



PRO VIRILI PARTE

P • A • P • E • R • S

Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of
Birmingham University School

Issue No. 1

By Amanda Neel Davis¹

Throughout 2022, The Altamont School has celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Birmingham University School (also known as B.U.S.). On September 10, 2022, there was a dinner for all B.U.S. alumni in Altamont's Patton Gymnasium. On December 10, 2022, an historic marker was dedicated in front of the first school building located at 1211 28th Street South, just off Highland Avenue at the south end of Rhodes Park. Fortunately, almost 10 years before the centennial celebration, Chris Thomas, Altamont Class of 1990, agreed to write a history of B.U.S., which was published in 2010. Thomas earned a B. A. in history from Tulane University in 1994 and his M.A. from the University of Alabama in 1996. In the Fall of 1996, he returned to Altamont to teach history. When beginning his book project, Thomas found B.U.S. records to be extremely sketchy and scattered. Even so, from *Omni-BUS* newspapers; *Equestria* annuals; newspaper clippings; as well as hundreds of interviews and correspondences a picture of B.U.S. as an institution slowly took shape for him. The product was a well-researched account with copious photos and footnotes. Thomas's book serves as a main resource for this series of six centennial newsletters which attempt to tell a success story of how a small school like B.U.S., while always struggling financially, became one of the top ten high schools in Alabama, and the only one located within the city limits of Birmingham.²

Why *Pro Virili Parte*?

In the foreword to Chris Thomas's 2010 book, *History of Birmingham University School*, Sarah Whiteside, Head of Altamont School from 2007 until 2018, provided our newsletter title: ³

Just inside the entry of The Altamont School hangs the Birmingham University School seal embossed with the motto *Pro Virili Parte*. This daily reminder of the earliest roots of Altamont is just one example of the inestimable debt we owe to our forefathers who, under the direction of Captain Basil Manly Parks, conceived and created a new institution of learning for the young men of Birmingham.

Mrs. Whiteside first came to Altamont as a Latin teacher in 1978 and translates the motto from Latin literally as "for the manly part." She explains further that this phrase was an idiom used by the ancient Roman statesman Cicero, which meant at the time "to the best of one's abilities." Mrs. Whiteside's foreword makes the point that the *pro-virili-parte* vision still flourishes on the Altamont campus, located atop Red Mountain less than two miles from the original school building. Although the Altamont motto – "Truth, Knowledge, Honor" moves away from the gender-specific nature of *pro virili parte*, members of the Altamont community – faculty, students, alumni, etc. – still strive to live out the Ciceronian ideal of doing everything to the best of one's ability.

¹ Amanda Neel Davis (Brooke Hill Class of 1966) was a math teacher on the first Altamont faculty in 1975. From 1991-1996, she served as Altamont's first Director of Development.

² List of top-ten high schools (including public and private) was from a mid-2022 AI.com LEDE.

³ Christopher Thomas *A History of Birmingham University School*, page v.

Birmingham University School 1922-1929

While not incorporated until 1871, and unlike Atlanta, Chattanooga, or New Orleans, Birmingham, Alabama was a “new-south city.” By the early 1920s, the iron and steel industries were booming and included numerous mills, foundries, mines, and fabricating plants. Other industries – textiles, lumber, and machine tools – were also being established. In 1922, a group of Birmingham’s first industrial leaders recruited Basil Parks, a highly respected instructor at Marion Institute to provide a preparatory education for their sons, which was focused on academic excellence, discipline, and honor. In addition to its emphasis on discipline, the school’s military flavor was apparent in several ways, one of which was the insistence of Headmaster Parks that teachers be referred to as “Captain,” (pronounced “Cap’m” by the young southern gentlemen).⁴ For the first few years, the school did not have its own building but met on the upper floor of a building on Highland Avenue, which also housed Margaret Allen’s school for girls.

1926: The First “Schoolhouse”



As enrollment increased, patrons purchased property near the corner of Highland Avenue and 28th Street. In 1925, construction of a new school building began at 1211 28th Street, South (known as Waucoma Street at the time) and in early 1926, six teachers and 69 students moved in. Fortunately, Parks had placed B.U.S. in an ideal location to be the “neighborhood school” for Birmingham’s most prominent families. Highland Avenue residents could either walk or ride their bicycles to school each day. The school was also within walking or biking distance of newly built homes

on the Red Mountain crest with their spectacular views of the city below. It was even a convenient location for new suburbs, just over Red Mountain in Shades Valley.

