HISTORY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE AT HARRISONBURG

By Act of March 7, 1884, the first female normal school in Virginia was established at Farmville.

The demand for additional normal school facilities for the training of teachers had its initiative at the session of 1901-2. Senator LeCato, of Accomac, was the author of the joint-resolution, appointing a committee to gather information on the subject. The LeCato resolution was: "RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That a Committee of five persons be appointed, two to be chosen by the President of the Senate, and three by the Speaker of the House of Delegates, whose duty it shall be to gather information bearing upon the establishment of an additional normal school, embodying provisions for industrial training, and report to the next session of the General Assembly, it being understood that this resolution involves no expense to the State." This resolution passed the Senate, was communicated to the House of Delegates, and passed by that body March 28, 1902.

Senators appointed: A. D. Watkins of Prince Edward, John N. Opie of Staunton. Delegates appointed: F. T. West of Louisa, George Settle of Rappahannock, and M. K. Lowry of Stafford. On Monday, December 7, 1903, the committee reported, favoring the establishment of a normal school with industrial training. In this report they said: "The civilization of today has no place for the ignorant and incompetent man. There are 6,871 teachers in the public schools of Virginia; 1,671 are males and 5,200 are females. Thus we find that ninetenths of the teachers in the white schools of the State are females. Notwithstanding this ratio of female teachers, there are four institutions—William and Mary, Virginia Military Institute, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and the University of Virginia—for the equipment of the sons of the State. There is only one, the Farmville Normal School, for the equipment of the daughters of the State. .. .

"Industrial training is no longer a fad or an experiment."

"We recommend the establishment of another normal school for females, with industrial training."

(Signed)

A. D. Watkins,
John N. Opie,
Senate

Frank T. West,
M. K. Lowry,
House

As early as January 22, 1903, Mr. Lion of Prince William introduced a bill in the House of Delegates, establishing a State Normal School for Girls at Manassas. This bill does not seem to have had any action taken on it.

On December 8, 1903, Mr. Frank T. West of Louisa, introduced a bill: "To establish a normal female school, with industrial training." This bill, as introduced, was reported unfavorably by the House Committee to which it was referred. A few days later, however, it was amended, and passing through the regular course, was passed on December 17, 1903, by a vote of 57 ayes to 8 noes. Delegates Sipe and Robinson, Rockingham Representatives in the House of Delegates, are both recorded in its
favor, and the bill was reported to the Senate for concurrence. 

Here my immediate connection with the matter of additional normal schools commenced. I was a member of the Senate, and of its Committee of Public Institutions and Education when the school at Farmville had been established. No investigation of the suitability of the proposed site of this institution was made by Representatives of the General Assembly before voting the small appropriation asked for its establishment. Later, it developed that the building on the land donated was not fitted for the purposes of the school and that the amount of land was too small for proper development into the great institution it has grown to be. The West Bill, as it passed the House of Delegates, provided that the Governor should appoint a Board of Visitors, or Trustees, who should, in turn, locate and establish what was to be known as the “Northside Normal School,” etc. I was chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Institutions and Education, to which this, the West Bill, was referred. I told Mr. West that I strongly favored additional facilities for the training of our daughters, as provided in his bill, but I was not willing to repeat what I considered was an error in the method pursued when the Farmville school was established. I also told him that I considered the establishment and location of such a school a legislative, and not an executive function, and I could not support his bill, but would actively support a proposition, or bill, providing for the appointment of one member of the Senate and one member of the House from each of the five grand divisions of the State to visit the various localities suggested, examine into all matters concerning their suitability, and report to the next session of the General Assembly. I prepared such a bill and it was reported as a substitute for the West Bill; passed the Senate and was accepted by the House of Delegates on January 7 by unanimous vote; and received the approval of the Governor January 11, 1904. The Committee appointed under this bill as Senate members: J. Boyd Sears of Mathews, P. F. St. Claire of Giles, W. P. Barksdale of Halifax, George T. Ford of Loudoun, and George B. Keezell of Rockingham; as House of Delegates members: R. E. Lee of Fairfax, L. P. Stearnes of Newport News, J. R. Stafford of Giles, R. S. B. Smith of Clarke, and Frank T. West of Louisa, who was made Chairman of the Committee.

