

HISTORY

LOVERS OF THE ARTS AND SCIENCES: MASONIC COLLEGES IN ANTEBELLUM ALABAMA

BY WAYNE E. SIRMON, MMS

In 1820, a man destined to serve as the Vice President of the United States drew the plans for a new town in Alabama. On a high bluff of the Alabama River, the plat included wide avenues with room for stately churches and homes that would display the wealth of the antebellum south. William Rufus King, a native of North Carolina (where he received the Masonic degrees in Phoenix Lodge No. 8), owned a large plantation ten miles downstream from the site. With the advent of statehood and the steamboat, he and other investors established the Selma Town Land Company and incorporated the town of Selma. During the next thirty years, Selma would grow in importance as it became a transportation hub for central Alabama. Along with the banks, railroads and churches, another indicator of the development of the town was the formation, in 1828, of Selma Fraternal Lodge No. 27. Twenty years later these Masons would construct a large, three storey building at the south end of Alabama Avenue. This grand structure would not be their Masonic Hall but was built to serve the surrounding community and state as the Central Masonic Institute.

The Common School movement, championed by Horace Mann, led to the creation of public schools in the northern states in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, this system of education had only

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a weak effect in the southern states. Wealthy families might send their children to northern boarding schools to receive final preparation for attending college, but the educational needs of most southern youth were met through the uses of tutors and private schools.

As the population of Alabama and the other southern states grew, the need for a better system of education became apparent. Most histories of American education make mention of the role of church-sponsored schools. From the days of the medieval universities, churches had shouldered this task. The earliest colleges in America were founded by various religious denominations. Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, and Princeton were only the first such universities. What is almost totally missing from the standard histories is the influence of Freemasonry in the development of American education. While somewhat familiar to Masonic scholars, efforts such as James Carter's two volumes on *Education and Masonry in Texas* are unknown to those who study the history of American education. According to Carter's tabulation, thirty-

three schools were established by Texas Masonic lodges with an additional twenty schools using Masonic buildings.¹ Although generally overlooked, Masonic-sponsored schools were found across the antebellum nation and there are hints of a tantalizing untold story. Sidney Kase provided some background of

Masonic interest in education when the Masonic Service Association printed "Freemasonry and Public Education" in the November 1990 *Short Talk Bulletin*.² Cloyd Bumgardner described the discovery of the Masonic foundations of Summerset Kentucky schools. Accompanying his article in the March-April 2010 issue of *The Scottish Rite Journal* was a list (reprinted in the Masonic Service Association's *Emessay Notes*, May

Summery. Photo: Vaughan-Smitherman Museum

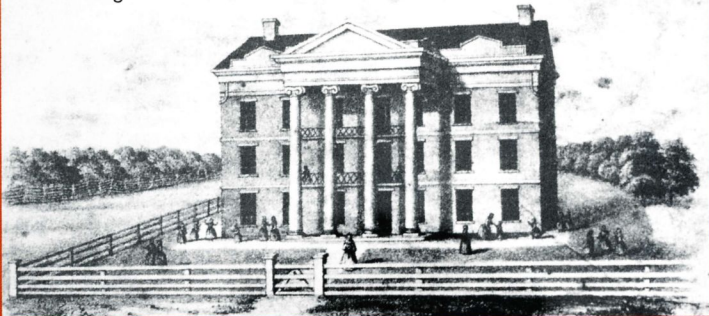
| | |
|--|-----|
| RESIDENT GRADUATES..... | 2 |
| COLLEGIATE COURSE. | |
| SENIOR CLASS..... | 4 |
| MIDDLE "..... | 10 |
| JUNIOR "..... | 27 |
| ACADEMIC COURSE. | |
| THIRD CLASS..... | 30 |
| SECOND "..... | 21 |
| FIRST "..... | 16 |
| PUPILS IN MUSIC, &c., NAMES NOT MENTIONED..... | 3 |
| PRIMARY COURSE. | |
| Total..... | 151 |

1851 enrollment of the Female Department of the Central Masonic Institute in Selma, AL as printed in the school catalogue.

2010) containing thirty-one Masonic colleges founded between 1840 and 1892.³ In five volumes of transcriptions of early nineteenth century documents, Edgar Knight collected a wide variety of materials related to education in the south. There the reader finds a detailed discussion of the efforts of North Carolina Masons to establish a "manual labor school" (1843) and "A Seminary of Learning" (1847).⁴ From these sources we know of the Masonic roots of schools and colleges in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Tennessee. But, there are many, many others and each represents a story of Freemasonry in action.

