

The Phoenix Rises from the Ashes: The Origins of Union Springs Academy, 1918-1921

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Background

Before 1922 the State of New York was divided into three Adventist Conferences: the Greater New York Conference (est. 1902), encompassing the metropolitan New York City area; the Western New York Conference (est. 1906), including all the counties between Buffalo and the eastern boundaries of Cayuga, Tompkins, and Tioga counties; and the Eastern New York Conference (est. 1906), including all the counties between Cayuga, Tompkins, and Tioga east to Albany and north into the Adirondacks region. While the Western New York Conference had operated a secondary school near Salamanca successively called the Tunesassa School (1906-1907), Tunesassa Intermediate School (1907-1913), Fernwood Intermediate School (1913-1917), and Fernwood Academy (1917-1921), the Eastern New York Conference did not establish its secondary school, called Clinton Academy, until 1920.¹ But between 1918 and 1921, two fires; WWI; epidemics of influenza, TB, and pneumonia; declining enrollments; and financial hardship changed the face of Adventist education in New York.

Oakwood Seminary

The first crisis was a fire in Union Springs. In 1851 Elihu Barber had erected a three-story brick building for a Young Ladies' Institute (or Seminary) which closed three years later.² In 1857 the Society of Friends (Quakers) purchased the property for \$9842 and established Oakwood Seminary, a coeducational secondary school where 110 whites and Native Americans of all religious faiths studied English, French, Latin, Greek, art, Bible, German, physiology, natural science, astronomy, geometry, trigonometry, and surveying.³ Yet steadily declining enrollments after 1885 and then the devastating fire of 1918 that burned the cupola and upper

story rooms of the seminary persuaded the Friends not to attempt repairs. Instead, they moved their school east to Poughkeepsie-on-the-Hudson. For the next three years (1918-1921) the building stood empty, ravaged by rain and wind, rodents and insects. Its charred timbers fell down and local farmers stored hay and straw in the old chapel.⁴

Fernwood Academy

Meanwhile a struggling Adventist institution, Fernwood Academy in southwestern New York, was facing difficulties of its own. With only \$158 in cash reserves, five teachers, and barely 32 students in 1916-17, the 11-grade school was heavily tuition-driven and financially in debt to its creditors. Nonetheless, through its constituents' sacrificial giving, a new 17-room girls' dorm with steam heat, electric lights, and indoor bathrooms was completed in 1917.⁵ But the loss of some older male students drafted during WWI and the ravages of a devastating influenza, TB, and pneumonia epidemic that followed in the wake of the war further weakened the school's bottom line. By the 1918-19 school term, Fernwood had only \$183.50 in cash reserves.⁶ Frequent transfers of teachers to other Adventist institutions created further fiscal instability and annual curriculum shifts. By 1919-20 there were only 40 students enrolled in grades 1-10.⁷ Despite its rather bleak financial outlook, however, this tiny academy garnered 46 students for grades 1-11 in 1920-21; built a new administration-classroom building in February 1921; and planned on adding 12th grade to become a senior academy for the 1921-22 school year.⁸

But the scourge of all wooden buildings, whether old or new, Quaker or Adventist, nixed those carefully laid plans. During the night of April 12, 1921, a fire, originating in the furnace room of the girls' dorm, quickly engulfed the timbered structure. Five minutes after the girls' dean gave the alarm, the building went up in smoke and flames. Since all the fire-fighting

equipment was locked in the furnace room, students and faculty could not reach it. Although all 28 girls escaped unharmed (mostly in their night clothes), within half an hour their dormitory was reduced to a flaming pile of debris. Teachers sent the girls to the boys' dorm for the night (where many donned male attire to stay warm) and the boys were hustled off to the hayloft in the barn. Breakfast for everyone the next morning was hard-boiled eggs, cooked over the ashes that glowed red, blue, and green for three days. As with most Adventist institutions a century ago, the dormitory had not been adequately insured for full replacement. For the final eight weeks of the semester, classes met in the boys' dorm where a temporary kitchen was set up as well.⁹

Fernwood Academy's last graduation was held on June 6, 1921 as three tenth graders accepted their diplomas in an outdoor service.¹⁰ As the officers of the Western New York Conference deliberated on whether to rebuild or move to another location, the fate of yet another Adventist academy hung in the balance.