I have often been urged to give an account of my connection with the establishment of the State Normal School for Women, and of its location at Harrisonburg. This institution, now known as the Harrisonburg State Teachers College, was established by Act of the General Assembly, approved March 14, 1908. Before going into the details of my connection with the establishment and location of this great educational, moral, and financial asset in what was then the Town of Harrisonburg, County Seat of Rockingham County, which I had the honor to represent in the Senate of Virginia, I want to give the fullest acknowledgment to the aid extended me by my associates in the Senate and House of Delegates, to the officials of Rockingham County and the Town of Harrisonburg, and to the splendid support of the citizenship of both Town and County.

I had long been a member of the Senate by the partiality of the voters of Rockingham County, then including the Town of Harrisonburg. Because of this long service, and the rule of seniority, I was holding important committee assignments on committees that had to deal directly with this matter. When it came to the appointment of the committee authorized by the substitute for the West Bill to investigate and report on location for the proposed new school, I did something I had never done before during my service in the Senate, that is, to ask for a committee assignment. Hon. Jos. E. Willard was then Lieutenant-Governor and, as such, presiding officer of the Senate, and
would name the membership of this committee from the Senate. He was a close personal and political friend. When I told him I wanted appointment on this committee as the Valley representative, he jestingly said: "I see you have an axe to grind. You have some place in mind." I replied: "No more than any other Senator you may name, and I am sure, if I have, I cannot succeed unless I show the committee I have the place that should be chosen and the axe that ought to be ground."

Demands came from more than thirty places for the location of this proposed school. Twenty-eight places were visited by the committee. It was very apparent to the committee that the demands were such that no one location could be selected that would satisfy these demands or meet the requirements of the State for the additional number of trained teachers needed in the schools. The committee unanimously decided to recommend the establishment of three such schools, as rapidly as the finances of the State would permit, one of these schools to be located in the Valley or northern Virginia, one in the Southwest, and one in Tidewater. Radford was unanimously agreed upon as the location for the Southwest; Harrisonburg received six votes, Front Royal and Manassas dividing the remaining four for the Valley or northern section. Fredericksburg and Newport News each received five votes for the Tidewater location.

This report was submitted to the 1906 General Assembly. Many other localities were still actively in earnest to secure the location of this school, or quietly hoping to be selected as a compromise. I prepared a bill locating the school at Harrisonburg and introduced it early in the session of 1906. It was referred to its appropriate committee—the Committee of Public Institutions and Education of the Senate, of which I was still chairman, and it took its place on the calendar of the committee ahead of all similar bills. Other bills followed, naming other localities. The committee ruled that as all these bills had a similar object, the only difference being the location, only one would be considered, and if the committee did not approve of the location named in this bill, another location could be substituted for it by a majority of the committee.

It was very apparent to me that the financial condition of the State would not permit the establishment of even one school at that session, and that the real fight would come, most likely, at the next session. However, hearings were had by the committee and the merits and advantages of the various locations were presented. No action was taken by the committee or by the General Assembly at that session. When the session of 1908 met, I had become chairman of the Senate Committee of Finance, and was still the ranking member of the Committee of Public Institutions and Education. My bill for Harrisonburg was very promptly introduced, referred to the Committee of Public Institutions and Education, and again took its place ahead of all similar bills on the calendar of the committee. It was reported by this committee to the Senate, naming Harrisonburg as the location, and referred by the Senate to the Committee of Finance for the consideration of its financial aspect. A little later this bill was favorably reported by the Committee of Finance, carrying an appropriation of $75,000.00—$50,000.00 for the first year and $25,000.00 for the second year. Then it was that the battle was really on, and it was a battle royal.

My bill, locating the school at Harrisonburg, was on the calendar of the Senate with favorable reports, both from the Committee of Public Institutions and Education and from the Committee of Finance. I had made a thorough canvass of the Senate membership of forty, and had assurances from twenty-four Senators that they would support Harrisonburg in preference to all other places, not local, as to their immediate section. When the effort was made to strike Harrisonburg from the bill and substitute
some other place, only those in immediate proximity to the location named, in the amendment proposed, would vote affirmatively and the motion would fail. After going through the whole list, Harrisonburg remained in the Bill, and the Bill was ordered to its engrossment and third reading. It had now passed the amendatory stage and was ready for a vote on its passage. Before it was again reached, advocates of the other localities got together and decided to pass the bill by, when it was reached, instead of putting it on its passage. This they succeeded in doing for one day—over my most earnest protest.

