

New College, New Nation:

Remarks at the Re-Dedication of the Beaufort College Building, November 2, 2000

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Lord Thomas Babington Macauley was arguably the greatest British historian of the 19th century. In the introduction to his monumental *History of England* (1848) he penned the following maxim: "Any people who are ignorant of the noble achievements of their remote ancestors are unlikely to achieve anything worth being remembered by their descendants." It is a statement appropriate to today's grand and hopeful occasion. For here we are today trying to build a new college for future generations on the foundation of the noble achievement of our remote ancestors, the founders of the old Beaufort College.

On December 19, 1795, the General Assembly of South Carolina passed "An Act to Vest Certain Lands in the District of Beaufort, in Trustees for the purpose of building and endowing a College in the Town of Beaufort." The Act was signed by David Ramsay of Charleston as President of the Senate and by Robert Barnwell of Beaufort as Speaker of the House. Robert Barnwell was the second man appointed to the Trustees of the College of Beaufort and his brother, General John Barnwell was the first. John Barnwell was elected the first president of the Trustees. So politically the "fix was in" as they say.

The fact is that the men who founded the Beaufort College in 1795 were among the most influential men in South Carolina. All nine of them were veterans of the Continental Army or the South Carolina militia during the Revolutionary War. John Barnwell was a Brigadier General in the South Carolina militia and an Elector for President John Adams in 1796. Robert Barnwell was a U.S. Congressman for one term before serving as Speaker of the House and later, President of the Senate in the South Carolina General Assembly. Robert Barnwell was also one of the leaders of the Ratifying Convention of the new United States Constitution in May 1788. During those momentous debates, Robert Barnwell overcame skeptical opposition from the South Carolina Upcountry by comparing the new Constitution to the foundation of Athenian Democracy. The U.S. Constitution was, he said, "... like the laws of Solon, not the best possible to be found, but the best our situation will admit of." It was one of the more famous references to the ancient classics that later became the bedrock of the educational curriculum of the Beaufort College.

Probably the most influential of the original Trustees was William Elliott (1761-1808). Elliott was a pioneer agronomist whose experiments with long-staple, Anguilla seed cotton resulted in

the first successful commercial crop of Sea Island cotton at his Myrtle Bank plantation on Hilton Head Island in 1790. This was the beginning of the cotton revolution in South Carolina. The spread of cotton across the southern states transformed the economy and compelled the politics of the Old South well into the 20th Century. Sea Island cotton was also the foundation of the great wealth and prosperity of antebellum Beaufort, without which the founding Trustees never would have contemplated so ambitious an undertaking as founding a "new college in a new nation."

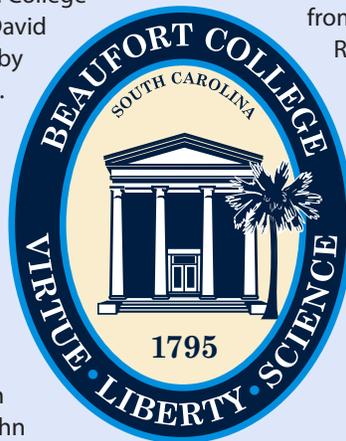
The Act of Incorporation, which chartered the Beaufort College in 1795, specified that the funds for the endeavor were to be derived from "escheated" properties in the Beaufort District and specifically town lots in Beaufort that had been confiscated from the estates of Loyalists during the American Revolution. This provided both ample real estate, and by 1803, an endowment of 5,900 pounds sterling; a very large sum of money in 1803.

By the terms of the original charter, the Trustees of the College of Beaufort were empowered to establish whatever schools they thought necessary to support the College and to "... grant or confer such ... degrees in the liberal arts or sciences, to any of the students of the said college, ... as are usually granted or conferred in other colleges in Europe or America..."

Section 8 of the original charter also specified "... that no person shall be excluded from any privilege, immunity, office or situation in the said College on account of his religious persuasion. Provided he demean himself in a sober, peaceable and orderly manner and conform to the rules and regulations ..." of the College.

The Beaufort College was given an ample and on-going, source of revenue, a self-perpetuating Board of Trustees and wide latitude in establishing the curriculum and conferring degrees. The most interesting restriction on the Trustees was the prohibition against religious discrimination, thus separating the Beaufort College from earlier colonial colleges begun in Puritan New England, and continuing South Carolina's long tradition of very liberal religious toleration.

The Trustees had much work to do in those early years. They had to sell their real estate, place the money at an interest, hire a college president and build a building to house the College. By 1802 they



had amassed considerable funds and on November 4, 1802, they laid the cornerstone of the first Beaufort College Building on the corner of Bay Street and Church Street.