Although originally painted red, this 1926 building retains many vestiges of the original appearance – both outside and inside. As one walks up the steps to the portico and enters the first-floor hallway, a visitor (almost 100 years later) can visualize the students of long-ago changing classes – laughing and taunting each other as boys and young men tend to

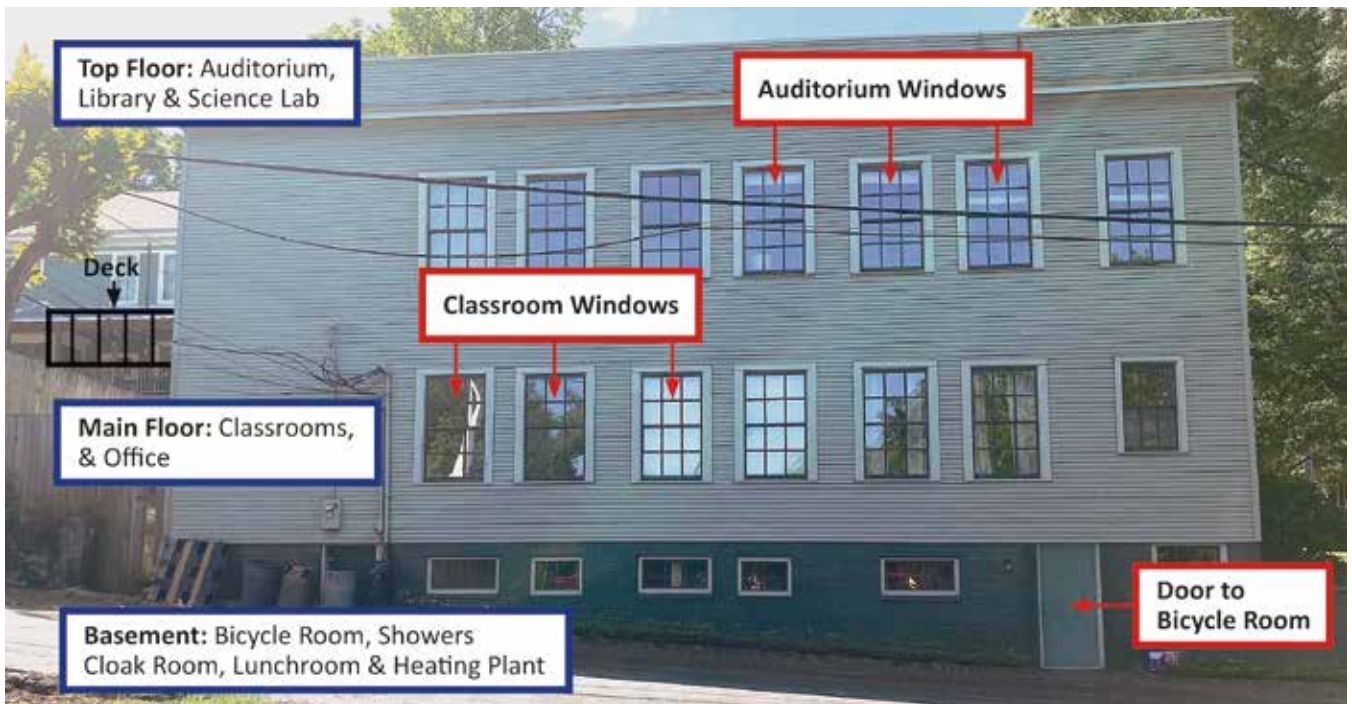


⁴ Thomas book, p 11



do. To the right of the entrance are two stairways, one leading up and one leading down. On the top floor there was a library, an auditorium, and a laboratory. These upstairs rooms are now configured as offices. In the basement, was a bicycle room, cloak room, lunchroom, and the heating plant.

Students would arrive early in the morning. Many rode their bicycles and would enter through the basement bicycle room. Before going upstairs, they would go to the cloak room, hang up their coats, and get books they needed. Captain Parks was especially proud of the modern steel lockers added in 1930 through the efforts of the B.U.S. mothers.⁵



⁵ Thomas p 19

The 1905 Peters House

On the uphill end of the property was the Peters House (1215 28th Street, South), which became the home of Captain Parks and his wife.⁶ Its style was reminiscent of the Victorian shingle style but with the distinctive Birmingham touch of rock walls and pillars. The 1905 Peters House and the B.U.S. school building belong to a collection still-standing historic buildings of various styles which are today interspersed among new apartments, offices, restaurants, and shops. Sidewalks connect three lovely parks along Highland Avenue – Caldwell, Rhodes, and Rushton.

