First published in 1928, *College Life in the Old South* relates the early history of the University of Georgia from its founding in 1785 through the Reconstruction era. Not a dry compilation of facts, E. Merton Coulter's classic study portrays the struggles and accomplishments of America's first chartered state university.

Coulter recounts, among other things, how Athens was chosen as the university's location; how the state tried to close the university and refused to give it a fixed allowance until long after the Civil War; the early rules and how students invariably broke them; the days when the Phi Kappa and Demosthenian literary societies ruled the campus; and the vast commencement crowds that overwhelmed Athens to feast on oratory and watermelons. Coulter's account, interspersed with delightful anecdotes, not only depicts the early university but also shows its importance in the antebellum South.

**E. Merton Coulter** came to the University of Georgia as an associate professor in 1919; he was named an emeritus professor of history in 1958 and continued to work on campus until his death in 1981. During his distinguished career, he wroted or edited more than thirty books and his contributions to periodicals were extensive. Coulter was coeditor of the ten-volume *History of the South* and author of two of the volumes in the series; he also served as editor of the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* for fifty years.

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College Life in the Old South

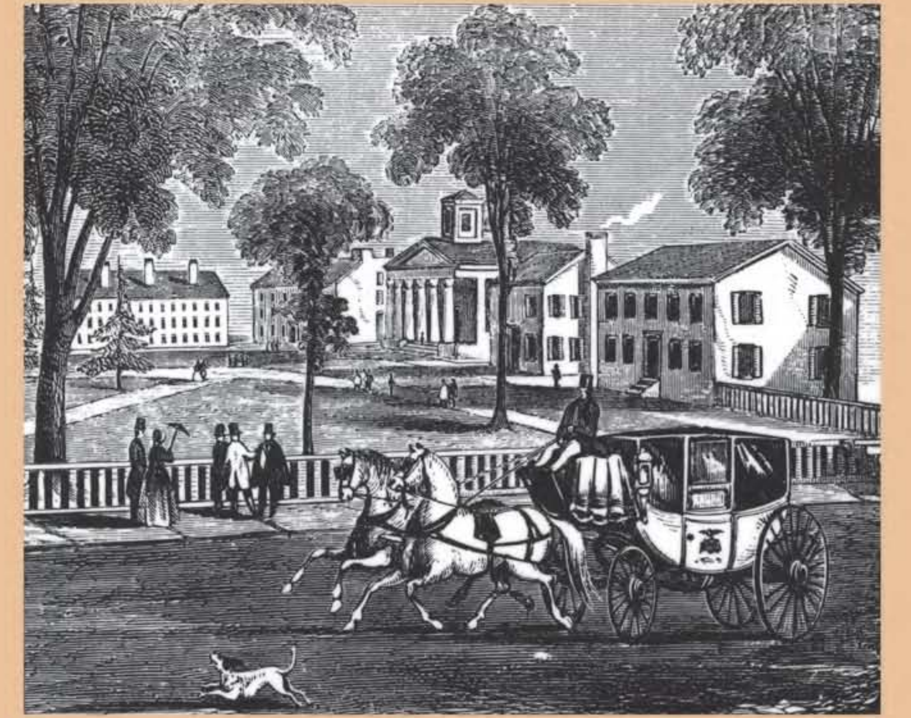
COULTER

Georgia

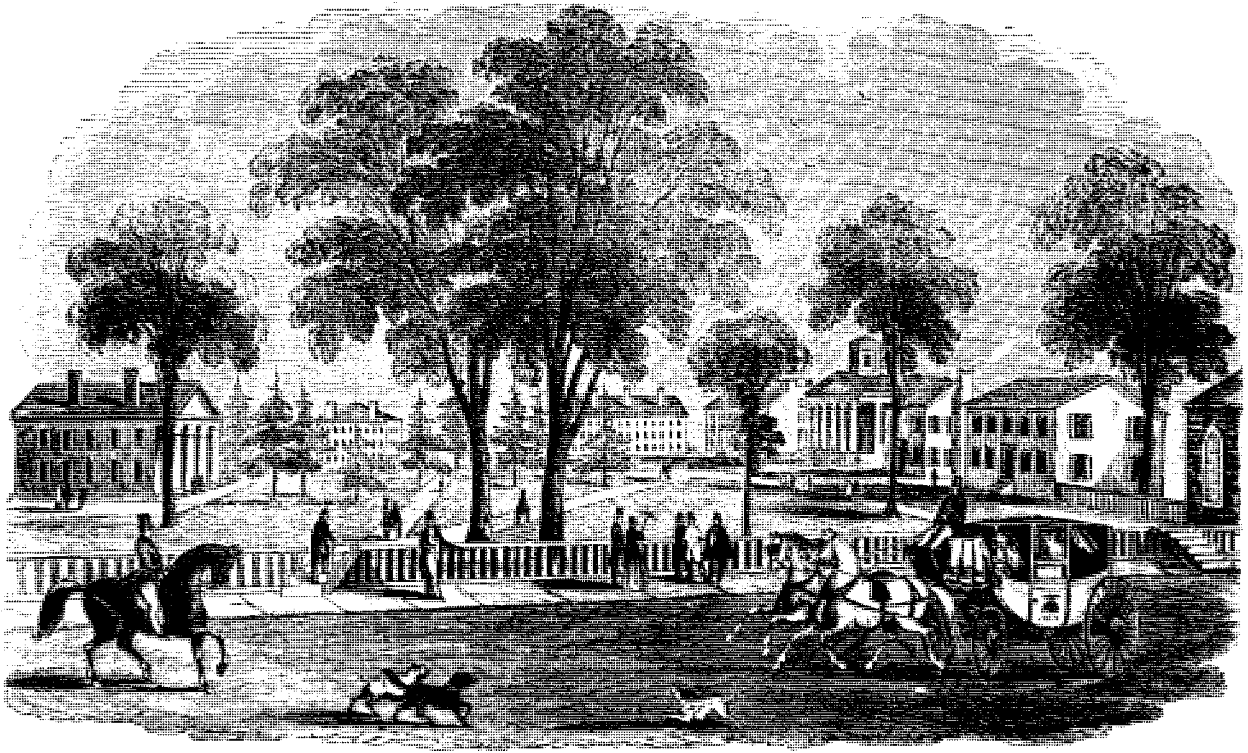
# College Life in the Old South

## *E. Merton Coulter*

### *Foreword by Thomas G. Dyer*



*As Seen at the University of Georgia*



