

## Allen Academy

Author unknown<sup>1</sup>

c.1978

Allen Academy, the oldest boy's preparatory school in Texas, traces its beginnings to Madison Academy, founded by John Hodges and Rivers A. Allen, sons of Nathaniel and Nancy (Hodges) Allen at Madisonville, Texas, March 16, 1886. The Allens in America migrated from Maine to Virginia during the early nineteenth century, and from there westward and eventually settled at Verona, Mississippi, where Nathaniel and Nancy Allen sought to provide a good, sound education for their children. John Hodges Allen, their second son, was born November 10, 1854, and later commenced his education in the community school at Verona. After the Civil War he attended Verona Male Academy founded by Captain Richard M. Leavell.<sup>2</sup> Here John H. Allen received a classical education and excelled in Mathematics. Through the influence of Headmaster James G. Dupree he got the idea of establishing a private school of his own. Upon receipt of a state teacher's certificate in 1882, Allen became the principal of a private school at Tupelo, Mississippi. Two years later he decided to leave Mississippi to seek a teaching position in Texas.

John H. Allen arrived in Houston, and from there rode the train to Navasota, where he arrived on October 10, 1884. He found employment as principal of the nearby Bedias Community School for 1884-1885. In 1885 he received a teaching position at Rock Prairie, sixty<sup>3</sup> miles from Huntsville, and in 1886 became the principal of Midway School. In September 1886, he was teaching in the public district school of Madisonville. On March 16, 1886, Allen purchased the school property, and thereafter the Madison

---

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: An author's name of Barbara Leverage LeUnes is inserted in ink, probably by D. Parmelee who made additional notations in this history. However, the author herself states that she did not write this narrative, although it makes extensive use of the materials in her thesis. The initials "D.P." most likely are those of Deolece Parmelee, who worked for the Texas Historical Commission for many years.

<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: Handwritten marginal note: "Verona is about ten miles sw of Tupelo, MS. Richard M. Leavell later (1889) became a professor of English, (1890s) and Professor of Logic at the University of Mississippi; Allen had good training. s/ D. Parmelee, 2-18-1978."

<sup>3</sup> Editor's Note: unclear on copy. Current mileage as of 2008 is given.

district school became known as Madison Academy.<sup>4</sup> The school continued to receive state aid. Allen married Miss Fannie Austin Burtis, one of the assistants at the school. During the summers for several years Allen conducted a series of teacher training institutes.

On June 4, 1895 John H. Allen applied to the Secretary of State in Austin to change the name of his school to Madison College. The petition was granted, and thereafter the school was conducted for academic purposes not only as a primary and elementary school but also as a secondary or high school level school. In the Fall of 1895, plans were made with his youngest brother, Rivers O. Allen, for the latter to leave his principalship in Lynnville, Tennessee, to join him at Madison College at the beginning of the 1896 school year.

Rivers C. Allen was born in Mississippi, November 1, 1865, educated at Verona Male Academy and at the National Normal University in Lebanon, Ohio. Later, while teaching in Texas, he attended the University of Texas at Austin. Rivers Allen was not unfamiliar with the teaching situation in Texas, having previously served as school superintendent of Cherokee County and as a teacher at Rusk and Wheelock, Texas, before taking on the principalship at Lynnville Academy in 1894. With the return of Rivers Allen to Texas, a circular dated September 7, 1896, announced a change of the name from Madison College to Allen Academy. The two brothers now decided to reorganize Allen Academy into a private Boarding school for boys. In December 1898, Rivers O. Allen Married Miss Martha Witte, also a teacher well respected in the community. The struggle of the Allen brothers to gain a good education for themselves caused them to want to help others to do likewise.

Where to locate the school received considerable attention. While a few citizens of means in Madisonville wanted the school to remain there, Madisonville seemed to be too small a community with limited potential growth since the railroad had not come to Madisonville at that time. A number of places were considered including several large cities. After considerable deliberation the Allen brothers picked Bryan, thirty-six miles to the southwest of Madisonville because it not only had rail connections, but was near the all male Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Editor's Note: Handwritten marginal note: "Allen certainly went to town "1<sup>st</sup>" once he immigrated to Texas."