The southern pattern of private education being sponsored by various religious denominations was evident in Alabama. Prior to the Civil War, the University of Alabama (founded in 1831) was the only public school of higher education in the state. There are ten Alabama colleges that trace their origins to the antebellum period. While the University of Alabama's entire history has been as a state school, five schools have

Photo: Vaughan-Smitherman Museum



The Central Masonic Institute, Selma, circa 1850.



Photo: Wayne E. Sirmon

The Vaughan-Smitherman Museum

maintained their historic denominational affiliation. Four others that were initially private, religiously based schools are now state supported universities. Even today, one-half of Alabama's four-year colleges are private and only two do not have a denominational affiliation.⁵

In addition to these surviving colleges the demand for educational opportunities beyond primary schools and tutors spurred the creation of numerous seminaries, institutes, colleges and universities. The 1840s and 50s marked a period of rapid growth in the population and wealth of Alabama and during these years there was intense state-wide interest in the creation of "honors level" education. While the majority (and most long-lasting) efforts were the product of religious associations, there are frequent references to local associations establishing schools that appear to have been started by a collection of "concerned citizens." Perhaps a significant portion of these schools reflect a common, but informal connection among their founders and trustees. At times, these connections may have been religious while in other circumstances these men may have been connected by the bonds of fraternity.⁶

Direct fraternal involvement is a simpler relationship to demonstrate. The most obvious cases are when the word "Masonic" is contained in the school's name. "Auburn Masonic Female College," "Dadeville Masonic Seminary," and Selma's "Central Masonic Institute," have unmistakable fraternal ties. Less obvious are the "East Alabama Female Institute" and "Union Female College." The term "seminary," while not having an exact definition, tended to indicate a higher grade of schooling and was generally equal to the term "college." Institutes could have included a range of curricula that approximate the courses found in modern high schools, college preparatory schools or junior colleges. Some also awarded degrees.⁷

The advent of computer search engines such as Google and JSTOR has allowed researchers to locate Masonic connections that appear in a variety of sources which in the past would have been overlooked.

In addition to references to books and journal articles, other internet resources include files such as the list of closed colleges prepared by Ray C. Brown.⁸

Additional information is contained in the Proceedings of the various Grand Lodges, however many of the older records remain unavailable to the non-Masonic (or even Masonic) researcher. The lack of staff and training in the handling and maintenance archival materials further limits access to useful information.⁹ Grand Lodge histories are of variable quality and until recently did not provide adequate citations to primary documents. Joseph Jackson's history of Masonry in Alabama does include a paragraph relating the 1842 effort by Thomas Chilton and the Committee on Education to establish a "Masonic Public School".¹⁰ This school of "high literary character" would serve as a boarding school for the destitute orphans and was the first time Masons of Alabama considered the development of a Masonic Home and Orphanage.

"We would go prepared, to say to the little sufferer; weep not! Death has indeed buried all your hopes in the grave of a father - and the tempest of adversity howls around you; yet look up and rejoice - we will be to you as father; - we are your friends, and have provided for you, a home, where the helpless orphan may safely rest!"¹¹ The possibility of creating this school continued to be discussed at the Grand Lodge sessions until 1853, but no action was taken. The concept of a Masonic Home would continue to be a topic of discussion in the closing years of the nineteenth century with the first positive vote occurring in 1906. The first children entered the home in 1913, however it did not include a school.

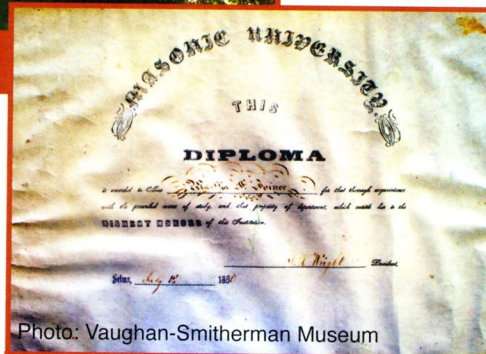


Photo: Vaughan-Smitherman Museum

The Diploma of Martha F. Joiner, first graduate of the Central Masonic Institute in Selma. Notice that the school "Masonic University" was not officially changed until 1852.