It was an occasion of great ceremony as today is. In 1802, a procession was formed at the John Cross Tavern. The Masonic Lodges of Beaufort and St. Helena Island led the procession with music and regalia. Following the Masons were upwards of 100 schoolboys boarding in the town. Following the students were their schoolmasters, then the Beaufort Library Society, the St. Helena Society, the Beaufort Society, the Trustees of the College and finally the citizens of the town. After appropriate remarks, a brass plate was attached to the cornerstone, which read:

BEAUFORT COLLEGE
CORNER STONE LAID THE 4TH OF NOVEMBER 1802
IN THE 27TH YEAR
OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEDICATED TO
VIRTUE, LIBERTY AND SCIENCE

While the first Beaufort College building was under construction, the Trustees began the search for a president for the new College. They sought the assistance of the most distinguished educators in early America in their quest. Robert Barnwell wrote to Rufus King in London, George Washington's ambassador to Great Britain and one of the most influential framers of the U.S. Constitution, who called the offer of a \$1300 per year salary "alluring." But he found no suitable candidates. Dr. Smith, the president of Princeton University wrote to recommend Dr. Charles Henry Wharton who had recently resigned as president of Columbia University for the job in Beaufort. Dr. Wharton declined the "handsome offer," preferring to remain the Episcopal rector of Burlington, New Jersey. It was this search which brought the brothers Jonathan, Virgil and Milton Maxcy to South Carolina. Jonathan was the second president of Brown University and the first president of the University of South Carolina in 1804. Virgil Maxcy was the first head of the grammar (high) school in Beaufort and Milton Maxcy settled in Beaufort, married a local heiress, Mary/ Bull, and became one of Beaufort's many prominent schoolmasters.

Having begun the first building, established the endowment and begun the search for professors, the last task of the organizers was to design the curriculum and educational plan for the new College. This task was assigned to a committee of Trustees headed by Stephen Elliott (1771-1830).

Stephen Elliott was one of the most remarkable intellects in early South Carolina. He was born in Beaufort in 1771 and despite the hardships of the Revolutionary War, he was raised in wealth and privilege. In 1788 he was sent to Yale College and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1791. He returned to Beaufort where he married Esther Habersham, daughter of the Governor of Georgia. They had thirteen children.

Elliott was elected to the S.C. Senate where he authored the "Free School Act" of 1811 and is often regarded as the father of public education in South Carolina. He was the longtime president of

the Bank of South Carolina, a Trustee of the University of South Carolina, a Trustee of the College of Charleston and one of the founders of the Medical College of South Carolina in 1824. He was the author of the classical scientific treatise *A Sketch of the Botany of South Carolina and Georgia* ("1821, 1824), the founder and editor of the *Southern Review* and the president of the Beaufort Library Society, the Charleston Library Society and vice-president of the American Geological Society. For all these accomplishments, Elliott was awarded honorary doctorates from Yale in 1819, Harvard in 1822, Columbia in 1825 and the Medical College of South Carolina in 1825. The reason I tell you all of this about Stephen Elliott is because he was the author of the plan for the organization of the Beaufort College and his vision tells us what the original Trustees intended for this College to be. Elliott's report was submitted to the Trustees on August 1, 1803. Listen to what Elliott said:

If the views and objects of the Trustees are to establish a seminary which commencing at the first elements of Learning should in progression embrace the outlines of all those Sciences which in Infancy and Youth can generally be acquired, the following arrangements are proposed and submitted –

To establish 1st a primary School where Children of the tenderest ages may be received and taught the elements of their native tongue – to Spell, to read, to write – and arithmetic as far as the rule of three – These simple but important foundations of knowledge, ought to be acquired by every citizen of a Free Country and can easily be learned at an age, when even those who are ultimately destined to laborious occupations, will not be required to labour In this School the Trustees will have an opportunity of repaying in part their obligations to the Beaufort and St. Helena Societies by teaching annually free of expense, a certain number of Children to be recommended to them by the respective Societies – And if the general price of tuition can be affixed at a low rate, this school humble as its destination might seem may prove highly beneficial to the community Those to whom the Studies of this School are only to serve as an induction to higher pursuits will as soon as they are completed pass into

2n: The Grammar School – Where shall be taught Arithmetic as far as decimal Fractions; an outline of Geography and the Languages, so much Latin as to read Cicero and Virgil, and Greek enough to understand the Testament. In this School the rudiments of any other Language a pupil may wish to learn ought to be taught – For this future provision can be made. At present it will be sufficient to consider it as a School where those who wish to finish their education in College may be prepared for admission and others may receive sufficient instruction to pass decently through Life— The most ordinary capacity, by steady application, may master ne Studies proposed to be taught in this School by the age of fifteen or sixteen years, and earlier than this it would perhaps be unwise to precipitate youths of the brightest understandings into the profound investigations which most of the Studies in a collegiate Education require. The foundation and rudiments of all knowledge are gained by memory and the memory cannot too soon be exercised. But where the more solid powers of the understanding are to be called into action, where ideas are to be associated or separated, combined or abstracted, that period of Life ought to be waited for when the

