



Nile Union Academy

Photo courtesy of Nabil Mansour.

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Nile Union Academy (NUA) is a Seventh-day Adventist coeducational secondary day and boarding school. It is operated by the Egypt-Sudan Field (part of the current Middle East and North Africa Union) at Gabal Asfar, 10

miles (16 kilometers) northeast of Cairo, Egypt. NUA is accredited by the Board of Regents of the General Conference, and religious training is emphasized.

Early Beginnings

A forerunner of the school was the short-lived Arabic Union Training School. It operated for three years at Matariah, near Cairo, from 1927 to about 1930 and was directed by V. E. Toppenberg, with Ibrahim Khalil as a teacher.¹

In November of 1945, the Fayoum Training School began in Asyut, in rented quarters under the leadership of Habib Ghali. It was strictly a boarding school for boys only and covered grades 6-11. The purpose was to train workers to finish the work of the gospel.²

The school was transferred in 1946 to a large acreage near Seila, as the need arose for more space for the physical training of the students in addition to the mental and spiritual development.³ The campus, which was situated on a 65-acre (26-hectare) farm, was purchased partly with the life savings of an Armenian church member in Cairo. During the first year, while the administration building was under construction, the 25 students who attended lived in tents.⁴

Hoping to become self-sufficient as soon as possible, the administration put plans in motion to begin cultivation of the land, which at the time was being reclaimed from the desert. Under the direction of Fouad Guirguis, an irrigation system was installed and several thousand fruit trees—date, mango, lemon, tangerine, and olive trees—were planted that first year, along with a variety of vegetables.⁵

Robert L. Rowe was the first director of the school, and he continued to manage the farm when, in mid-1948, E. C. Wines was appointed principal. The school, while at Seila, was variously known as Fayoum Training School, Egypt Training School, and Egypt Academy.⁶

When it was decided to move the school closer to Cairo, a 33-acre (13-hectare) parcel of land was secured in the village of Gabal Asfar in 1952. Students attended secondary school in Heliopolis from 1953 to 1954 with J. S. Russell as headmaster while boarding facilities, an administration building, and four faculty cottages were built. An irrigation system and canals were also prepared to support an orchard and a vegetable garden. In October 1954 classes began at the new facilities under the directorship of Yacoub Nashed. There were 39 boys in attendance.⁷

First known as the Adventist Institute and then as the Nile Union Training School, the school was designated Nile Union Academy in 1955. It was operated by the Nile Union from 1951 to 1962, when the union was dissolved. The Egypt Section then took over the operation of the school.⁸

Some of the original faculty included Hanna Malaka (dean of men, chemistry and science teacher), Hanna Watson (math and academic dean), and Shehata Gindi (business manager, history and geography teacher).⁹

Hugh L. Cowles succeeded Nashed as principal in 1956 and spent the next few years developing the farm. When the government recognized the advanced agriculture program the school was following, it helped to divert the course of the canal to have it run just behind the school fence. This made it easier for the gigantic motor to pump water from it to irrigate the farm. Like the school in Seila, the farm also grew a variety of fruit trees in addition to a vegetable garden, and students worked there to earn their school fees.¹⁰ The orchard products were sold every year, supplying the school with enough funds to keep it running.

In addition to the farm, the school embarked on other projects to provide additional funding. Two large chicken-wire cages were purchased, and more than one hundred hens provided eggs for the school cafeteria. A Jersey bull and two heifers were also purchased to begin a dairy business. The cows were milked daily to supply the student cafeteria with fresh milk for breakfast. Several beehives produced enough honey for the cafeteria. The surplus from all these products was sold, which proved particularly helpful, as students coming from Upper Egypt were poor and could not pay their part of the fees.

Since the water that was pumped from under the ground was unsuitable in taste, the yard included a mule and a horse for the purpose of pulling the wagon to bring pure drinking water from a nearby village.

Principal Cowles supervised the bee program and taught students how to gather the honey without being stung. In 1958 agriculture, carpentry, welding, palming for dates, and electricity were added to the curriculum. Students helped to construct the beds, windows, doors, and cupboards for the boys' dorm, in addition to installing the electricity connections and the plumbing. Enrollment increased to 50 students that year!¹¹

In addition to farming and practical studies, Cowles began a music program, teaching students how to play the trumpet and trombone. Every Sabbath someone would accompany three students to the Heliopolis church or the Center Church and present a special musical item. Special music and yearly concerts were also performed at the school church.

