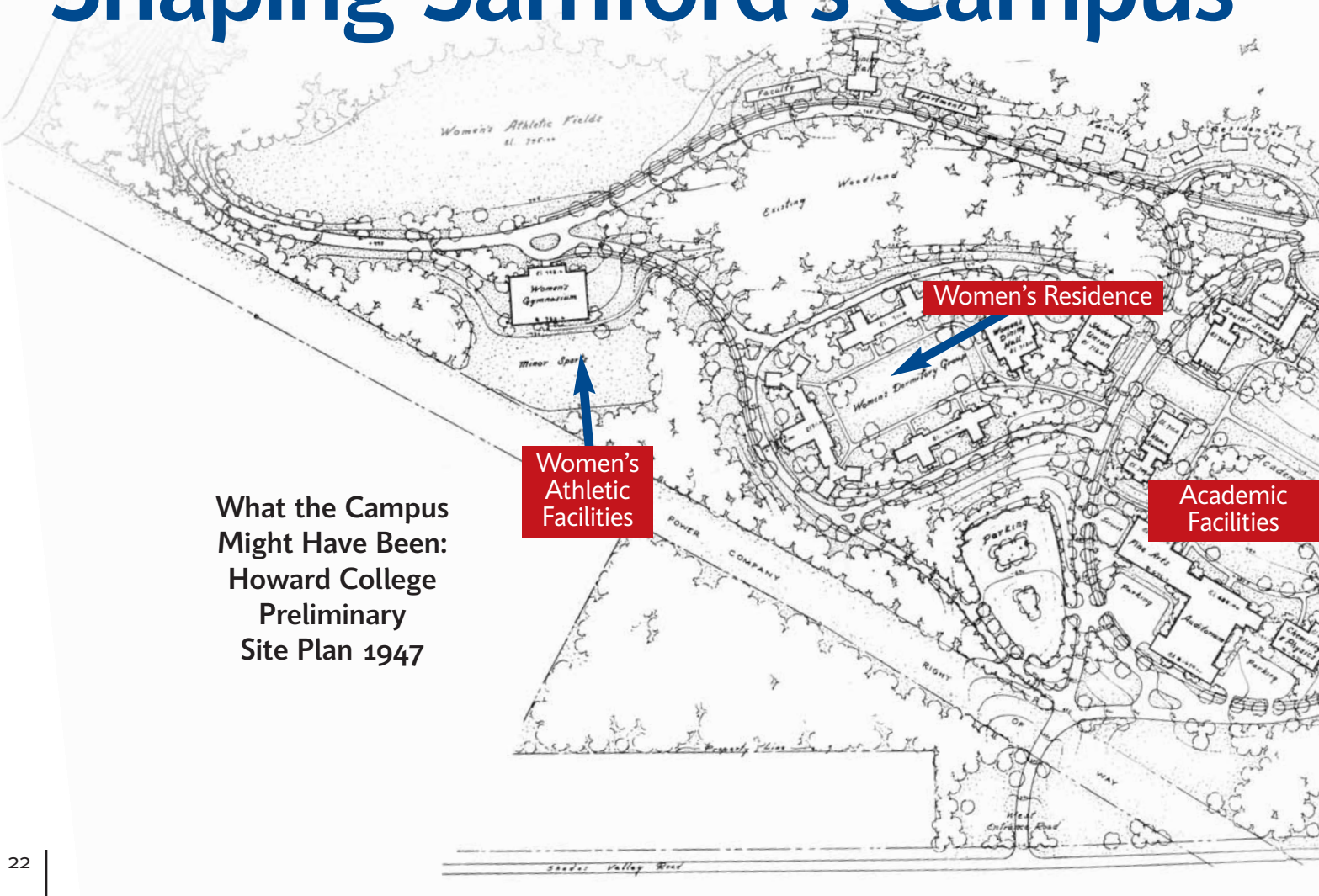
Sacred Space:

Shaping Samford's Campus

by David Bains



What the Campus Might Have Been: Howard College Preliminary Site Plan 1947

In the heart of Samford's campus, at the head of Centennial Walk, is one of the most poignant monuments to the importance of the college campus in American culture. There, one finds a bronze plaque memorializing not a person, an idea or an event, but a lost place—the East Lake campus of Howard College. The plaque maps Old Main, the other buildings and the famous "Sherman Oak."

On the opposite side of the plaque dedicating the walk is a map of the Lakeshore Drive campus, not as it is now, but as it was when the walk was dedicated in 1988. Visitors who try to use it to find the Sciencenter or Hodges Chapel will be frustrated, but alumni with fond memories of life in the inauspiciously named Residences A, B and C will here find a token of their former presence.

