Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly
Part of the Archival Science Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly/109
Published in: Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 29, Issue 1, Spring April 1, 2019. Copyright © 2019 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.
Brewton, Alabama, is not a special place. Nestled deep in the south of Alabama, it holds few industries and faced varying times of prosperity and poverty throughout the twentieth century. Around 6,000 people live there, a number that has held mostly steady for over fifty years (for comparison, it’s about one-fifth the size of Holland, Michigan). Brewton’s main claim to fame is that it was once known as “The Richest Little Town in the South,” due to its abundance of lumber. By the early years of the twentieth century though, this industry faded, and the town struggles. Like many small towns in America, it exists quietly, with people making their way through the world without much of a fuss.

There was, however, something that made Brewton more special than what meets the eye. It was a school. Or, rather, it was a hodgepodge collection of old buildings, refurbished chapels, and sprawling grounds, that formed the Southern Normal School a few miles outside of Brewton. Inside, hundreds of students learned a variety of subjects, rooted in a decidedly Christian upbringing. The influence of the Reformed Church of America, specifically, was deeply felt, from the Bergen Memorial Chapel to the teachers who arrived as part of the national missions board.

Southern Normal’s impact on the lives of black students in southern Alabama in the twentieth century is massive, a little-known school in a little-known place that changed lives. The story of Southern Normal is one of bravery, forbearance, and faith. James Dooley, the founder of Southern Normal, and each succeeding generation had to navigate complex relationships between mostly white, Reformed funders and a black student and faculty body. The brochures, letters, magazine articles, and newspaper reports from the school prove to be a microcosm for the shifting relationships between white and black, North and South, and even Reformed and non-Reformed in this era. They show the power of granting agency to those on the ground, truly listening to the needs of a marginalized population, and of recognizing the inherent humanity and dignity of all people.

James Dooley was not a rich man. His parents were slaves on the Barnabas Dooley plantation in Elbert, Georgia—Barnabas was a Confederate major in the Civil War. James was born in 1865, the same year the war finally ended. He would spend just months in slavery, but the experience of his parents and grandparents on the plantation may well have fueled a deep desire to learn and change his family’s fortunes. His mother, Caroline, passed away when James was 13, after instilling a deep desire for education into her young son. Dooley worked in a Georgia ore mine and at several other odd jobs to make ends meet in his early teenage years. One supporter wrote that Dooley’s “whole life had

(continued on page 2)
been a struggle for education.” After working at the ore mine long enough to earn $150, Dooley paid to enter Knoxville College and graduated in 1883, becoming a teacher in the Tennessee area.

Dooley wanted to form a school for African American children of the South that was rooted in the Christian faith. But with—as he once wrote to a friend—“few friends and less money,” such an idea seemed impossible. Several extraordinary events had to happen in order for Southern Normal School to be founded and then stay open. The first of these extraordinary events was finding a place to have a school. According to the Christian Intelligencer, Dooley just happened to be in Brewton, and noticed a basically abandoned piece of property. The Harriman Institute for Boys, a reformatory school, had been there and failed several years earlier. Owners of the property were about to give the land away to investors when Dooley made his pitch. Miraculously, he had his land.

Southern Normal School was thus founded in 1911, with the mission to “educate the heart, head, and hands” of African American youth. A noble mission indeed, it nonetheless struggled to get off the ground in the early years. Lacking sufficient funds to build a boarding house, Dooley and his wife would often host students in their home outside of Brewton. Southern Normal was the first school of its kind in Alabama, and faced an uphill battle to educate young people whose great-grandparents had been slaves, and whose grandparents and parents had been systematically disenfranchised and denied an education. Fundraising seems to have taken up most of Dooley’s time, and he made frequent trips to the North in order to spread his mission and ask for funds. He even came to Hope College in 1930 just months before he died, and explained how at the southern school “while the minds and hands are trained, the hearts are also reached with the Christian teachings.”

The very fact that James Dooley was invited to speak at Hope is due to another extraordinary event which occurred in 1918. In what was reported as “an accident to an incident,” Dooley came into contact with Christian Reformed and Reformed Church ministers, who “had never previously engaged in anything strictly for the uplift of the Black man.” They apparently heard his plight and were moved enough to share the school’s funding woes with the Board of Domestic Missions of the Reformed Church. A year later, the Board would “take responsibility” for Southern Normal School, granting it funding and allowing it to thrive to its full potential as a “mission station.” With Dooley at the helm, the school could now undertake the daunting task of providing a first-class education to young black students in southern Alabama.

