

AN INTERVIEW WITH MISS FRANCES S. JENNINGS FORMER DEAN, ARLINGTON HALL JUNIOR COLLEGE*

In 1942 Arlington Hall Junior College closed its doors after an existence of just fifteen years. In February, 1978, Mr. James Gilbert conducted an interview, in the form of a written questionnaire, with Miss Frances S. Jennings, former Dean, Arlington Hall Junior College.

As Arlington County considers and evaluates possible uses of portions of this property, we feel it is of interest to look back on the history of the Arlington Hall tract and its days as a private junior college for young ladies.

Background and Establishment of the College

Q. Give a brief biographical sketch of yourself, listing positions and dates held with Arlington Hall College. What were the circumstances leading to your first becoming involved with the college?

A. Miss Frances S. Jennings, a native of Cynthiana, Kentucky in the central part of the Blue Grass State; attended the University of Kentucky, receiving the A.B. degree in 1925 with a major in romance languages; M.A. degree in sociology in 1926; selected as one of the charter members of the University of Kentucky chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. I then taught at Sullins College, a private junior college for girls in Bristol, Virginia for one year, 1926-27. In the spring of 1926, the President of Sullins, Dr. William E. Martin, invited me and three other members of the faculty to form the nucleus of a faculty to pioneer with him in establishing a similar junior college in Arlington, Virginia. This was currently under construction on 100 acres of land he owned about four miles from Washington, DC just off Glebe Road beyond Fort Myer. I had been aware that during the spring semester he, with proper chaperones, had taken a bus-load of students on a two-week trip for the purpose of sightseeing in the nation's capital — “an enrichment of educational opportunities in their particular fields of interest” (a catalog quote). The students wrote papers for college credit on lectures given, concerts attended, art galleries visited, etc. They had lodging and two meals a day in the two cottages which remain in the front of the campus. This was known as “The Washington Seminar.”

Q. What was the background and purpose of establishing the college? Who was instrumental in its founding? How was the land obtained?

A. Dr. Martin, with his family and his wife's connections with the Baskervills of Vanderbilt University, was an industrious, ambitious, resourceful man of a likeable and engaging personality. He had made Sullins into one of the leading private junior colleges of the south. Adjacent to the college

he had developed a summer camp with a stable of horses, and various girls' sports, an indirect "feeder" to create interest in attending Sullins. So, he saw an opportunity for establishing a sister college with Washington advantages on the land he had bought in Arlington County. It was all woodland; the only villages nearby were Ballston and Clarendon. An interurban street-car, running to Falls Church was the only means of public transportation.

The original tract of land was only a few acres on which the two identical cottages were built. A cousin's family, the Luther Martins, lived in one; the other housed the student group. It was in the cottages that the faculty of Arlington Hall and some students had to live at the opening of the college in 1927.

Note: More details relative to the clearing of the woods, the construction of the main building, the difficulties encountered, can be obtained from Mr. Wendall Logan, a valued trusted black man who came from Bristol with others and helped in the various stages of construction. Wendall remained with the college in a very trusted position the entire fifteen years, and now lives in Arlington at 2500 South Kenwood Street. He was one of the staff retained by the Army when the government took over.

Growth and Expansion

Q. Describe the growth and expansion of the college, its buildings, faculty, and student body.

A. The date for the opening of Arlington Hall had to be postponed several times., It finally was set for the latter part of September 1927, due to delays in construction details of the main building, even after we, the faculty, had been advised to report. We and some students were housed and fed in the cottages for the first week. Even then, there were necessary conveniences for which we had to return to the cottages for the next several days. Nothing was actually "finished" for weeks and weeks as we climbed over dirt, dust, mud, and plaster. The first meal we ate in an improvised dining room in the basement was on a Thursday night. (Usually at Sullins this was a "formal" night, when formal dress was required.) I recall our amazement on seeing the Head Mistress literally picking her way down the wooden plank steps in a long red formal dress and silver slippers. She was setting the tone of formality which henceforth would characterize the Thursday night dinners at Arlington Hall.

At first there was only the Main Building — in fact, we did not have the East Wing for another year and then the two buildings were connected only through the basement and first floor. The chapel and library were also added later, and the foyers on first and second floors connecting Main and East

Wing still later in 1933 or 1934. The gymnasium and swimming pool were built about the time of the East Wing. The riding arena was not built until about 1939 or 1940, as was the Chatterbox. This was a large one-room log cabin with kitchen and front porch, a tea house in the woods, with a path leading from the right of the gym. This was a popular after class retreat for the students in the afternoon and frequently in the evening for private birthday parties. Tennis courts, bridle paths, and hunt courses were added in due time.