Allen Academy could be somewhat of a preparatory school for those wishing to enter Texas A&M; the place was strategically located between Houston, Waco, Dallas, and Austin; the Bryan community at the time numbered about 3,500 and was free of the distractions and problems so common to large cities. The Allen brothers met on May 29, 1899, at the local opera house in Bryan with several prominent citizens and formed a corporation for the purpose of establishing Allen Academy in Bryan, and a charter was filed with the Secretary of State in Austin on June 26, 1899, marking the date of the creation of the Allen Academy Corporation. Although the enrollment of the school in Madisonville was somewhat over 200 students, the enrollment of the Academy in Bryan was initially limited to 60 boys in order to give an opportunity "to study the peculiar needs of each boy placed under our care, and to accomplish higher results than heretofore has been possible." (**Bryan Eagle**, June 1, 1899). In the summer of 1899, John H. and Rivers O. Allen moved their families to Bryan, and commenced to lay the foundations for Allen Academy, which continues to this date. The formal opening of Allen Academy in Bryan took place on Tuesday, September 12, 1899.

The ownership of the school remained in the Allen family from 1886 to 1953, when it was transferred in June of that year to the Allen Academy Foundation, although administration continued in the hands of a member of the Allen family until the retirement of Nat Burtis Allen, Jr., in February 1973, on account of poor health. The corporation was reorganized on March 27, 1975, under the name of the Texas Private School Foundation, Inc., to secure better clear titles to the property and to stabilize the financial status of the school for the purpose of continuing the operation of Allen Academy.

Upon the removal of the Academy to Bryan, the Allen brothers purchased a five acre tract of land with a residential building which had been the residence of Dr. Jefferson P. Mitchell, Sr., and was then a part of the J. P. Mitchell Estate. The academy building contained two classrooms, a library, and a small laboratory. Before the opening of the 1902-03 school year, a large room, used as a study hall and for classes, was added to the back of the original building. A new addition to house 20 boys was also added. During the year 1902-03, a cottage, later called South Dormitory, was added to accommodate a teacher and 12 boys. During the school year 1904-05, twenty acres of land were purchased for use as an athletic field. At the same time all buildings were wired for electricity.

In 1906 a block of land was purchased from W. A. Reed upon which was a twelve room building that became known as Reed Dormitory and a home for a teacher and 12 boys. In 1908 a dining hall was constructed, and a new library was added in 1910. In 1911 the property and home of H. W. South was acquired. The bottom floor of the South home became the academy's hospital. In 1912-12, a three-story brick dormitory, known as Bryan Hall, was built to provide rooms for 44 boys and three teachers. At the beginning of the 1913-14 school year, Allen Academy owned 34 acres of land, a main school building, South Dormitory, Haysor House, Bryan Hall, Reed House, and a dining hall.

With the coming of World War I, Allen Academy in 1917 commenced the offering of military training. Enrollment increased, and two wings were added to the South Dormitory. On September 29, 1918, a fire destroyed the main building and the John H. Allen home. In spite of these adversities, the Allen brothers were determined to continue to build their school. In 1919, bungalows and tents were erected to accommodate the students. During the 1919-20 session the J. H. McCulloch home and two acres of land were purchased. Such was the physical status of the school when John H. Allen, co-founder and co-principal of the school, died on October 1, 1920. In 1924 a new administration building, consisting of an auditorium, classrooms, library and offices was constructed. During the same year the John H. Allen gymnasium was built, which housed a basketball court, constituted a drill hall, and provided a dressing room, showers, and sleeping quarters for visiting teams.

Upon the death of John Hodges Allen on October 1, 1920, his brother and co-principal of the school from its founding, Rivers O. Allen, assumed the leadership of the school. Soon, however, he asked his nephew, Nat Burtis Allen, son of John Hodges Allen, to share with him the leadership as co-principal of the school. Upon the death of his uncle in 1925, Nat Burtis Allen became the director of the school. He was born August 2, 1892, in Madisonville, Texas, where he attended the public schools until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when he enrolled in Allen Academy. During the twenty years of his principalship, the school expanded rapidly and gained national recognition.