The University of Georgia in antebellum times. This engraving first appeared in *Gleason's Magazine* in 1854 but probably depicts the campus about a decade earlier. (University of Georgia Libraries.)

# COLLEGE LIFE IN THE OLD SOUTH

E. Merton Coulter

*Foreword by Thomas G. Dyer*

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CHAPTER I

# A UNIVERSITY IN THE WILDERNESS

IN THE straggling little frontier settlement of Louisville, saddled with the proud importance of being the capital of the State of Georgia, in the year 1801, a collection of respectable citizens bearing the extraordinary title of Senatus Academicus were contending with due parliamentary dignity, but with considerable animation, over who should have a coveted prize. The object of their desire was nothing more than a "college or seminary of learning," which the state had chartered sixteen years previously. Off and on for two years this unseemly contest had been going on among these sonorously titled gentlemen, during which time every county in the state outside of the "sickly coast" had been voted upon as a possible location. As each was conscious of the other's desire to possess this new institution they attempted to delay the final decision in their first meeting in 1799 (November 27th to December 2nd) by selecting a temporary site. This maneuver failed; thereupon the champions of Hancock, Wilkes, Greene, and Jefferson counties sought victory. None could get the required vote. Then an attempt was made to call the Academy of Columbia County the college, with the hope that it might sometime live up to its new name if given proper care. Failure again was written.[1] The meeting now adjourned in disgust until 1800, when the fight was begun over again with the same result. Finally on November 27th, Greene County was triumphant and a committee was appointed to build there a "wing of the university" sufficient to accommodate 100 students.[2]

