

6-1-2003

## John Plyler's Vision

Beatrice Dennis Plyler

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### Recommended Citation

Plyler, Beatrice Dennis (2003) "John Plyler's Vision," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol46/iss2/9>

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precious jewel. On October 1, 1964, my prediction came true, as Old Main caught fire. Although the building was only damaged by the blaze, the rest of it was soon leveled.

With the loss of this treasure, chain saws and bulldozers came in to flatten the beautiful hills and vales of the old campus and to remove 98 percent of the trees. One could never even dream of what had been there before. A second-rate shopping center, called the "Bell Tower Mall," was erected on the property, but it lasted only about 15 years. After much negotiation, Greenville County bought the mall, remodeled it and dedicated it for much-needed office space. County Square, as it is now known, made the property once more an asset to the city.

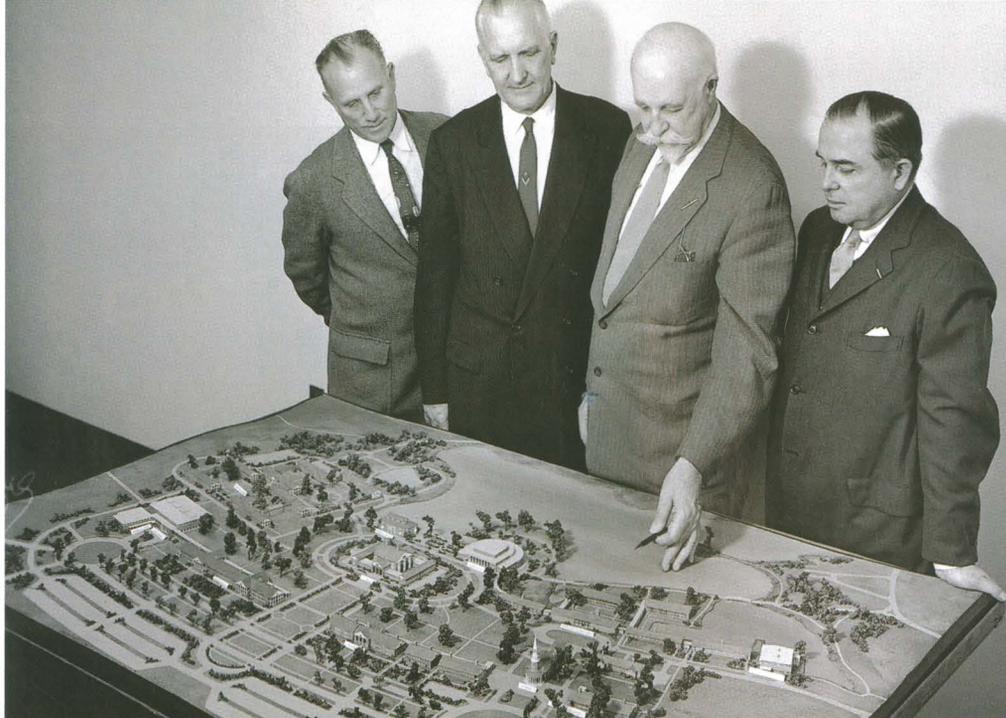
The choice property of the Woman's College downtown was sold to the city of Greenville for development. Later named Heritage Green, it became home for the county library, art museum and Little Theatre. The finest property on the Woman's College campus to succumb to the wrecker's ball was Ramsay Fine Arts Center. Its beautiful columns were given to Anderson College.

Today, it seems clear that both downtown college properties have become genuine assets for Greenville. And there is no question that the new campus has been the catalyst for Furman's growth and progress over the last 50 years. ●

*The author taught at Furman from 1953-88 and is professor emeritus of religion.*

## Sources

For more on the planning and construction of the present campus, see *Academy and College: The History of the Woman's College of Furman University*, by Judith T. Bainbridge (Mercer University Press, 2001); *A History of South Carolina Baptists*, by Joe M. King (South Carolina Baptist Convention, 1964); and *Furman University: Toward a New Identity 1925-1975*, by Alfred S. Reid (Duke University Press, 1976).



## JOHN PLYLERS VISION

*Plyler (second from left) and the architects study a model of the new campus.*

*This article is adapted from a talk given by Beatrice Dennis Plyler, Furman's First Lady from 1939-64, during an October 2001 program commemorating the university's 175th anniversary. Her husband, John, the university's longest-serving president, died in April 1966.*

I'm often asked, "What do you think John Plyler would say if he saw Furman today?" I usually answer that he would be very pleased with what has transpired, but I'm always tempted to say that he *had* seen Furman as it is today.

John was a man of great vision. Even prior to the purchase of the property on which the current campus sits, we were standing in France, on the grounds of Versailles, and talking about the beauty that fountains could bring to a college campus. In England we saw the work of their gardeners. It was not by chance that the first building constructed on the new campus was a greenhouse and that one of the first employees dedicated to this campus was an English gardener, Ronald Hebblethwaite.

John also asked that the water flow from the springs on this property be measured to determine what size lake it would support. He wanted a lake on the campus. The stone bridge at the upper end of the lake was designed from a sketch of a bridge in Scotland.

When it was time to select the architects for the campus, John was most impressed with the firm of Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, Kehoe and Dean, and for a number of reasons. They had designed buildings for schools in New England, among them the dining facility for Harvard Business School. They had for some time served as coordinating architects for Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, they were one of the eight U.S. firms selected to design the memorials for each of the eight overseas World War II cemeteries (their

assignment was Cambridge, England), and the senior partners in the firm had held faculty appointments at Harvard or MIT. John wanted the best architects for the new campus project.

Similarly, he selected Innocente and Webel, a landscape architectural firm in New York. General Dean, Mr. Perry and Dr. Webel were professionals with whom John enjoyed special relationships.

Manly Hall and Furman Hall were completed in 1955 and the men of the class of 1959 moved to the campus in September 1955. John and I moved with them, as we left the president's home on the men's campus downtown to live in the faculty apartment in Manly Hall for a term, while waiting for a home we were building near the new campus to be completed. For the 1956-57 academic year and the next, all students lived on the downtown campuses, where they crowded into every available space. In the fall of 1958 all men and some senior women moved permanently to the new campus.

In February 1957 John was interviewed for a national broadcast on NBC radio. The interviewer asked about the rows of trees being planted on campus while many buildings were still under construction. John's reply was, and I quote, "We hope to make our campus second to none in the nation in beauty. To this end we have planted more than 5,000 trees and shrubs."

You can now understand why I say that John had seen Furman as it is today, not only in the beauty of the campus, but as a leading liberal arts college.