While failing to act at the state level, local lodges and individual Masons did respond to the need to provide quality education. During the twenty years prior to the American Civil War there are five known Alabama colleges with Masonic connections. These schools were located in Auburn, Dadeville, Talladega, Eufaula, and Selma.¹²

Auburn Masonic Female College

Perhaps Auburn's Masonic College is the best known of Alabama's "Masonic colleges" because the school's chapel, which was the largest auditorium in east Alabama, was moved to the Auburn University campus in 1889. The remodeled building was renamed Langdon Hall and continues to serve the educational needs of Alabama into the twenty-first century. While there were educational opportunities for young men in the Auburn area, none existed for girls in 1840s. Nathaniel Scott convinced Auburn Lodge No. 76 of this need and in 1853 a state charter for the school was granted by the legislature. Scott was later instrumental in having the Methodists charter the East Alabama Male College from which Auburn University traces its roots.¹³

Dadeville Masonic Seminary

This school may be typical of many of the colleges sponsored by Freemasons in that little information is readily available about its operation. Located in Tallapoosa County near the site of the 1813 Battle of Horseshoe Bend, this school for girls was identified as being "under control of Tohopeka Lodge No. 71 and Chapter No. 45, of Dadeville." Chartered in 1852, it was considered to be a "regular college."¹⁴

Photo: Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind



The East Alabama Masonic Female Institute in Talladega was purchased by the state of Alabama to become the Alabama Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind. Illustration is from their 1870 annual report.

East Alabama Female Institute

The need for schooling for young women in Talladega dates back to 1836 when the Talladega Academy was chartered. In 1850 the cornerstone for the “East Alabama Female Institute” was laid by the Masonic lodge which organized the school for “high grade” education of girls. After three years of operation, the school was sold to the Alabama Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but this organization also failed to develop an enduring program. Although the school was closed in 1858, it was immediately rented for the purpose of opening a school for the deaf. Within two years the state of Alabama purchased the property and established the forerunner of today’s Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind.¹⁵ Now known as Manning Hall on the campus of the Alabama School for the Deaf, the legacy of this Masonic school continues as the administrative offices for AIDB and the AIDB Foundation, the AIDB archives and the Warren Museum.

Union Female College

In 1853 three organizations joined forces to establish a nonsectarian school of higher education for women. Chartered by the Masons, Odd Fellows and Sons of Temperance in Eufaula, this college began to experience a decline in the 1870s and ceased operations in 1905. By that time the Sons of Temperance was defunct and their share of the control of the school had been passed to the City of Eufaula. Around that same time, Brenau College-Conservatory (now Brenau University) was seeking to establish branch campuses and the Union Female College facilities were offered free of charge with a lease for ten years. Unfortunately “Alabama Brenau” never thrived and ceased operations after a few years.¹⁶

Central Masonic Institute/Masonic University

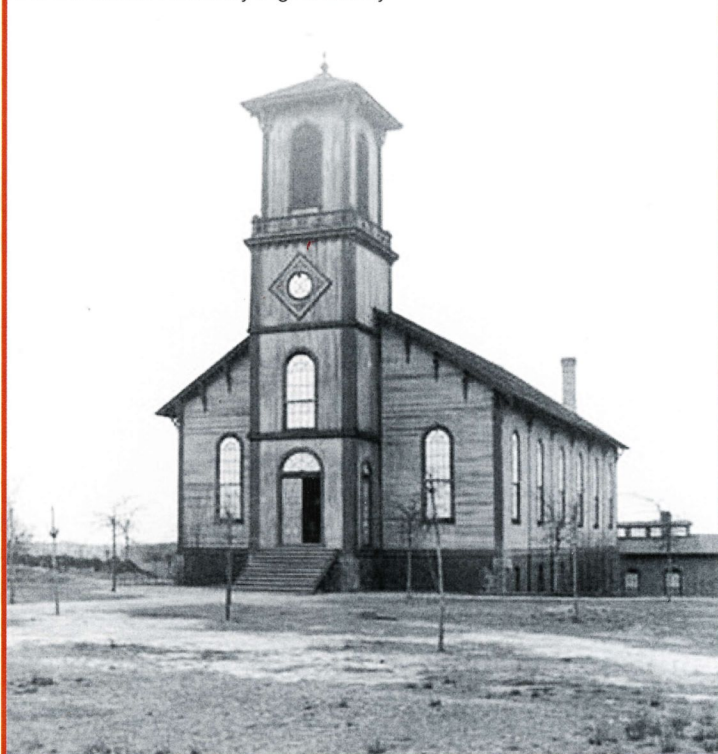
Selma was a prime example of “cotton fever” that swept through antebellum Alabama. The rapid increase in the wealth of the planters, factors, and merchants involved in the growing, transporting and marketing of cotton is evident in the many fine examples of antebellum architecture that grace this city.