By the end of the 1927-28 school year, Allen Academy had erected four additional buildings on the 36 acres it owned. The new buildings included a home for the headmaster and a few students; Allen Hall, a dormitory for two teachers and 12 boys; the Griner House, the home for the

Commandant and eight cadets; and Olive Hall, another dormitory for two teachers and 12 students. In 1929, the school purchased a building, later known as the James House, to accommodate eight cadets and one teacher. At this time 153 acres of land northeast of the campus were acquired, upon which a recreational center was developed, including a swimming pool, a 14-acre lake, picnic facilities, and 75 acres devoted to gardens, farming and pastures. Olive Hall, II, a two-story building with apartments for two teachers and rooms for 36 students, was erected during the 1942-43 school year. The school also rented a building from Mrs. Rivers O. Allen, known as Allen Hall, II, which provided space for 16 boys and one teacher. One hundred and twelve acres out of the John Austin League were purchased, and later during the aforementioned school year three lots on Ursuline Street were acquired. These lots were known as West Point I, II, and III. In 1943, two additional residences were purchased, known as West Point IV and the Barren House. During the same period, 50 acres of the Howell Estate, the original home of the Villa Maria-Ursuline Academy, and the 24-room house of the Howells, was purchased. The dream of Nat B. Allen, Sr., was to build the school on this beautiful property acquired from the Howell Estate, but due to ill health he never saw the realization of his dream. At the close of his administration in 1946, Allen Academy owned the following: 368 acres of land, 35 buildings, a recreational center, athletic field, drill field, dairy, and farm.

Nat B. Allen, Sr. was known as a great teacher, and was fondly called "Fessor Nat" by the students and all who knew him. A dedicated teacher, an outstanding citizen of the community and civic leader, a fine Christian gentleman, and a good family man, Nat Allen's moral and intellectual leadership have had a wholesome effect upon the lives of hundreds of young men who have passed through the portals of Allen Academy. With his untimely death on March 16, 1946, at the age of 53, the leadership of the school fell into the less experienced hands of his youthful son, Nat Burtis Allen, Jr., at the age of 26.

Nat Burtis Allen, Jr. was born on April 30, 1919, in Bryan Hall on the Allen Academy campus. He attended the public schools until the sixth grade, when he entered his father's Academy, and from there in 1937 entered the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, but soon returned to Bryan to attend the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas. During World War II he saw duty briefly in the U. S. Army, but was soon called home on account of the illness of his father, who soon died, leaving the direction of the Academy to

his 26-year old son. With limited experience, Nat B. Allen, Jr. set about the task of managing the oldest<sup>5</sup>, and one of the finest, most respected private schools in the state. He broadened the curriculum, revamped the original organization, and modernized the physical plant. During the summer of 1949, a gymnasium was built on the Howell property. Then, beginning in 1957, the construction of one-story brick dormitory units was commenced. Before the opening of the school year of 1960-61, twenty-one dormitory units had been completed. Bryan Hall became the home of the military headquarters, the cadet store, and some classrooms. The John Allen Gymnasium was rebuilt to house the science laboratory, and the name of the building was changed to Blanton Hall in honor of Robert Wynn Blanton, who was a graduate of the class of '44. In 1956, the present dining hall, known as the Jesse Jones Dining Hall, was built, and the old dining hall building was converted into a snack bar, club rooms, and recreational area. Since this renovation was financed by Dr. V. R. Hurst, brother-in-law of Mrs. Nat B. Allen, Sr., the building's name was changed to Hurst Recreational Center. In 1963, the school purchased the Brogdon estate and home. During the spring of 1973, the W. M. Dickson Gymnasium and Swimming Pool was dedicated.