Some of the first students were attracted from Sullins, a few from Arlington County, and the remainder from the east as far as New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, with a few from the south and midwest. In the spring of that first year, Dr. Martin began bringing successive bus-loads from Sullins for the Washington Seminar. (We, the faculty, had to change and add to our teaching schedule with each new group who came, for the visiting students were told they would continue their classes in the morning and go sightseeing in the afternoon. What adjustments, what complications! Now we know why the young faculty members from Sullins were selected "to pioneer!") Inevitably out of each group, several, perhaps two or four, would decide to transfer to Arlington Hall, so by the end of the year our student body grew from the original 35 to 50 or so. And thereafter, a similar transference would take place.

Faculty and Governing Body

I have mentioned the original faculty members who came from Sullins College. There were two more from the Music Department — Madame Vicarino for voice, and Miksa Merson for piano — both outstanding who attracted those especially interested in these fields. The academic Dean, Miss Carrie Sutherlin, M.A. in English from Farmville, Virginia brought with her several former graduates from the Farmville College (now Longwood College). Another college from which the Dean drew faculty was Randolph-Macon, Lynchburg. These were the members for the first several years and then later we drew from George Washington University, The American University, and the University of Maryland, depending upon the vacancies in the departments and the need for expansion.

Q. By what type of governing body was the college administered? Did this ever change?

A. Governing Body: President W.E. Martin, Ph.D.

Vanderbilt University, 1927-32

Academic Dean —

Miss Carrie Sutherlin, M.A.

Columbia University, 1927-32

- Math Teacher — Mrs. Mary Baskervill, A.B.
Randolph-Macon, 1929-34(?)
- Acting Head Mistress and
French & Sociology — Miss Frances S. Jennings, M.A.
University of Kentucky, 1929-30
- Head Mistress — Mrs. Janie Baskervill, 1930-32
(Mrs. Martin's mother)
- Change in Governing Body, 1932-42:
- Board of Directors: Mr. Sam Carter, Banker & Financier,
(Trustees) Bristol, Va.
Mr. George Warfield, Banker,
Alexandria, Va.
Mr. Gardner L. Boothe, Lawyer,
Alexandria, Va.
Mr. Donald T. Stant, Lawyer,
Bristol, Va.
- Executive Committee: Dr. Harold G. Sutton, Dean
of Admissions, George Washington University,
Washington, D.C.
Dr. William R. Smithy, Dean,
University of Virginia,
Charlottesville, Virginia
Dr. Joseph L. Jarman, President,
Farmville, Teachers College,
Farmville, Virginia
Mr. T. Lee Hayworth, Comptroller,
Bristol, Virginia
- Change in College Administration:
- President — Miss Carrie Sutherlin, M.A. 1932-1942
Dean — Miss Frances S. Jennings, M.S. 1932-1942
Registrar — Mrs. Mary H. Baskervill, A.B. 1932-1936
Registrar — Mrs. Evelyn Magee, A.B. 1936-1942
Comptroller-Treasurer-Business Manager — T. Lee Hayworth 1932-1942

The Great Depression

The Great Depression of 1927-1932 took its toll. Dr. Martin was sacrificing his holdings in Bristol, including Sullins College properties for the sake of Arlington Hall, in an attempt to pay salaries, maintenance expenses, and additional construction at Arlington Hall. The faculty were not paid salaries (only room and board) after the first month of 1931. Many creditors and finally the banks in Bristol and Alexandria brought pressure and finally bankruptcy proceedings against Dr. Martin. Immediately after the end of the school year 1932, Arlington Hall was closed and Dr. Martin returned

to Sullins College, continuing as president of Sullins for the time being. The court appointed a receiver, Mr. L.T. Hayworth, representing the banks and other creditors, including the faculty. During the summer, the location, the physical plant, the academic promise and progress of Arlington Hall and its possibility as a continuing junior college for girls were evaluated. A Board of Directors was formed, a number of the faculty agreed to return, notice was sent to parents of the students. Miss Sutherlin was invited to become president and I was to become dean, and we began plans in earnest to continue Arlington Hall.

Q. How was the school publicized and students recruited? What were the criteria for admittance?

A. The majority of the students, excepting the Graduating Class of 1932, returned. An intensive recruitment program began via letters to principals of high schools, advertisement in selected magazines in the College Directory section, use of college personnel to supplement the personnel representatives previously employed to interview students, and the addition of another representative in the New England and New York area. By September 1932 we had sufficient number to open and to begin a program worthy of our efforts. (I don't recall the size of the enrollment, but it increased year by year until the maximum was attained — 300 including day students.)

