



Madison Matthews/Johanna City Press

The histories of Hopwood Memorial Christian Church and Milligan College are intertwined.



Contributed/Milligan College

On April 21, 1881, the Buffalo Male and Female Institute's name was changed to Milligan College. The pictured structure, circa 1896, was added to the existing two-story building used to house the school.



Rev. Wilson G. Barker, of Bristol, Va., took charge of the school that was started by the Buffalo Creek congregation in 1866.

The congregation of the Buffalo Creek Christian Church — which was renamed Hopwood Memorial Christian Church in 1941 after Josephus Hopwood, one of the early leaders of the college — has had a longstanding commitment to Christian education. What was once the Buffalo Male and Female Institute, an academy founded in 1866 in the church, later became Milligan College.

The Hopwood-Milligan connection

The two iconic local institutions have a shared history.

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MILLIGAN COLLEGE — While they are two separate institutions, the heritage of both Hopwood Memorial Christian Church and Milligan College are intertwined.

The congregation of the Buffalo Creek Christian Church — which was renamed Hopwood Memorial Christian Church in 1941 after Josephus Hopwood, one of the early leaders of the college — has had a longstanding commitment to Christian education. What was once the Buffalo Male and Female Institute, an academy founded in 1866 in the church, later became Milligan College.

The beginnings of the Buffalo Creek Christian Church can be traced back to a division that took place amongst the congregation of the Sinking Creek Baptist Church, the oldest church in Tennessee, during the 1820s.

While Buffalo Creek Christian claims to have started in 1834, there is evidence that shows the church may have been started in 1828 or earlier.

According to church documents and "Beside the Waters of the Buffalo: A History of Milligan College to 1941" by Cynthia Ann Cornwell, the division of the church was caused by a controversy surrounding the baptism of Fanny Renfro, a woman who was slated to be baptized into the Baptist church, but was instead baptized a week earlier by Jeriel Dodge, an early minister of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

The controversy surrounding the baptism of Renfro played an important role in the creation of the Buffalo Creek Christian Church in that the Baptists didn't recognize her baptism by Dodge, because they were at odds with the teachings of the ministers within the reformation.

"On examination of the case of Fanny Renfro we do unanimously agree that the Baptist administered is not agreeable to gospel order as practiced by the Baptist Churches. We further do also advise the Church at Sinking Creek to hold Fanny Renfro in the same situation that she stood in the church before she was baptized by the sd. Jeriel Dodge," Baptist leaders wrote in a statement issued on April 17, 1825.

Due to the conflicting beliefs of the Baptists and early followers of the reformation, the Baptists claimed to not have any proof that God had chosen her to be a Christian, which undermined the Baptist concept of salvation, Cornwell wrote in her book.

The fallout over the baptism led to the excommunication of at least eight members of Sinking Creek Baptist Church, at which point the group left and began the Buffalo Creek church.

From its beginnings, the church was almost always involved with education. By 1840, a field school was meeting in the building, and early records indicate the church may have sponsored some type of school within its building when it was originally formed.

On Dec. 15, 1851, a proposal was made to build a facility that would serve as an academy and church. According to Cornwell, the building was to be located on the west side of Buffalo creek on land donated by Caswell C. Taylor and A.W. Taylor "to be used for an academy as well as house of worship by any orthodox protestant religious organization."

The school continued to have classes throughout the 1850s, as well as throughout the Civil War. Following the war, Rev. Wilson G. Barker, a school teacher and ordained Christian Church minister, came to Buffalo Creek with his family from Bristol, Va. in 1866 in

order to lead the school and act as pastor of the church.

At that time, the Buffalo Creek Christian Church was housed in a log structure, which Barker immediately began to remodel upon his arrival. In order to meet the needs of an ever-growing school, Barker knew he had to find the funds to build a new school building that was adjacent to the church property. After gaining funding, the Buffalo Male and Female Institute was born.

Until the late 1870s, the school thrived in educating young men and women. During that time, however, the school accumulated a debt of \$1,250.

"It appeared that the school, which had been born from educational zeal of one congregation, might spring up and wilt within a short time," Cornwell wrote.

But the arrival of Josephus and Sarah Eleanor LaRue Hopwood ultimately helped save the school and led to its elevation into a college institution in 1882.

Following his service with the 6th and 7th Illinois Calvary during the Civil War, Josephus Hopwood and his wife set out to found a school in the South.

"They came south with reconstruction to help bring education to the poor southerners. They weren't imperialists trying to impose. They wanted to bring the gospel through education to a place that had no education," Milligan College professor of history and humanities Dr. Tim Dillon said.

Taking up a challenge presented to him by Robert Milligan, one of his professors at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Ky., to become a missionary, Hopwood decided to follow his passion for both education and the Christian mission.

After years of searching for the right place, Hopwood ended up taking a job as principal of a school in Sneedville.

In 1875, the Hopwoods met with two men who told them about the Buffalo Male and Female Institute, which was dedicated to furthering the education of both men and women. Hopwood was a strong advocate of coeducation.

"While many schools practiced separate education, Hopwood believed the idea that boys and girls should educated separately was not true to human nature," Cornwell wrote.

Hopwood met with Barker about the disjecting the academy, and Barker agreed to bring Hopwood on board.

"They really wanted someone with academic credentials to turn their academy into a college," Dillon said.

Hopwood immediately began recruiting students to the school. According to Cornwell, 85 were enrolled during his first term, while nearly doubling four years later.

By 1881, the school featured four departments: primary, preparatory, normal and the college.

The primary and normal departments met in the same building and were overseen by Sarah Hopwood. The normal department was a one year course featuring science, elementary algebra and English literature, and was designed to train school teachers.

English, physics and a knowledge of Latin and Greek were taught in the preparatory departments to prepare students to college.

On the collegiate level, the academy offered Latin, arithmetic, algebra, rhetoric, astronomy, analysis of English, essays, debate and Roman history.

On April 21, 1881, Hopwood announced during the commencement ceremony that the college's new name was to be known as Milligan College, in honor of Robert Milligan.

On May 1, 1882, the college was granted a new charter by the state of Tennessee, which allowed the school to award degrees.



Josephus and Sarah Eleanor LaRue Hopwood, circa 1886; son, Robert Milligan was one of Josephus Hopwood's professors at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Ky. In 1881, Hopwood renamed the school in honor of his instructor.

The first graduating class of Milligan College consisted of eight men and two women, six of whom became educators.

Hopwood served as president of Milligan College until 1903 when he left to found Lynchburg College in Virginia. He later founded another school in Georgia.

Eventually, the Hopwoods returned to the area during their retirement years in 1915, during which time Josephus Hopwood served a president until 1917.

While Milligan College continued to grow throughout the years, Buffalo Creek Christian relied on the college. The church has always consisted of a mixture of students, people of the area and Milligan faculty.

"There's always been a close tie between the Hopwood congregation and Milligan," Hopwood pastor Tim Ross said. "I think the congregation has gained a lot from scholars and biblical teachers who have enriched the congregational life and, in turn, the college has been enriched by the gifts of the Hopwood congregation."