As these plaques suggest, college campuses have a special hold on the American imagination. Their buildings point beyond themselves to ancient traditions of learning, their grounds to the beauty of the natural world. As they participate in the rituals and activities of college life, students enjoy campuses as unique places of freedom, community and personal discovery. Alumni return to them to relive fond memories, marvel at improvements, bemoan changes from the good old days and to be again at the place that helped make them what they are. Charged with meaning, story and ritual, a campus is a sacred space.

Colleges are also the guardians of treasured goods, centuries of accumulated wisdom and beauty, cutting-edge scientific knowledge, the dispassionate search for truth and the disciplines for forming character. Church-related colleges, like Samford, include Christian faith among these. Campus planners seek to express all these things in their designs and, most importantly, create space that facilitates the research, community, study and prayer necessary to develop and transmit these treasured goods.

Shaping Samford's Campus

Many have judged Samford's campus to be quintessentially collegiate. Some first-time visitors remark that the campus is "the most beautiful" they have seen. Others comment that with its green lawns, large trees, columns and symmetrical red brick buildings, it looks "just like a college should." To understand how the sacred space that is Samford has been fashioned and why it appeals to so many, one must consider its particular history of vision, planning, investment and adjustments to pragmatic realities.

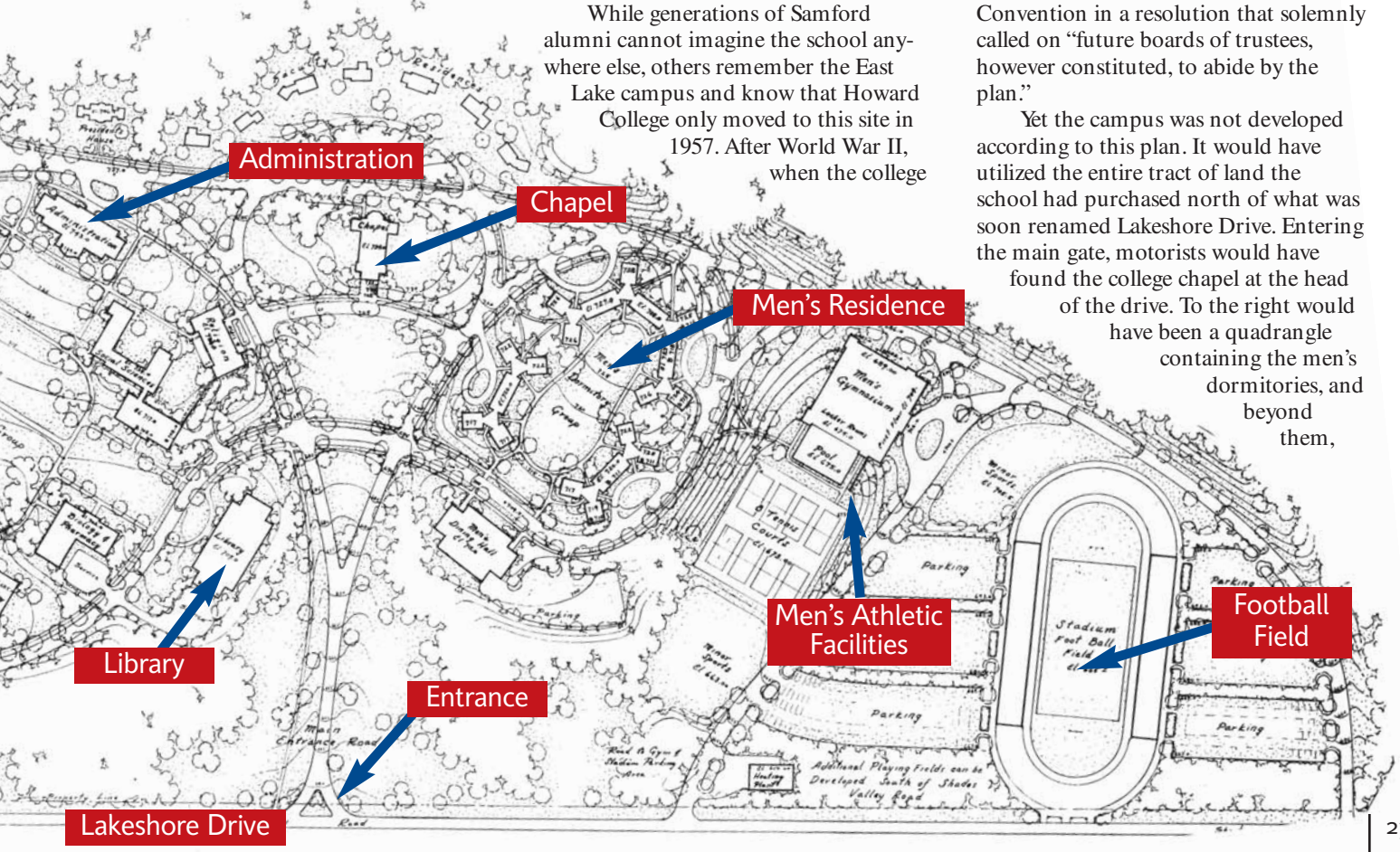
While generations of Samford alumni cannot imagine the school anywhere else, others remember the East Lake campus and know that Howard College only moved to this site in 1957. After World War II, when the college president, Harwell Davis, sought a new campus for the school, his top choice was the Roebuck Golf Course, just over a mile to the northeast of the East Lake campus. Howard would have moved there had the City of Birmingham been willing to sell the 100-acre site.