The boys' dormitory was completed in 1959, and a new wing was added to the administration building in 1961, adding more classroom space for a potential intermediate school for girls.¹² New sidewalks made the campus look more attractive, and the addition of a telephone and "city electricity" helped solve many of the material problems.¹³

Increasing government regulation of the secondary school curriculum led to the adoption of a seminary-type program, and in the 1960's the school was renamed as the Coptic Adventist Theological Seminary. Later, in 1961, the name was shortened to the Adventist Theological Institute. It was recognized by the government and accredited by the Ministry of Education as a theological school.¹⁴

Challenges

Shehata Gindi succeeded Cowels in 1962 as principal. By the early 1970s, there were 12 staff members and only 36 students between the junior academy and higher secondary students.

There were several factors that contributed to making Adventist education in Egypt difficult. It was the law that the national language, Arabic, could only be taught by a Muslim, and that it must be offered to children whose parents did not want them to study another religion. In addition, only qualified teachers recognized by the government were allowed to teach all the other subjects. Because Middle East College did not offer a degree in education, no qualified Adventist teachers were being trained to teach these subjects. As a result, non-Adventist teachers were mainly employed to teach at the school.¹⁵

An additional challenge was that all of the official examinations required to be taken at the end of twelfth grade fell on Sabbath. From the beginning of its founding, efforts to obtain an exception from the Ministry of Education had so far failed. Because the certificate of completion of these examinations was a prerequisite for college or university entrance, both in Egypt and abroad, this posed a serious, ongoing problem for the graduates who wanted to enter higher education.¹⁶

Toward the end of 1970, the problem was once again presented in a meeting with the Minister of Education, and the matter this time was taken up with the Deputy Director General. A technical committee was sent to survey the academy in order to study the program and evaluate the school. The committee found the standard of education to be on par with other schools in the country. As a result, a decree was issued by the ministry authorizing the academy certificate to be equalized with the government certificate.¹⁷

This decision gave special accreditation that would also allow students to be treated as diploma holders, thereby allowing them to postpone their army duties, and spend only two years in the army instead of three.

In 1985, however, due to a conflict the Ministry of Education had with a school staff member, the ministry suddenly denied all privileges and took away the certification. The school lost government recognition as a theological seminary in 1986 and tried in vain until 1994 to regain it. After 1986 the school became known as Nile Union Academy.¹⁸

In 1987 Monroe Morford succeeded Albert Anderson as principal. Looking for other ways to remedy the situation, he approached the British Council in Egypt to see if they could get certification to teach the British IGCSE. This was granted, and the school was recognized by Cambridge University in the UK. In 1988 the school became a center for teaching the IGCSE curriculum. This was in addition to being accredited by the Adventist Board of Education.¹⁹

Special teachers were hired, and the enrollment increased dramatically for a period of time. In 1989 Latif Radi Khillla succeeded Morford as principal and carried on supervision of the program. Unfortunately, in 2000 the Egyptian government introduced some obstacles that hindered the continuation of this promising program. As a result, the enrollment dropped quickly, as students felt they were being deceived.²⁰

A girls' dormitory, which was designed by engineer Nasr from Gabal Asfar, was completed in 1989.²¹ The building was able to accommodate 25 students in five rooms and housed the girls' dean's apartment, a storeroom, office, showers, guestrooms, and a chapel.²² The dean of women was Fawziah Ghali, whose husband was Samaan Ghali, the business manager. Rida Abdel Messieh replaced Fawziah.

Growth

Throughout the 1990s, due to a lack of stability in administration and lack of qualified Adventist teachers, the Egypt Field feared it would have to close NUA. In 1998 a closure announcement was made, but it was later canceled due to locating a new overseas principal from Canada. Dwight Rose and his wife Dona (ESL teacher) arrived for the 1999-2000 school year. No one was happier than Mamdouh Kalliny, the treasurer, who had also been filling in as principal.²³

The 1999-2000 school year opened with 31 students and five Adventist teachers, including Ashraf Fawzy, Ehab William, and Hilda Malaka (student missionary). After that NUA grew each year until both dormitories were full, in addition to the many day students who traveled to and from Cairo every school day. Most of the day students were Sudanese who had fled to Egypt because of the unrest in South Sudan.

A year later the curriculum was strengthened when Zaher Adly, a qualified Adventist Egyptian science teacher, joined the staff. Monroe and Francis Morford, who had formerly taught at the school, returned to take up teaching duties, and Nada Malaka also joined the staff as treasurer and registrar.

