



Miss Amaza Lee Meredith, Dr. Edna Meade Colson at Home Near Virginia State College  
The Two Women Were Among the First Faculty Members at the College in Petersburg

# They've Seen Campus Change

By LeeNora Everett

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PETERSBURG — When stepping into the yard of their house near the Virginia State College campus, two retired faculty members who were among the school's pioneer teachers often reflect on the transformation that has taken place.

Dr. Edna Meade Colson, 85, and Miss Amaza Lee Meredith, 79, can look across the landscape and easily visualize when only one large building, the first Virginia Hall, stood there. They recall the controversy of the early 1930s when it was ordered demolished, and the college mace made from a newel post salvaged from the stairway of that building.

As the college celebrates its 93rd anniversary on March 2 and reflects on its history, probably no celebrant will have been more personally involved with this school than Dr. Colson.

**HER FATHER**, James Major Colson, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Dartmouth College, served in 1885 as principal of what was then Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute before the first college president, John Mercer Langston, was appointed. Colson, who remained at the school until 1904, is credited with laying the groundwork for academic standards carried on by the college.

He and his wife, who was also a teacher at the school, occupied faculty quarters in an upper story of the old Virginia Hall.

Had not her mother chosen to go into nearby Petersburg on Oct. 7, 1888, for her birth, it is said that Dr. Colson, who has spent most of her life on this campus, would probably have been born in Virginia Hall.

In 1909, when she was 21, she became a member of the faculty at the Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute.

As the school evolved into Virginia State College, she was the first woman faculty member to hold a doctoral degree, which she earned at Columbia University.

**DR. COLSON WAS** the first director of the VSC school of education and was chairman of the first department of graduate study.

The paths of Dr. Colson and Miss Meredith, her former student, crossed frequently through the years. Miss Meredith returned to this campus in 1930 as a fine arts instructor. In 1939 the two built a house which was designed by Miss Meredith and they have occupied it since. Called Azurest, the door sign reads, "Only peace, love and beauty shall enter."

Many VSC alumni stay in contact with the two retired educators and a visit to the campus also means a visit to Azurest. When Dr. Colson returned home from a recent hospital stay after suffering a slight stroke, one of the first to telephone was opera singer Camilla Williams, a VSC graduate.

**MISS MEREDITH** graduated in 1915

and lived in Virginia Hall. She recalls an old bell and a large farm bell that were rung daily at 6 a.m., signaling students that it was time to begin their day. She remembers that the radiators in the building "popped like the Fourth of July."

In 1930, after she received her bachelor's degree from Teachers College at Columbia, she returned to teach fine arts. Room 8 in old Virginia Hall was cleaned out, she said, and served as the first art room. She noted that at the time "I was the art department."

She and Dr. Colson recall old Virginia Hall as a "beautiful building," but the state, according to Miss Meredith, felt it was too expensive to retain, should be razed and a new hall built. That demolition in the 1930s produced "much controversy."

While the demolition was going on, Miss Meredith said a man named L.T. Penn, who served in industrial education at the school, set about salvaging as many of the materials as he could.

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Continued From First Page



Drawing Shows Original Virginia Hall at VSC  
Order to Demolish It Provoked Controversy

academic authority and the school's development. Penn and members of the industrial arts department did the carving, she said. Semi-precious stones of orange and blue, the school colors, were set in the mace. Engraved metal bands with the name changes of the school and the dates they took place were incorporated.

When the General Assembly established this school, it was "for the higher education of the colored youth of the commonwealth and to furnish competent teachers for the colored schools of the state and to foster industrial education as well."

It was founded as Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute.

tion of \$100,000, realized from

the states selling its interest in the Atlantic, Mississippi and Ohio Railroad, was allowed toward erection of buildings. About \$20,000 was allocated annually for the school's support.

**AFTER 15 YEARS** of freedom, leading blacks of this area and from throughout the state felt they should have their own institution of learning, noting that whites had the University of Virginia. The Readjuster party backing them, Alfred W. Harris of Petersburg and Dinwiddie County, a member of the House of Delegates from 1881 to 1888, and 12 other Negro delegates succeeded in getting legislation passed during the 1881-82 General Assembly creating the

Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute.

Under the act of March 6, 1882, the institute was to have a three year normal department to train teachers, and a four-year liberal arts college for the higher education "of colored persons."

Fleets Farm, on a hilltop in Ettrick across the Appomattox River from Petersburg, was selected by a committee for the school site. It was purchased from John C. Griffin for \$13,500, included 33 acres and a 12-room brick house.

The two-story house, which Miss Meredith said stood in the area of the present Jones Dining Hall was used as the initial facility. When classes began in October of 1883 there were 41 students and a faculty of seven.

Today there are more than 4,000 students and a faculty of 261. The school now has about 10 per cent white undergraduate enrollment and more than 30 per cent white enrollment in its graduate school.

**CAMPUS HOLDINGS** now total 210 acres, and there are 54 permanent buildings, many constructed in the last 25 years.

VSC today is the only institution in the state combining the functions of a land-grant, teachers' and liberal arts colleges, officials here say.

The cornerstone for the original Virginia Hall was laid on July 4, 1883. Early accounts said the ceremony was held at 4 p.m. in the presence of 3,000 to 4,000 with some whites attending. The event was preceded by a procession, including two bands, moving onto the hilltop for the event.

Construction of the original hall, which was five stories high, had a 367-foot frontage and was to accommodate 500 students, began in 1883 but was not completed until 1888 because of shortage of funds.

**THE COURSE OF STUDY** in the first three years consisted of an academic and normal department. Tuition for a three-month term was \$3.35 and room and board was \$20.

In 1887 a collegiate department was added to the lower division. In 1889 Walter Fayerman of Petersburg became the first degree graduate. Before the institution had to abandon college work in 1902, the bachelor of arts degree had been awarded to 49 students.

The Readjuster party, which created the school in 1882, was supplanted by the old line Democratic party in 1888. The displacement brought changes for the school. The board of visitors became predominantly white, accounts said, and was under the control of the State Board of Education. The collegiate department was dropped. The name was changed to Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute.

It was not to become a degree-granting institution again until 20 years later. In 1884 one state delegate, P.C. Cabell of Amherst, even called for abolishing the school and for the facility to be used as an insane asylum for blacks.