The Pre-Warlick Years: 1935-1970

In the spring of 1935, Mayor Thomas Gamble of Savannah began to formulate plans for a two-year institution that aimed to create an economic stimulus for the city during the midst of the Great Depression and moreover, provide the local youth with the beginnings of a college education. Almost immediately upon this idea’s conception, Gamble began to seek funds and overhead for the school’s operations. Despite his ambitious plans, he met with success and the project launched within a matter of months. The mansion that initially housed the college, for instance, was found at Whitaker and Gaston Streets in the Savannah historic district and was donated to the city by Mrs. Lucy M. C. Moltz (formerly married to the late George Armstrong, a Savannah shipping executive). The school thus became known as Armstrong Junior College, which the local Board of Education agreed to fund, and which a commission of prominent community members would oversee.

Throughout the summer of 1935, Dean Ernest Lowe (sought out for his position by the Armstrong Commission) worked to construct the required curriculum that would undergo implementation at Armstrong Junior College later that fall. He hired, among other professors, Mr. J. Thomas Askew as Instructor in the Social Sciences, and indeed, in the institution’s earliest years, several courses in the social sciences were required for a student to earn his or her degree. By 1936, this mandate required that an enrollee pass any three courses of “The Foundations of Western Civilization,” “The Progress of Western Civilization through the Industrial Revolution (1660-1870),” “The Contemporary World (1870-1936),” and “American Government and Politics.” By 1943, during the turmoil of World War II, the college continued to compel its
students to attend history classes, but new faculty members had been hired to teach these offerings, due in part to the departure of teachers drafted into the military. Professors Orson Beecher and William Dabney now shared the responsibility for teaching History, Political Science, and the Romance Languages, and the more general job title once held by Thomas Askew (by this time, the school’s president) had disappeared.

Throughout the next decade, particularly in the aftermath of the war, Armstrong’s enrollment skyrocketed, and as a consequence, the administration struggled to find adequate space to host both academic and extracurricular functions. The institution thus lacked the means to instruct the large number of students seeking to register for classes and appeared to be facing an economic crisis, a situation eventually mitigated through both a bank loan secured by Chairman Herschel Jenkins of the Armstrong Commission, in addition to an increase in appropriations from the city of Savannah. This influx of revenue helped to boost Armstrong’s position, and the school was eventually able to fund a number of new student activities (including a debate club advised by historian Orson Beecher), as well as to purchase additional classroom locations nearby the original building. As an indication of its rising status in the community, the school dropped “Junior” from its title and changed its name twice within a matter of years—in 1948, by the recommendation of Jenkins, to Armstrong College; then again in 1952 to Armstrong College of Savannah.

The college’s troubles were not over for good, however. Government statistics seemed to demonstrate that by the early 1970s, the number of Americans seeking higher education would double. In just two decades, then, Armstrong could expect to face funding and spatial difficulties yet again. President Hawes, who had assumed control of the institution when Askew joined the military, thus partnered with Chairman Jenkins to ask the City of Savannah to begin talks for
state backing with the University System of Georgia. These discussions continued for the next four years, and on New Year’s Day of 1959, Armstrong College of Savannah officially joined the University System, an organization of institutions that required all faculty members to possess a graduate degree and further, all departments to appoint a department head. For the Social Sciences Department, the first chairman was Orson Beecher, a scholar with degrees from Emory University and the University of Georgia. While this transition was ongoing, the number of history courses required for graduation decreased yet again. Now, a student was required to pass only two classes on the topics of “An Historical Introduction to Contemporary Civilization” and “A Continuation of History.”

In 1964, Armstrong’s administration revealed that it would become a four-year institution, with its first baccalaureate degrees to be granted in the spring of 1968. Coinciding with this change, Roy Carroll of Vanderbilt University became chairman of the newly created history and political science department in 1965 and as a specialist on early modern England, expanded its course offerings to include more concentrated classes on topics within American and European history, as well as Russia and the Far East. In addition, his tenure saw the department offer its first elective course in geography, a focus it has maintained to the present day. By far, however, the most significant event to occur under the leadership of Carroll was the 1966 move of Armstrong’s campus to its current location at the (then) terminus of Abercorn Street on Savannah’s Southside. Just before the transition, the school changed its name to Armstrong State College, and the history department found its new home in Victor Hall, a building named for the late wife of Armstrong Committee Chairman Irving Victor. Carroll remained as department chairman until 1970, when Evans C. Johnson of North Carolina took control for one year, and the department began to offer courses on the history of Latin America.
The Warlick Years (1971-1993)

In 1971, Dr. Roger K. Warlick assumed the chairmanship of Armstrong’s history department and in this position, shaped the program in ways that continue to be experienced by twenty-first century students at the university. Under Warlick, the department greatly expanded its course offerings, and those courses remain in place almost forty years after their implementation. In 1973, for instance, the first classes to emphasize African history and the history of Native Americans were added to the curriculum. Then, in 1978, the department offered its first courses in women’s history and the history of Georgia. Finally, in 1984, it offered its first courses on the History of the Middle East. Most important for the department’s long-term development, though, was the 1976 transition of its Civilization course (which had been in the curriculum since 1967) from a focus on Western history to one of world history. To this day, the Civilization courses continues to be the department’s primary survey course serving as both the prerequisite for future work in the department and as the fulfillment of a core requirement.