Clinton Academy

For a couple of generations, boys and girls from the Eastern New York Conference had gone to South Lancaster, Massachusetts, for their secondary education. But by WWI, Lancaster Junior College had reached its maximum capacity and was becoming congested, with boarding rooms in short supply. So in September 1920 Conference officials opened Eastern New York Academy (commonly referred to as Clinton Academy). Located one mile from the trolley line at Clinton in the beautiful Mohawk River Valley, Clinton Academy boasted a 155-acre campus about nine miles southwest of Utica. The girls occupied a 20-room farm house and the boys crammed into another 12-room house nearby. For many of these rural kids, Clinton Academy offered them their first experience with such luxuries as gas and electric lights, steam heat, running water, and indoor bathrooms.¹¹

However, despite general optimism and high hopes for the Academy's future, in the fall of 1920 the school had only \$200 in cash reserves, five teaching faculty, and barely 20 students in grades 7 to 10. Thus, like Fernwood Academy, Clinton Academy was basically a junior high with only a handful of 9th and 10th grade students; the two schools were also similar in that they operated on shoe-string, tuition-driven budgets with a heavy dependency on Conference subsidies and much borrowing against future income. In short, they existed in a financial twilight zone.¹² A single disaster (such as a fire) or major expense (such as a building program) could push them over the edge.

Nonetheless, after a successful first year, the faculty and students looked forward to gathering at Clinton in the fall of 1921 for another good term. Female students had already selected their school uniforms: blue middie suits for classroom wear and white dresses for Sabbath and special occasions.¹³ The faculty had also been hired: Elder L. H. Gardiner, the principal, would teach Bible and science courses; William B. Higgins would provide instruction in history and mathematics; Ruth E. Blakney, the girls' dean, would lead the music program and teach elementary classes; and Mrs. Gardiner, the matron, would provide everyone with healthy meals in the family dining hall. However, not one of these faculty members would actually teach at Clinton Academy that fall; instead, they all transferred to the campus of a brand new school which opened its doors on September 14, 1921: Union Springs Academy.¹⁴ How did that come about?

As we have seen, both Fernwood and Clinton academies were struggling to survive on shoestring budgets with low enrollments, high overhead costs, frequent repairs, expensive building projects (especially at Fernwood), and mounting debts due to extensive borrowing. Consequently when disaster struck (as in the case of the fire at Fernwood), there were no cash

reserves, no endowment funds, and no fire insurance refund to cover the catastrophe. The officers and constituency of the Western New York Conference were therefore faced with the following four options: find the means to rebuild; close the school; move to another location and start anew; or merge with another Adventist institution. But the Conference lacked the funds to rebuild; loyal alumni objected to closing their school; and the cost of starting over somewhere else would most likely exceed the expense of rebuilding at Fernwood. So that left only one viable option: merge with another Adventist school.

Union Springs Academy

In the spring of 1921, Lewis Mundy, a local Union Springs Adventist businessman, suggested to Elder Fries, the president of the Western New York Conference, that the abandoned Quaker seminary in town would make an ideal site for an Adventist school. The Conference committee authorized Harold Fleming, a prosperous Adventist farmer, to purchase the 33 acres (which contained six buildings, farm tools, horses, cows, chickens, and pigs) from the Society of Friends in Poughkeepsie-on-the-Hudson. Their asking price, \$15,000, while not unreasonable, was much too high for one Conference to pay. After several meetings with the Friends and further negotiations, the price dropped to \$5000. Recognizing the benefits of having a private secondary institution in their town, the local Union Springs board of trade gave Adventists \$1000—so the actual price they paid for the property was only \$4000—less than half what the Quakers had paid for it in 1857!¹⁵

Further friendly negotiations between officials of the Western and Eastern New York conferences resulted in an agreement to share the cost of buying the property. The Eastern New York Conference put up \$2500 and the Western New York Conference donated \$1500; all other expenses they shared equally.¹⁶ On August 11-12, 1921, the newly appointed board of trustees

(which included the Atlantic Union Conference president and educational secretary, the academy principal, three representatives from the Eastern New York Conference, and three representatives from the Western New York Conference) voted to call the new school “Union Springs Academy.” The board also spelled out in great detail what farm, classroom, and office equipment would be contributed to the new school by the former Fernwood and Clinton academies. In addition, the trustees created a local board of five members to handle routine business matters.¹⁷

Although none of the faculty from Fernwood Academy moved to Union Springs that fall, choosing instead to accept teaching positions at other Adventist institutions, all of the teachers and staff at Clinton Academy joined the faculty at Union Springs Academy. Elder L. H. Gardiner became boys’ dean; William Higgins taught French, history, and literature; and Ruth Blakney taught Latin and music. In addition, Professor Claude Shull moved from South Lancaster, Massachusetts to become the first principal. Other faculty brought on board that first year included Mrs. Fleming as cafeteria director; Bernice Andrews as girls’ dean; Howard May as accountant; Harold Fleming as farm manager; Hazel Sager in the laundry; Paul Quimby as Bible teacher; Mrs. Quimby as English teacher; Janette Stone in hydrotherapy, physiology, and New Testament; Gerald Miles in math and science; Mrs. Shull for drawing and art; and Mrs. Ellis for sewing classes. These faculty and staff, who represented almost twice the number of teachers who had served both Fernwood and Clinton academies in 1920-21, greatly strengthened the curriculum of the new school.¹⁸