Here, as in other southern cities and towns, was a concern over the advanced education of the sons and daughters of Selma’s leading families. In 1838 it was determined “That it is expedient and proper at this time to erect and establish an Academy in the town of Selma, for the education of females.” After a public meeting a committee was formed and was directed to investigate “erecting a Female Academy in connection with an Episcopal Church.”¹⁷

While it is unclear what developed from this committee, either the same or a parallel effort resulted in the creation of the “Ladies’ Educational Society of Selma.” Incorporated in 1839, its goal was the creation of schools. Once established, the operation of Dallas Academy was transferred to an all male board of trustees.¹⁸ This academy began operation in the 1839 and was highly regarded and continued in operation well after the Civil War.

The ladies continued to work on behalf of the education of women. In his detailed 1879 history of Selma, John Hardy acknowledges that these ladies “did much in the erection of church buildings and establishing schools.” Later he writes, “The society had used every laudable means to raise a fund in connection with the Masonic Order of the town, to erect a female academy.” On St. John’s Day, 1841, Selma Fraternal Lodge formed a procession and marched from the Episcopal Church to the southern terminus of Alabama Avenue where the cornerstone was laid.¹⁹

Photo: Auburn University Digital Library



The Chapel of Auburn Masonic Female College after it was moved to the campus of Auburn University in the 1880s.

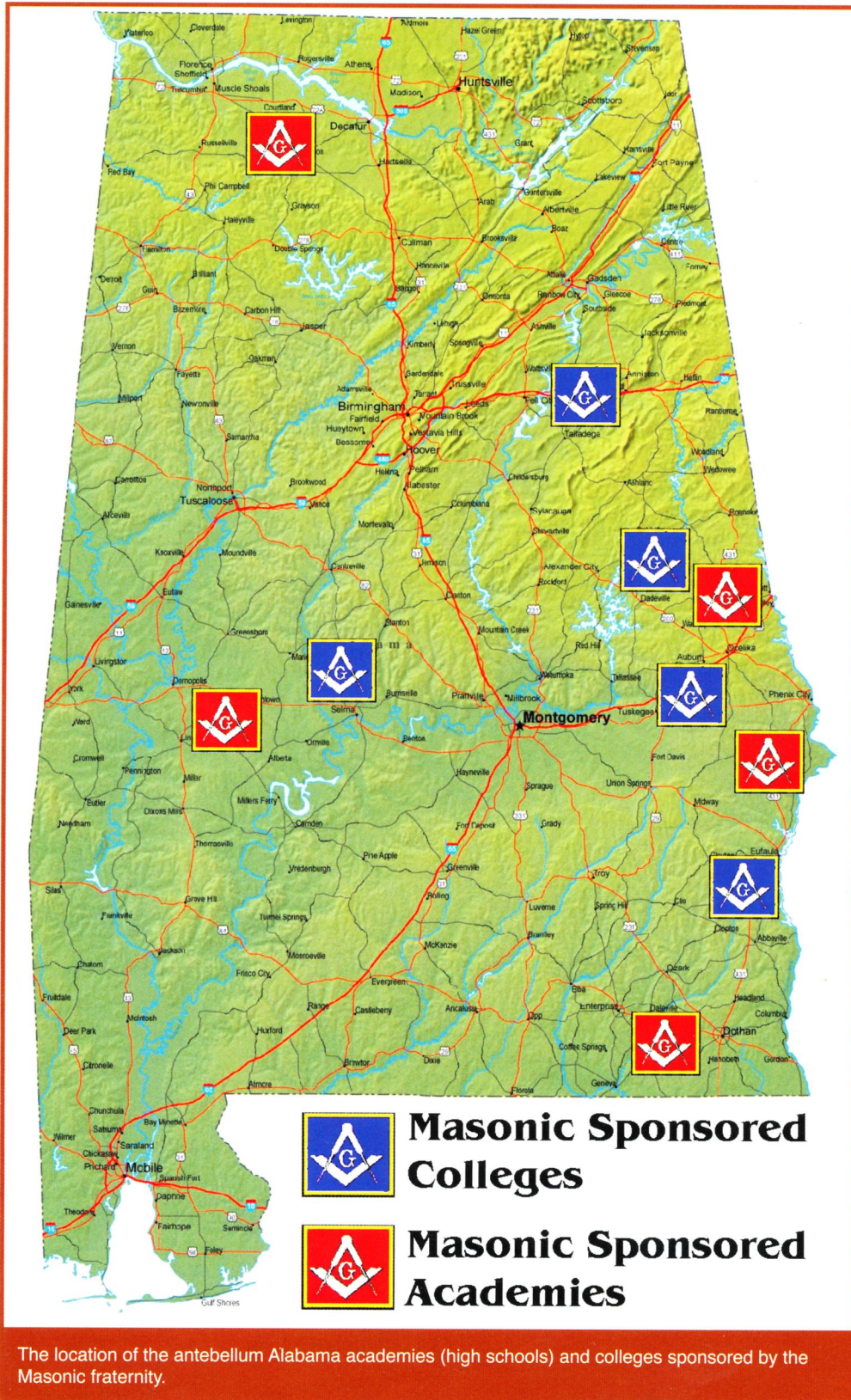
Every reference except one gives credit to Selma Fraternal Lodge for the construction and operation of the school that would be named the Central Masonic Institute. The Act of Incorporation, dated February 17, 1848, creates the Central Masonic Institute “for the purposes of educating youth of both sexes” and names “William Hendrix, Grand High Priest of the Royal Arch Chapter of the State of Alabama, and the most worshipful Rufus Green, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the State of Alabama, and their successors in office” and eleven other

