



Southern Adventist University

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Southern Adventist University is a Seventh-day Adventist coeducational liberal arts college offering sixty-four baccalaureate majors, seventeen associate majors, ten masters degrees, and one doctoral degree program. Its enrollment in the fall of 2018 was 2,942 undergraduate and graduate students.

## Graysville Academy

Southern Adventist University evolved from a tiny private one-room school located on the second floor of a general store in Graysville, Tennessee, the headquarters for the Adventist work in the South at that time.<sup>1</sup> The founder, George W. Colcord, had already established Milton Academy in Oregon, considered a forerunner of Walla Walla University. Colcord had come to Graysville at the invitation of Robert M. Kilgore, the leader of district 2, which was at that time the designation for what later became the Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Kilgore was anxious to establish an Adventist educational work in the South; but when Colcord arrived, he discovered that he was on his own. Undaunted, he set out establishing a private school using his own funds. Classes apparently began sometime in February 1892.<sup>2</sup>

By January 1893, enrollment had nearly tripled from the original twenty-three students, mostly in the elementary grades, to a total of sixty-two. Consequently, Colcord built a two-story building on nine acres of donated land.<sup>3</sup> Within a year, Graysville Academy became a boarding school.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the elementary and high school curricula, the academy offered an embryonic teacher training program.<sup>5</sup>

Enrollment continued to grow. During the 1894-1895 school year, Graysville Academy had 125 students. Then disaster struck in the form of Tennessee's harsh Sunday laws. Students were provided the opportunity to earn some of their school expenses through labor, and Sunday was the most convenient day to schedule paid labor. Faculty members worked with and supervised the student workers. In March 1895, three of the five faculty members, along with six other Graysville Adventists, were arrested, convicted, and jailed for Sunday law violations. With the majority of the faculty in jail, Graysville Academy had no choice but to end the school year earlier than planned. Consequently, enrollment dropped to seventy-five.<sup>6</sup>

## Southern Industrial School and Southern Training School

In the wake of this disaster, the General Conference accepted responsibility for the school. Taking control in September 1896, the General conference installed a completely new faculty, established new rules, and implemented a brand-new program.<sup>7</sup> Student work opportunities were expanded and the administration expressed its intention to teach students practical work skills. Consequently, in 1897 the school was renamed Southern Industrial School.<sup>8</sup> However, the following year a new principal, Charles Walter Irwin, drastically reoriented the school program, now focusing more specifically on quickly preparing laborers "in the cause of God for the salvation of souls." Although Irwin determined, "so far as possible" to have students "do all the work connected with the school,"—he expanded the school farm, started a canning business, and had students run a print shop —the administration began to realize that the school was unable to provide as much work as the students needed. In 1901, the school's name was changed again, this time to Southern Training School. In 1912, the board voted to add grades 13 and 14 (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year), making the school in effect a junior college.<sup>9</sup>

Southern Training School graduates were soon filling responsible positions in the denomination's workforce. By June 1914, seventy percent of its graduates were either denominational employees or in the process of furthering their education.<sup>10</sup> Among those graduates were Gentry George Lowry, missionary to India, and John Francis Wright, missionary to South Africa. Lowry eventually became president of the Southern Asian Division. Wright became president of the Southern African Division and then vice president of the General Conference.<sup>11</sup>

## The Move to Collegedale

The Graysville location was not conducive to the school's growth. Southern Training School needed room to expand if it was going to develop additional industries and have a more substantial agricultural program in order to provide sufficient employment for students to work their way through school. In addition, the location in town was beginning to cause discipline problems.<sup>12</sup> Moving had been discussed as early as 1912; by January 3, 1914, the majority of the board members favored such a move, but the Graysville Seventh-day Adventist church opposed the idea.<sup>13</sup> Matters were brought to a head on February 18, 1915, when the women's dormitory burned down. Fortunately, none of the residents lost their lives, although three were injured in trying to escape from the fire and nearly all of the girls' clothing was destroyed. The school temporarily dropped down to twelve grades while a locating committee searched for a new site.<sup>14</sup> They were looking for a secluded place suitable for agriculture, yet located near a railroad stop to facilitate students' travel and the shipment of the school's agricultural and manufacturing products. The committee chose Jim Thatcher's farm near Ooltewah, Tennessee, and decided to call the new community Collegedale.<sup>15</sup>

