

# Spaulding Institute

(pictured on home page of Muskogee County Genealogical Society's website)

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by Linda Morgan Clark, Mth

Spaulding College/Institute was originally founded in 1881 as Harrell International Institute by Rev. Theodore F. Brewer, pastor of what was commonly known as “The Rock Church”, aka the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and his sister, Mary Locke. The church was located at the southeast corner of present day Okmulgee and Cherokee Streets. When it opened it was the first school organized in Indian Territory that offered, what were then considered college courses, to students of all Indian nations and white children.

In August 1878, Rev. Brewer accepted the position of principal of the Asbury Manual Training School in old North Fork Town, I.T. (near present day Eufaula). In October he was assigned to start ME Church, South, churches in both Muskogee and Eufaula. He continued to teach at Asbury for two years, until the Muskogee congregation completed a parsonage south of the Rock Church. Only then did he and his wife relinquish their work at Asbury and move their family to Muskogee.

Rev. Brewer's sister, Mary Locke, moved to Muskogee in 1881, and took up residence in a small house constructed for her east of the church. Together, Mary and Rev. Brewer founded Harrell International Institute.

The trustees of the church passed a resolution as follows:

*Resolved; that in the opinion of the board a Methodist High School offering first class privilege [sic] should be open in the town of Muskogee.*

*Resolved; that we apply at once to the Hon. Samuel Checote principal chief of Muskogee Nation for permission to open such a school in said town of Muskogee on the first Monday in September 1881.*

*Resolved; that the Rev. T.F. Brewer be, and is hereby elected President of said school with authority of this board to engage the services of such assistants as he may need and to make all necessary arrangement for opening the school.*

An act granting the request of the trustees passed the Creek Council and was approved by Chief Checote, November 2, 1881.

Classes started in Mary's living room and quickly expanded to using the Rock Church as well. It was only a day school at first with students seated on improvised seats, a few benches with no backs, made from placing planks across boxes and nail kegs, as well as chairs borrowed from neighbors. The first year the school had 91 students and two other teachers besides Mary: Mrs. Mary Brewer (Rev. Brewer's wife), and Miss Alice Boardman, who taught music and gave piano lessons on Mrs. Brewer's piano in the parlor of the parsonage. Mary Locke was the Principal of the Primary Department. Because pupils were coming from all over the area, the school started admitting boarding students and they lived with townfolk as well as with Rev. and Mrs. Brewer at the church's parsonage. After rooms were added to the parsonage, the Brewers also took in some of the teachers as borders.

In October 1883, the Indian Mission Conference of the MEC South, officially accepted the

school as a part of the Conference, rather than the sole responsibility of Rev. Brewer, the Rock Church, and the college trustees. That same year *Our Brother in Red*, the official newspaper of the Indian Mission Conference, reported the following:

*Many things have conspired to interfere with the success of Harrell Institute during its second annual term... First the civil disturbances in the Creek Nation prevented some students from a distance from attending the school. Then the mumps and measles, and last of all, the scarlet fever visited the school and town. Notwithstanding these hinderances [sic] 132 students matriculated during the term, and peace and harmony prevailed in the school.*

It soon became obvious that the school needed a building of its own, so plans were made for constructing Muskogee's "first brick building" east of the Rock Church. It was to be "a modern four-story building with broad hallways, large classrooms, art and music room, sunny well-ventilated bedrooms, a large dining hall, and a well equipped basement and laundry area."

The cornerstone was laid September 1, 1884. When the fall term opened, the student body was made up of the daughters of Methodist bishops, cattlemen, merchants, doctors, and farmers as well as Native American girls. "The children of the town flocked to Harrell, to school Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Boys and Girls of all ages from first grade pupils to seniors were given an opportunity to study under cultured well educated, many times exceptionally talented, teachers."

The students always wore uniforms and many of them received free board as well as clothing and books. Families and friends of the students were always welcome to visit and stay in the guest room, if necessary. The Methodist Circuit Riders and their mounts were also welcome to take advantage of the school's hospitality.

That same year the school's trustees ordered that Harrell should become, as originally envisioned, a girl's only school. But that didn't last long. While the day school had always admitted boys, the "boarding department" yielded to the demand and added a new dormitory and athletic hall for boys. The President could permit boys to be admitted, provided they were family members of students or local patrons and were under the age of 12. This proviso allowed Rev. Brewer's sons to attend as well as the young Will Rogers for a brief time.

But it was difficult to keep the school financially afloat. Tuitions were not always paid on time or paid at all and the ME Church, South's Board of Missions was asked for assistance many times. To keep up with the times and attract more students, the main building was extensively renovated in the early part of 1898. H. B. Spaulding (who was a member of the church) used his considerable wealth and influence to pay for the extensive renovations. A hot air furnace was installed, along with running water, sanitary plumbing, and electric lighting. This made it possible to add baths and bathrooms on every floor. The school was renamed Spaulding Institute in recognition of Spaulding's financial support.