Judgement begins to unfold – Nothing can be learned accurately or profoundly that is learned immaturely – and the Parent who wishes to accelerate too much the Education of a Child will often grasp a Shadow while the substance escaped him—

When these preparatory arrangements are completed and a Student reviewed into College, the languages must still occupy much of his attention – In a learned Education the knowledge of the Greek and Latin Languages cannot with propriety be omitted as long as they continue to be taught in all Colleges and Universities, and constitute in a great measure the Language of Science – and it is needless to remark that whatever is worth teaching is worth teaching well – Greek and Latin will therefore through the first year be read every day, in such books as shall from time to time be pointed out, but they will not occupy a student's whole time – The knowledge of Geography is easily attained and is useful in every employment and department of Life. The study of it will therefore commence at the first entrance into College, and be continued daily until some good system be read through – When this is finished. English Grammar, and some good treatise on composition. Rhetoric and the Belles Lettres, will supply its place – And these Studies will probably fill up the first year of Collegiate Life—

In the Second year the Languages may still be read alternately every morning and the Professor of Mathematics will teach the branches appertaining to his professorship ~ a Survey of Arithmetic, which those regularly prepared will have learnt as far as decimal Fractions before their entrance into College, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Surveying, Navigation, and Conic Sections – These are studies all of them useful through life and most of them essentially necessary to those desirous of understanding the her branches of Natural Philosophy—

During the third year a Professor of Natural Philosophy will teach the higher branches of Physics – Mechanics, Pneumatics, Hydrostatics, Optics, Astronomy, Electricity and Magnetism – With these the important and hourly increasing Science of Chemistry may be associated, but should be taught by a professor appropriated to that Pursuit.

The fourth year will be devoted to those Studies which qualify men to become active and useful members of Society, and prepare them to mingle with their Fellow Citizens on the great theatre of action to which they are hastening. In this year will be taught that part of Metaphysics which relates to the powers and operations of the human Understanding, an outline of History, of the Law of Nature and of Nations, of Government, of jurisprudence, of Political Economy, of Moral Philosophy and Theology.

From the end of the first year the composition of the English Language should receive continued attention by obliging the Students in the three higher classes to compose regularly in some established rotation. Essays on such subjects as may be prescribed to them or as they themselves may select—

The Trustees might seriously to inquire whether the utility of our Institution would not be increased, by admitting Students not regularly members of the College to attend the recitations and Lectures of any Class in whose Studies they may wish to associate

without requiring any other qualification than a subscription to the Articles of College Discipline, and perhaps some limitation with regard to age.

I should be unwilling to admit such occasional Students under the age of seventeen or eighteen years; lest the regular classes be loaded and clogged by persons incapable of attending them in their several studies—

It will be considered as the duty of the President to superintend the Studies of the last year unless he prefers the charge of one of the lower classes, in which case a Professor of Moral and Political Philosophy will be required—

As the Arrangements here proposed comprehend all the Sciences considered as fundamental in a Classical Education they will be sufficient to secure to our College reputation and respect—



Dr. Martin Luther Hurlbut

The Beaufort College opened on January 18, 1804, with no president in place. Eventually, Dr. Martin Luther Hurlbut of Portland, Maine, became the new college's first president. He later became president of the College of Charleston. Other distinguished faculty at the college were James L. Petigru, the intellectual leader of antebellum Charleston and mentor of the South Carolina legal profession (the old Law School at the University of South Carolina was named in his honor) and William J. Grayson, congressman, planter and poet who taught at the Beaufort College until it was closed by a yellow fever epidemic in 1817.

The College was always a reflection of the fortunes of the town and the surrounding Sea Islands. When cotton prices were high, the student population increased, tuition was easy to collect and faculty members were induced to remain on task. When commodity prices, hurricanes or caterpillars reduced the crop, the College struggled to make ends meet. Throughout the antebellum era, the College functioned more like a modern junior college, with graduates continuing on to Harvard, Yale, Brown or the University

of Virginia. Most graduates of the Beaufort College finished their higher education at the University of South Carolina. In 1856, the Beaufort College curriculum specifically required students to complete the courses “necessary for admission into the sophomore class of the South Carolina College.”