That things not settled right are never settled must have been the slogan of the opponents of Greene County is evident, for when the Senatus Academicus in their Louisville meeting (1801) attempted to get the institution started, these irreconcilables reopened the fight. After seven charges and counter-charges Greene County lost her prize to Jackson.[3] Would this decision stand? This was the third attempt of the ghost to take on corporeal existence, its first effort being when, only one year old, it was to be given joint abode in the new capital at Louisville, itself yet to be born in the wilderness.[4]

The plan of a college or university for the state was none of Georgia's making; it was imported. In her first constitution (1777) not a thought was given to a university, although the example of North Carolina providing in her constitution of the preceding year for "one or more universities" was at hand. During the years of the Revolution that followed, Georgia tried hard to take her own life with her Whigs and Tories arrayed against each other in a terrible carnival of murder and pillage, ever after known as the "War of Extermination." But the mountains and valleys and rivers and fertile plains were just as attractive as ever, and it did not take long for the news to get abroad that Georgia was distinctly the place in which to settle and grow up. Two classes of people took advantage of this opportunity. One group had discovered this El Dorado about the time the Revolution broke out, and following their vision they had begun to swarm over into the regions to the northward of the coast country and to settle in what came to be known as Middle Georgia. These people were the restless, land-hungry, gambling, hard-drinking gentry from as far north as Maryland, who had failed to be satisfied in their Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina homes. Most of them had been driven out of Georgia during the war, but when peace came they returned with many thousands of their fellows, and before the end of the century they greatly outnumbered the lowlanders. They cared little for schools and had no conception whatsoever of a university.

The other group, not so large, who came prospecting to Georgia was not primarily looking for land on which to settle. Some would not turn away from such easy fortunes as could apparently be made in Yazoo speculations; but others were more interested in using their talents toward taking charge of this dynamic commonwealth, whose varied potentialities, with a vast domain extending to the Mississippi River, were likely unequaled in the whole Confederation. These newcomers drifted almost invariably into the settled regions—largely to Savannah and the coast and to Augusta. They came to be governors, politicians, lawyers, teachers in academies, and managers of whatever needed managing. And they were not disappointed. George Mathews came down from Virginia one year and was elected governor the next. But this group was made up largely of enterprising Yankees from New England. Their number was never large as compared with the influx into Middle Georgia, but their influence was far-reaching. The Colonial Georgians, among whom they settled, were of recent European origin, mostly from British dominions, but some of them were foregathered from the ends of the earth. The debtors and their descendants from the English jails were only a small part of the whole. There were besides them, other English, Jews, Greeks, Swiss, Salzburgers, Scots, Moravians, Huguenots, and Piedmontese.

Yale College graduates particularly early fell in love with Georgia and scarcely a class failed to send representatives to embrace her opportunities. Their activities and interests were varied; they turned their inventive minds to everything from cotton gins to universities. It was in 1783 that Abraham Baldwin, a graduate of Yale and a former teacher there, caught the Georgia fever from General Nathanael Greene, who owned a plantation near Savannah, presented to him by the state.[5] No doubt Baldwin expected to enter into some kind of educational as well as political work in Georgia, especially so since Governor Lyman Hall, another Yale graduate, had just been arguing with his legislature over setting up some "seminaries of learning."[6] The next legislature acted by granting in the law laying out Washington and Franklin counties, 40,000 acres of land (20,000 in each) to endow not "seminaries of learning" but "a college or seminary of learning."[7] The influence of Baldwin may not have been lacking in the change. The legislature was willing to do this small favor for those who wanted a college, for what was 40,000 acres of land when compared with the vast areas extending to the Mississippi; and after all what was the price of land in Georgia!—any head of a family who cared to settle in these same counties could have a thousand acres free![8]