Then, seven months after Muskogee's "Great Fire of 1899", "The Pride of Muskogee", as the school became known, burned to the ground, September 25, 1899. The gymnasium building which held the art department was where the conflagration started and from which it spread. Left in smoldering ruins were the main building which held the girl's dormitory, the dining room, kitchens, and newly installed heating plant. The laundry east of the main building was gone, along with the coal and storage buildings. Nearby business buildings were threatened but none were damaged. The closest

building was saved by covering the top and sides with wet blankets. As the fire began to spread from its origin, students, faculty, and townsfolk went to work saving all the furniture and pianos from the school's buildings, and piling student's clothing in the street. None of the students or faculty were injured, but several townsfolk who helped were, some very seriously. The newspaper reported that "a number of the ladies were somewhat affected by the excitement" as well.

Almost immediately the newspaper reported that "a little water just at hand might have saved Spaulding Institute so the "people of Muskogee have decided to buy a fire engine" for \$3,000.

The school resumed classes the following day using the the lower floor of the boy's dormitory that had not burned and the recently expanded church building, now known as Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The old vacant parsonage was also converted into dormitory space. The pastor, Rev. Sam Thompson, was quoted in the newspaper: "Above the smoldering ruins and broken walls, Spaulding Institute will be rebuilt and continue to grow."

Plans soon were made to move and build anew on the Indian Fair grounds (present day Spaulding Park is only a small part of those Fair Grounds) that would face Spaulding Boulevard. (The new location was bordered by Okmulgee Avenue, "G" Street, Park Avenue, and Spaulding Boulevard.) An earlier donation from Mr. Spaulding had not been fully spent on the pre-fire renovations. Rebuilding began almost immediately with the remaining Spaulding money, along with a good insurance settlement and another \$5,000 contribution from Spaulding. The projected cost was estimated at \$30,000 to \$40,000. In 18 months, everything was ready to receive classes in the new building September 17, 1901, with 135 students on its new 11 acre campus.

At that time Rev. Brewer and his wife, returned to Muskogee to lead the school. Then in 1903, by order of the Indian Mission Conference, the name was changed to Spaulding Female College. It was yet another attempt to turn the co-educational school into an all female school even though about a third of the student body was male.

It took almost two years to accomplish the change, but by the school's 24<sup>th</sup> year there were 185 female students, more than the total enrollment of both females and males the previous year. Ten states and territories were represented in the student body. The faculty comprised 14 teachers and the property was valued at \$75,000. Several improvements were made to the landscaping, new furniture purchased, and hot and cold water was available throughout the building. The baths were heated by hot air and new electric motors were installed for the forced air heat.

While Rev. Brewer served both as president and teacher at Harrell Institute and its successor, Spaulding College, (Rev. Brewer was at the helm of the school for almost two decades), it is probably safe to assume that it was "Mother Brewer", as Mary Brewer was affectionately called, who captured the hearts of the students. As the resident Matron from 1903-1908, a biography reflects some of what campus life was like and portrays the student's affection for her.

*"Here Mrs. Brewer's room was a haven for any homesick or lonesome girl. She did many fine things without a thought of doing anything great or even unusual. There were always students, sometimes 6 or 7 at one time, whom she was helping to get an education, even assisting with clothes and books. Thrifty in things pertaining to her own affairs, she was lavish in the hospitality she extended. At all times the 'home folks' of the students were welcome visitors to*

*the school. She loved youth and was an everlasting inspiration to all of the students. No woman moulded [sic] and shaped so many lives of foremost citizens as did Mrs. Brewer.”*

The Muskogee Phoenix’s *Turn of the Century* edition (1899) describes the community’s regard for the Brewers’ work as well: “Most of the young ladies who were placed under the care of [Rev. Brewer] and his worthy wife left the school Christians, and now many a God-fearing home stands a monument to their labors.”

May 20, 1903, after the Bethel ME Church, South, burned, the Spaulding College Chapel was immediately made available to the 600 member congregation. The Sunday after the blaze, Sunday School met at 9:45 a.m., the Commencement Service for Spaulding's graduating class went ahead as planned in the chapel at 11 o'clock, and “regular” worship for the church was at 8 p.m. The next Sunday began the regular schedule of Sunday School at 9:45 a.m., worship at 11:00 a.m., Epworth League at 7:00 p.m. and “preaching’ at 8:00 p.m., all in the chapel. This was to be the church's home and schedule for the next 18 months.