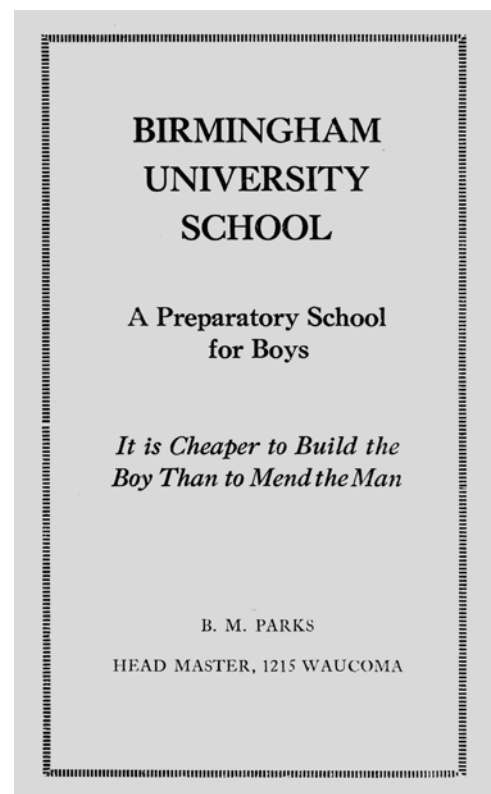


Building the Boy: Rigor, Discipline, and Effort

The overarching goal for Headmaster Parks and his faculty was to offer the future leaders of this new city a college preparatory education at home – without going away to boarding schools in states to the north and east of Alabama. The new school’s curriculum was classical and rigorous. Using the nomenclature common to English public schools and New England academies, B.U.S. organized its students into “forms” rather than grades. The eight forms, described on the “Courses of Study and Texts” page of the 1925-26 B.U.S. handbook, correspond to today’s Altamont structure of Lower School (grades 5-8) and Upper School (grades 9-12).

Mathematics was the subject listed first in all eight forms. Captain Parks believed that being able to think quantitatively while standing on one’s feet would give the B.U.S. boys a step forward on their future educational paths and in life. Captain Parks frequently held mental arithmetic competitions. B.U.S. alumni who were interviewed for Chris Thomas’s 2010 book remembered William Caldwell, Caldwell Marks, Pete Marzoni, and Joe Farley as frequent winners in these competitions.⁷ Mathematics was followed in the courses of study with English grammar, reading, writing, and spelling, disciplines now frequently referred to by educators as “the Language Arts.”

To attest to rigor in grammar, Pete McGriff who attended BUS from 1929 to 1936 remembered having to diagram sentences that were a paragraph long.⁸ Other students remembered being required to define and spell arcane and difficult words found by their English teachers through “microscopic examination” of



⁶ Thomas, p 16

⁷ Thomas, page 26

⁸ Thomas, p 22

COURSES OF STUDY AND TEXTS

First Form

Mathematics—School Arithmetic, Book One; Wentworth-Smith. New Mental Arithmetic; Brooks.
English—Modern English, Book One; Emerson and Bender.

Reading—Selections from Fifth Readers.

Writing—Palmer Method.

Spelling—Mastery of Words, Book One; Arnold.

Geography—New Geography, Book One; Frye.

Second Form

Mathematics—School Arithmetic, Book Two; Wentworth-Smith. New Mental Arithmetic, Brooks.

English—Modern English, Book One; Emerson and Bender.

Reading—Selections from Sixth Readers.

Writing—Palmer Method.

Spelling—Mastery of Words, Book One; Arnold.

Geography—New Geography, Book Two; Atwood.

Third Form

Mathematics—Complete Arithmetic; Wentworth-Smith.

English—Modern English, Book Two; Emerson and Bender.

Reading—Advanced Literary Reader; Young and Field.

Writing—Palmer Method.

Spelling—Common Word Speller, Book Two; Lewis.

Geography—New Geography, Book Two; Atwood.

History—School History of the U. S.; Stevenson.

Fourth Form

Mathematics—Wentworth-Smith Complete Arithmetic. Complete Algebra; Slaughter and Lennes.