Dooley founded Southern Normal with the ideals of the renowned black lawyer and scholar Booker T. Washington in mind. A former slave, Washington espoused the ideals of vocational and technical education for young African Americans of the time. Early brochures from the school mention Booker T. Washington in comparison to Dooley, with one 1940s brochure noting how the school’s students were “mentally alert and fired with the zeal to help their own [in] answer to Booker T. Washington’s challenge, that
his race is equal to all it is given to do with the hand.”

Even the motto of the school—to educate the heart, head, and hand—is a reflection of Washington’s writing. In 1952, one student at the school was quoted as saying, “the very height of my ambition is not to become the President of the US, the president of some great university, or a great man of wealth, but to develop myself into an honest, industrious worthwhile member of the community.” This statement is a perfect example of Washington and Dooley’s philosophy, that it was the responsibility of African Americans to educate themselves, and create opportunities through technical work within a white political system. It is important to note that this was not the only philosophy concerning the education of African Americans at the time. Washington was in direct opposition to activist W.E.B. DuBois, who advocated for the promotion of African American intellectuals and founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Unlike Booker T., DuBois emphasized academic work over vocational education.

There is at least one implicit reference to this battle in the brochures given to publicize the work done at Southern Normal. In the late 1940s, the Board sent out a “quiz” for students to fill out on important African Americans of the 19th and twentieth centuries. The description for Booker T. Washington is “greatest race leader of the 19th century.” Meanwhile, the description for DuBois—a renowned scholar, journalist, activist, and advocate—is merely, “former editor of ‘The Crisis,’” an African American newspaper. Clearly, vocational and technical work would play a major role in the life of a Southern Normal student. It was not until the late 1950s, as battles over the segregation of schools raged in the Supreme Court, that Southern Normal began to publicize its academics over its technical skills classes.

While the classes and education at Southern Normal evolved over time, its Christian roots remained from the beginning. Dooley had set out to educate the “heart, head, and hand” of African American students of the Deep South, and “heart” meant encouraging growth in the Christian faith. The Reformed Church, obviously, encouraged and helped grow the significance of Christianity at the school. One brochure from 1952 noted how “every attempt is made to make Christianity central in the life of every student.” Bergen Memorial Chapel, opened in 1950, became the focus of the school’s efforts to promote Christianity. It was named after Old Bergen Reformed Church in Jersey City, a church that sent many of its children to Hope College. One Southern Normal student wrote, “being without parents, Jesus has been both mother and father to me and really means more to me than I am able to say or write, because he is my friend.” Testimonials like this were of critical importance to the school, as they helped provide effective evidence for why members of the Reformed Church should give money to keep the school alive.

A young student without one or both parents was not particularly uncommon at Southern Normal. Most of the students came from impoverished backgrounds. Racism was embedded into the fabric of their everyday lives, and each student overcame much difficulty to get their education. Katie Lett, who graduated from Southern Normal in 1937, told the Board of Domestic Missions, “we have no running water, electric devices and other labor-saving equipment...the life in my home is characteristic of the life carried on in the majority of Negro homes here in Brewton.” Another—perhaps apocryphal—essay told the story of a Jesse Brooks, a young African American boy who arrived at Southern Normal after walking sixty-five miles; his mother had died from tuberculosis and he had nowhere to go. Stories like these abound in the brochures sent to Reformed Church members, helping to explain why the board was
Two articles, published in the Reformed Church’s *Church Herald* magazine in 1958 and 1967, reveal more of the complexity of the relationship between Southern Normal and the Brewton community and the wider country. The first writer, Ida Mae Hollinger, was a teacher at Southern Normal throughout the 1950s. She wrote a piece called “Is God Prejudiced Too?” in response to one of her students’ questions. Hollinger explained, “God has become to me big enough to embrace all mankind—all races, all nations. He is not that large to many of the Negro youth with whom we work.” Her message must have been hard to swallow, but it was fundamentally necessary for everyone to understand just how much Southern Normal students went through, all for an education. She argued, “the pupils read about Christianity and American democracy but they live with the practice of white supremacy.” All students had to recognize their inherent value and worth within a Christian context to move forward in learning. This was easier said than done, when even the God they heard about believed they were inferior. One of the school’s greatest triumphs would be to convince scores of young children of color that God loved them deeply as themselves.