On a related matter, the department in 1979 began to offer a concentration in Museum and Preservation Studies (MPS), which provided students with “unique opportunities . . . to gain practical experience while making a realistic assessment of the possibilities offered by their field of interest,” including archival and manuscript curation, historic site administration and interpretation, and obviously, museum studies and historic preservation. In order to help students accomplish these goals, the department maintained cooperative arrangements with area organizations, such as the Historic Savannah Foundation, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah Landmark Project, Oatland Island Center, Telfair Academy, Fort Pulaski, Fort King George, and the Juliette Low Center. In 1981, The Center for Low Country Studies, a program established for the purpose of conducting archeological research and assisting with the salvage of deteriorating
records, was established under the umbrella of the MPS program. The combined impact of these developments was tremendous. The emphasis on historical work within the Savannah area continued into the post-Warlick era, with the MPS program changing its name in 1993 to Public History, a focus that remains significant in the department to the present day.

After a brief attempt in the 1970s at maintaining a joint graduate program with Savannah State College, Armstrong’s history department looked to offer its own Master’s degrees in History. Beginning in 1980, one year after the move of the history department from Victor Hall to Gamble Hall, the History department collaborated with the Education department to offer a M.Ed. with an emphasis in History. Although the department ended this program in 1986, it broke away from the Political Science and Economics departments in 1985 and began to offer its own Master of Arts degrees. Although no Graduate Coordinator (the advisor to all graduate students in the program) was listed for the first two years of that degree’s existence, Department Head Roger Warlick assumed the role himself in 1987, and the next year, Dr. Olavi Arens accepted the responsibility. In 1990, the Armstrong and Savannah State graduate programs became affiliated with Georgia Southern University, occasionally permitting students to take classes at the other campus and to invite that institution’s faculty to serve on their thesis defenses.

Finally, during Dr. Warlick’s lengthy tenure, he and Drs. Osmos “Os” Lanier and Jimmie Gross helped to found Armstrong’s Sigma Theta Chapter of the Phi Alpha Theta History Honor Society. This organization, which continues to exist on campus, hosted events at which students and their professors could meet in a more casual atmosphere and moreover, attend tours, lectures, and other events both on campus and in the community. Notably, within six months of the chapter’s founding, it was chosen for Honorable Mention in the Best Chapter Award Contest.
for campuses with 1,700 to 4,000 students. It obtained this award again in 1973, 1980, 1984, and 1986 and in 1978, tied for Best Chapter at a school of its enrollment size. Throughout this period, many students were recognized for outstanding papers that they delivered at conferences hosted by Phi Alpha Theta, thus making Armstrong’s name known to other institutions of higher learning throughout the United States.

The Post-Warlick Years (1994-Present)

The 1994-1995 academic year was a busy one for Armstrong’s Department of History. In 1993, Roger K. Warlick, the long-time chairman of the history department, stepped down to enter his new role as Assistant to the Dean of Arts and Sciences. He was replaced temporarily by Dr. Jimmie Gross, who had served on the faculty since 1969 when he received his PhD from the University of Georgia. In addition, Warlick’s departure and Gross’s promotion to “acting” department head coincided with the hiring of the department’s first full-time geographer, Dr. Thomas Howard, educated at the University of California, Berkeley. Gross, however, did not remain long in his position of leadership before he decided to take retirement. The following year, Nancy White was brought to the college as the department’s first chairwoman, and at the same time, Dr. Robert Patterson took over the role of Graduate Coordinator from Olavi Arens. Also in 1995, the Armstrong State College and Savannah State College graduate programs disaffiliated themselves from Georgia Southern University in Statesboro. As a consequence, the partnership that existed between Armstrong’s and GSU’s history departments was brought to an end.

Change continued through the remainder of the twentieth century. In 1996, for instance, the school changed its name, after a faculty field trip on which Tom Howard and historian Chris
Hendricks suggested a title that provided a geographic identifier to people unfamiliar with the institution. Although Hendricks’s suggestion of Georgia Atlantic University eventually succumbed to Armstrong Atlantic State University, his influence was far from over; in 1997, he took over the role of Graduate Coordinator from the retiring Bob Patterson. In 1998, sadly, former department head Roger Warlick died after a lengthy illness (the road behind the college later named in his memory). And in 1999, the department offered its first courses in African-American history, which were taught by Howard Robinson and represented a long-overdue development that is now considered a significant area of focus in most universities’ curriculums. Moreover, the department introduced a course on Ethics and Values in History, which required students to consider ethical questions from an historical perspective and like Civilization, continues to provide students with the means by which to fulfill a core requirement.

Because the early years of the twenty-first century have occurred so recently, the consequences of contemporary events on the department’s history may not yet be obvious. Michael Price, an Armstrong faculty member since 1995, became department head in 2000 and the following year, the History department moved across the quad, from the second floor of Gamble Hall to the first floor of Hawes Hall (formerly home to the university’s science departments, which were relocated in more contemporary facilities at the back of campus). In 2005, June Hopkins, a faculty member since 1998 and the granddaughter of Franklin Roosevelt’s adviser Harry Hopkins, became department head and served in that capacity for six years. And in 2011, Price served once more in an acting capacity until the department hired Christopher Curtis in 2013. That same year, Ella Howard became Graduate Coordinator. And the university dropped “Atlantic” from its name, changing its title to simply Armstrong State University. Because Curtis and Howard have only been in their positions for a short time, the full impact of their
management have yet to be determined. One thing is likely, however; just as Orson Beecher, Roger Warlick, and their contemporaries organized the department in a manner that affected the education of future Armstrong generations, so too will the current departmental leadership make decisions that will be felt many years into the future.

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