

Fletcher Academy

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Fletcher Academy is a co-educational college preparatory high school. Although independently managed and operated by Fletcher Academy, Inc., the school is closely affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist church. Fletcher Academy, Inc. also owns and manages Captain Gilmer Christian School, Fletcher Park Inn, and the Lelia Patterson Center—a fitness and aquatics facility.

Developments That Led to Establishment of the School

In the decades after the American Civil War the Southern economy struggled. Farms had been destroyed, industrial production had been largely dismantled or destroyed, and what infrastructure that existed prior to the war had suffered during the war. Education in the Southern states lagged behind that of Northern states, and in the mountain regions of the Appalachians this was especially true. In 1895 and 1896, Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church leader Ellen G. White wrote a series of articles on the need to move into the South and to begin reaching Southerners. White implored Adventists to go South, not West, writing, “those who labor in the Southern field will meet with deplorable ignorance.”

By 1892, there were already workers at Graysville Academy, in East Tennessee, but it would be more than a decade before Adventist missionaries arrived in the mountains of Western North Carolina and could muster the resources to open a school. One of the those who did respond to that call was Graysville Academy teacher, Arthur Whitefield Spalding. In 1909, Spalding moved to Asheville and immediately set out to recruit several families who could homeschool their children and also operate a medical clinic. Spalding soon abandoned the homeschool concept, however, and began to search for land on which to build a school.² Spalding, also an author, spent time exploring the hills and hollows around Asheville gathering material for the books he was writing. In late 1909 or early 1910, Spalding was traveling in rural Henderson County, near Horseshoe and Naples, researching for a book he later published as *Men of the Mountains*, when he learned that a piece of land known as Byer Farm was for sale. The farm was only about a mile from the Naples post office. It was an old slave plantation that had belonged to a Confederate military officer. On the 416-acre tract were structures believed to be old slave quarters and a farmhouse that was built after emancipation but was, nonetheless, called “the Big

House," a term often used on slave plantations to refer to the slaveholder's residence. Spalding reported his find to the Asheville search committee, a group of his fellow church members who were already searching for land.³

By 1910, there were a small handful of Adventist secondary schools in the South.⁴ One of these was the Nashville Agricultural and Normal Institute, in Madison, just outside Nashville, Tennessee, which served as a model for many other newly forming church institutions in the South. The Madison philosophy was to operate as a legitimate business that could balance a budget while also engaging in mission work. Some missionaries were, "able to support themselves by their business, or labor, but they do little missionary work," one explanation of the school in Madison noted, then added, "There are others who do missionary work, but they do not earn their living with their own hands while doing this."⁵ Madison was attempting to do both. This Madison approach served as the model for Fletcher.

Spalding and the search committee in Asheville were not alone in their interest in building a school. A wealthy Adventist woman in Asheville named Mrs. Martha E. Rumbough had spoken with Ellen White in 1909 as White traveled through the South on her way to the General Conference session near Washington, District of Columbia. Rumbough had asked White, "What more can I do with my share of my family's wealth to further the cause of God locally?" White told her, "the Lord would be pleased if you would start a medical and educational work in the vicinity [of Asheville] ..." Rumbough committed to finding and purchasing a farm close to Asheville to open an Adventist school and sanitarium.⁶ Rumbough had already donated thousands of dollars to the Adventist cause in Asheville, funding a parsonage and, in 1907, a church for the black community.⁷

Rumbough decided to support the efforts for a new school in the Naples area, and in 1910 she spent \$5,750 to purchase the land Spalding had found, and then donated the land for a sanitarium and school.⁸ Due to the lack of existing schools, the Asheville area was the perfect location for an Adventist school. Transportation was slow in 1910, even though Madison and Nashville were only a few hundred miles away—today just over a four-hour drive by car— in 1911 one account of the trip from Nashville to Asheville reported that eighteen hours after departing Nashville the mountains finally came into view.⁹ With only the mountains in view this passenger may have been just halfway to Asheville.