Criteria for Admittance: The upper ten percent of the high school graduating class with reservations due to special skills exhibited or particular achievements in special talents of art, drama, and music. Also, students who had other special interests such as home economics, secretarial training, physical education. Personal interviews were required and recommendations from the high school principal and a teacher, and a character reference.

Q. Describe the buildings, location of classrooms, offices, and dormitories. If possible, describe the campus and its buildings in relation to the present post. When was the pond in existence?

A. Buildings: The classrooms were on the first floor front of the East Wing. Science labs, home economics, etc. were on the basement floor of the Main Building. Art studio and music studios were in and adjacent to the chapel on the first floor west. Physical education classes were in the gym. Riding was in the arena.

Offices: President: Suite near Chapel

Dean: Suite beyond Red Parlor on south side of Main Building

Business Office: Basement floor near north entrance

Registrar Office: First floor Main adjacent to northeast drawing room.

Library: Beyond chapel, south side.

Dormitories: Second and third floors Main and East Wing. Suites of two bed rooms with connecting bath for each. Private room and bath on each floor dormitory staff — a middle-aged lady know as Resident Assistant, Chaperone, or Hostess on each floor.

Dining Room: Large front room on lower floor of East Wing; also used for college dances and other social functions.

Tea Room: Built from native logs from the campus; informal recreation center, built about 1938

Pond: Originally, 1927 to about 1930, was in the swamp on the lowest side of the north campus, between the cottages and the Main Building. It was fed by a narrow wet weather stream from the opposite side of the path and thus was unsightly most of the time. Therefore, it was filled in and became the setting for the annual May Day pageants which also were the occasion for The Parents' Weekends.

Q. What was the level of academic standing of the college and its students? Where did most of the girls go after graduation? Careers? Further education? Was the turnover rate high or did most of the girls remain at the school for more than one year?

A. Academic Standing: The accrediting organization for all colleges in Virginia and other southern states is The Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. A college must prove its standing by various measures, most important being the ratings of its faculty, and the academic achievements of its students. In the case of a two-year college (junior college) this criteria is the academic record of the students in the junior college and the academic record the graduates of said college have made upon transferring to a senior college. For the first several years, very few Arlington Hall students requested transfer to senior colleges. This fact plus the financial situation of Arlington Hall during the period 1927-32 made acceptance with credit of Arlington Hall students difficult. In some instances, the student was accepted ad given provisional credits if her Arlington Hall record and recommendations were sufficiently high. One other assistance was the letter of recommendation from one of our academic members of the Board (The Executive Committee) — either Dr. Sutton or Dr. Smithey. In time, however, acceptance with credit was more frequent. We had been given tentative assurance our application for recognition and accreditation would be favorably received and approved at the annual meeting of the Association in 1942, the very year our school was forced to close.

Careers: Keep in mind that only those students completing the secretarial course were in a position to obtain positions of any career status. For several years following our reorganization, it was difficult for our students to receive transfer credit at senior colleges. For those who did, we made attempts to follow their progress, but this was not very successful until our Arlington

Hall Alumnae Association was organized in 1940. We found elementary teacher, music teacher, social welfare worker, physical education, and journalism were the careers most frequently listed.

Turnover Rate: Following 1932, the majority returned for the second or senior year.

Q. Who were some of the outstanding personalities of the campus — faculty and student body?

A. In retrospect these appear to have been in the special fields: Madame Regina Vicarino, a coloratura opera singer, retired from active performance, who taught voice, conducted the Glee Club, and gave most fascinating concerts and chapel talks on campus; Madame Blanca Renard from Brazil, an accomplished pianist, gave a concert in Carnegie Hall, attended by practically the entire student body; Max Merson, another pianist equally superb, gave several private concerts in Washington. Other outstanding professors were Dr. Helen Creighton, Economics and Mathematics; Dr. Frances Drown, English, Head of the English Department who later received a Ph.D. degree from Boston University and became Academic Dean at Farmville College, Virginia; Dr. Hazel Ramsey, Head of the History and Social Science Department.

Students: We made no distinction in backgrounds or parental status, although there were daughters of Army and Navy personnel, the granddaughter of Vice President Garner, daughters of Congressmen and state legislators, or professionals and academicians.

Q. Did any of the faculty or students make outstanding contributions in professional fields after leaving Arlington Hall?

