

# When the Boys Came to Town

**George W. Miles had a vision. St. Albans, a new preparatory school for boys was to form future southern gentlemen and put Virginia's newest city, Radford, on the map. The young educator from Smyth County thought big. He named the new school St. Albans after the famous St. Albans School in England, 20 miles northwest of London, founded in 948 A.D. as part of a monastery and one of the oldest boy's schools in the world. Just like its English counterpart, the site for the new school was on a steep hill overlooking the river and town.**



**St. Albans, built in 1892**

In fact, by the time the two St. Albans buildings were finished in September 1892, the rapidly growing town of Radford had been incorporated as a city and the brand new “Iron Horse” passenger bridge (modern-day Memorial Bridge) spanned the New River.

Exquisite mansions went up in the West End and a super-sized City Council (four members from the West Ward, four from the East and one mayor) was busy with building a bridge over Connolly's Run. With its growing population, its favorable location as a gateway to West Virginia's coalfields and a thriving business community, Radford was regarded as Southwest Virginia's boomtown. George W. Miles, the founder and headmaster of St. Albans, was determined not to miss the opportunity.

On opening day in September 1892, 50 dormitory students from all over the South and 20 to 30 day students (living in Radford but coming over for classes) listened to the words of Thomas Nelson Page. The famous Virginian lawyer and writer had a clear message for the new institution: a good education stressed physical condition



first and scholarly endeavors second. In this he was in complete agreement with Headmaster Miles, who had handpicked some of the best athletes from the South for his opening class.

The forward-thinking Miles subscribed to the funny notion that a successful school must be built around championship football and baseball teams. Today, more than 100 years later, with collegiate sports dominating campus life and a crucial component of university fundraising, one can safely say: he had a point..

He also had an eye for talent. St. Albans became one of the major athletic powerhouses in the state, regularly playing UVA, Virginia Tech and other universities – to the point where other prep schools didn't want to compete anymore.

This athletic prowess must have left little room for scholarly excellence. The atmosphere at the school was rough and competitive. It clearly favored the stronger boys (or bullies as we would say today) and made short work of the more cerebral types like one E. Blackburn Runyon, whose painful experience at the school was poignantly summed up by a yearbook editor in 1904: "E. Blackburn Runyon did not return after Christmas, much to our sorrow, as it put a stop to the football games on the terrace in which he figured prominently as the football."

The initial success of the school had a profound impact on Radford. The comparatively wealthy students provided a new source of income for the local economy. Whole families moved to the city in order to send their sons to this elite institution. Athletic success at St. Albans made the city known around the state. The annual Opening German and Easter German (the "German Waltz" was a popular dance at the time that lives on in so-called German clubs on campuses throughout the US) were important social events that attracted the female offspring of Radford's leading families. Soon, the area around St. Albans became known as North Radford, even though it officially was and is part of Pulaski County.





St. Albans baseball team in 1902.

Under the leadership of George W. Miles the school prospered, even after a stockmarket collapse in 1893 brought Radford's first boom to a screeching halt. The enterprising young professor ran the Radford Advance, a local newspaper, and even took over the operation of the public utilities for some time. According to one source, he was even considered to serve as the first president of the University of Virginia but didn't get the job. He supposedly then moved to Marion, where he was involved in the building of the Marion & Rye Valley Railroad. Other sources tell that he died of cancer in 1903. In any case, his departure or death dealt a serious blow to the school whose student numbers slowly dwindled. St. Albans School for Boys closed in 1911.

Five years later another visionary, Dr. John C. King, bought the two magnificent buildings and opened the St. Albans Sanatorium, one of the first psychiatric treatment facilities of this kind in the nation. It went on to become one of the finest in the nation, too. Read more about this part of St. Albans past in the second part of this little series.

## A Place to Heal - St. Albans Sanatorium

It was the vision and energy of a young man that started St. Albans Sanatorium - just like 20 years before when George Miles started his boys' school. Dr. John C. King had been superintendent of the Southwestern Lunatic Asylum - nowadays called Southwestern Virginia Mental Health Institute (SWVMHI) - in Marion. He was presumably not satisfied with how things were run in Marion and set out to realize his



**vision of a facility that could produce a higher percentage of recovery for mentally-ill patients.**



**St. Albans, from the air in the 1950s.**

Starting in Germany, the treatment and perception of mentally ill patients had just begun to be considered a scientific endeavor. Prior to this period, “psychiatry” was a mere administration of people with socially unacceptable and untreatable behaviors.

It was only at the end of the 19th century that German pioneer Emil Kraepelin first classified mental diseases and described conditions like manic depression or schizophrenia. Kraepelin believed that psychiatric diseases are mainly caused by biological and genetic disorders, a view that is widely shared today. In 1915, however, psychiatry was in its infancy; the treatment of mental illness was not one of the most highly regarded fields of medicine.

To realize his dream, Dr. King took considerable risks, both career-wise as well as financially. With \$500 of his own money, he formed a corporation and with \$16,000 in borrowed funds he acquired the Saint Albans buildings along with 56 acres of land. The buildings were thoroughly renovated and, on January 15, 1916, the first four patients were admitted.

In the tradition of other treatment facilities of the time, St. Albans Sanatorium included a farm which, according to an old brochure, “[...] affords ample space for out-of-door games, diversional exercises and employment, also vegetable and flower gardens, an adequate dairy herd and extensive poultry-raising, all of which are interesting and helpful to the patients.”



St. Albans Sanatorium struggled initially with financial problems. However, Dr. King and his wife kept the hospital open and gradually expanded its services and reputation. The building of the Radford Arsenal and the rapid population growth associated with it had a profound impact on St. Albans. Patient numbers rose and, since it was the only hospital in the community at the time, it also provided general medical care.

To accommodate all these patients, the staff worked six days a week while living in quarters provided by the hospital. By 1945, the total number of patients treated during its first 29 years was 6509 and its staff numbered 48.

The hospital continued to grow in the following decades. St. Albans became a fully recognized hospital in 1960, and started opening outpatient clinics in Roanoke, Blacksburg, and Beckley, WV. In 1980, in order to stay up-to-date with advancing technology, parts of St. Albans were relocated into a more modern \$8 million facility. In the late 1980s, the institution on the New River was the Commonwealth's only private, full service, not-for-profit psychiatric hospital. It was a source of pride for many people living in Radford and Pulaski County.

The glory days of the old St. Albans were, however, almost over. In the 1990s, the hospital became part of the Carilion Health System, which moved ahead with plans to relocate it to another site, eventually building the "New River Medical Center" at its current location off of Interstate 81. The old buildings and the surrounding 78 acres became a gift from Carilion to the Radford University Foundation in 2004. Whereas the addition houses RU West Campus, the historic buildings have been virtually empty ever since. With the planned sale of the property, the future of this landmark – a center of learning and healing for more than a century – is still uncertain.

Two men put their dreams into St. Albans. George Miles wanted to establish an elite boys' school overlooking the New River. Dr. John King aspired to make a better psychiatric care facility. It was their visions that put St. Albans on the map. Maybe it is time for another one.

### **UPDATE ON ST. ALBANS (January 2008)**

The demolition of the 1890s structure was halted in December 2007, and a group of concerned citizens from around the New River Valley was about to begin a proper historical review as mandated by the federal government. The Radford University Foundation, current owner of the 78-acre property, is now trying to sell the complex,

which leaves the future of the historic buildings in question. The Radford Heritage Foundation still supports a thorough review of all options that would preserve these magnificent buildings.