But the 15 faculty and 96 students who gathered together on September 14, 1921 to begin the first year on campus faced several daunting tasks.¹⁹ They had to prepare buildings that had been sitting vacant for three years to become dormitory rooms, classrooms, and offices. Fire-

charred timbers had to be removed and replaced; mice droppings had to be cleaned up; wind and rain damage required extensive repairs; inches of dust and debris had to be swept away; and tons of hay and straw stored in the chapel had to be removed. So for three weeks in late August and early September, Principal Shull directed a crew of carpenters and plumbers in what he delicately described as “rather extensive improvements” to repair floors, roofs, and walls, and to install new pipe lines across campus.²⁰ Many members of the 50 Adventist families who now flocked to Union Springs (swelling the village population by twenty percent) also pitched in to help.²¹

In addition to the physical challenges involved in preparing the campus for student occupation in a matter of days, the Academy faced daunting financial problems. Although the school began with \$49,000 in assets, it also had liabilities of over \$45,000 for a net worth of only \$3656. Worse still, the cash box contained only \$800 to pay \$3000 in pressing bills. Principal Shull urged parents to be prompt in paying students’ tuition. “It is a great help to us,” he explained, “for we are absolutely dependent on our monthly income to meet our expenses.” Despite these physical and financial challenges, Shull optimistically declared, “I have never seen such a favorable opening for the starting of a school.”²²

Having worked closely and amicably together to give birth to this new academy, the two New York conferences decided to take the next logical step. In August of 1922, the Eastern New York Conference and the Western New York Conference voted themselves out of existence, agreeing to merge into the New York Conference. From 1922 to 1943, the Conference headquarters would be located in a large three-story white house on Grove Street in Union Springs until yet another devastating fire forced them to move the Conference offices to Syracuse. Also after 1922, the Conference’s Dorcas Welfare Center was established in Union

Springs. Likewise, its annual camp meeting would be held on the campus of Union Springs Academy for the next century and beyond.²³

One Last Fire

Just as Oakwood Seminary in 1918 and Fernwood Academy in 1921 had experienced devastating fires that forced them to abandon or merge their campuses, so on December 3, 2016 an electrical fire gutted Newmyer Hall (the administrative and classroom building) at Union Springs Academy causing tens of thousands of dollars in smoke and fire damage. But the Academy did not close; it did not relocate; it did not merge with another institution. What made the difference this time? Insurance—the New York Conference’s fire insurance policy assured total replacement of all damaged materials (walls, ceilings, floors, wiring, alarm systems, computers, appliances, furniture, etc.) with new and updated versions of that which had been destroyed by the fire. Thus, Union Springs Academy, unlike its two predecessors, has been able to rise like the phoenix from the flames stronger than before as it nears its centennial in 2021.²⁴

Endnotes:

¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, s.v. “New York Conference,” 1996 ed., p. 171; Brian E. Strayer, “Union Springs Academy,” article for the on-line Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists, forthcoming.

² Sheila Tucker, *Auburn Citizen*, 18 and 25 April 1976.

³ *Ibid.*; A. Glenn Rogers, *Forgotten Stories of the Finger Lakes: Dramatic Tales of Fact and Legend* (Geneva, NY: A. Glenn Rogers, 1953), 130-32; *Bicentennial History of Springport*, 28; Storke and Smith, *History of Cayuga County*, 363; *Auburn Citizen*, 18 and 25 April 1976; Ralph Neall, “Valedictory,” *Echo*, July 1945, p. 4.

⁴ *Bicentennial History of Springport*, 25; *Union Springs Advertiser*, 3 June 1920, p. 1; *Auburn Citizen*, 18 and 25 April 1976.

⁵ *Gleaner*, 25 October 1916, pp. 6, 8; 8 November 1916, p. 4; 3 January 1917, p. 5; 19 September 1917, p. 5; 24 October 1917, p. 5; 31 October 1917, p. 8; 13 February 1918, p. 3; *SDA Yearbook* (1917), 183; General Conference of SDAs, *Annual Statistical Report* (1916), 11; H. E. Rogers, *Financial Statement of SDA Institutions and Organizations* (Washington, DC: General Conference of SDAs, 1927), 1913 and 1916 statements; Fernwood Academy, “Twelfth Annual Announcement” (1917).