So it was, then, that the germ of a state university was planted in these 40,000 acres on February 25, 1784, five months after the signing of the treaty of peace granting Georgia her independence. Endowing schools with land had long been a favorite method of dealing with the question of education. Henrico College, a phantom institution chartered in Virginia in 1619, had been given 9,000 acres, and William and Mary College received 20,000 acres with its charter.[9]

There was little likelihood or expectation that a university could be set up for some years to come, but at the same time the land was granted, a board of trustees was named, who were to be little more than landlords charged with the impossible task of renting land where it was free for the asking. These gentlemen, eight in all, including the governor (Hall), Baldwin, and ex-governor Nathan Brownson, a Yale graduate, set to work to have 5,000-acre tracts of "land of the first quality" surveyed and set aside. Next, there should be a charter, but who in Georgia knew anything about university charters? Even Baldwin and Hall, Yale graduates, knew nothing about such rare documents. Governor Hall wrote Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale, inquiring about the mechanism of a university, and Baldwin asked him to send Yale's charter down, or one of his own composition.[10] Armed with all the information he could get and filled with the enthusiasm of a builder, Baldwin set to work to convince the trustees and the legislature that a charter should be adopted immediately. He presented one he had worked out, and the legislature with rare good judgment accepted it on January 27, 1785.[11] To John Milledge and Nathan Brownson must also go part of the credit for developing the plan of a university for Georgia. Arguing the terrible risks society undergoes from untamed barbaric nature, the charter calls for the molding influence of a university, to be managed and directed by two bodies, a board of visitors and a board of trustees. These two bodies meeting together were known as the "Senatus Academicus of the University of Georgia." This was an ingenious scheme for linking together the state government and the university under the direct management of one body. The visitors were at first the governor and the councillors, and later when the council was dropped from the state government, the governor, the senators, the superior court judges, and the president of the senate and the speaker of the house.[12] It placed the University under the watchful eye of the people's representatives, and it also gave the University a vantage point from which to argue for support. The trustees were composed of the old board of landlords with six new members added, making fourteen in all.

The scheme of education contemplated in the charter embraced elementary schools, academies, and the University at the top. The University was merely one wing of the beautiful structure, and the president of the University had the important duty of visiting the academies and supervising them. To emphasize the unity of eduation and literature in Georgia, all schools receiving state aid were "considered as parts or members of the University." Baldwin may have received some of his ideas from Jefferson, who had at least three years earlier suggested some such scheme for Virginia.[13] The essential elements of this plan were later used by Quesnay de Beauregard in his system worked out for Jefferson in 1788 and by Dupont de Nemours, for the nation in 1801.[14] South Carolina College followed the Georgia scheme in the latter year.[15]

As might be expected, Baldwin was elected president of this educational establishment (1785), whose worldly possessions consisted of two governing bodies, two academies, and the right to 40,000 acres of land. As supervising academies did not greatly appeal to Baldwin, he entered politics and left the trustees to collect the rents and do whatever else pleased them. They laid off the land into 100-acre lots and soon had a modest rent roll. Booming a town was early discovered to be a quick way to make money.

In 1786 the trustees began the town of Greensboro by selling the greater part of one thousand acres, incidentally reserving enough for another academy, a church, a courthouse, and a jail. Thus would they collect money for a university and prepare students for it.[16] New brooms sweep clean, but they never stay new for long. The task was difficult and the trustees soon tired. The President went away to Philadelphia to help save his country by helping to make a new constitution, and then he entered Congress. The Senatus Academicus continued to remain only a name—and the idea of a university came near fading from men's minds. Some of the trustees died, others moved away, and for eight years preceeding 1794 not a meeting was held. Four more years of inaction followed, and then life suddenly burst forth. Someone discovered that during the past thirteen years about $6,000 had accumulated —was it not time to start the University?