When it was again reached on the calendar and another effort was made to pass by, I made possibly the strongest and most impassioned appeal I ever made before any body on any subject—for fair play and for a vote. I urged that I had fought fairly, openly and above board, that no other place had shown enough strength to displace Harrisonburg, that had I lost I would have supported the winning place, because the State needed such an institution as was being proposed, and that I thought I was entitled to have the judgment of the Senate. Then it was that my neighbor and friend, Senator Echols, of Staunton— whose memory I will always cherish—and others joined with me and appealed to the Senate not to be guilty of the discourtesy of refusing a vote on a measure of such importance, and that had had such full consideration. The vote was ordered and twenty-four Senators recorded themselves in favor of the bill, establishing the school and locating it at Harrisonburg. The Senate Bill then went to the House of Delegates and was referred to the Committee of Schools and Colleges of that body. I made repeated efforts to have the Bill heard by that committee and asked that it might be reported to the House with some kind of recommendation, and placed on the calendar of the House for some kind of action. I was unable to get any action of any kind by the House Committee, so as to get the Bill on the calendar of the House for some kind of action by that body. It was then that I went to Governor Swanson to try to enlist his aid to get the bill before the House. He asked me a question. “Why don’t you do as is frequently done in Congress, write this bill, as an amendment to, and a rider on the appropriation bill?” I thanked the Governor for his suggestion.

At the next meeting of the Committee of Finance, I laid the situation before its members, told them of my inability to get any action from the House Committee, and of what the Governor had suggested. I very frankly admitted that I did not like this method, but that I had exhausted every other means of getting a hearing in the House. The committee—fourteen of the forty Senators then composing it—told me to go ahead and put it in as an amendment on the appropriation bill and then it certainly would be heard in the House. When this amendment was reported to the Senate, there was the greatest stir I ever saw in legislative circles. Friends of Fredericksburg came in great haste to know whether I would agree to name Fredericksburg along with Harrisonburg, even if no appropriation of money should go to Fredericksburg. My answer was: “I will treat Fredericksburg better than Fredericksburg’s friends on the House Committee of Schools and Colleges were willing to treat Harrisonburg. I will agree that Fredericksburg be included and that she receive $25,000.00 of the $75,000.00 the bill carried for Harrisonburg.” So, by agreement, Fredericksburg was written in the bill, and instead of providing for the establishment of one normal school for women at that session, two were named.

My colleagues in the House of Delegates were Dr. H. M. Rodgers, who had served several terms, and Hon. P. B. F. Good, then serving his first term. Dr. Rodgers was in very poor health, was necessarily absent from the House most of the time, and could not take any active part in securing passage of the bill by the House. In fact, he was so
unwell he could not be present to cast his vote. It required fifty-one affirmative votes to pass this bill and every friend, who for any reason could not be present, virtually counted against the bill. Mr. Good did all that could be expected of any new member, rendering valuable aid, but the bill was seriously handicapped by the enforced absence of Dr. Rodgers, whose wide acquaintance, great personal popularity, and familiarity with legislative procedure gained by service through several sessions, rendered his presence at this critical stage invaluable. The appropriation bill, having passed both branches, and the conference report, reconciling all differences having been adopted, went to the Governor, receiving his signature, and became law on March 14, 1908.

The provision, establishing the two state normal schools for women, one at Harrisonburg and one at Fredericksburg, remained as it passed the Senate—Harrisonburg receiving $50,000.00 of the $75,000.00 appropriation, available during the first fiscal year. Fredericksburg $25,000.00 available during the second fiscal year. Two years later a bill, establishing the school at Radford, was passed, thus carrying into effect the recommendations of the Committee on Locating a Normal School.

Governor Swanson named as the Board of Trustees for the Harrisonburg School the following:

For two years from March 14, 1908: Geo. B. Keezell, Rockingham; N. B. Early, Jr., Greene; Orville Stone, Charlottesville; Don P. Halsey, Lynchburg.

For four years from March 14, 1908: Geo. N. Conrad, Harrisonburg; E. W. Carpenter, Harrisonburg; Frank Moore, Lexington; J. A. Pettit, Nelson; F. W. King, Clifton Forge.