The other article, written by James C. Hefley, is even more blatant than Hollinger in his depictions of Brewton. He arrived there to interview Southern Normal’s administrators and students on the integration of schools in their area. A common question asked whether the school’s mission was still relevant if black children could attend “white” schools. On his way to the school, Hefley stopped and asked for directions from a waitress, who described Southern Normal as a “n— church school.” When he asked white members of the town about the school’s significance, most of them claimed it was no longer necessary in a world where everyone could go to school together. Though his writing would be politically incorrect and crass in a modern context, he did astutely point out the disconnect between what the white persons he interviewed were saying and what was actually happening in the town, where few black persons were visible in high-paying jobs. Many students from Southern Normal went on to become teachers in the Brewton area, usually at segregated or quasi-segregated schools. While residents generally considered Brewton better than most towns, they still had a long way to go in fully making the community inclusive. When asked if Southern Normal still mattered as integration became law, most administrators answered with something along the lines of, “only at Southern Normal can Negro students get a Christ-centered education, be guided and motivated by a Christian interracial faculty, and study and work in an atmosphere of love.” The school was a safe place, and students wanted to be there because the school recognized their value.
While discussions about integration continued in Brewton, Hope College made its own—small—moves to create a more inclusive campus. 1928 brought the first African American student to Hope, James Carter Dooley. He was the son of the founder of Southern Normal, James Dooley, and did all he could to continue the legacy of educating the “heart, head, and hand” of students. While he was at Hope, the elder Dooley passed away, leaving a legacy of education and service. After graduating from Hope with a degree in history in 1932, the younger Dooley also became an educator, teaching in public schools in the South for over forty years. His tenure at Hope, in fact, came and went nearly forty years before the first black students were admitted to the University of Alabama, where George Wallace infamously stood to block the door to education in 1963. Dooley became the first of many students to come to Hope through Brewton and Southern Normal. The relationship between the southern school and the Reformed college became even more solidified by these tenacious students, willing to leave behind their homes and safe places to lead the way in attending predominantly white colleges.

The “Brewton students” did not arrive at Hope without controversy. In 1969, President Calvin Vander Werf made a note in a speech calling students from Brewton “risk students.” One complaint letter to Vander Werf about the speech said, “I resent this statement and anything that is referred to as a black student as a ‘risk student.’ These students have a lot more potential than a lot of white students.” That same year, Hope administrator W. A. DeMeester penned an essay on “Hope College and the Black Student,” where he wrote, “students from Brewton may be an exception” to “typical” college requirements. Despite the success and passion displayed by the students from Southern Normal, and despite the active serving relationship between Hope and the school, there were still members of the Hope community who did not believe those students belonged there. Inclusion is not merely expecting students to fit in, just as integration is not accepting one student who is not white. Hope, the Reformed Church, and Southern Normal’s relationship is complicated, occasionally messy, but always striving towards the goal of educating the heart, head, and hand.

The debates over integration and the relevance of black boarding schools continued well into the twentieth century. Southern Normal struggled with enrollment, and the Reformed Church’s funding did not last forever. Per the New York Times, in 1992 “the church ceded control to a foundation created to raise enough money to purchase and operate the 400-acre campus.” Five years later, the school closed suddenly at the beginning of the spring semester, and eventually became an off-campus offshoot of Alabama State University. In June 2015, the Brewton Standard reported a complete shutdown of Southern Normal’s campus. Alumni were shocked and devastated to find their beloved school padlocked, with the grave of James Dooley still on the campus. Recently, the community of Brewton has come together to rebuild the old campus and restore it to its former glory. To this day, Southern Normal alumni and community members fight to ensure Dooley’s work is remembered.