In 1798 the trustees met in Augusta and decided that another meeting should be held the next year at Louisville and that any trustee who was so careless as to be absent without a good excuse should be fined $20. At the appointed time a few stragglers met at the "Coffee House," called the roll, and found a quorum absent. They repeated this performance three times before they could assemble seven out of the thirteen.[17] As the Senatus Academicus had never yet shown signs of life, the governor prodded it with a proclamation calling it to awake and bestir itself.[18] Its first meeting was held in 1799, and all the latent forces of political bickering were let loose over the location of the University. In 1800 the legislature lent a hand by abandoning the Louisville site and limiting the location to the up-country.[19] And so in 1801, as heretofore recounted, the Senatus Academicus finally chose Jackson County.

But Jackson County was extensive in those days, indeed, as large as a half dozen twentieth century Georgia counties, and so the problem was only half settled until the exact spot was picked out. These Senatorial Academicians sublet this practical work to a committee of five headed by President Baldwin, whose duties as United States Senator were not engaging him at this time.[20] His campus had heretofore been the whole state; now he was at last about to get it concentrated within a few acres. In the midst of summer (1801) they set out into the forests to the northwest and did not stop until they had almost entered the Indian territory. The land was hilly and the streams clear and swift. Here at the last tavern, on the edge of all white habitation, they began the intensive search for the inevitable hill from which knowledge should go out to the people. After debating various eminences, they agreed upon a small plateau high above the Oconee River where it swirled down over some rocks near a clump of cedar trees.

This spot was known as the Cedar Shoals among the few frontiersmen who had wandered this far into the northwest, and here it was that Daniel Easley with a keen eye for business and a faith in the future had purchased almost 1,000 acres, and had directed some of the water to run a small mill he had built. Daniel Easley had been one of the commissioners appointed five years previously to locate a county seat for Jackson County, and the law was so unwise as to state that the business of the county should be done at Easley's house until a choice had been made. It may readily be guessed that the difficulties of finding the proper site were insurmountable. Those difficulties were never overcome until two years later (1798) when the commissioners were reorganized and Easley left out.[21] So when these five unsuspecting university promoters happened up on the wily Easley, their quest was at an end. Although the University owned a 5,000-acre tract nearby, Easley convinced this committee that his hill high above the Cedar Shoals was unsurpassed as a location for an institution of learning. He also convinced them that it would take at least 633 acres on which to build that institution. Here was the spectacle of the university organization, land rich and money poor, acquiring more land. John Milledge, one of the committeemen, and a friend and follower of Thomas Jefferson, who must have been particularly pleased with the hill and especially with the fine spring of water flowing out of the side, bought the land and presented it to the University. Easley was careful to reserve some of the most likely region near the river. What name could be more appropriate for the town that should arise here than Athens?—so Athens it became.[22]

Easley's persuasion had not been entirely responsible for this choice; this region was unquestionably beautiful in all its primeval glory, its undulating forests of pine and oak, its yellow jessamine and honeysuckle, and its streams of cool, clear water. Baldwin had long held that just such scenes should surround a college. At best there were great dangers "in the pleasing walks of science"; but if the location were unhealthful "it can be but an infirmary, a habitation of Diseases, rather than a seat of the Muses." Furthermore, there was none of the evils of town life here, and there was room aplenty in which a thriving countryside could develop to furnish the University fresh milk and butter and wholesome vegetables.[23] Such views were common in this age. North Carolina had already in 1793 selected much the same sort of spot for her university, and Thomas Jefferson had expressed exactly the same sentiments to Joseph Priestley in 1800.[24]

