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July 3, 2007

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WKU and the Pleasant J. Potter College: A Shared Heritage

by Lynn Niedermeier

A century ago, Bowling Green students complained of long walks up the steep incline of College Street even as the view from its summit inspired them to write affectionate poetry to their school “way up on the hill.” But these were not WKU students; they were the young ladies of The Pleasant J. Potter College. Touted as “one of the leading and most fashionable female colleges in the South,” from 1889 to 1909 Potter College educated both local girls and boarders in its large classroom and dormitory building located where WKU’s Cherry Hall now stands.

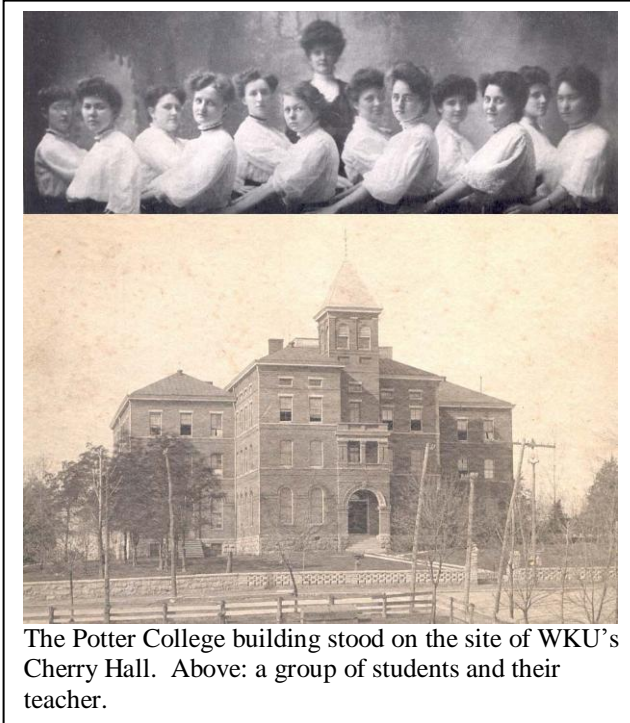
Potter College’s life began with the purchase in March 1889 of a four-acre site at the crest of a rugged, cedar-covered rise known first as “Vinegar Hill,” then as “Copley Knob.” The acquisition culminated more than a year’s planning by a committee of Bowling Green businessmen, one of whom also provided the school’s founding legend. Public stock subscriptions had initially funded the venture but when money ran low, banker Pleasant J. Potter saved the day by contributing \$5,000 (equivalent to more than \$100,000 in 2006) to ensure completion of the school building. In recognition of his generosity, the college was chartered bearing his name.

The choice of an elevated, well-drained campus was practical for health reasons, but the school’s location on high ground at what was then the edge of town had been characteristic of women’s colleges, particularly in the South, since the early nineteenth century. Ideally, wrote one educator, such schools should be “a little retired from busy marts of commerce . . . embosomed in Sylvan Bowers, protected by Shady Avenues,” and thereby “in harmony with the modesty and delicacy which are always associated with the gentler sex.” The building design of such colleges conveyed a similar message. After Mary Lyon founded Massachusetts’ renowned Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1837, many female colleges adopted her “congregate” system in which classrooms, living and eating quarters, library and public rooms were under one roof. This home-like arrangement ensured constant protection, supervision, and the development of a girl’s intellect in the context of enhancing her fitness in the domestic sphere.

Adopting these ideas for Potter College, prominent Louisville architect Harry P. McDonald designed a structure that symbolized both the femininity of its occupants and the physical mass deemed necessary to control them. An asymmetrical three-story facade with tall, narrow windows, a square, four-story tower, and a low-pitched, hipped roof embodied the Italianate style long familiar to Kentuckians. Two large wings extended back 104 feet (a third wing was added to the west side in 1890) and flanked another home-like feature: a massive, three-tiered porch with spindlework supports adorning the rear facade.

Inside, mirroring the customary Victorian separation of public and private spheres, Potter College's reception rooms, chapel, dining room, kitchen, library and classrooms occupied the first floor. Two-occupant dormitory rooms shared the second and third floors with a music room, gymnasium and nine bathrooms. The college's president, Benjamin F. Cabell, his wife, and a watchful cadre of female teachers also resided in the building.

When students retired at night, locked lattice gates closed off access to the first floor.



The Potter College building stood on the site of WKU's Cherry Hall. Above: a group of students and their teacher.

Although the school quickly became a source of pride to both alumnae and local residents, Potter College struggled to accommodate changing attitudes toward women's higher education. As early as 1875, planners of women's colleges had regarded Mary Lyon's congregate system as out of date, favoring instead smaller, more specialized structures that gave students greater freedom to regulate their own conduct. At Potter, students chafed at a succession of rules, bells, and institutional constraints: in the 1898 yearbook, one called herself a "Potter Prisoner." Some of the faculty light-heartedly

petitioned the president for relief from the burden of their duties as chaperones and surrogate mothers.

The most sensational challenge to institutional authority occurred on a spring evening in 1901, when President Cabell confronted some local boys caught in the act of spiriting five girls down a ladder from their second-story rooms for a midnight date. In the ensuing uproar Cabell and the boys even exchanged gunfire, but fortunately no one was injured. After the incident was widely reported, the local newspaper mocked the double standard that prompted Cabell to seek leniency for the boys while expelling the girls.