Not long ago, Hope College hosted Austin Channing Brown, a renowned speaker and author of I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness. In her speech, Brown called for each member of the Hope community to decide what they considered a fundamental human right. The power of educating all three parts of a person—heart, head, and hand—seems like a very good beginning to an answer. While Southern Normal has drastically changed, its legacy remains the same—make room for passionate students, and provide opportunities for them to break through and receive an excellent education. With that, James Dooley can rest easy, knowing the roots of his school will bear fruit for generations to come.

Aine O’Connor is a senior at Hope College studying history and English. Her areas of interest include local history, disability history, and children’s history. After graduation, Aine plans on attending graduate school to earn a master’s degree in library and information science.
Collections Now Open

H06-1599. Grunst, Robert C.

Papers, 1971-2002. 1.00 linear ft.

Robert C. Grunst is a professor of English in the English Department at the College of St. Catherine (Minneapolis, Minnesota). He received his undergraduate from Western Michigan University and his graduate degrees (M.F.A., M.A.W., Ph.D.) from the University of Iowa. The collection contains information on local fisherman and audiotape cassettes (originals and 2006 copies) containing oral history interviews with commercial fisherman that include: Ray Wiinikka (May 22, 1997); John Karr (October 7, 1994); Albert Razal and Allen Cornell (November 11, 2000); Axel Niemi (July 10, 1993); Melvin “Moe” Gauthier (December 30, 1993)/Louis Cloutier (January 4, 1994); Moe Gauthier (June 28, 1993); Bev Hudson/David Fritz (December 31, 1993) Moe Gauthier (January 5, 1994); Louis Cloutier (January 4, 1994)/Bev Hudson/David Fritz (n.d.); Barb Hubbard and Jack Doyle (1993); Ross Horrall/Clarence Sellman/Robert Sellman (April 2, 1993); Elmer Hansen (Copper City) (n.d.); Norman Hansen (n.d.); David Haataja (1998); Lloyd McCash/Jim McCash/John Maynard (December 30, 2000); Don Ostling et al (October 8, 1994); Ernest “Grub” Jones (June 26, 1994); Howard Killoran (October 8, 1994); Roy and Jenette Rimpela (August 27, 1998); Murray Chambers (March 25, 1993); Murray Chambers (January 4, 1995); Murray Chambers (December 30, 1993/January 3, 1994); Murray Chambers (June 30, 1993); Murray Chambers (January 1, 1993); Murray Chambers (January 1, 1993/January 2, 1993); Murray Chambers (December 28, 1992); Bud Olsen/Gordon Sandberg/Carlson (Olsen)/Jean Smeltzer (Rodel) and husband (December 29, 1992).


Papers, 1931-1936. 0.25 linear ft.

Hope College class of 1936; Michigan State University class of 1969; Western Michigan University teaching certificate; cost accountant for the City of Wyoming; teacher at Central High School. Collection includes photos, a newsletter, and a scrapbook relating to his time in high school and at Hope College, 1931-1936.


Hope College Class of 1899; Princeton Theological Seminary class of 1904; McCormick Theological Seminary class of 1912; Hope College Doctor of Divinity recipient of 1935; pastor at Grace Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, MI, 1912-1938. Collection consists of handwritten sermons preached at Grace Reformed and other churches, 1906-1924.


Papers, 1905-1993. 3.00 linear ft.

Sailor, 1907-1919; United States Coast Guard, 1917-1918 and 1942; Collection includes photographs, correspondence, clippings, reports, and currency relating to Harry L. Orr’s time as a sailor, service in the World Wars, and family business. Also contains records and correspondence of Orr family concerning the tug boat Leona G. as well as personal memorabilia from Harry’s military service.
Joint Archives of Holland
Honor Roll of Donors 2019