The first heyday of the Beaufort College was from 1804 to 1817, during the first cotton boom in the Sea Islands. During those years, students filled up the town, excellent faculty were retained and the list of alumni reads like a who’s who of early South Carolina history: Robert W. Barnwell (1801-1882); valedictorian of the Harvard class of 1821, U.S. Congressman, U.S. Senator and President of the University of South Carolina from 1836-1841; Robert Barnwell Rhett (1801-1876), S.C. Attorney General, U.S. Congressman, U.S. Senator and “father of Secession” in South Carolina; William Ferguson Colcock (1804-1864), valedictorian of the University of South Carolina class of 1825, Speaker of the South Carolina House and U.S. Congressman; and Reverend Richard Fuller (1804-1876), Harvard graduate, lawyer, author, nationally known preacher and co-founder of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Perhaps the most exciting story of the Beaufort College alumni was the story of the Lubbock brothers. Francis Richard Lubbock and Thomas Saltus Lubbock were born, raised and educated in Beaufort while their father, Henry W. Lubbock, was captain of the steamboat that ran through the Sea Islands from Charleston to Savannah. The Lubbock brothers left Beaufort to seek their fortunes in the west. Francis R. Lubbock moved to New Orleans, became a lawyer and later followed his brother to Texas. Thomas Saltus Lubbock went to the Texas frontier, fought with Sam Houston at the Battle of San Jacinto and was one of the original 12 men appointed “Texas Rangers” for the new Republic of Texas. Brother Francis was elected wartime Governor of Texas from 1861 to 1863. The county and city of Lubbock, Texas, is named for them. In 1900, at the age of 90, Governor Lubbock published his memoirs and reflected on his boyhood in Beaufort and his education at the Beaufort College. “Through all these years,” he wrote, “Beaufort has always remained one of the pleasures of my memory.”

The old Beaufort College suffered a setback in 1817 when the worst pestilence in the history of the town, a yellow fever epidemic, took the lives of one-third the students and one sixth of the town. The original College building included a dormitory where the epidemic was thought to have begun. The building was abandoned, sold and eventually razed to the ground. The College struggled on through the 1830s, occupying several buildings in town and equipping a separate library building in 1835. During the Depression of 1841, much of the College endowment was lost with the collapse of the Bank of the United States. But in the 1850s, cotton prices rose to new highs; the College enrolled more than 50 students and plans for a new College building were begun.

The person most responsible for the new College building, which we are re-dedicating today, was Beaufort College alumnus, long-time Trustee and former President of the South Carolina College, Robert W. Barnwell. The building was begun in 1852, completed in 1855 and opened for students on January 1, 1856. It was a busy and successful institution enrolling upwards of 60 students for the

next five years.

Early in the Civil War, Beaufort and the Sea Islands were conquered by the U.S. Navy and the whole town became a headquarters, hospital and convalescent center for the U.S. Army Department of the South. The Beaufort College building was commandeered as a hospital and then converted into the headquarters of the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, better known as

the Freedmen’s Bureau. From 1866 to 1873, they conducted classes there for the newly liberated slaves of the Sea Islands. In 1868, the first public school house of Beaufort School District #1 was built on the lot next door. Thus, throughout Reconstruction, the Beaufort College building remained a symbol of the high expectations of the past and the promise of the future.

In 1866, the Trustees of the College of Beaufort reconstituted themselves, reclaimed the College building and recovered some of their endowment. Though the College was never reorganized after the Civil War, the Trustees of the College have remained continuously active as benefactors of higher education in the community and ultimate custodians of the Beaufort College building. Continuously active for 205 years, the Trustees of the College of Beaufort are the oldest incorporated body in the town of Beaufort.

After the war, one of the town properties controlled by the Trustees was turned over to Miss Mary Hamilton who operated a primary school there. Almost single-handedly, she kept alive the vision of the founders of the College for forty years following the Civil War. In honor of her selfless devotion to the tradition of her ancestors and the task at hand, her students contributed the handsome stone plaque on display in the Performing Arts building.

During the 1880s, the Trustees sponsored a graded school for the children of the town. It was known as the “Beaufort College School” and it operated in the College building. In 1908 the College building was deeded to Beaufort School District #1 and a large wing was added in 1909. From 1909 to 1959, the Beaufort College building, along with its two story 1909 addition, was the principal elementary school in Beaufort.

In 1959, the old Beaufort College building was made available by the county to the University of South Carolina to operate its second branch campus in the state. For the past forty-one years, the University of South Carolina has kept alive the vision and intention of the founders of the Beaufort College in 1795.

And now, at the end of the millennium, we are poised to inaugurate a new bigger and busier chapter in the long odyssey of higher education in Beaufort County.

We do so by standing on the shoulders of giants: giants like Stephen Elliott, Robert W. Barnwell and Mary Hamilton.

We do so cognizant, in the words of Lord Macauley, of the “noble achievements of our remote ancestors.”

We do so in hopes that we can achieve something “worthy of being remembered by our descendants.”