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| A. Carrie Sutherlin — | President, Chevy Chase Junior College,
Washington, D.C. |
| Frances S. Jennings — | Dean of Women, Transylvania University, Lexington,
Kentucky, 1943-50
Dean of Students, 1950-67
Honorary Ph.D. granted upon retirement |
| Frances R. Brown — | Ph.D. degree, Boston University
Academic Dean, Farmville College, Virginia |
| Mr. & Mrs. Harry Brown — | Owners and directors of Brown Ledge Camp in Vermont
(At Arlington Hall, Mr. Brown was a teacher; Mrs.
Brown was an assistant in the Residence Department). |

Q. Describe some of the highlights of the school year.

- A. 1. Orientation of new students — first week by selected student leaders.

2. Formal Thursday evening dinners followed by student, faculty, or visitor recitals of dramatic performances.
3. Sunday Vesper Services by Dr. Peter Marshall, minister of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, when available.
4. Christmas Banquet with Board members, their wives, and other important guests. Dinner was followed by distribution of gifts to each member of maintenance, kitchen, dining room staffs as each was called in and applauded.
5. Formal dances in dining room converted and decorated as a ball-room — fall, winter, and spring.
6. Parents' Weekend in spring; May Day Pageant.
7. Winter Horse Show (indoor arena) followed by buffet.
8. Spring Horse Show (indoor and outdoor arenas) followed by picnic buffet. Participation by advanced riders in Fort Myer horse shows.
9. Alphabet Teas — open fire in Red Parlor — January (Homesick Month) by Dean Jennings (hot biscuits and ham served).
10. Concerts and plays in Washington.
11. Annapolis and West Point dances for those receiving invitations.

Problems

Q. What were some of the problems faced by an administrator?

A. Living on campus, long hours, esprit de corps, occasional conflict of faculty-student relationship. These required discipline according to "the rule" when counseling could have had more lasting effect.

Q. Did the college face financial problems at its closure? What were the causes?

A. There were no financial problems once the bankruptcy proceedings and aftermath were over. The comptroller worked well with the Board of Directors, the academic administration, the faculty, and the students. He was an excellent, careful business head. Plans were being made to make it one of the best private junior colleges for girls in the area — academically and physically. The financial debt (mortgage) was being amortized even with annual improvements in the physical plant, annual faculty salaries raised to standards, departments strengthened. Long range planning was in the initial stage of eventually handing the entire operation over to the alumnae with responsible co-administration first, followed by complete administration gradually.

The causes of the closure were World War II and the corresponding need

for a "Center for The Intelligence Corps" with sufficient acreage for expansion. When purchase was denied by our Board, the government knew it could take the property by condemnation. This it did, paying only the remainder of the mortgage — \$600,000 — for the "ideal location" near the Pentagon, at a time when there was the whole of Arlington County to be developed. It was a terrific sacrifice, with only one consolation — it was a most strategic link in the winning of the war.

Q. What characterized the transition period before the government took over?

A. Many felt we should relocate elsewhere in nearby Virginia, but our alumnae after only fifteen years were still young, the older ones in process of establishing their own families and to assist with funds could work a hardship. Other financial resources in wartime would not be available. In general, we felt the emphasis for the immediate future would be upon public-financed coeducational institutions. Furthermore, we were at war and all efforts should be directed toward the expected and unexpected demands for the duration.

Q. Is there anything else you wish to add, any particularly satisfying experience you had in connection with the school? Any amusing anecdote?

A. Christmas 1940, I began a practice — two years before Arlington Hall closed — of writing a letter of Christmas Greetings to our Alumnae. Little did I realize that this would become an annual custom and thus did become a means, partially at least, of keeping a nucleus of alumnae in touch. After several years, a desire developed to have an Alumnae Reunion. Our first one, in 1946 I think, was at the Mayflower Hotel where we had enjoyed many banquets and luncheons. In time, officers were elected and it was decided to hold our reunions quinquennially beginning in 1950. One exception was made in 1977 to celebrate the fifty year founding date of our school — 1927. For the last four reunions it has been our privilege, through the courtesy of the Commanding Officer of the Arlington Hall Station, to return to the campus to have a luncheon at the Officers Club — the highlight of our weekend.

*This article is adapted from "Response to Written Questionnaire" by Miss Frances S. Jennings, donated February 19, 1981 to the Virginia Collection, Arlington County Library, by Mr. James Gilbert. Mr. Gilbert is Command Historian, U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command (Arlington Hall Station). We are grateful to him for sharing this with us.