Henk Aay
Robert V. Abendroth
Gerry and Nina Albers
Byron and Marcia Aldrich
Theresa E. Allen
Grace Antoon
J. Anne Appleton
Cyd Archer
Daniel and Sharlene Aument
Marilyn Bambridge
Sharon Bandstra
Chet Baumann
Arthur Bielfelt
Mr. and Mrs. John A. Blom
Marjorie A. Bocks
Vernon and Lois Boersma
Philip Bohlander
Bruce Bolinger
John Bos
Bradford Company
Judson and Catharine Bradford
Jerald and Dawn Bredeweg
Donald A. Brinks
Howard Broek
Will Brown
Donald J. Bruggink
Elton and Elaine Bruins
Ken Bus
Mark and Janet Cook
Laurie Coolidge
Jane Dalman
Ron and Jessie Dalman
Robert and Frances De Bruin
Roger A. and Florence De Graaf
Ms. Karel Deich
Robert DenHerder
Jack and Henny De Roo
Ruth C. Dirkse
Robert Donia
Winnifred Dreeuws
William and Sharon Drythout
Mr. Harvey Dykema
Gregory and Amanda Dykhouse
Robert J. Dykstra
Marshall Elzinga
Lance and Marty Evert
Dave and Trudy Fetters
Dr. and Mrs. Albert C. Gaw
Harold and Nancy Gazan
Bert A. Getz
Nancy and Bob Gillette
Charles G. Gosselink
Nick Goutziers
Lisa Grenier
Astrid Griffin
Norm Gysbers
Mr. Pat Hall

James and Lynne Heetderks
Joan Heneveld
Etta Hesselink
Paulus and Rosemary Heule
Paul D. Hoeksema
Terry and Ruth Hofmeyer
J. Samuel Hofman
Greg Holcombe
William and Theresa Holden
Jennifer Holman
Lavina Hoogeveen
Les Hoogland
John and Mary Hoogstra
Dianne Hoyt
Phyllis M. Huff
Fred Jacobs
Shirley Japinga
Eugene Jekel
Martha L. Joynt
Ken Katerberg
Lois Jesiek Kayes
Dr. and Mrs. Roger D. Kempers
Rev. Mary Decker Klaaren
Mr. and Mrs. Martin Klaver
Fritz L. Kliphuis
Blaine and Kristi Jo Knoll
Michael Kollen
Eldon and Janet Kramer
Robert D. Kroeze
Gordon and Natalie Laman
Cal and Yvonne Langejans
Loren Lenmen
Cindy Lett
Robert and Gary Looman
Arend D. Lubbers
Don Luidens
Larry Lynn
John Maher
Sharol McManus
Hank and Liesel Meijer
Gerald Meyer
Hannes and Marjorie Meyers
Kae and Dale Moes
Bob and Pam Molenhouse
Mr. and Mrs. Michael Mooney
Mary Mouw
Roger and Beverly Mulder
Rev. James and Barbara Neveel
Dr. Robert and Bette Jo Nienhuis
Milton and Mariliee Nieuwsma
Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Norman
Sarolyn and David Nye
Jack and Lee Nyenhuis
Robert Ortman
Cliff and Ruth Owen
Bill and Judy Parr
Timothy J. Pennings

Henry A. Ploegstra
Angie Ploegstra
Merle and Arnola Prins
Paul and Karen Prins
Protestant Reformed Seminary
Mary Raper
Jerry and Elsie Redeker
Craig and Vickie Rich
Judi K. Rutledge
Lavonne Samlaska
Louis and Deborah Schakel
Gerrit W. and Janet S. Smeehers
Dorothy Sherburne
Sara E. Simmons
Richard and Marti Slight
Lois Snow
Neal Sobania
Chris Spencer
John Sporer
Rev. and Mrs. Henry Stegenga
Richard T. Swanson
Don and Cheryl Swierenga
Robert P. Swierenga
Leona Tersma
Peter J. Theune
Ruth Tidd
Barbara Timmer
Mr. and Mrs. Paul M. Trap
Swanette Triem
John and Pat Tysse
Mike and Mae Van Ark
Norma Van Bunte
Mr. Hugo M. Van den Dool
Mary L. Vande Poel
Tom Vander Kuy
Dr. Arend A. Vander Pols
Mary Vande Water
Nancy VanDeWater
William G. Van Dyke
Dr. Charles and Jean Van Engen
F. Phillip Van Eyl
Rev. and Mrs. Gerald Van Heest
Paul Van Kolken
Don and Lois Van Lare
Clare R. Van Wieren
Dorothy Voss
Frank Wagenaar
Larry and Deb Wagenaar
Douglas and Kay Walvoord
Bob and Jean Weber
Theron Wierenga
Henry Witte
Zeeland Historical Society
Kenneth and Elaine O. Zimmerman
George Zuidema
Randy and Char Zwiers
In 1911, Southern Normal and Industrial Institute in Brewton, Alabama, was established.