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- ⁶ *Gleaner*, 27 February 1918, p. 4; 9 October 1918, p. 4; 19 February 1919, p. 4; *SDA Yearbook* (1919), 198; Rogers, *Financial Statement* (1919), 6; interviews with Lillian (Myers) Fox (8 March 1989), Charlene Vitrano and C. Roy Smith, Jr. (21 February 1989); Marion Mix to Brian E. Strayer, 6 February 1987.
- ⁷ *SDA Yearbook* (1920), 222; Fernwood Academy, "Fourteenth Annual Announcement" (1919); *Gleaner*, 24 September 1919, p. 3; 3 December 1919, p. 5; Rogers, *Financial Statement* (1919), 6.
- ⁸ *Gleaner*, 23 June 1920, p. 3; 7 July 1920, p. 5; 20 October 1920, p. 5; *SDA Yearbook* (1921), 155; interview with Silas Raymond (16 December 1986).
- ⁹ *Gleaner*, 20 April 1921, p. 5; interviews with Lenora (Eldridge) Higgins (9 July 1990); Silas Raymond (16 December 1986); Charlene Vitrano and C. Roy Smith, Jr. (21 February 1989); letters to author from Charlotte (Bueg) Berkeley (15 January 1990); Marion (Seitz) Simmons (26 June 1990); Raymond Grantier (5 January 1987); Aletha (Cossentine) Caster (17 December 1986, 14 February 1989, 25 May 1989).
- ¹⁰ *Gleaner*, 15 June 1921, p. 5; Marion (Seitz) Simons to author, 26 June 1990.
- ¹¹ Eastern New York Academy, "Second Annual Announcement" (1921), pp. 4-7; Rogers, *Financial Statement* (1920), 6.
- ¹² *SDA Yearbook* (1921), 154; *Gleaner*, 13 October 1920, p. 5; 1 June 1921, pp. 2-3; Eastern New York Academy, "Second Annual Announcement" (1921), pp. 1-2; Glenn A. Coon to author, 30 January 1989; Astrid W. King to author, 2 June 1989.
- ¹³ Eastern New York Academy, "Second Annual Announcement" (1921), pp. 8-14; Glenn A. Coon to author, 30 January 1990.
- ¹⁴ *Gleaner*, 1 June 1921, pp. 2-3; Eastern New York Academy, "Second Annual Announcement" (1921), pp. 1-2; Glenn A. Coon to author, 30 January 1989; Astrid W. King to author, 2 June 1989; Union Springs Academy Board of Trustees minutes, 28 August 1921, pp. 7-8; Carlene Kriegelstein, composite list of Union Springs Academy faculty (1921-22).
- ¹⁵ H. A. Fleming, "The Beginning of U.S.A." [typewritten manuscript], 17 November 1977, Union Springs Academy collection; *Advertiser*, 26 May 1921, p. 1.
- ¹⁶ Atlantic Union Conference Executive Committee minutes, August 11, 1921, Union Springs, Registrar's Office, Union Springs Academy, pp. 1-4.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7. Fernwood Academy contributed 20 seats, 16 dressers, 29 dining chairs, several electrical fixtures, a piano, printing outfit, four cows, 200 pounds of sugar, 650 pounds of flour, and some shredded wheat cereal. Clinton Academy gave a piano, a Ford truck, 65 chairs, 13 dressers, and an ensilage cutter. Both academies gave their libraries (about 1000 volumes) to Union Springs Academy. See local board minutes, 26 September 1921, pp. 11-15; *Gleaner*, 24 August 1921, p. 2.
- ¹⁸ *Gleaner*, 1 June 1921, pp. 2-3; Eastern New York Academy, "Second Annual Announcement" (1921), pp. 1-2; Glenn A. Coon to author, 30 January 1989; Astrid W. King to author, 2 June 1989; Board of Trustees minutes, 28 August 1921, pp. 7-8; Carlene Kriegelstein, composite list of Union Springs Academy faculty (1921-22).
- ¹⁹ *Gleaner*, 31 August 1921, p. 2.
- ²⁰ Board of Trustees minutes, 17 August 1922, p. 37; *Gleaner*, 4 October 1922, p. 2; *Auburn Citizen*, 18 and 25 April 1976; *Syracuse Herald-American*, 30 April 1972, p. 12.
- ²¹ *Bicentennial History of Springport*, 82.
- ²² Local board minutes, 3 October 1921, p. 16; Claude Shull, quoted in *Gleaner*, 31 August 1921, p. 2; *Gleaner*, 7 December 1921, p. 2; Rogers, *Financial Statement* (1921), 6.
- ²³ *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, s.v. "New York Conference," 1996 ed., p. 171.
- ²⁴ James S. Plumley, email to the Class of 1970, December 7, 2016.