In October 1904 two churches emerged from the chapel. First ME Church, South, continued under the pastorate of Rev. M. L. Butler, and moved into their new building. St. Paul MEC, South, received a new pastor at the same time and all Methodists living west of the KATY railroad moved first to the old Opera House/Gavigan Hall and later to the old First Baptist Church until their new building was completed in 1906.

Meanwhile public schools in Muskogee and throughout the state, were siphoning off prospective students and enrollments at Spaulding and finances began to decline. Indicative of the need to shore up the financial support for the school, beginning in March 1906, it was announced there there was a “movement afoot” to raise a \$100,000 endowment for both Bacone University and Spaulding College.

By May, 1907, there were only nine graduates. The school's trustees met immediately following commencement exercises to discuss the future of the school. Then Rev. Brewer, whose wife was in failing health, resigned the presidency October 28, 1907, returned to the ministry, and moved to Guthrie. The school cafeteria was opened to the public for meals (“We cook with coal. Delicious home-cooking 25c”), and rooms were rented out to help bring in revenue. In April 1908, the coal was sold to the public and in May, after graduating only six young women, the school closed and the building was turned into a private boarding house. In June the entire building was advertised for rent, “furnished: immediate possession.” After that, the newspapers have numerous advertisements to attract boarders and roomers to occupy the building at 518 Baltimore.

In November 1908, the Oklahoma ME South Conference took over the building for one year in order to “decide whether [a] college will remain permanently in [the] city.” The pastor of First ME Church, South, O. B. Staples, was appointed president. After Rev. Staple's wife died quite suddenly, Rev. O.E. Goddard assumed the office. In 1909 the kitchen and dining room were advertised for rent, lease, or sale. In a decision that clearly indicates the school was defunct the church lost a court case that resulted in the property being subject to taxes since it was no longer a school. Adding to the property's problems, a woman employed in the dining room died from a gas leak while sleeping in room next to one where there was an “automatic water heater with a gas connection”.

The first commercial tenant of the building was was Mid-Continent Insurance Company. They occupied the building only briefly in 1909. By 1910, the 10 acre campus was being subdivided, and parcels sold to individuals who built homes, some of which still stand in the area surrounding the lot (still vacant) on which the school building stood.

In 1913 the Oklahoma Legislature required the Oklahoma School for the Blind (OSB) to move from Ft. Gibson to Muskogee. The state leased the Spaulding property while a new building for OSB was under construction at its present location, A concrete floor was poured in the basement and on one of Spaulding's main floors. The outside wood trim was painted and the building given a "general overhaul". Since Muskogee's city charter prohibited giving institutions free water, the mayor, it is believed, paid the \$1.00 annual fee that was offered in compromise. The Gas and Electric company once more provided utilities. June 1, 1913, tOSB opened in the repurposed building where it operated for one year. When they vacated the property the building was for rent once more.

In 1914 a group of women hoped to establish a home for girls in the building where they could be taught "domestic science and other arts useful in home-making," There is no record of their plans becoming a reality, and the Spaulding property remained vacant.

In 1915, Rev. Brewer tried again to establish a Methodist college in Muskogee to be known as the Oklahoma Women's College. Initial plans called for it to be housed in the old Spaulding building, while a new building was to be erected on Agency Hill where the current VA Hospital stands. That plan did not materialize and numerous attempts were made to raise funds for the new structure. However, only the foundations for an administration building were ever laid and the project was halted for lack of financial backing from both the ME Church, South, and the Muskogee community. Brewer's dream to establish this college became part of the overall work Oklahoma Methodists were doing at the time to establish a college in Oklahoma. That effort finally led to establishing Oklahoma City University in Oklahoma City.

In 1918 The United Mine Workers of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas voted to move their headquarters from McAlester to Muskogee and take over the Spaulding building for their organization. One of the things they hoped to construct was their own general hospital. The newspaper reported in connection with this announcement, that "a hospital was desired in Muskogee from the overtures made not long ago" for the Spaulding building.

In 1923, the newspapers reported that Franklin and Sequoyah ward schools were "overflowing". It was suggested that the Sequoyah school use rooms at the old Spaulding College, since it was close by.

However, that same year, Police Sergeant G.C. Parker and his wife purchased the Spaulding building they had been jointly owning as an apartment building since at least 1921. They remodeled it into 100 rooms subdivided into 35 furnished two, three, and four room apartments with kitchenettes. They hoped to net \$1,000 a month from their investment and reportedly turned down an offer of \$65,000 for the property.

In 1926 the City of Muskogee purchased the Spaulding building from its owner, believed to be a Native American woman from Sapulpa, for \$25,000.00. The City then sold to the Veteran's Administration (with the help of Alice Robertson) the hospital they had previously built on Agency Hill

and in 1928 the Spaulding building became the 94-bed Muskogee General Hospital. During WWII a nurses dormitory was added west of the new hospital location.