Founding of the School and Sanitarium

Finally, in March 1910 the Naples Agricultural and Normal School was founded on the old Byer Farm. Ownership of the school was "like that of the Hillcrest [school for black students] and Madison schools, is vested in a board of trustees. To all intents and purposes, it is a gift forever to the work for which the institution is founded. The land, the buildings, the cattle and horses, and the farm tools and machinery, are the property of" the school.¹⁰ Organizationally, it was not possible to "alienate the property from the work to which it has been devoted."¹¹ The purpose of the school would be to conduct a "training school for Christian workers, in connection with a medical work, for the training of workers and the care of the sick."¹²

Shortly after acquiring the property in March, the A.W. Spalding and Sydney Brownsberger families moved into the “Big House”—later known as Rumbough Hall—and in April began teaching courses.¹³ Both A.W. Spalding and Sydney Brownsberger had taught in Battle Creek, and Brownsberger was also the first president of Battle Creek College (later Emmanuel Missionary College, and today Andrews University). Spalding was instrumental in developing the English department at Emmanuel Missionary College, and had taught at Graysville Academy in Eastern Tennessee. The Big House served as housing for faculty, as well as the dining hall, classrooms, and on Sabbath, the church. The house, built in 1885, was two stories with ten rooms and a basement.

Almost immediately Spalding began working in the local communities, attempting to spread the Seventh-day Adventist message. The land was perfectly situated to both reach the middle class farmers and Asheville residents in one direction, and in the other direction—toward Hickorynut Gap—“the dark corner” of Henderson County.¹⁴ The dark corner was filled with “the most needy class of the mountaineer, living in small windowless log cabins, and subsisting meagerly and wretchedly.”¹⁵ The farmer class, on the other hand, were “more progressive and prosperous.”¹⁶ In Asheville, not only were the higher economic classes found, but also the tourists.

In the “dark corner” of Henderson County, Spalding attended local Sunday Schools where he handed out Adventist literature and spoke to them after their Sunday services. The local people in these highland districts were mostly Baptist but responded, Spalding reported, “with vigorous nods and exclamations of these true principles.”¹⁷ They were largely without books and one visitor reported “passing through the woods and crossing little mountain streams” before finally arriving at a log church in a state of disrepair.¹⁸

Whether the first students came from the middle and upper classes of Asheville or from the poorer classes in the dark corner of Henderson County is not known.; however, the school seems to have initially attracted students with little or no education, including adult students. By November of 1910, the school enrolled ten students ages 18 to 28, six men and four women. The course of teacher’s training, or “normal work,” was intended to be two years, but because students had little education and required elementary studies, they remained “several years to become well fitted for Christian work.” Subsequently, the school administrators preferred “to get young people who have a fair education” so that Bible workers could be sent into the mission field more quickly.¹⁹

With the school open the founders began planning for a nurse training program; however, “the training of nurses, of course, must wait till we have a sanitarium, or at least a physician or competent nurse. But the training of teachers can be begun at once, and is now going on with the two or three advanced students we have.”²⁰ Spalding had scouted sites for a sanitarium and in 1911 wrote,

There are two excellent sanitarium sites on the place. One is about a mile north of the school, on a beautiful sloping ridge bordered by a second-growth oak and pine. Near by [sic] is a little spring... Another good site is nearer, in a beautiful grove of oaks on a gentle slope just across the road, southwest from the school.²¹

The region was also well-situated to open a sanitarium. Other sanitariums had opened in Asheville and its mountain climate had attracted wealthy families like the Vanderbilts, and tens of thousands of tourists every year as well. Although the 1910s was the era of the sanitorium (spelled with an “o,” from the Latin *sanare*), which worked primarily with tuberculosis patients, Adventist sanitariums (spelled with an “a,” from the Latin *sanitas*) were often primarily focused on better health.