It became the duty of this Board to select and procure the site, to elect the President of the school and such aides as should be necessary, to erect such buildings as could be provided with funds available and all other duties incident to the organization and opening of the school. At its first meeting, I was made Chairman of the Board, and re-elected each two years, continuing as such until all four Normal Schools for Women were placed under a single Board; viz, Farmville, Harrisonburg, Fredericksburg, and Radford. Governor Stuart, in naming the Board of Twelve, provided in this bill for the four schools—decided, no doubt wisely,—to drop all Board members of the four schools and name an entirely new Board. This ended my official connection with the Harrisonburg school, but not my interest in its success and development.

When the Board met for organization, a committee was named, of which I was a member, on selecting a site. Two locations were seriously considered, the one finally chosen, and one which is known as the Waterman land. The proposed Waterman site of fifty acres was offered at a most reasonable price, but the committee thought the site on the Newman land—all things taken into consideration—the better, though it embraced fewer acres and cost more. I was named as a committee of one to take up with its owner, the late A. M. Newman, the purchase of the land desired. This embraced that part of his farm southeast of Harrisonburg, lying north of the C. & W. Railway and east of the Valley Pike, and containing something over forty-two acres, including the Newman residence, barns and out-buildings. The price finally named by Mr. Newman, while much in excess of the amount contemplated for the purchase of a site, was regarded as reasonable and its acreage none too large. After consulting with the late E. W. Carpenter, then also a member of the Board, he and I agreed that, should the Legislature refuse to take this site at the agreed price, we would ourselves take it and the State might have just so much of it as it wished and was willing to pay for. Later, when the matter was presented to the Finance Committee of the Senate, it was told that whilst we may have exceeded our authority, we believed we were doing so in the interest of the State; if they thought otherwise, the State was in no way
bound by our action; that we would take the property ourselves, or so much of it as was not needed. The appropriation to pay for the site was very promptly recommended, and our action commended.

There were a number of applicants for President of the school. A committee of which Ormond Stone and Senator Floyd W. King were members was named to make a thorough investigation as to the suitability of the applicants. The report of the committee strongly recommended the selection of Julian A. Burruss, then of Richmond, and he was selected, though a stranger to possibly every member of the Board. All personal, political, and geographical considerations were ignored in an effort to secure the man best suited to launch this new enterprise on a successful voyage. No mistake was made in the selection, as the growth of the school under the Burruss administration and its high standing, abundantly testify.

Before building operations were decided upon, plans were asked for a plant capable of taking care of one thousand girls. Plans prepared by Architect C. A. Robinson of Richmond, Virginia, were adopted. These plans locate each building necessary for this completed plan. Bids for the first units of this plan were asked to name both stone and brick construction. There were thirteen competitive bids, some less for stone than brick, some the reverse—less for brick than stone, the general average for stone construction being less. W. M. Bucher and Son being the low bidder, was awarded the contract, and stone was decided upon as the material. The plans as agreed upon have been very closely adhered to and now
after twenty years, the plant is rapidly nearing completion, and the number of students is approaching the one-thousand mark.

No necessity has arisen for making expensive changes in location or plans. I feel the Board, of which I had the honor to be chairman, is to be congratulated for the business foresight it displayed in securing ample acreage and fully developed plans.

Before passing from this phase of this narrative, I want to impress, as strongly as language can convey, the fact that at every step I had the most loyal and cordial support of what was then the Town of Harrisonburg, its officials and citizens of the County of Rockingham, its officers and citizens, and of the press of the town. The County gave $10,000.00; the Town $5,000.00 in cash—not in boom lots and forsaken buildings, chips and whetstones, as many places offered, and this was a strong point in getting a favorable report from the committee on location. As an illustration of the spirit which has made such a success of this enterprise, I will relate this incident:

When the Newman land was purchased, the lot of five acres, known as the Lurty lot, was regarded as essential, but could not be secured, because it was in litigation. This lot lies between the Newman land and the hospital grounds. At that time, had it not been in litigation, it could doubtless have been bought for $1,500.00. Later, when it was offered for sale, and enhanced in value because of the location of the school, the Board decided to buy if it could. There were several realtors, we were informed, that would be willing to pay $5,000.00 for this lot. However, when it became known that the State desired this property, these gentlemen declined to bid. The Commissioners of Sale said they did not feel they could recommend confirmation of a sale under $3,000.00. Mr. Carpenter and I, representing the Board, bid this property up to the $3,000.00 limit, and secured it for the State.