Many other possibilities were considered, as Susan Ingram Hunt Ray explained in *The Major: Harwell G. Davis: Alabama Statesman and Baptist Leader.* These included land adjoining Birmingham-Southern College and Lane Park, the present site of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens.

While sites 10 to 15 miles from Birmingham were suggested, Davis insisted that, because of the many commuting students, the new campus be accessible by public transportation. Once an extension of a bus route was guaranteed, the land for the present campus was purchased in the spring of 1947.

In selecting and planning the site, Davis and other Howard leaders drew on the expertise of Olmstead Brothers, the famous Brookline, Mass., landscape architecture firm. In planning the site, Olmstead collaborated with the school's architects, the Birmingham firm of E. B. Van Keuren and Charles F. Davis, Jr. In the fall of 1947, the site plan was enthusiastically approved by both the board of trustees and the Alabama Baptist State Convention in a resolution that solemnly called on "future boards of trustees, however constituted, to abide by the plan."

Yet the campus was not developed according to this plan. It would have utilized the entire tract of land the school had purchased north of what was soon renamed Lakeshore Drive. Entering the main gate, motorists would have found the college chapel at the head of the drive. To the right would have been a quadrangle containing the men's dormitories, and beyond them,



the football field. To the left of the entrance drive would have been the academic quadrangle, arranged at an angle to Lakeshore Drive, with the administration building, not the library, at its head and the performing arts center at its foot. Beyond the academic quad on the west side of the campus was another quadrangle of women's dormitories and a back gate opening onto Salter Road.

This plan was rooted in the landscape design approach established by Frederick Law Olmstead (1822–1903), the firm's founder. He is best remembered as a designer of parks and estates, including New York's Central Park and the Biltmore Estate in western North Carolina. Olmstead also made major contributions to campus design. He believed campuses should be composed of small groups of buildings positioned independently wherever they could take best advantage of the topography and scenery. The Olmstead Brothers site plan for the Howard campus reflected this picturesque approach with its three independent groups of buildings arranged at various angles to one another, the faculty houses along the ridge at the back of the campus, and the gently curving roads that ran though the campus.

When college officials began to prepare the site, however, they soon discovered that grading the land to conform with the plan would be prohibitively expensive. The campus was restudied twice, by Olmstead Brothers in 1949 and by Van Keuren and Davis, apparently independently, in 1953. It was the 1953 plan that was built. It substantially reduced costs by only requiring the development of the central portion of the site, and gave the campus a more formal and impressive public face.

While the initial plan had used a formal classical plan of the type promoted by early 20th-century architects for the academic quadrangle, the final plan utilized this classical approach throughout. The central quadrangle was arranged parallel to the road. The entrance drive, while still curving like those on Olmstead Brothers' picturesque plan, led into the quadrangle. The openness to the road, elevated site and compact nature of Samford's campus make it more impressive than many other similar campuses. One of the most successful aspects is how it carefully balances the three most common focal points of American college campuses—the library, administration building and chapel.

Baptist colleges planning new campuses in the 1940s and '50s almost invariably chose the colonial tradition. Architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson termed Williamsburg the 20th century's "great tastemaker." By all accounts, President Davis' wife, Lena Vail Davis, was a strong supporter of the Williamsburg style. Thus, it was no surprise when in 1950 the *Howard College Alumnus* featured a drawing of the proposed campus (according to the Olmstead plan) that used colonial revival buildings.

The primary desire of faculty and students, however, was for modern, functional and efficient buildings. As late as February 1953, the trustees considered adopting modern architecture because of its "functional use and cheaper cost of construction." But they decided that "the architecture remain of the formal type," though changes could be made "for the sake of economy and functional purposes, provided that the aesthetic beauty of the conservative architecture was not thereby impaired."

Maj. Davis later explained that potential benefactors had expressed a preference for a classical style. The architects assured Davis that the Georgian style was the appropriate choice because it could provide impressive buildings with functional interiors. The monumental plan developed by Van Keuren and Davis displayed this traditional architecture to maximum effect.

Within a few years of its opening in 1957, the campus was celebrated as "the Williamsburg of the South." The uniform use of sand-faced bricks, Flemish bond, limestone trim and double-sash windows with white trim and mullions marked the campus as being in the colonial Georgian style.