men as Trustees.²⁰ Hendrix served as Grand Master in 1850. Among the other trustees, Nimrod Benson was Grand Master from 1825-27 and John Strong had served as Junior Grand Warden in 1847. The Grand Lodge Trust Fund also supported the Central Masonic Institute with the loan of \$2,753.75 in 1851. Additional funds were contributed by Sumter Lodge No. 17. When it surrendered its charter in 1848 the lodge donated its entire treasury to the school.²¹

It appears that the Institute began as a program for girls and later added a “Male Department.” This explains the early references to it being established as a “Female Academy” and its incorporation “for the purposes of educating youth of both sexes.”²² Additional support for the staggered opening of the Female and then Male Departments is provided by the 1851 Catalogue. In the summary of the “Female Department” section shows one hundred and fifty-one young women enrolled. Forty-one are enrolled in the Collegiate Course, seventy in the Academic Course (high school) and thirty-eight in the Primary Course (grammar school). The remaining two women are listed as Resident Graduates. Earlier in the Catalogue, Alumnae are listed with one graduate in 1850 and two in 1851. This indicates that the Female Department began offering college level courses shortly after being chartered in 1848. The copy of the Catalogue, provided by the Vaughan-Smitherman Museum, is missing two pages from the Male Department section. However, there is a listing of students enrolled in the Collegiate Course and the Classical Academic Course. There are only two men in the Collegiate Course and they are in the Freshmen Class. This suggests that the men’s college courses began several years after the school began operation.

The Academic Course has forty-five men enrolled. The school also offered a less rigorous English Academic Course for “young gentlemen who may not wish to go through with a regular College course.” A partial list of the third class (English Course) contains twelve students. From this scant information, the size of the English Course appears to be equal or even larger than the Classical Course. There is no information to suggest that the Male Department offered the Primary Course. Nonetheless, the catalogue contains the names of two hundred and seventeen students.²³

The future looked bright, and early in 1852 the name was changed to “Masonic University of the State of Alabama.” Unfortunately, the university was not a financial success and even before the tremendous disruption of the Civil War there were signs of failure. Court records detail the Institute being sued by the Camden



Republic newspaper for unpaid advertisements and the Grand Lodge found it necessary to sue the school's trustees in an effort to recover an overdue loan.²⁴

During the Civil War the building was converted to use as a hospital for Confederate soldiers and during reconstruction it served the medical needs of the Freeman's Bureau. The City of Selma purchased the structure and gave it to Dallas County to serve as the courthouse when the county seat was moved from Cahawba. It served this function from 1868 until a new courthouse was constructed in 1900. During the first years of the twentieth century the building again housed a school. This time it was a military high school operated by the Presbyterian Church. By 1911 it was again a hospital. For fifty years Vaughan Memorial Hospital would serve the citizens of Selma. Presently, the Vaughan-Smitherman Museum houses a collection of artifacts that describes the many changes witnessed by this building, town and state.

The stories of Masonic brotherhood in times of war excite the imagination and record acts of friendship and compassion that stand as tributes to the impact that the fraternity has on the lives of men who have taken their obligations to heart. Yet, stories of equal importance lay silent. Unknown to Masons and the nation is a story of men who devoted their energy and wealth to promote the education of America's men and women. The story of the Masonic colleges, academies, seminaries and institutes has been relegated to a few brief lines on roadside markers or a quaint factoid of isolated history of a repurposed building.