In all the steps preliminary to the passing of the bill establishing this school, I am under obligation to my many personal friends, irrespective of political affiliations, without whose aid success would have been impossible. I speak of the membership of Senate and House of Delegates particularly, in both of which bodies I did not realize until in the thick of this battle how many well wishers and real friends I had. There was another whose help was invaluable. I speak of my good wife, who was with me in Richmond, and as thoroughly interested as I in every phase of this matter. She had been a teacher from her girlhood days till the time of our marriage, and was much better qualified than I to know the value along educational lines of that for which we were striving. Her knowledge of the value of such training as that for which we were working, her great interest in education and her practical knowledge, no doubt influenced and convinced not a few members to lend their aid and give their votes.

Now that twenty years have passed and we look back to the beginning and realize the growth and phenomenal success of this institution, its value to the State at large and its peculiar value to the locality in which it is located, we cannot fail to realize how well worthwhile were all the efforts used to secure it.

The very flattering Report of the Commission on revision of our educational system, cannot fail to be gratifying to the Board of Trustees, which secured the location, planned its buildings, selected its President and his assistants, and with their aid started it on its career of usefulness and success. Because of its exceptionally fine location, its room for expansion and the superiority of its buildings and its surroundings, this Commission recommended this institution as the one in the State best suited for the higher education of women, should the policy of the State approve a separate institution for women for this purpose.

It will doubtless be of interest to see just what has been appropriated out of the public
revenues up till the meeting of the 1928 General Assembly to this institution—a total of $1,399,058.00, of which sum $976,658.00 was for support and the remaining $422,400 for buildings, etc.

I think I can safely say that nowhere else in the State has as much real value been secured for anything like the same expenditure.

The value of this institution to the City and County along commercial lines is hard to estimate, but it is conceded to be Harrisonburg's most valuable asset. Its contribution to the moral, educational, religious, and social uplift cannot be measured in dollars. The thousands of young women from all parts of the State who have received inspiration and training here have gone out into the world to give others the advantages of this training, and the broader outlook. Those of them who have seen fit to accept woman's highest responsibility—that of wife and homemaker—are better equipped to make the home ideal than their less fortunate sisters.

The wisdom of establishing these three schools seems fully vindicated; their growth has been as rapid as the finances of the State would permit. All of these institutions are filled and unable to accommodate many who seek admission—and the benefit of the training they give.

George B. Keezell

Of 6,404 themes on “My Best Teacher,” written by pupils in schools of Cleveland, Ohio, by assignment of the elementary supervisor, to determine what present-day school children like best in their teachers, 5,118 mentioned traits of character, 3,621 had to do with teaching ability, 1,896 with discipline, and 262 with personal appearance. The statement that “She did not scold” was made by 555 pupils; and the teacher’s participation in different school activities was mentioned by 603 pupils. High school students emphasized a sense of humor.

LETTERS OF FELICITATION MARKING THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE AT HARRISONBURG

ONE feature of the Founders’ Day program held in Walter Reed Hall at 10:30 a.m. on March 14, 1928, was the reading of letters of felicitation. These letters are reprinted complete.

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

March 11, 1928.

Samuel P. Duke, President,
The State Teachers College,
Harrisonburg, Virginia.

My dear Mr. Duke:

On the approaching celebration of Founder’s Day, which is to be held in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the establishing of your institution at Harrisonburg, permit me to offer both to yourself and your college my very kindest personal and official regards.

The work being accomplished by your institution is notable and of great benefit to the whole State. The State Teachers Colleges throughout Virginia are recognized as tremendous factors in the advancement of education. Among this group of institutions the college at Harrisonburg ranks proudly.

It is with real pleasure I send to the State Teachers College at Harrisonburg greetings from Virginia and wish for the institution the highest measure of continued success.

Most cordially yours,

H. F. Byrd,
Governor.

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
RICHMOND

March 9, 1928.

Mr. S. P. Duke,
President State Teachers College,
Harrisonburg, Virginia.

My dear Mr. Duke:

I learn with great interest that on Wed-