The colonial revival was before anything else a style for domestic architecture. Its use at Samford helped associate the school with the home. The inclusion of dormer windows in the roofs of almost all the buildings highlighted the domestic character of the campus. Even large buildings were given a more domestic sense of scale by being broken into smaller parts. The flat-roofed wings of some buildings such as Samford and Ingalls halls suggested to viewers that an older building had received more modern additions.

The inclusion of cupolas on large buildings with significant functions (Samford, Ingalls, Davis Library and Beeson University Center) further cemented the link to colonial buildings, especially to Williamsburg. The only building that evoked a specific colonial reference was the chapel. Its spire was promoted as copying that of the First Baptist Church in Providence, R.I. (built 1775–76), founded by Roger Williams in 1638 as the first Baptist Church in America.

The colonial revival typically combined classical buildings in a lush garden-like setting. While Samford had few trees in its early years, the landscape was an important part of the campus. Boxwoods were moved from the East Lake campus to create a large formal garden in the center of the campus. This was later replaced by Centennial Walk, which was similar to the plaza depicted on the school's 1953 plan.

Samford's campus was remarkably conservative in its treatment of the colonial Georgian style. There are few modern elements present in the exterior of the older buildings. Glass was only used in the traditional fashion. Interiors remained firmly separated from exteriors. Most subsequent buildings maintained the colonial Georgian style, though several more recent ones, including the Rotunda, Hodges Chapel, the law library and the Sciencenter, diverged from it while staying within the classical tradition and maintaining the major exterior

elements of sand-faced brick, mullioned windows and limestone trim.

Beeson Law Library and the Sciencenter reflect different directions within the classical tradition. The law library relates to the other buildings on campus with its arches and rectangular mullioned windows. The oversized elements on its exterior, like those on the east side of the extension to the University Library, reveal the large volumes that make up its interior. Its massive size is displayed, not hidden through apparent additions.

The Sciencenter is masterfully integrated into the symbolic core of the university through its pavilions that terminate the walks running the length of the quad. It brings Reid Chapel more into the center of the campus. Like the law library, it departs from the colonial revival by clearly being one complete large building without the illusion of major additions. Unlike the law library, it includes itself in the exact style of the older buildings by imitating their sash windows and dormers. On the west side, its massiveness is broken down through the addition of dormers, false balconies and well-placed downspouts. While it appears domestic, there is no humble domesticity of scale. This is a palace, the architecture of empire, not of humble colonials.

Challenges

Although the campus is widely praised, several shortcomings might be noted. First, one of the distinctive aspects of the American collegiate experience has long been the integration of classroom learning and residential life. Samford has pursued this goal by seeking to house more students on campus. Yet, with the transformation of Crawford Johnson Hall into Beeson Divinity School and the construction of Beeson Woods and West Campus, residential space has grown more distant from academic space in both real and symbolic terms.

While visitors are initially impressed by the exterior of Samford's buildings, the inside of some buildings provide a jarring contrast. Painted cinderblock and ceramic tile show what the architects meant when they promised that colonial Georgian exteriors could be combined with functional and economical interiors.

There are fewer informal spaces for gathering than on many other campuses. Ben Brown Plaza provides one informal outdoor space, but in academic buildings, offices and classrooms are placed along corridors, not around lounges that foster interaction and informal learning. The large, open spaces and various groupings of easy chairs and tables in the University Library are the most intentional efforts to provide more contemporary, informal space.

The campus most significantly departs from the American college ideal in that there is no college town across the grassy lawn. To go anywhere, students need a car. At East Lake and in Marion, Howard's quadrangle opened to a walking neighborhood. When the school moved to Lakeshore, it moved into the world of the automobile suburb. Through various programs such as Samford-in-Mission, Samford seeks to help students pierce the campus's bubble and connect with the broader community. The bridging of Shades Creek in the 1990s, the development of the pedestrian greenway in 2000 and the pending construction of the Village at University Park are beginning to change Samford's immediate environment.

Despite these challenges, the style and shape of Samford's campus give it a certain dignity and associate it with times and places that help make it sacred space. Most fundamentally, however, the campus provides a place for community and learning. It is the rituals and activities of this community, official and unofficial, that do the most to invest the campus with sacred meaning. At the end of their college careers, in academia's most distinctive ritual, students process, not in a solemn march but in a jubilant walk, across the campus invested with years of personal and communal meaning, gathering as they go the values, memories and spirit of the place and taking them into the world. ■

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These 1955 campus renderings show how portions of the Samford campus might have looked. On the opposite page, the fine arts center entrance faces the rear of Samford Hall, with a plaza between the two, unlike the actual arrangement, in which the fine arts entrance faces Montague Drive. Below, a large plaza area surrounded by boxwoods connects Montague Circle with Davis Library, similar to today's Centennial Walk.