## Southern Junior College

Renamed Southern Junior College, the school opened at its new Collegedale location on October 18, 1916, with a greatly reduced enrollment. Nearly 200 students had been turned away due to the fact that Southern Junior College was trying to operate with the existing buildings, including the twelve-room Thatcher farmhouse, some rough abandoned workers' cabins, and the addition of some temporary tent-like structures. Classes began with only thirty-three students; by year's end there were fifty-seven.<sup>16</sup> A women's dormitory was erected in 1917, a men's dormitory followed in 1919, and an administration building was built in 1924. Also built during the early years were agricultural and industrial buildings, faculty cottages, and a "normal school" for teacher training. During the 1930s, additional industrial buildings and a new elementary school were constructed.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1920 and 1922, Southern Junior College began exploring the possibility of receiving junior college accreditation. The response was not encouraging. President Lynn Wood came to the conclusion that accreditation was an unwise idea and implied that it would be unnecessary if the students received all of their education at Seventh-day Adventist schools. But Henry James Klooster, who became president in 1927, disagreed and in 1928 he began campaigning for accreditation. By 1930, he secured secondary school

accreditation. Klooster then began sending some of the teachers to graduate school and taking other steps to qualify for junior college accreditation. He stated that "a considerable number" of Adventist students were going elsewhere because Southern Junior College was not accredited. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools turned Southern Junior College down twice before finally granting them junior college accreditation in 1936. By this time, Klooster was already pushing for senior college status.<sup>18</sup>

## Southern Missionary College

Although Klooster was unable to secure permission from the General Conference for Southern Junior College to become a senior college, Kenneth Wright succeeded in doing so in the spring of 1944. The college began offering grade 15 (3<sup>rd</sup> year) in the summer of 1944 and grade 16 (4<sup>th</sup> year) during the 1945-1946 school year. Meanwhile, its name was changed to Southern Missionary College. In May 1946, two men and four women receive the first baccalaureate degrees from Southern Missionary College. All six of them became denominational employees. One of the two male 1946 graduates was Joseph Crews, who later became the well-known speaker for the Amazing Facts radio and television ministry. A little over four years after its first baccalaureate graduation, on December 7, 1950, the Southern Association granted Southern Missionary College accreditation as a full four-year college.<sup>19</sup>

The March 1956 issue of *Reader's Digest* included an article about Southern Missionary College entitled "College with a Built in Pocketbook." It claimed that "more than 80 percent" of Southern's students earned "at least one fourth of their expenses, while 25 percent" worked "all their way."<sup>20</sup> Southern Missionary College had a plethora of industries in which students could earn their expenses, including a large diversified farm which included an orchard, an apiary, a poultry, and a dairy. Student labor was involved in all the construction and repairs of campus buildings. Other industries included the college press, a bakery, a wood products factory, a basket factory, a broom factory, a food factory, a hosiery mill, a commercial laundry, and a variety of retail businesses. However, changing tax laws and other economic circumstances led the college to begin privatizing its industries in 1974. The consistently unprofitable farm had already been shut down in the 1950s. By 1985, Southern Missionary College was operating only five commercial businesses: the college press, a grocery store, a bakery, the campus shop (which sold books and other student essentials), and—for a short time—a broom shop.<sup>21</sup> By this time, fewer students seemed interested in earning their way.