Since World War II, many private schools and colleges have been beset with financial difficulties, and Allen Academy was no exception. Through a charter revision in 1953 Nat B. Allen, Jr., converted the Academy into a non-profit institution administered by the Allen Academy Foundation. In February 1973, Allen retired on account of ill health, and Roy T. Sheffield, former headmaster of Woodward Academy of Atlanta Georgia, became the President of Allen Academy. In November, 1973 Nat Allen died. The corporation was further reorganized in March, 1975, under the name of the Texas Private School Foundation, Inc. The Armstrong House was purchased in December, 1976, to house the administrative offices and a museum. The physical plant, in the meantime, has been reduced to its present 60 acres of land upon which are located 25 usable buildings.

Allen Academy has served the local community, the state of Texas, and the nation for 91 years as the oldest preparatory<sup>6</sup> boys' school in Texas.

---

<sup>5</sup> Editor's Note: Handwritten marginal note: "Untrue," D.P... 2-18-78 In wa??? Lon Morris est as Alex Inst is old" [rest not visible at paper's edge]. The reference is understood to be to Lon Morris Institute of Danville/Jacksonville, TX.

<sup>6</sup> Editor's Note: Handwritten marginal note: "Untrue," D. P., 2-18-1978. The Texas Education Agency thinks it is the "oldest non-church-affiliated" prep school. See letter of 3-9-1978"

During this time it has had a tremendous impact upon the cultural and economic development of the Bryan-College Station community. The contributions made by Allen Academy are revealed in the successes of the many graduates. Quite a number of these have gone on to serve in prominent places and have utilized the military training received at the Academy to serve their country in time of war. Allen Academy through the years and currently has sponsored a number of special events annually that involve outstanding citizens of the local community as well as persons of national renown. As a boarding school it provides a wholesome environment in which to study and offers advantages to American citizens who are called to perform business or military duties abroad by providing an excellent preparatory school in this country for their children. Through its enrollment of foreign students, it enhances the relationships of Texas and the United States with other nations. A total school program, from kindergarten through grade 12, is available to the boys and girls of the local community as day students.

Allen Academy is accredited by the Texas Education Agency and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The school is a member of the Southern Association of Independent Schools and the National Association of Independent Schools.

A few of the more important persons who have attended Allen Academy are: Marion J. Neeley, a graduate of Allen Academy in 1918, was born on October 29, 1898. He also graduated from Texas A&M in 1922, with a degree in industrial engineering. Mr. Neeley founded, and is now President of M. J. Neeley and Company. He is Chairman of the Fort Worth Savings and Loan Association, President of Trailer Finance Company, and Director of the University State Bank, Fort Worth Steel and Machinery Company, and Georgetown Railroad Company, and presently a member of the Allen Academy Advisory Council.

A 1925 graduate of Allen Academy is Hershel Burgess, who was born February 24, 1905. He is the founder of the Community Savings and Loan Association in College Station, Texas, and a rancher. Burgess graduated from Texas A&M College in 1929, where he was an all-American football player. He was recently named to the Texas A&M Hall of Fame. He has been a member of the Board of Trustees of Allen Academy for many years.

Edward Clark, former U. S. Ambassador to Australia, graduated from Allen Academy in 1923. He has served as Texas Secretary of State, and was an assistant to Governor James V. Allred and formerly an Assistant Attorney General of Texas. He is currently President and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Capitol National Bank of Austin, member of the board of directors of the San Benito Bank & Trust Company, and senior partner in the Austin law firm of Clark, Thomas, Winters, and Shapiro.

Major General Homer I. ("Pete") Lewis born February 1, 1919, is past Chief of the Air Force Reserve, U. S. Air Force. He attended Allen Academy. He has received many decorations and awards.

Cecil Compton Mills born February 25, 1920, graduated from Allen Academy in 1937 and later from the University of Texas. Mills has been a successful Dallas businessman, and has served as President of the Associated Federal Hotels, Inc. and of the National Hotel Management & Consulting Company. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of Allen Academy.

Another well-known ex-student of Allen Academy is Representative Bill Clayton of the House of Representatives of the Texas Legislature, who was born September 11, 1928, and graduated from the Academy in 1946 and later from Texas A&M College in 1950, with a degree in agricultural economics. He maintains farming, ranching, and banking interests in Lamb County, but his most important position held has been that of the 59<sup>th</sup> Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Legislature of Texas, which position he has held since 1975.