But even had such views not been held by the educational philosophers of the time, the up-country would nevertheless have received the University, for more Georgians lived in the up-country than on the coast and what good was a democracy if it could not prove that what fifty-one per cent of the people want is always right and that what forty-nine per cent want is always wrong? The small ribbon of old colonial settlers along the coast, hugging the Savannah up as far as Augusta, the colonial aristocrats, were almost ceasing to be of any moment in this new Georgia—the frontier Georgia. In 1790 there were fewer white settlers here than in Kentucky, and, indeed, the only excuse Georgia had for being a state was that she had been one of the thirteen colonies which had revolted. So apart from the coast the state was distinctly a frontier region with the same kind of Indian wars and Indian fighters as were to be found in the regions west of the Alleghenies. These hordes who swept in and seized the state were just as boisterous and wicked, as brave and hospitable, as inquisitive and reckless as any adventurers anywhere on the frontier from the Great Lakes to the Gulf. They had no ministers to pester them every seventh day; they had by design left Sunday behind. There was not an ordained minister in the up-country in 1784 "except 2 or 3 illiterate Baptist Elders," according to Ezra Stiles.[25] The Episcopal Church which had at one time been foisted upon the people as an Established Church had been cast out of the country with the other trappings of the King. Now, indeed, was there freedom from religion as well as from tyranny. For a generation to come they were to be illiterate, irreligious and happy.

Their occupations and pastimes were those typical of the frontier everywhere. Log-rollings, gander-pullings, shooting for turkeys and beef, heavy drinking, card playing, militia musters, and county court days gave them some outlet for their vigorous natures. They delighted in profane swearing and it went unchecked until the legislature in 1786 laid a fine of five shillings on any officer of the law who should emit an unholy oath, and two shillings and sixpence on the ordinary citizen.[26] The barbaric custom of gouging was particularly relished by participants as well as onlookers. But even in the wildest state of nature, protective measures must sooner or later develop. In 1787 the majesty of the law asserted itself by making it a high crime to "cut out or disable the tongue," gouge out an eye, slit the nose or lips, bite off an ear or nose, or in any other manner disfigure any member of the body. The first offense cost £100 and two hours in the pillory. A second offense carried death without benefit of clergy.[27]

To say that these people originated the University would be foolish. But since there was to be one they must be given credit for being wise enough to accept it as a gift. They had had neither education nor religion before coming to Georgia, as many had lived too far from the older parts of the Colonies where there was some little of both, and they were not very anxious in their new homes to depart from their old ways. Education for the masses had been part of the political philosophy and democratic dogma of the eighteenth century, which had led to the Revolution. The principles of a democracy must be protected from its own self, and educating the masses was an integral and indispensable part of this new democratic system. And furthermore the new order was to be built around the unlimited perfectibility of mankind.[28] The Georgia leaders were first to attempt to apply this doctrine in any American state, and the willingness of the Georgia people to allow this experiment to be made upon them is not to their discredit. Especially is this true when it is remembered that the start was made less than a year after the Revolution had ended, when the state was impoverished and almost ruined.

The lowlanders had stared with wonderment on this rampant barbarian invasion, which turned into unconcealed hostility when these rough frontiersmen began to seize every part of the government which the New Englanders had not got hold on. These uplanders first made a descent on Savannah and marched away with the capital up to Augusta, where they rested a few years before carrying it on to Louisville—so far into the wilderness that a town had not yet grown up there. But the *West* found it difficult to keep ahead of the *East;* so in 1807 these Westerners again carried the capital on to Milledgeville. The University was also legitimate spoils worth having, and, of course, the coast could not have it. The northwesternmost verge of white habitation got it. Savannah and the coast could make little complaint in losing it, as the coastal climate was undoubtedly deadly. In 1785 no less than three young Yale graduates had died in Savannah.[29] But nevertheless, there were many mutterings of dissatisfaction on virtually hiding the University up in the hills on the edge of the Indian country, and Governor Tattnall in 1801 admitted that a more central location would have been better. Before going out of office the following year he expressed the hope that the opposition would die down and that "the fabric of science, [would] rise rapidly into view."[30] The friends of the University, in defense, argued not only the beauty and healthfulness of the location, but called attention to the fine shad that ascended the river "as high as Athens in great perfection." As a further health item the rather strange phenomenon was noted that "what little vapour rises at any time from the river is always attracted by the opposite hills, toward the rising sun."[31]

