A History Of The Greenville Male Academy

by Roger Kammerer

Education has always been a never ending endeavor in Greenville. From 1787 to 1903, a series of schools and academies tried to educate Greenville's youth. The oldest and most famous school, the Pitt Academy, was operated intermittently from 1787 to about 1849 in a building located on the corner of Second and Greene Streets (now the site of the Chamber of Commerce). In 1849, the trustees of Pitt Academy built a new school on the extreme southern edge of Greenville (now the site of Sheppard Memorial Library) which was known as the Greenville Male Academy.

On April 25, 1849, Thomas E. Nelson sold 1 1/4 acres to the trustees of the Pitt Academy for $50.00. The trustees were Marshall Dickinson, Charles Greene, Benjamin M. Selby, William Bernard, Louis P. Olds, Edward H. Goelet, William J. Blow, Goald Hoyt, E. C. Yellowby, William Moore, William D. Moya and Benjamin Brown. The schoolhouse was built soon after since on December 19, 1849, Goald Hoyt, trustee of the Greenville Male Academy, insured the school building with the NC Mutual Insurance Company. In the policy the school was described as a "new-wooden building, one story high, 27 feet by 60 feet" in dimension.

The names of the early teachers have been lost to history. In the 1850's Pitt County census there appears only one teacher in Greenville, Samuel M. Goelet (age 19), who may have been the first teacher since he was a relation to one of the trustees.

Nothing more is known about the academy until the Civil War. It is known from the reminiscences of Confederate veterans that the academy building was used as one of the several hospitals in Greenville at the time and "the kind and loving attention shown by the ladies of Greenville remained a lasting memory to many of them."

The next reference to the Greenville Male Academy is found in a State Business Directory for 1867/1868. The Academy was listed as being under the care of J. Armstrong and T.M. Barnes. J. Armstrong was also mentioned as heading the Greenville Primary School and the Greenville African School.

The academy appears to have become extinct during the Reconstruction years. In the Fall of 1878, Professor Stephen Decatur Bagley (1840-1904) opened a first class.
Professor Bagley was remembered as a Christian gentleman and a scholar of geography, history and English literature. Bagley operated the Male Academy until the summer of 1882 when he accepted the principalship of the Washington Academy. He later wound up in Louisburg, NC. He and his family are buried in Cherry Hill Cemetery in Greenville.


In 1883, a group of Greenville businessmen formed a committee to get another school in the academy. The board of trustees were Dr. W. M. B. Brown (President), J. B. Cherry (Secretary), Dr. J. G. Cherry, T. R. Cherry, Germain Bernard, B. W. Brown, A. W. Moye, Simon B. Wilson and W. H. Tucker. In July 1883, Professor William H. Ragsdale, a graduate of Wake Forest College, came to Greenville from Scotland Neck and accepted the principalship of the Greenville Male Academy.

Ragsdale's school opened July 30, 1883, and had 22 pupils. The fall session he had over 40 students. In 1884, Ragsdale was exalted as one the foremost academic teachers in the state and judged "one of the best teachers Greenville had had during the last half century." Ragsdale taught until early 1885, when he married and returned to his native Granville County.

In August 1885, Mrs. Acca Warren opened a school in the academy with 21 pupils.

In January 1887, after repairing the academy building, Major Henry Harding, a member of the Pitt County Board of Education, opened a public school in the academy. In February 1888, Mrs. C. M. Bernard and Miss Sadie Short opened a school in the old academy.

In August 1890, a new group of citizens formed a school committee. The committee consisted of J. B. Yellowby, Thomas J. Jarvis, John Flanagan, J. H. Tucker and C. A. White. They had the old school building repaired and hired Professor W. J. Matthews to be in charge of a male academy. The school began September 1, 1890 with 22 pupils, but because of unfinished repairs to the academy building, the school met in the courthouse for the first week. Matthews taught until 1891 and taught English, Latin, French, Greek and German.

In 1891, Professor W. H. Ragsdale returned to Greenville to again take charge of the old Male Academy. The same year he was elected County Superintendent of Educa-