In addition to the national staff members, student missionaries came from abroad, postponing their college programs for a year in order to teach at NUA. Some years there were as many as seven student missionaries.

As mentioned earlier, the NUA campus is located in the middle of 33 acres of orchard and farmland that is directed by a farm manager. Each afternoon the maintenance director and the farm manager would organize the students into groups of 4-6 workers to help with maintenance and farm work. Azer Girgis served many years as farm manager and was succeeded by Messiha Rizk.

Until 2002 NUA did not have a name sign at the front gate. That year engineer Nasr designed an entirely new front entrance with curved walls and attractive signs in both Arabic and English.

The orchard at NUA is irrigated from three wells with an abundant source of water that is distributed throughout the orchard by flood irrigation. When Mike Fisher arrived in 2002 to serve as maintenance director, he took on the mammoth project of installing sprinkler irrigation in the large fields used to grow grain and vegetables. Students were utilized to dig the channels for the underground piping. When the project was completed, everyone came out to watch as the system was turned on for the first time. As water quickly filled each section of pipes, the sprinklers suddenly began to spray, and the entire field came alive with water. It was a sight to behold!

In 2004 Samir and Tanya Berbawy came to Egypt to help the Adventist school system. Samir served as principal of Zeitoun Adventist School in Cairo and Tanya brought her expertise to NUA, serving as treasurer and registrar. In 2008 Ron Miller joined the staff as a math teacher and maintenance director. His wife, Peggy, a qualified nurse practitioner, served as teacher and campus doctor.

The school struggled with financial difficulties because many students could not afford to pay all their school fees. Some Egyptians came from needy families in Upper Egypt, and most of the Sudanese living in Cairo had left Sudan to escape the civil war and did not have enough funds to care for their tuition. But the school had to insist that fees be paid in full, otherwise debt would quickly accumulate and would eventually force the school to close. This problem seemed unsolvable.

But with God, all things are possible. One of the churches in Canada adopted NUA as its mission project and began to give regular donations to support it. The funds were deposited in a special bank account that could be accessed in Egypt through an ATM machine. Like the widow's jar of oil that never failed in the days of Elijah the prophet, that ATM machine never failed to supply money when there was a need. For several years this project provided the funds needed to supplement the partial fees paid by needy families. Because of this gift, a great many students were able to remain in the school and eventually graduate.

In a boarding school, good food is essential. NUA was fortunate to have excellent, experienced cooks. Taffeda Beshai and Faiza Aziz served for many years and were followed by Warda Boutros, Nadia Malak, Rusha Zaki, and Renee Maher.

When the Academy was built, only the front wall facing Khanka Road (the north side) was built of bricks. All other walls were made of mud. By 2004 several sections of the mud walls had seriously disintegrated or had fallen down completely. When a donor offered to finance the project, a new 12-foot high (3.5 meters) brick fence was built on the west, south, and east sides of the school, which greatly improved NUA security.

Military service is mandatory for boys in Egypt, but if one graduated from a government-approved school, their period of service could be reduced from three years to one year, and they could enter Egyptian universities.

In 2005 the Egypt Field decided once again to pursue local accreditation for NUA with the Egyptian Ministry of Education. However, due to a variety of missional reasons and being that the school did not follow the Egyptian curriculum that did not allow for Bible classes, approval was once again refused and negotiations were terminated. After that arrangements were made with Middle East University in Beirut, Lebanon, to accept all NUA students who were able to qualify by passing the MEU entrance exam. Currently (as of 2020), many NUA graduates go to MEU for their college training.

In order to provide practical skills that students could use in the village, application was made for NUA to receive part of a Thirteenth Sabbath offering from the world church to build an Industrial Arts Center. Again, architect Nasr from Gabal Asfar helped to make this plan a reality. In 2008 he designed and built the complex that

provided large classrooms with high ceilings for teaching carpentry, electricity, welding, metal work, brick laying, et cetera.

Attendance at this time had reached about one hundred forty students (88 in the boys' dorm, 36 in the girls' dorm, and the rest were day students from Cairo). Ashraf Fawzy, Isaac Malak, and Girgis Malak served as deans of men, and Manal Sobhy, Saidiya Malaka, and Janet Habib served as deans of women. Students attended classes in the morning, worked in the orchard or around the campus in the afternoon, and studied in the evening.