In its new location, the General Hospital flourished and grew. Many people alive today say “I was born there.” In 1952, however, the Fire Marshal declared the old building a firetrap – its walls insulated with highly flammable materials - and cited numerous conditions that indicated that the building was no longer suitable for a modern hospital with the latest technology. The building was over-crowded and dangerous. Inspections revealed cracks in the walls that extended from the interior to the exterior brick and stone. The board responsible for accrediting the hospital “de-certified” it and community leaders began exploring other possibilities for re-locating the hospital or merging it with the Baptist Hospital.

A decision was finally made to build a new hospital and two possible locations were put forth. One – to build on the original Spaulding acreage or, two – to build on Hatbox Field property on the west side of town. The Spaulding location was rejected after 27 property owners who had built their homes on some of the lots made available when the original acreage was subdivided, objected strenuously to losing their homes to a new hospital. The Hatbox Field location was accepted and with a voter approved 1.4 million dollar bond issue, construction began in 1957 on a new Muskogee General Hospital on Rockefeller Drive. In 1959 the hospital moved to its new location and a significant piece of Muskogee's history was once more vacant.

In 1961 Muskogee Junior College, aka “Bessie Huff University”, moved from Muskogee's Central High School to the Spaulding building. It closed in 1962 due to financial problem.

The old building remained vacant and continued to deteriorate, becoming a magnet for mischief and vandalism. What had once been “The Pride of Muskogee” was now considered by the City as its “White Elephant” - too costly to maintain. Finally in November 1964, the City let a contract to Parker Wrecking Co., of Oklahoma City to take down the building within 90 days.

It is to the Muskogee General Hospital that goes the honor of holding the record for being the longest-lived, sole occupant of the Spaulding school building from the time it was built in 1901 until it was demolished in 1965. But the story of Spaulding College is far more than a recounting of the history of the school and the occupants of its historic building. Its predecessor, Harrell Institute, set the school on a course of great influence in the city of Muskogee, its various churches, and Oklahoma Methodism in particular. Spaulding College continued in that tradition during its brief existence as a school, and the building it occupied stood for many years as a testimony to the influence and value of Methodism's contribution to the civic and religious life of Muskogee.

Countless newspaper accounts from the beginnings of Harrell Institute and throughout the life of Spaulding College reflect the importance of the school to Muskogee and beyond. (Miesch Jewelry advertised a line of souvenir spoons, one of which had an image of Spaulding Institute engraved in the bowl.) The school's faculty were the Sunday School teachers, administrators, musicians, choir members, and pastors of Methodist churches.

Spaulding's music department produced semi-annual recitals, both vocal and instrumental, that were well attended by the community. Its elocution department exposed Muskogee's citizenry to stirring renditions of the major literary works of the day. Its sports teams never failed to provide

exciting competition. Its patrons were the social set of the community that entertained visiting dignitaries, and raised money for charitable causes. And its founder, Rev. Brewer, established a well-read newspaper (*Our Brother in Red*) and went on to be a trail blazer in Methodist higher education as well as an advocate for health care and a Methodist hospital in the state. Graduates who came from other states often remained in Muskogee to become spiritual, political, and social leaders. Other graduates spread out across the region taking their education, religious training, and memories with them. When they returned to Muskogee to visit family or their old Spaulding friends their names and association with Spaulding are frequently noted in the newspapers.

The quality of the education acquired at both Harrell Institute and Spaulding College was recounted to “Miss Ella” Mary Robinson in an interview of Mrs. Eck E. Brook for the Works Progress Administration. Mrs. Brook, herself a graduate, told that another graduate, while visiting Muskogee said, “I wonder if you feel as I do about old Harrell? (Spaulding's predecessor) We had splendid teachers and they gave us a great deal more then [sic] we relized [sic] at the time.” Another said, “you know that Professor Savage who taught [my] mother Latin, must have been a whiz. I took the boys home with me just to show mother off. She can read Latin as well as I can read English, and she has been out of school for twenty years.”

While Harrell/Spaulding graduates undoubtedly benefited from their association with the school throughout their lives, no other individuals lives were more intertwined with the school than the Rev. and Mrs. Theodore F. Brewer. Serving as administrators, mentors, and chief advocates for almost two decades, their longtime connection with the school provided a steadying hand throughout the school's history and left a lasting legacy. It was said of them: “The good that they did was built into the lives of all those around them and lives today in many homes throughout the state of Oklahoma.” It can also be said of Spaulding that the good it did, both as a school and as an historical building in the life of Muskogee's citizenry, still lives today in many places throughout the nation.