building), past Margaret Nance, McLaurin, Bancroft, Crawford, McBryde, and the Little Chapel.

And Bill Culp, near the end of our trek, turned to me and said, 'You know, D.B. Johnson couldn't sit still because he had important things to do. There was an urgency about Dr. Johnson. He was that way from the beginning,' Bill Culp told me.

And that was true in 1886, and it's true in 2010-11. None of us, in today's turbulent world can sit still. Our mission here on this campus – and beyond – is too important to sit still, and there is an urgency about us. Our mission does not permit us to sit still. The nurturing of the mind, the planting of the seeds of inquiry and experimentation, the intellectual tools distributed in Columbia, (and a decade later here in Rock Hill), fulfilled Henry Grady's goal of a confident New South.

Anything was possible in 1886 and, on the horizon, was another century, one which would see the institution's campus grow, its faculty expand, its student body become more diverse, its curriculum more rigorous, and its designation as a university. Winthrop, in its 125th year, has realized the dreams of Henry Grady, D. B. Johnson, and Mary Hall Leonard. As Johnson told those assembled at one of the first Winthrop convocations, 'So many are prone to soothe their consciences for present idleness by the resolve to be diligent tomorrow – and tomorrow never comes.' President Johnson concluded with the advice, "Begin right now."

And so, in our 125th year, we begin and we begin right now."

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