In 1916 the Naples school opened a sanitarium, and in 1918 added six more rooms to the treatment center, which was initially built with only two treatment rooms. As with other Adventist sanitariums, Naples did not accept “tuberculosis, contagious, or insane cases.”²² They primarily focused on “patients suffering from the common chronic disturbances such as gastric and intestinal diseases, heart, blood and circulatory troubles, as well as acute cases requiring the services of skilled physicians and surgeons.”²³ Those treatments included using

natural remedies in combating disease, therefore, liberal use is made of nature’s great forces—fresh air, sunshine, pure mountain water, a simple well balanced dietary treatment and regulated exercise and rest. Battle Creek methods of treatment are employed—baths of all kinds, sprays, fomentations, hot and cold packs, massage and electrical treatments.²⁴

It was with the opening of the sanitarium that the name of the institution changed to Naples Rural School and Sanitarium. But the Naples school campus was not the only Adventist-managed ministry in the Asheville area, and the Naples school was apparently looking to expand its ministry.

History of the School, with Emphasis on Important Events and Periods

In 1920, The Good Health Cafeteria and its upstairs “Treatment Parlors” merged with Naples Rural School and Sanitarium. It was agreed that the headquarters for both groups would move to the Naples campus, but with that merger came another name change. On January 26, 1920, a certificate of incorporation was recorded in Henderson County for the Asheville Agricultural School and Mountain Sanitarium (AASMS), and “Naples” permanently disappeared from the name. The school would be of the same model as the Nashville Agricultural and Normal Institute in Madison, Tennessee, the purpose of which was “to train young men and women in agricultural and normal work to act as self-supporting teachers and missionary workers especially in neglected communities.”²⁵ With the name change came new management as well; Arthur Jasperson and Lelia Patterson were hired to manage the sanitarium.²⁶

Although the name had changed yet again, the primary change to the institution seems to have been the merger of the AASMS and The Good Health Cafeteria (later renamed The Good Health Place). The Good Health Cafeteria was located at 85 Patton Avenue in downtown Asheville and was the first and—its advertising claimed in 1921—the only cafeteria in the city. As advertised in 1921, the cafeteria had a “quiet location, prices are

moderate, the place is clean, using all white help, the service is best and quickest you can find—and the ‘eats’—Come and try them. It’s all ‘home cooking’ following the ‘Battle Creek Diet System.’” The treatment parlors were upstairs and offered a “full line of baths, hydrotherapy treatments, and Swedish massage.”²⁷

The racism displayed in this 1921 advertisement is extraordinarily and unapologetically frank. Although racism was undoubtedly more prevalent in the South than in other regions of the United States in 1921, it is also true that of the types of employment open to African-Americans in the South at this time, working as cooks and bakers was common. This meant that most southerners had eaten a meal prepared by non-white “help” if they had ever eaten a meal out. Whether this advertisement proved effective with the Good Health Cafeteria’s target market is not known, but it does not seem consistent with what church leader Ellen White was calling for when she wrote, “It will be necessary for the worker in the Southern field not only to have an appreciation of the physical wants of the colored people, but his heart must also be aglow with the love of God.”²⁸ Among the few studies on racism in the South among early Adventist institutions that have been undertaken, Kessia Reyne Bennett argued in 2011 that early Adventist missionaries—most of whom were not from the South—initially rejected the pressures of racism in the South. Yet over time they came to accept segregation, which “began as accommodation [and] was normalized and institutionalized. In effect, it became part of the Adventist culture in America.”²⁹ Further study of racism and segregation in the Seventh-day Adventist church, specifically in the South during the first half of the 20th century, is warranted.

Over the next few decades all institutions within the AASMS campus were considered a single corporate entity and the students at the school both trained and worked. Employment possibilities included the farm, the school bakery, laundry, or the “Mountain San,” as it was affectionately known. During this period there were important benchmarks, not least of which was the electrification of the campus during the 1920s.³⁰ In either 1929 or 1930, the Mountain Sanitarium officially opened a nursing school, which offered a three-year post-secondary course in nursing; one of the entrance requirements was a full twelve-grade education.³¹ Then, in 1931 the sanitarium opened a free clinic for the poor, requiring only a registration fee of twenty-five cents.³² In 1933 the first three-year class graduated from the sanitarium nursing school, and in 1934 the academy was awarded accreditation by the North Carolina State Board of Nursing Education. The first accredited class graduated.³³

The Mountain San continued to thrive, but as tuberculosis cases had all but disappeared by the end of the 1930s, the concept of both sanitarium and sanatoria began to decline. Most sanitarium and sanatoria in the United States had, by this time, either closed or converted to hospitals. In 1941 the Good Health Place treatment parlor rooms in downtown Asheville closed permanently, and another name change for the Asheville Agricultural School and Mountain Sanitarium was on the horizon as well.