Despite a dip from 1947 to 1950, Southern Missionary College's enrollment was on an upward trajectory from 177 in 1944 to 2079 in 1980. Return of the GIs after World War II fueled an especially sharp increase in enrollment from 258 in 1945 to 503 in 1946. The increase in the student population was accompanied by the multiplication of campus buildings.<sup>22</sup>

## Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists

As early as 1972, the inspection team of the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges suggested that the word "missionary" in the school's name was misleading and "detrimental to the school's image" by suggesting it was just a "Bible college" rather than a liberal arts institution. The Southern Missionary College board debated the name off and on over the next decade before voting unanimously to adopt the name Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, which became the school's official name on July 1, 1982.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the school's enrollment was dropping precipitously, decreasing by 764 students over a six-year period.<sup>24</sup> Believing that the decline in enrollment was largely due to the perception that Southern was no longer teaching the old-time religion, President Donald Sahly promoted Southern's image as "the most traditional of Adventist colleges." While he was president, enrollment grew, budgets were balanced, and Southern recovered its reputation for standing by historic Adventist values and principles.

When Sahly assumed the presidency in 1986, Southern was in debt \$3 million, paying 6.8% interest. He made paying off the debt a priority. This took three years. He and Board Chairman Alfred C. McClure vowed not to ever let the college go into debt again on their watch. Nevertheless, Southern resumed the building program that had been suspended in the face of the earlier enrollment decline. The biggest construction project was a new science center, but it was built on the condition that the money would be acquired in a special fundraising campaign, that no funds would be borrowed, and that the project would be free of debt. Other projects included preserving and rebuilding Lynn Wood Hall, the former administration building, and renovating the cafeteria and both dormitories. In addition, overcrowded student housing conditions were relieved by the construction of an apartment complex called Southern Village.<sup>25</sup>

Jack McClarty led the fundraising campaign for Hickman Science Center, and also solicited funds for endowed scholarships and endowed chairs. His efforts resulted in a significant growth in student scholarship money.<sup>26</sup>

## Southern Adventist University

In 1986, during Sahly's administration, Southern changed its name once again, this time to Southern Adventist University. It began offering graduate programs, beginning with Masters degrees in education and religion.<sup>27</sup>

Gordon Bietz, Sahly's successor, was Southern's president for nineteen years, the longest tenure of any of the school's chief administrators. He "passed out nearly half of all the diplomas given since the founding of the school in Graysville." During his administration, enrollment continued to grow until 2012, when it peaked at 3319. Capital campaigns facilitated the construction of new buildings, including AdventHealth Hall (originally called Florida Hospital Hall), which housed the School of Nursing, and the Hulsey Wellness Center, as well as the renovation of numerous existing buildings. In addition, two apartment complexes were purchased in which to accommodate student.<sup>28</sup> Budgets remained healthy<sup>29</sup> while strategies were explored that would reduce the rate of tuition increases and to increase the level of financial help to needy students.<sup>30</sup>

New academic programs during the Bietz years ranged from the introduction of a construction management undergraduate major to a doctoral program in nursing practice. In addition, these years saw the establishment of the Lynn Wood Archaeological Museum, the Evangelism Resource Center, and a production center in the School of Visual Arts<sup>31</sup>

Ethnic diversity increased. When Bietz assumed office in 1997, eighty-one percent of the students were caucasian. In 2015, only 49.7% were Caucasian.<sup>32</sup> By the time he retired, Southern had been listed in the top tier category of the *U.S. News & World Report* "Best Colleges" list for fourteen years.<sup>33</sup>

Bietz frequently quoted Albert Meyer: "Education is a conversation between the older and younger generations on what is important." Of prime importance, according to Bietz, was that that Southern's campus be Christ-centered. He said in the Christian college "the Christian faith can touch the entire range of life and learning to which a liberal education exposes students," noting that the "exchanges of faith experiences are not the exclusive domain of religion classes but are part and parcel of the university experience." Declaring that "truth comes to us in community as we live in relationship to others. That means that the residential University experience is really vital for the transmission of community values."<sup>34</sup>

It was important to Bietz that the university remain distinctively Adventist and that Adventism be true to its roots. He said, "to the extent that the vision and mission of the SDA church merges with society of as a whole—to that same extent there will be a loss of interest in support of our educational system." Stating that "our roots grow deep in traditional Biblical interpretation and are nourished by commitment to Biblical truth," he said, "Let us never separate ourselves from these roots. This commitment to a distinctive SDA environment means we should be a counter-culture movement." He urged the university board "to remember our students come to this institution because of the reputation of our community culture" and cautioned against "inappropriately" disturbing the students' thinking.<sup>35</sup>

When Bietz retired, David Smith took up the mantle of presidential leadership for the University. He was expected to follow a similar philosophy to that articulated by Gordon Bietz. Meanwhile, construction continued with the building of the Bietz Center for Student Life.