English—Modern English, Book Two; Emerson and Bender.

Reading—Advanced Literary Reader; Young and Field.

Writing—Palmer Method.

Spelling—Common Word Speller, Book Two; Lewis.

Latin—Elements of Latin; D'ooge.

Fifth Form

Mathematics—Complete Algebra; Slaughter and Lennes.

English—Effective English, Junior; Claxton and McGuinness. Also Composition and the Classic Readings.

History—Man's Early Progress; West.

Latin—Elements of Latin; D'ooge.

Sixth Form

Mathematics—Complete Algebra; Slaughter and Lennes.

English—Effective English, Junior; Claxton and McGuinness. Studies in Grammar, Hermann. Composition and Classics.

Latin—Caesar.

History—Modern Progress; West.

Seventh Form

Mathematics—Robbins.

English—Effective English; Claxton and McGuinness. Handbook of Composition; Wooley. Composition and Classics.

Latin—Cicero.

History—English History; Montgomery.

Spanish—Beginning.

Biology—Biology for High Schools, Smallwood, Revelly, Bailey.

Eighth Form

Mathematics—Solid Geometry, Wentworth-Smith. Plane Trigonometry; Wentworth-Smith.

English—Effective English; Claxton and McGuinness. Handbook of Composition; Wooley. Composition and Classics.

Latin—Vergil.

History—An American History; Stevenson.

Spanish—Selected Readings.

Chemistry—Essentials of Chemistry; Hester and Smith.

Physics—Millikan and Gale.

"THE HIGHER EDUCATION is an adventure of the soul; its aim is to quicken the imagination, invigorate the mind, and ennoble the spirit; its practical service comes from giving the world men as leaders with some sweep of the centuries in their thought and some deep intelligence in their actions."—Sterling Tracy in the *Boston Transcript*.

various classics.⁹ Additionally, Captain Parks and his faculty believed training in public speaking was necessary for success in any field. Thus, all boys, regardless of form, were expected to deliver weekly speeches in the auditorium in front of the entire student body. Topics were chosen by the students themselves. Faculty approved topics, judged the speeches, and selected winners.

Classroom discipline was rarely a problem, as more than half of the faculty came to B.U.S. from Marion Institute. Teachers demanded strict attention to the day's lessons and the boys responded appropriately. Although class time was business-like, friendly conversations among both students and faculty took place

⁹ Thomas, page 13



in the downstairs and upstairs halls between classes. In addition to discipline in academic pursuits, the discipline of military-style physical fitness was also taught. The school was located just a few blocks up the hill from Rhodes Park which became the athletic field. Each day Captain Parks would shout “Fifth Form Rise! About Face! March! So, off they went to the park, walking in the military formation like a platoon of soldiers on parade. The daily program included calisthenics – sit-ups, push-ups, jumping-jacks, etc. For the annual competition, Captain Parks brought in a few local army officers who selected winners based on form and endurance.¹⁰

Captain Parks and his faculty required a considerable amount of daily effort from the students with the expectation that every student could succeed academically. Those whose lessons were “poorly prepared” were forced to spend an extra hour at school each day correcting their mistakes. Students who were unable to complete their work during the week were required to come to school for half a day on Saturdays. According to Parks,

“For those who have the ability and do not try, an hour after school is punishment. For those who do their best, the hour is for the purpose of giving them individual attention.”¹¹

The Spirit of Fellowship and Teaching Excellence

The Birmingham University School prospered throughout the 1920s, and during these early years, characteristics which would come to define B.U.S. (and later Altamont) were already well established. First characteristic was “the spirit of fellowship” as described by Herbert E. Smith, Jr. in his 1931 editorial in the