Across the southern states it was the fraternity of Freemasons that sought to provide non-sectarian education of "high grade" to the young men and women. The devastations of war destroyed the majority of these efforts, but nonetheless they stand as moments of Freemasonry's struggle against ignorance and superstition; a demonstration that these men valued the liberal arts and strove to build a better world.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

- 1 James D. Carter, *Education and Masonry in Texas to 1846*, Waco TX: Grand Lodge of Texas, 1963, and *Education and Masonry in Texas 1846 to 1861*, Waco TX: Grand Lodge of Texas, 1964, 596.
- 2 Sidney Kase, "Freemasonry and Public Education," *Short Talk Bulletin*, Nov 1990.
- 3 Cloyd J. Bumgardner, "The Educational Legacy of Somerset Lodge No. 111," *The Scottish Rite Journal*, March-April, 2010.
- 4 Edgar W. Knight, Ed. *A Documentary History of Education in the South Before 1860*, Vol. 5, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1949, 141-143, 340-349.

- 5 The four public universities that trace their origins to private schools are: Athens State University (private female school 1822 – United Methodist 1842), Auburn University (East Alabama Male College 1856 - Methodist Episcopal), University of North Alabama (Le Grange College 1830 - Methodist Episcopal), and University of West Alabama (Livingston Female Academy 1835 - Presbyterian).
- 6 Carter's *Education and Masonry in Texas* includes detailed studies of the Masonic membership of the founders of Texas schools yielded a strong Masonic influence in the creation of those schools. Similar studies in other states may produce similar results.
- 7 Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: higher education and student socialization in the antebellum South*, New York NY: New York University Press, 1994, 65; David Mathews, *Why Public Schools? Whose Public Schools? What Early Communities Have to Tell Us* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2003) 60-61.
- 8 "List of Colleges and Universities the have Closed, Merged or Changed their Names," accessed November 12, 2013, http://www2.westminster-mo.edu/wc_users/homepages/staff/brownr/ClosedCollegeIndex.htm.
- 9 This was a major topic of discussion among participants at the September 2013 Quarry Project, sponsored by The Masonic Society, Masonic Museum and Library Association and the George Washington Masonic National Memorial.
- 10 Joseph A. Jackson, *Masonry in Alabama: A Sesquicentennial History, 1821-1971*, Brown Printing; Montgomery, AL, 1970, 54.
- 11 Grand Lodge of Alabama, *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Alabama Annual Communication, December 1842*, M. D. J. Slade: Tuskaaloosa, AL, 1842, 12-16.
- 12 Other schools were started with the help of Masons but they do not appear to have operated as colleges. Examples include schools located at Daleville, Dayton, Glennville and Oak Bowery.
- 13 Ralph B. Draughon, Delos D. Hughes, and Ann B. Pearson, *Lost Auburn: A Village Remembered in Period Photographs*, Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2012, 48-49.
- 14 I. M. E. Blandin, *History of Higher Education of Women in the South Prior to 1860*, New York, NY: The Neale Publishing Co., 1909, 118. The lodge was named after the Creek village at Horseshoe Bend, moved and renamed Dudleyville and then renamed Dadeville when it returned to that location.
- 15 Blandin, 110-112.
- 16 Blandin, 77-79. <http://window.brenau.edu/articles/exceedingly-rare-brenau-at-135/>.
- 17 John Hardy, *Selma, Her Institutions and Her Men*, Selma, AL: Times Book and Job Office, 1879, 26.
- 18 Farnham, 56.
- 19 Hardy 34, 40.
- 20 *Acts Passed at the first biennial session of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama begun and held in the City of Montgomery on the first Monday in December, 1847*, Montgomery, AL: McCormick and Walshe, Printers, 1848, 61.
- 21 Grand Lodge of Alabama, *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of the State of Alabama Convened in the city of Montgomery, December, 1848*, Montgomery, AL: McCormick and Brittan Printers, 1849, 14.
- 22 *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama, 1848*, No. 13 (February 17, 1848).
- 23 *Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of the Central Masonic Institute*, Selma, AL: Reporter Print, 1851.
- 24 *Report of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Alabama, Vol. 35*, Montgomery, AL: Barrett, Wimbish & Co., 1860, 608-609; *Report of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Alabama, Vol. 36*, Montgomery, AL: Barrett, Wimbish & Co., 1861, 313-319.