After climbing the University hill and surveying the country undulating in every direction, Baldwin no doubt had a sort of feeling of sublimity, for choosing the site was the last of his official acts. He had now brought the Flying Dutchman into port and had anchored it. Being a United States Senator and the president of a university that must now be built up were incompatible. So at the meeting of the Senatus Academicus when the committee had been appointed to select the site in Jackson County he had resigned the presidency into the hands of Josiah Meigs, another Yale graduate and former tutor there. Meigs had been instructed by Baldwin at Yale and ever after held him in high esteem, expressing the hope later that it would always be remembered his appointment had come through Baldwin's recommendation. In 1800 Meigs had first been brought to the attention of the Senatus Academicus, when he had been elected a professor with the understanding that he would succeed to the presidency if Baldwin should resign.[32] He was to have $1,500 a year, and $400 should be given him for his expenses in reaching Georgia.[33] His acquaintance and standing in New England were high. Among his classmates were Noah Webster, Joel Barlow, and Oliver Wolcott.[34] Into his hands was now cast the difficult duty of molding a university—a work the gigantic importance of which he keenly realized.

If bricks cannot be made without straw, how can a university be set up without money? The lack of money had been the cause of the past sixteen years' delay. In 1798 Aquilla Scott, the treasurer, reported about $7,500 on hand, but when he was asked to produce it the next year, the Senatus Academicus found that he had peculated to the extent of more than $900.[35] But the University must have money if it was to arise—from whence should it come? The state had given the charter and some land—was not that enough? At least the University builders at this time were afraid to ask for more. Instead they cast themselves on the bounty of individual Georgians, circulating lists for subscriptions and appealing for aid in the newspapers of the state.[36] The citizenry were not greatly moved by such impractical causes as education —all except James Gunn, a nephew of the Gunn of malodorous Yazoo Fraud fame, who gave $1,000, with the feeling, perhaps, of atoning for his uncle's evil doings.[37] The only hope remaining was with hat in hand to approach the legislature with the established fact of a university building already begun and a prayer for money with which to finish it. This body agreed to advance $5,000 to be well secured and to be returned within five years with ample interest.[38] The next year (1803) the state gave the trustees permission to sell all their holdings in Hancock County and all that John Milledge had given, except 37 acres "for a college yard." These various maneuvers produced by 1804 over $30,000—no mean sum for higher education in those days.[39]

In the fall of 1801 President Meigs, leaving his family in Augusta, came up to Athens, the place in the forest where the University should be set up, and engaged lodging at Easley's home—the only dwelling "in town." Soon the woodsman's ax was busy clearing out a campus, and men with chains and pegs were staking off the sites for various structures. A dwelling for the president held priority and Easley secured the contract to build it. He also turned his home into a tavern for the numerous workmen who were attracted to this town in the building. A large three-story brick structure, patterned after the principal hall at Yale, began to arise on the crest of the hill. Here the University and all of its business should be housed. The contract went to David Gaddy and Jett Thomas, who promised to commence and finish it without delay. Armed with $1,000 they went to Augusta, a hundred miles away, for nails and lime. Also President Meigs called on his brother, the Indian agent at Hiawassee, Tennessee, to secure permission of the Cherokees to bring lime through their boundaries. Two miles from Athens they found fine clay which other contractors promised to mold into 300,000 or more nice red bricks.[40] The first college building south of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, now began to rise above surrounding shrubs and saplings. By 1805 the western half had been finished, which the trustees jubilantly named Franklin College in honor of honest Ben, who personified learning and wisdom and who had at one time endeared himself to Georgians by acting as their Colonial agent in London. The next year the building stood complete, all except two porches on the south side added six years later, and President Meigs proudly announced that "Better accommodations for students cannot be found in any College in the United States."[41] The friends of learning everywhere could justly greet this new edifice on the hill, which compared so favorably with other colleges of the country—even with Yale, its inspiration, which had at this time only two small dormitories and a chapel. Franklin College was decorated with shining "electric conductors," and an insurance policy in the Phoenix Insurance Company of London was taken out to give it further protection. A new sun had risen in Georgia.