In 1907, President Cabell moved into his own home next door to the school building, but financial difficulties and failing health soon forced him to close Potter College. In May 1909, Henry Hardin Cherry, president of the Western Kentucky State Normal School (now WKU), which occupied premises located farther down the hill on College Street, negotiated the purchase of Potter College's land and buildings together with some 160 surrounding acres. WKU's era on the Hill was about to begin.

For some citizens of Bowling Green, however, WKU represented an unwelcome departure from the genteel traditions of the young ladies' college it was replacing. Since 1892, when he first managed a school in Bowling Green, Henry Hardin Cherry had

aggressively marketed practical, inexpensive instruction as a means to financial success and social mobility. As America's railroads, banks, trading houses and public schools generated high demand for a new professional class and Darwinian imagery dominated economic and social thought, Cherry urged young men and women to arm themselves for "the great battle of life" through specialized training in teaching, commerce, bookkeeping and telegraphy. Such an approach, bolstered by his belief in coeducation, had led Cherry to challenge the culture of female schools like Potter College. Segregation from males, close supervision, and a broad liberal arts curriculum that included "ornamental" subjects such as music, drawing and painting, Cherry suggested, produced young women preoccupied with social status and guilty of "inefficiency of attainment and silliness."

But Cherry was somewhat guilty of caricature. Although Potter College's president had urged his affluent students to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of their "high position," he had also called upon them to become "true and practical women" who might "fill with dignity and honor any position in society." Potter's catalogue had avoided any references to careerism, yet many of the young ladies took delight in the prospects that higher education afforded them as writers, artists, nurses, social reformers, businesswomen and especially teachers. A 1907 graduate had written confidently of the value of her liberal education. Colleges, she believed, should not serve an "age of commercialism," but rather should stand for "the power and worth of the personal as against the mere financial" and for "democracy, self restraint, soberness and service."

Over the preceding years, in fact, Henry Hardin Cherry had borrowed some of Potter College's philosophy to give his own school greater appeal. Recognizing the social imperative to treat males and females differently, he had promised his young women students a respectable school culture and the close support of lady faculty members. In 1895 he had opened a rooming house for women business students, offering them a "safe and pleasant home" under the care of an "elegant matron." For female teacher-trainees, Cherry built Frisbie Hall in 1904. Mindful of the continued popularity of so-called "ornamental" courses, in 1907 he hired two former Potter College students to teach piano and violin at WKU. The gulf between students of the two institutions began to narrow as more Potter College girls continued their education at WKU.

Cherry nevertheless felt the sting in 1909 when some of Bowling Green's socially conscious citizens recoiled at the prospect of a public institution occupying the former Potter College campus. His response was to assure them of his respect for the symbolic inheritance suddenly bestowed upon his institution. The scenery from the Hill "must be seen to be enjoyed – it cannot be described," rhapsodized WKU's February 1909 bulletin. The new location, it continued, was "among the finest to be found in the world. The grounds are sufficiently removed from the business section of the city to secure the quietness and retirement of a country location, and at the same time sufficiently near to have all the advantages of the city" – praise taken almost word-for-word from Potter College's catalogues. To respond to a hostile newspaper editorial, Cherry enlisted his brother Thomas, superintendent of the city schools, to insist that the best site in town was not "too good" for WKU. Fortunately, after Cherry unveiled long-term landscaping and architectural plans that included construction of a new administration building (now Van

Meter Hall), the newspaper grew more cheerful about the Hill's future as the new home of WKU. "It will be susceptible of beautification for years to come," admitted the editors, "the beginning of an educational upbuilding that will make Bowling Green's name known far and wide."

After two years of preparation, WKU moved to the Hill in February 1911, but the memory of its former occupants could not be extinguished. Their school building was renamed Recitation Hall, but many, including Cherry himself, habitually referred to it as the "old Potter College building." When former Potter students enrolled for studies on the Hill, Dean Finley Grise customarily found them well qualified for advanced standing. Also returned to the Hill was John H. Clagett, a teacher of Greek and Latin at Potter College, who would serve for twenty-nine years in WKU's English Department. Two 1906 Potter College graduates, Sarah Gilbert Garris and Nelle Gooch Travelstead, would spend twenty and forty-four years, respectively, on WKU's faculty.

In 1930, Potter College alumnae accepted an invitation to organize as an affiliate of WKU's Alumni Association, and for many decades represented their school prominently at annual reunions. At a 1932 alumnae luncheon Mary Armitage, an 1890 graduate, thanked "our foster brothers and sisters" of WKU and reflected on the legacy of her own *alma mater*. Together with the loyalty of its students, she concluded, it had bequeathed to WKU the beauty of its location, where not only Henry Hardin Cherry but the young ladies of Potter College had discovered "marvelous possibilities."

Sources:

Lynn Niedermeier, *"That Mighty Band of Maidens": A History of Potter College for Young Ladies, Bowling Green, Kentucky 1889-1909* (Landmark Association, 2001).

Potter College Collection, University Archives, Western Kentucky University.