

John W. Gonce's full description of Cornerstone Ceremony events (1923)

Source: John W. Gonce to C. W. Underwood, 1 January 1923, Cornerstone Ceremony folder 4, Early Papers of the University, University Archives.

Gonce's letter to Underwood detailed his experiences as an attendee at the Cornerstone Ceremony in 1860 and as a student in the short-lived precursor to the University in Winchester in 1866-1867. He also sent three copies of a student publication, "The Sibyl," which he edited. According to Gonce, he was "the first person to enter the Freshman Class of the University!"

Gonce-Anderson Farms
J. W. Gonce, Prop.
Anderson, Tennessee

Miami, Fla.
Jan. 1st, 1923

Mr. C. W. Underwood
Sewanee, Tenn.

Dear Sir:

. . . It was in 1860, I believe, that my grandfather, J. F. Anderson who lived about 12 miles from what is now Sewanee, gathered up all of his numerous family – to attend the laying of the Corner Stone of what was intended to be the first building of the University of the South. I, an orphan, without father, mother, sister or brother, lived with my grandfather and was taken along.

The trip was made by wagon and horseback through the mountains, and we camped out one night on the way. I was then about 10 years old, and remember being scared by the screaming of a wildcat during the night. We arrived at the site of the University the next day, and I will never forget the exciting events of that day. There were certainly enough startling events to excite an ignorant country boy, who was then getting his first glance into the means used to open up the vast reservoir of history and knowledge, which had so far been sealed to him.

None of our family had any education much beyond ability to read and write, and I then had little information as to the objects of a university – further than the fact that it was to be a big school of some kind where one could learn and grow in knowledge somewhat better than in the country schools I had been attending.

The first thing I noticed was the great throng of country people, more than I had ever seen or have seen since, gathered together there on the mountain top in a nearly unbroken forest. They had come as we had come on foot, horseback and in wagon, drawn by all sorts of teams, from afar and near, and they had come prepared to enjoy the day, bringing provisions for man and beast; also intoxicating liquor, I might say also for man and beast, for a large part of the men had a striking resemblance to beasts later in the day. I saw fighting on a large scale when the combatants were so numerous that no one had the least idea what the row was about. I saw fighting, horse-trading, gambling, all conducted openly and vociferously and without the least regard for the ceremonies that were being conducted around the corner stone, not over two hundred yards away, where was assembled also a large throng of better dressed and more orderly people around the church dignitaries dressed in their caps and gowns, who I suppose were calling on God to bless the building to be erected over that stone, for I could not get close enough to hear anything, and I doubt if much was heard by anyone more than a few yards away.

I was more impressed by the caps and gowns worn by the clergy than anything else. I had never seen any of our preachers dressed that way before, and could not understand why a man should dress so much like a woman. I believe I remember seeing that block of marble lying there in the woods, on the mountain top, with nothing around it to even indicate that it was the beginning of anything. I believe there was a railway track but no station, or any other buildings of any description. It was then hoped that the stone would be the beginning of a great University but it was not to be, it was destroyed during the Civil War by the Union soldiers. I will add that I have only passed through Sewanee once since, and have never entered any of the University buildings, although I have lived only 12 to 15 miles away practically all of my life.

Yet I was the first person to enter the Freshman Class of the University! Strange! How can that be? It was this way – After the end of the war, I believe it was Bishop Quintard who again got up a fund to start building operations for the University, and he was anxious also to begin the educational scheme. So he acquired the use of a school building at Winchester, and then started the University Course as well as a Primary Department. That was in 1866, and the school was in charge of Dr. Knight as Principal, and Dr. Hay as a teacher of Latin and Greek. There was another teacher or two whom I do not remember. There was another boy who took part of the University Freshman Course. He was from Memphis and the son of an architect. I remember that no one ever recited with me in Latin and Greek. I was reading Livy and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. I had also Trigonometry, Mental Philosophy, and Classical Literature. I got receipts printed under the style of the "University of the South" when I paid tuition.

I remember Dr. Knight as a very kind and worthy man, liked by all the students. But I admired Bishop Quintard most. He often visited the school, and I know he was a man of extraordinary ability, zealous and of a lovable character. I had in 1864 and [186]5 attended Mary Sharp College, one term, under the personal charge of Dr. Graves, a great teacher on the Socratic order, and one term at Georgetown, Kentucky, where I studied very little but Latin and Greek, so that when the University Course was established at Winchester I was able to enter....

I do not believe this branch of the University was continued another year at Winchester. I am sure some building operations had begun at Sewanee. Anyhow, I lost my hearing during the summer of 1867, and was not able to attend school any longer. This affliction destroyed all my hopes for the future, and farm life seemed to be all that was left open to me.

If I can serve you in any other way or by any further information, please let me hear from you.

Very truly yours,

/signed/ J. W. Gonce

Notes on the document

In his history of the University, Sam Williamson described how Bishop Quintard “took over the fledgling Carrick Academy in Winchester, appointed a headmaster, and launched it in 1866 as the Sewanee Collegiate Institute, a school he hoped would prepare young men for the yet-to-be-built university.” (*Sewanee Sesquicentennial History: The Making of the University of the South*, p. 21.)

Along with this letter, John Gonce also sent C. W. Underwood three copies of “The Sybil”, a literary magazine he edited in his year at the Collegiate Institute. Underwood then served as Secretary to the Vice-Chancellor in early 1923, and seems to have been collecting material related to the school’s early years for the University Archives.

Along the Tennessee-Alabama border, the unincorporated community of Anderson grew up on land that had been owned before the Civil War by Gonce’s grandfather, J. F. Anderson. Gonce ran the place before his retirement to Miami, Florida.

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