By 1950 evidence of the Naples pioneer early struggles were disappearing—the empty expanse of land once farmed by slaves had been replaced by a church, a sanitarium, school buildings, a chapel, and a host of staff and students. The Brownsberger family had moved to Madison, Tennessee. Sydney Brownsberger’s replacement

was Marguerite M. Jaspersen, who served as principal from 1926 until 1952. In 1953 the Big House burned down.³⁴ The old guard—both the individuals and the buildings—were gone. Only Lelia V. Patterson, the director of the sanitarium for nearly forty years, remained. Patterson served as director until 1963, when she retired.³⁵

As a fully established and accredited K-12 school with an accredited post-secondary nursing program operating out of the sanitarium, the institution had long settled into its mission of healthcare and education. Although there were notable events along the way, much of the day-to-day business was unaffected. The institution changed its name to Mountain Sanitarium and Fletcher Academy in 1969, and then in 1976 the sanitarium was renamed Fletcher Hospital.³⁶

In 1984 the hospital and the school separated for the first time in the institution's history when Adventist Health System (now AdventHealth Hendersonville) purchased the hospital. The hospital closed the nursing program in 1985. For the first time in half a century, the school would no longer graduate nurses. Beginning in 1935, a class had graduated from the sanitarium in every year, except for one—1955. According to longtime former principal, Lewis E. Nestell, in his book, *The Fletcher Story*,

the classes increased in size, until in 1949 the number of graduates was an even dozen. The largest class ever was in 1970, when 23 students graduated. The last two classes included 11 in 1984 and 8 in 1985. The last class had a number equivalent to that of the first class enrolled in 1929. The total number of graduates was 547, in the 51 classes of the school's existence.³⁷

Sixty-two of these graduates were males, the first four of whom graduated in the 1940 class.³⁸ Today, AdventHealth Hendersonville has no nursing school at the Fletcher campus, yet it remains a teaching hospital and employs over 1,000 people.

Since the split with the hospital in 1984, Fletcher Academy has continued to thrive. Although many of the self-supporting “mini-Madison” institutions have since come under the control of their regional Seventh-day Adventist conference administration, Fletcher has remained self-supporting. Mount Pisgah Academy, for example, just a few miles from Fletcher, became a conference school in 1951. By maintaining enrollment, Fletcher has done what many other self-supporting academies have not been able to do.

In 1985, after Fletcher separated from the hospital, academy enrollment was 156.³⁹ In the next two decades enrollment was subject to the ebbs and flows of other market forces, but generally enrollment remained steady. In March of 2020, schools across the United States and around the world closed due to COVID-19. Fletcher Academy was no exception. Fletcher's instruction was taken completely online, and when the fall 2020 semester opened, academy enrollment was down due both to safety concerns as well as to COVID-19-related financial hardships. Although enrollment decreased by about ten to fifteen students, the academy opened in August 2020 with 164.⁴⁰ Supporting those students have been multiple industries over the last century. A lumber mill, a printing press, the sanitarium, a bakery, the farm, and many others. As of 2022, Fletcher Academy, Inc., includes

Fletcher Academy, Captain Gilmer Elementary School, Fletcher Park Inn—a nursing home across the street from the academy, and the Lelia Patterson Center—a fitness, aquatics, and wellness center open to the public. Until the late 2010s, the complex also included the Fletcher Valley Nature Foods store across from AdventHealth.

Fletcher Academy continues in its tradition of service. The academy takes regular mission trips;⁴¹ during which they build churches, work with children in orphanages, lead Vacation Bible Schools, and assist with dental clinics. The academy continues to employ students on campus. Among other places, Fletcher students work with the plant services department, they find jobs in the nursing home next to the campus, and in the Lelia Patterson fitness center. The philosophy which led the early pioneers to establish a self-sustaining business that could operate outside of official church management remains unchanged.