Principals of Graysville Academy and Southern Industrial School: George W. Colcord, 1892-1896; W. T. Bland, 1896-1898; C. W. Irwin, 1898-1900; N. W. Lawrence, 1900-1901.

Principals of Southern Training School: J. E. Tenney, 1901-1908; M. B. Van Kirk, 1908-1912; C. L. Stone, 1912-1914; L. H. Wood, 1914-1915; A. Atteberry, 1915-1916.

Presidents of Southern Junior College: Leo Thiel, 1916-1918; L. H. Wood, 1918-1922; Leo Thiel, 1922-1925; H. H. Hamilton, 1925-January 1927; M. E. Cady, January 1927-May 20, 1927; H. J. Klooster, 1927-1937; J. C. Thompson, 1937-1942; D. E. Rebok, 1942-1943; K. A. Wright, 1943-1945.

Presidents of Southern Missionary College: K. A. Wright, 1945-1955; T. W. Walters, 1955-1958; C. N. Rees, 1958-1967; W. M. Schneider, 1967-1971; Frank Knittel, 1971-1983.

Presidents of Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists: John Wagner, 1983-1986; Donald Sahly, 1986-1996.

Presidents of Southern Adventist University: Donald Sahly, 1996-1997; Gordon Bietz, 1997-2016; David Smith, 2016-2021; Ken Shaw, 2021- .

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2. Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale, TN: Board of Trustees, Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 14-17.
3. Milton T Reiber, *Graysville—1888-1988: Battle Creek of the South* (Collegedale TN: The College Press, 1988), 7-8; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists," (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996).

4. Reiber, 9.
5. This consisted of completing the high school program and demonstrating one's competency for teaching  
"by conducting one class for ten weeks." Graysville Academy, *Announcement*, 1894-95, 2-3.
6. Reiber, 9-12; Pettibone, 19.
7. Reiber, 13-15; Pettibone, 19-20.
8. Reiber, 14.
9. Pettibone, 23, 25, 26, 30, 46.
10. *Ibid.*, 30.
11. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "Lowry, Gentry George;" *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "Wright, John Francis."
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists."
13. *Ibid.*; Reiber, 48; Southern Training School, Constituency Meeting Minutes, April 3, 1916.
14. Reiber, 53, 58.
15. Pettibone, 52, 53.
16. *Ibid.*, 56-59.
17. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists."
18. Pettibone, 70-73, 136-137.
19. *Ibid.*, 148-152, 156; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "Crews, Joseph Archie."
20. Cecil H. Coffey, "College with Built in Pocketbook," *Reader's Digest*, March 1956, 123-126.
21. Pettibone, 178-200.
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23. Pettibone, 288-290.
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25. Donald Sahly, email to Dennis Pettibone, January 1, 2020.
26. Author' s personal recollection; Donald Sahly, email to Dennis Pettibone, January 21, 2020.
27. Ibid.; Bob Young, email to Dennis Pettibone, January 1, 2020.
28. Ibid.; Southern Adventist University, President' s Report to Board of Trustees, May 15, 2016, 1
29. Steve Pawluk, Facebook Messenger note to Dennis Pettibone, January 8, 2020.
30. Presidents Report, 5-6, 9, 10.
31. Pawluk, loc. cit.; Young, loc. cit.
32. President's Report, 5-6.
33. Ibid., 6-7.
34. Ibid., 1-2, 8-9.
35. Ibid., 2, 7-9.

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