¹⁰ Thomas, p 27

¹¹ Thomas, p 21



B.U.S. school photograph in front of the Walker House, April 1927. FRONT ROW: Webb Badham, Page Hill, Walker Percy, Milner Benedict, William T. Estes, Billy Chenoweth, John Sharp Roberts, Jack Meyer, Steven Hettrick, Bobby Meyer, Roy Knight, Bob Montgomery, William Miller, —, David Roberts, John L. McConnell, Angus Randolph, Blaine Brownell, Buck Harris, Beach Chenoweth, Pete Rushton, Renaud Benedict, Edwin Finch, Billy Caldwell SECOND ROW: Joe Barker, Henry Sims, Alex Montgomery, Shelby Walker, John Ray Angwin, Leo Loeb, Frank Miller, David Meyer, Paschal Shook, Chester Smith, Allen Green, Dewitt Willcox, Leo Rich, David Barr, Paul J. Benrimo, Robert A. Mickle, Wilmer D. Webb, James White, Newell C. Griffin, Basil M. Parks, Sam Caldwell THIRD ROW: Billy Knopf, Reid Oliver, Perrin Porter, James Howard, Mortimer Jordan, Herbert Tutwiler, —, Abe Soloman, Haygood Bohler, Olin Floyd, Frank Floyd, Paul Ivy, Bill Barker, Gideon Wynne, Nelson Snow, Mac Roundtree, Delmar Hill, George Smith, Edward Warren FOURTH ROW: Donald Cowan, R.D. Burnett, —, Ronrico, Sam Stubbins, Paul O'Dell, Gene Munger, Tom Snead, Oscar Angwin, Laurence Weller, Richard Coe, Morris Benners, Alfred Walker, Hill Ferguson, Donald Comer, Ernest Oliver, Edwin Abbott, Frank Smith

school's newspaper *The Omni-BUS*. Although only a teenager, Smith recognized the lifelong value of the camaraderie within this small learning community. In looking at this 1927 photo we can envision these boys as a team. Yet, Captain Parks and his faculty also taught the boys that being competitive as an individual greatly enhanced the team's power. In looking back, we can also imagine the spirit of fellowship present in 1931 as a prelude for B.U.S of the late 1960's and early 1970s when Coach Phil Mulkey's boys won an amazing number of state athletic titles.¹²

The second characteristic present throughout our school's 100-year history is teaching excellence. The small numbers and faculty leadership at B.U.S. created an educational experience far more individualized than a boarding school or a public high school. Expectations were high for every student, not just those at the top of the class. Pictured in the 1927 school photo are six extraordinary men who were teachers, friends, mentors, coaches, and sometimes drill sergeants. They preached daily sermons about their belief that every boy could be successful – with effort every student at B.U.S. could “win,” whether it be a mental arithmetic prize, an athletic competition, or the best speech of the week.

Truly inspiring teachers also have high standards for themselves. They always teach to the top of the class and never “dumb-down” anything. The six men in the 1927 photograph will be followed by well-educated and committed men *and women* who will shape the lives of future students. Inspired by the Ciceronian ideal of personal best, they will continue to seek ways of reaching each student no matter where he or she is in the quest for knowledge and truth.

¹² In Chapter Four: Glory Days (1959-1968) Thomas's book cites the abundance of Alabama state titles. For a school with fewer than 200 students, this feat still ranks among the most impressive accomplishments in the history of Alabama high school athletics.

B.U.S. Connections with Marion Military Institute

In reading about the early years of B.U.S., we learn about the strong influences of Marion Military Institute, beginning in 1922 when Basil Manly Parks came to Birmingham along with two additional Marion faculty members to establish a new preparatory school for boys in the Highland Park neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama. Furthermore, in addition to Parks, the first Headmaster, the second headmaster, Captain Robert Louis Johnson, also came from Marion in 1929. Here is a brief history of Marion Military Institute.

In 1842, Marion Military Institute (MMI) was founded as a part of Howard College in Marion, Alabama. In 1887, the Southern Baptist Convention moved Howard to Birmingham. At the time of the move, Howard's president Colonel James T. Murfee chose to remain in Marion and formally establish Marion Military Institute on the existing campus. Further-



Captain Robert Louis Johnson

more, Marion's second president, Hopson O. Murfee was an innovative educator and an advocate for a student run government that focused on honor and ethics. Thus, MMI was one of the first schools in the South to establish a student-run SGA and honor system which are still part of the Corps today (www.marionmilitary.edu)

In 1910, Marion established its "Army Navy Department." The Army ROTC program was introduced in 1916 in response to World War I. Until 2006, MMI continued as an all-male private institution with a high-school program. Today, MMI is a public, coed community college and a part of the Alabama's Community College System. In recent publications, Marion Military Institute was ranked the #1 community college in the state and the #19 community college in the nation.



The Altamont School

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The mission of the Altamont School is to improve the fabric of society by graduating well-educated individuals capable of independent thinking and innovative ideas. To this end, the school attracts, nurtures, and challenges students whose commitment to truth, knowledge, and honor will prepare them not only for the most rigorous college programs but also for productive lives.