What Remains to be Done to Fulfill Mission of the School

The mission of Naples Agricultural and Normal School was originally focused on training Bible workers, teachers, and medical professionals. From its earliest days teachers and students evangelized to the community, trained teachers, and worked in the sanitarium. Much has changed over the last century; the neighboring community is no longer the “dark corner” A. W. Spalding found when canvassing the region, and the sanitarium and hospital are no longer operated by the academy. Yet the Lelia Patterson Health and Fitness Center provides continuity to that original mission, as does Fletcher Park Inn retirement community. More than a century later the campus and its technologies have changed, but the core of the mission has remained. In 2020, when asked about the continuing mission of the institution, Fletcher Academy Inc., president and CEO, Chris Carey, responded that, “Much is left to fulfill our mission as long as young people want to learn to be a transforming influence on the world as disciples of Christ. More than ever in this uncertain age, students are needed with ‘the highest standard of intellectual and moral culture.’ Fletcher is uniquely poised to continue doing that, hearkening back to our beginnings in 1910, with a vibrant community of self-supporting Adventist Christians... [working] in harmony to educate souls for Christ.”⁴²

Principals

Sidney Brownsberger (1910-1925), Marguerite M. Jaspersen (1925-1952), Lewis Nestell (1952-1969), Leland Zollinger (1969-1971), Gordon Brown (1971-1972), R. E. Schermerhorn (1972-1975), Jesse Cone (1975-1980), Craig S. Willis (1980-1982), Roy Dunn (1982-1985), Brent Yingling (1985-1989), Ray Hoffman (1989-1991), Spencer Hannah (1991-1994), Jon Smith (1994-1997), Chuck Workman (1997-2000), James Robertson (2000-2003), Randy Cox (2003-2005), Rob Gettys (2005-2008), Peter Cousins (2008-2009), Dale Twomley (2009-2012), Terry Pottle (2012-2015), Phil Wilhelm (2015-present).

Presidents of Fletcher Academy, Inc.

Sidney Brownsberger (1910-1920), Arthur A. Jasperson (1920-1952), Kent Griffin (1953-1958), C. G. Marquis (1958-1959), William Wilson (1959- 1963), A. C. Larson (1964-1966), Jack Williams (1966-1975), Herbert Coolidge (1975-1985), Roy Dunn (1985-1986), Van Camp (1986), Brent Yingling (1986-1989), Gerald Nash (1989-2004), Curt Watkins (2004-2008), Jon Smith (2008), Tim Tidwell (2008-2009), Peter Cousins (2009), Dale Twomley (2009-2014), Gary Carlson (2014-2020), Chris Cary (2020-present).

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White, W. C. "On the Way—No. 6, Our Visit to the Naples School." *Pacific Union Recorder*, March 1911.

NOTES

1. E. G. White, "Lift up Your Eyes and Look Upon the Field," *ARH*, January 1896, 1.
2. W. C. White, "On the Way – No. 5, Asheville and the Naples School," *Pacific Union Recorder*, March 1911, 1.
3. Arthur Gibbs, "Timeline of Fletcher Academy," Fletcher Academy Online Archives, accessed September 15, 2020, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1IW0GVw9qO3PAODh4rjqhQ_pQsmthwjTrWDAGs3Xwxxw/edit#gid=0.
4. Hillcrest School (for African Americans) opened in 1908, Graysville Academy opened in 1892, and Madison, Nashville Agricultural and Normal Institute in 1904. An institution was built in Hildebran, North Carolina, circa 1904, but burned down before it opened. See, W.C. White, "On the Way – No. 5."
5. Rose A. Newbiee, "Our Schools," *Southern Union Worker*, August 1911, 263.
6. "Mountain Memories: The Story of Mountain Sanitarium and Hospital School of Nursing," in *Mountain Memories: The Story of Mountain Sanitarium and Hospital School of Nursing* (Collegedale, Tennessee: The College Press, 1985), 8; Bethany Johnson, "A Brief History of Fletcher Academy," Fletcher Academy Online Archives, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1LoqTQ2yMx6LV4sVWuLt-n-xEuvTSpLx3>.
7. I. N. Martin, "Asheville Mission," *Field Tidings*, February 1910, 1-2.
8. W. C. White, "On the Way – No. 5, Asheville and the Naples School."