While not an alumnus, one of the most respected men associated with the Academy was Haskell Brownlee, born on December 12, 1906. He was a man of great character who will long be remembered by the many young men who attended the Academy between 1933-1968. Although having no children of his own, he had over 5,000 young men who called themselves "the Brownlee boys." Brownlee received his bachelor's degree from Texas State College of Arts and Industry at Kingsville and his master's degree from the University of Texas at Austin. He came to Allen Academy in 1933 as a teacher of history, and very quickly won the respect and hearts of the students, teachers and staff; therefore, in 1935, he was appointed headmaster. When the second year of Junior College was added in 1955, he accepted the role of Dean of the Academy. In 1962, he became Vice



President of Academic Affairs, in which capacity he served until his retirement in January, 1968. His death came on September 23, 1968. In memory of Brownlee's dedication to the Academy, the football field was named "The Brownlee Field."

## **Bibliography**

Deed Records. Brazos County, Texas. Office of the County Clerk, Bryan, Texas.

\_\_\_\_\_. Madison County, Texas. Office of the County Clerk, Madisonville, Texas.

Deed of Trust Records. Brazos County, Texas. Office of the County Clerk, Bryan, Texas.

Probate Minutes. Brazos County, Texas. Office of the County Clerk, Bryan, Texas.

Probate Records. Brazos County, Texas. Office of the County Clerk, Bryan, Texas.

State Department (Texas). Charter of Allen Academy. No. 8756, in the Office of the Secretary of State of the State of Texas, Austin, Texas.

\_\_\_\_\_. Charter of Madison College. No. 6862, in the Office of the Secretary of State of the State of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Biennial Reports of the Secretary of State of the State of Texas for 1896 and 1900. (Austin, Texas: Von Boeckman, Schultze & Co., 1900, and by Ben C. Jones & Co., 1897.)

Biennial Reports of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Texas Department of Education, for 1885, 1886, 1888, and 1898.

## **Unpublished Private Papers and Letters**

Allen, J. H. and R. O., To the Patrons of Allen Academy, Bryan, Texas. "n.d.", in the possession of Mrs. J. H. Caufield, Bryan, Texas.

Allen, Martha Witte. Notes concerning the Establishment of Allen Academy. June 27, 1??1, in the possession of Mrs. J. H. Caufield, Bryan, Texas.

Cofer, Sara Allen. "John Hodges Allen and Rivers O. Allen: Founders of Allen Academy." Information prepared for the Texas State Historical Society, November 1967, Typescript in possession of Sara Allen Cofer, College Station, Texas.

Contract between the Board of Directors of Allen Academy and J. H. and R. O. Allen, July 1, 1899, in the possession of Mrs. J. H. Caufield, Bryan, Texas.

Record of Agreement between R. O. Allen, J. R. Allen, and N. B. Allen, "n.d.," in possession of Mrs. J. H. Caufield, Bryan.

### **Printed Material**

Allen Academy Annuals.

Allen Academy Catalogs.

Allen, J. H. and R. O. "Announcement of Allen Academy." September 7, 1896. Printed broadside in the possession of Mrs. J. H. Caufield, Bryan, Texas.

Bryan Daily Eagle, 1899-1977.

### **Unprinted Secondary Materials**

Marshall, Elmer Grady. "The History of Brazos County, Texas." Master's thesis, University of Texas, 1937.

Thompson, Lockie Parten. "An Early Administrator, John Hodges Allen." Masters' thesis, University of Texas, 1948.

Wilcox, Lois Alyne. "The Early History of Bryan, Texas." Masters' thesis, University of Texas, 1952.

Williams, Erlene O'Neal. "A History of the Allen Military Academy." Masters' thesis, North Texas State College, 1944.

Le Unes, Barbara Laverne. "A History of Allen Academy, 1886-1968." Masters' thesis, Texas A&M University, 1970. This is by far the best work on Allen Academy, and contains a comprehensive bibliography.