Friday evenings were a special delight. The Friday vespers program was attended by all, and even attracted some visitors from Cairo. Praise teams were organized to lead out using English and Arabic songs and choruses. It became popular for praise team members to make comments on each song, often telling how the words related to their own experience. This also gave the ESL students a chance to practice and demonstrate their new English skills.

Egyptians love to participate in plays and to create their own drama presentations. Instead of sermons being preached, vespers often consisted of a story acted out by the students. These plays were favorites with the young and old alike. Finally, when vespers finished, the socializing would start and last for an hour or more. Friday evenings were a highlight that everyone looked forward to.

Another highlight that many enjoyed was graduation weekend. The church was beautifully decorated and a special worship service was planned involving the graduates. It was especially meaningful for those who had decided to be baptized. At the end of the Sabbath morning service and before partaking of a specially prepared noonday meal, everyone would make their way to the swimming pool. With everyone gathered around, throwing flower blossoms into the water, each candidate would be baptized and welcomed into the church family.

The graduation service itself was an outdoor event, held on Sunday evening when the heat of the day was past. A colorful stage was erected on the lawn in front of the boys' dorm, and later near the girls' dorm. The grads would proudly march from the church, through the crowd, to the front to receive their diplomas. Many relatives and friends, usually numbering 300-450, would be in attendance. It was a happy time, filled with memories.

As soon as graduation was over and the school was officially closed for the summer, camp meeting would take place at NUA. From all over Egypt families would come and camp out in the dormitories and classrooms. The meetings were held in a large covered area on the lawn in front of the boys' dorm.

In the fall of 2009, NUA started to bake its own bread. A small bakery was established, and Adel Isaac was trained as the baker. At first arrangements were made with the government to obtain low-cost allotments of flour, but later this privilege was lost. The bakery was able to continue, but it had to obtain its flour privately at a much greater cost.

In 2010 principal Tom Decker redesigned the center of the campus, including the Circle, to provide new walkways, seating for groups, a number of beautiful, tall palm trees, and a new fountain. The appearance of the campus was greatly enhanced!²⁴

With several small children among the families on campus, there was a need for a pre-school program. In 2013 Eriny Girgis began a small school for faculty children, which now has children from the community, as well. In 2019 30 children were enrolled, with many more on a waiting list.²⁵

Several missionary families from Brazil arrived at NUA in 2015, anxious to make a contribution to the work of the school. They not only had energy and hard work to offer, but financial resources, as well. They installed artificial turf on the football field to alleviate the dust conditions during games. They also built three much-needed new classrooms. Finally they built a small gymnasium for weight-lifting. Their help throughout the years has been immeasurable!²⁶

Continuing Challenges

NUA is not presently recognized by the Egyptian Ministry of Education. As long as this is the case, the school will not be recognized by the Egyptian government, and Egyptian graduates will not be granted army exemption. Therefore, the NUA board is now looking into the advantages of seeking accreditation as an international school. Recognition as an international school would allow NUA to retain its present curriculum (the American system) and have control over the choice of its teaching staff. It would also be able to maintain its Christian atmosphere, and its distinctive Adventist standards and practices, while at the same time being fully recognized by the government. The school is currently accredited by AAA (Adventist Accrediting Association) and it has been previously accredited by MSA (Middle States Association). The school is working with AAA to renew the MSA accreditation during the next accreditation review in 2021.²⁷

As we look back over the years since Nile Union Academy's humble beginnings in 1954, we can see that God's hand has been over this school. Hundreds of young people have walked its halls, studied in its classrooms, have found or strengthened their faith, and have come forth to serve God in their community and around the world.

Principals

Principals: Robert L. Rowe, 1946-1948; E. C. Wines, 1948, 1949; Yacoub Nashed, 1949-1951; Chafic Ogali, 1951-1953; J. S. Russell, 1953, 1954; Yacoub Nashed, 1954, 1955; L. H. Cowles, 1955-1961; Shehata Guindi, 1961-1978; Jim Neergaard, 1979; Jack Mentges, 1980-1986; Albert Anderson, 1986, 1987; Monroe Morford, 1987-1989; Latif Radi Khilla, 1990, 1991; Gary Ver Steeg, 1992-1993; Timothy Scott, 1994, 1995; Monroe Morford, 1995, 1996; Michael Munsey, 1996-1998; Dwight Rose, 1999-2009; Tom Decker, 2009-2013; Richard Doss, 2013-2017; Damon Gilliam, 2017, 2018; Lowell Jenks, 2018-Present.

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NOTES

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