9. J. E. Hanson, "A Vacation Trip," *Youth Instructor*, January 1911, 3-4.
10. W. C. White, "On the Way – No. 6, Our Visit to the Naples School," *Pacific Union Recorder*, March 1911, 1-2.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. "A Brief History of Fletcher Academy."
14. A. W. Spalding, "Among the American Highlanders," *Lake Union Herald*, September 14, 1910, 2-3.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. "A Vacation Trip."
19. W. C. White, "On the Way – No. 5, Asheville and the Naples School."
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid. Today medical facilities are located on both locations.
22. *Mountain Memories: The Story of Mountain*, 10; "Who is Admitted" in *The Mountain Sanitarium and Hospital*, pamphlet, (n.p.: Carolina Press, n.d.), accessed September 22, 2020, <https://nursinghistory.appstate.edu/sites/nursinghistory.appstate.edu/files/Fletcher.pdf>.
23. "Who is Admitted."
24. "Treatment" in *The Mountain Sanitarium and Hospital*, Fletcher, N.C., pamphlet (n. p.: Carolina Press, n.d.), accessed September 22, 2020, <http://nursinghistory.appstate.edu/sites/nursinghistory.appstate.edu/files/Fletcher.pdf>.
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26. Lewis E. Nestell, *The Fletcher Story*, (Collegedale, TN: The College Press, 1997), 17-18, accessed September 22, 2020, https://www.fletcheracademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The_Fletcher_Story.pdf.

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28. E. G. White, "Lift up Your Eyes and Look Upon the Field," *ARH*, January 1896, 1.
29. Kessia Reyne Bennett, "Resistance and Accommodation to Racism Among Early Seventh-day Adventist Missionaries in the American South: a Case Study on Relating to Oppressive Cultural Practices in Missions," (M.Div. thesis, Andrews University, 2011). See also Dennis Pettibone's *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale, TN: Board of Trustees, Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992). Pettibone's book does not deal exclusively with the racial issue, but he does consider racism at an Adventist school in the South. For a treatment of Adventists and racism in later decades, see Samuel London's *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement*. (University Press of Mississippi, 2010). Also see Cleran Hollancid's "Seventh-Day Adventists and 'Race' Relations in the U.S.: The Case of Black-White Structural Segregation," (Ph.D. diss., Western Michigan University, 2016).
30. *Mountain Memories*, 13.
31. Pictures exist of the first class of nursing students to enroll, in 1929, yet an advertisement published in the publication *Field Tidings* in 1930 suggests that the nursing school had not yet opened and specifically noted that "plans for registering are being formulated." See, "School of Nursing," *Field Tidings*, April 23, 1930, 8. For photographs of the 1929 nursing class, see, *Mountain Memories*, 12.
32. "Reports Given at the Annual Meeting of the Asheville Agricultural School and Mountain Sanitarium, Fletcher, North Carolina," *Field Tidings*, March 25, 1931, 4.
33. Lelia V. Patterson, "Our Training School," *Fletcher Newsletter*, June 1934, 3, accessed September 11, 2020, http://www.fletcheracademy.com/alumni/newsletter/1934-06_Fletcher_Newsletter.pdf.
34. Sydney Brownsberger's son, John, returned to the school as a physician in 1929. <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1LqFUknFn5WqqGFqXE-gCdtqe-4BedcQZ> (restricted site).
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37. *The Fletcher Story*, 95.
38. Ibid.

39. Arthur Gibbs, email to the author, September 14, 2021.

40. Phil Wilhelm, email to the author, September 14, 2020.

41. Chris Carey, email to the author, September 14, 2020.

42. Ibid.

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