CHAPTER 3
Coming of Age:
September 1935 – August 1945

The youngest of them was only fifteen years old when the members of the first freshman class entered Armstrong Junior College on September 17, 1935. Most of the students were the usual college age, but several of them were in their twenties, having been caught by the Depression in a no-man’s-land of no jobs and no money to pay for college. If any of them glanced at the morning newspaper on the day that they began their college education, they saw a headline that announced the mounting crisis between Mussolini and Ethiopia. A small article on an inside page described the closing ceremony of the annual Nazi party rally in Nuremberg. War would come in the middle of Armstrong’s first decade, but on that September morning in 1935, Savannah and the rest of the country were preoccupied with the Depression. Mayor Gamble believed that the college would play an important role in the city’s economic recovery by providing educated men and women to serve local business and industry. The college would teach its students about America’s economic problems and equip them to provide solutions. As war approached, Armstrong added courses appropriate to military preparedness, and when war came, the college watched its young men leave for training camps and then move on to the Pacific and European fronts.

Armstrong came of age during the war, but during the college’s first five years the only battles that students fought were on the basketball court, the football field, or at the tennis nets. Administrators waged their skirmishes with budgets and building needs. And the trumpet that Armstrong remembered best from those early years had no association with war but came from the Jimmy Reed Family Orchestra at the Tuesday afternoon tea dances. Jimmy, a Rotary scholarship student, played the piano and his mother, father, brothers, and sisters added drums, banjo, guitar, and a saxophone to the bright brass notes pushed through brother Sammy’s horn.

FIRST THINGS
The opening exercises for the new junior college took place on September 17 in the Lawton Memorial building several blocks south of the Armstrong mansion. On the stage sat the key figures in the effort of the past nine months: Mayor Gamble, Ernest Lowe, Paul Adams, and Philip Weltner, the former Chancellor of the University System. Weltner delivered the major address, reminding his audience that education did not consist of buildings alone, but he and everyone else knew that the Armstrong building was central to the birth of the college. Mayor Gamble delivered the official welcome with his usual themes and Victorian prose:
For the first time in the more than two centuries of Savannah’s history, an institution of learning beyond the high school grades is being launched. It starts under exception- tionally bright auspices, and on what we all believe will be a continuous and constantly expanding life. While it will unquestionably and wisely adhere to all that has been proved sound and wholesome in education, it has no dehumanizing landscape of prejudice, no high hurdles of obsolete theories to overcome. When it finds new avenues of knowledge opening, new fields of thought developing, new paths of opportunity revealed by time’s changing currents, no hand can stretch forth from forgotten graves to negative [sic] its progress. You have the rare distinction of becoming the first class of the Armstrong Junior College. You are to help mould it for those who came after you. You are to be the prime factors in creating in governing impulses and in establishing its traditions. It may well thrill you, as it thrills us older ones who will watch your onward march.

From the beginning, Armstrong’s primary purpose was to serve local students who could not afford to go away to college. Every memory of those early years highlighted the fact that “Nobody had any money.” According to Lowe’s tally of the first three years, only seven out of 168 students selected came with a college education. Tuition at the college was $35.00 per quarter. Various civic groups offered scholarships or loans, and Mayor Gamble and Dean Lowe applied for work scholarships from the National Youth Administration. They obtained fifteen such awards for the college’s first year. One Savannah matron marched directly to City Hall to demand a scholarship for her niece, and the mayor complied. Bartering was also a possibility. Delores Cowart presented herself at Dean Lowe’s office and announced that she could not pay the tuition but she could play the piano. Lowe enrolled her and made her the college pianist. Many of the college’s students held after-school jobs, selling cars or serving sodas. Most of them came from homes in the neighborhoods around 37th Street. A few lived in the new Ashely Park suburbs. One lived in an elegant Victory Drive mansion. The mayor’s grandson, Tom Carr, came from 41st Street, and Ed Morgan, grandson of University System regent Samuel Morgan, drove in from Guyton every day with his father. The daughter of the city Superintendent of Recreation came, as did the son of a wholesale grocer, and the twin daughters of a modest railroad family. One way or another, 168 students found a way to enroll for Armstrong’s first fall term in September 1935.

Lowe also tallied the students’ academic skills, using the entrance tests of the University System as an admission requirement but for comparison with the scores of students entering state colleges. In fact, many Armstrong courses used the same syllabi and tests as those used in University System schools. After four years of testing, University System examiner F.S. Beers reported to Lowe that:

In its selection of entering freshmen, the level of accomplishment of sophomores, and the quality of work done in survey courses, Armstrong Junior College is appreciably above the average of the University System.... Few if any junior colleges in this region exceed Armstrong in quality of students selected and the thoroughness of the academic work accomplished.

Lowe personally reviewed the progress of students every two weeks and invited those who were performing poorly to meet with him in conferences known as “pink tea parties,” from the tell-tale tint of the summons. The small group of first faculty offered courses in history, government, biology, math, French, English, and home economics. The students found their instructors to be very young, much younger than their high school teachers; but they also saw them as “very proper people,” the sort of individuals that later language would label as good role models. Miss F. S. Boyd, mass instructor, taught English and was a universal favorite. The boys considered her a Greek goddess, and a small band of admirers unabashedly identified themselves as “Miss Fortson’s Fan Club,” besieging her with requests to form a reading club and a poetry club. Mr. Boyd, biology instructor, newly wed and very bald, taught “real” science, with microscopes and experiments such as the students had not known in high school. A steady succession of stray cats provided opportunities for dissection. Human reproduction received frank discussion, but the lectures on evolution created the greatest stir and prompted comments that Mr. Boyd’s classes stimulated more Bible reading than the city had seen in a good while. A few murmurrs surfaced about Christian dollars paying for un-Christian instruction.

Science classes met in the kitchen of the Armstrong house during the first year. A huge walk-in refrigerator, now disconnected, served as a storage room. It was one of many features that the new occupants observed with fascination and awe. White marble greeted them everywhere from the moment they entered the building; on the floor of the large entrance hall, on the fireplace mantles, and on the steps of the wide stairway curving up to the second floor. The basement contained two vaults, one for silver and one for wine. The third floor ballroom had a parquet floor. An immense bathroom on the second floor included a shower with spray jets on three sides. Bedrooms now became classrooms, with the addition of desks and portable blackboards, and, in some instances, domestic features adjusted nicely to academic use. Shoe shelves in bedroom closets served perfectly as pigeonholes for homework assignments and mail, and a barthub became a horizontal filing cabinet.

In January 1936, Mrs. Moltz and her daughter came for a visit and presented the college with a formal portrait of George Armstrong to hang in the entry hall. The plaque beneath the portrait generically identified Mrs. Moltz and her daughter as the founders of the college. But the real founder of the college, who probably composed the statement on the plaque, was home sick with a winter cold and was not present for the dedication ceremony. Mayor Gamble, however, was never one to miss a speech-making opportunity where
the college was concerned, and he sent his prepared remarks to be read by a city alderman. 

Gamble loved nothing better than making speeches at Armstrong occasions. When he mounted the platform to introduce a speaker and reached slowly inside his jacket to pull out his text, the faculty settled back, knowing that the mayor’s introduction was likely to be as long as the speech of the person being introduced. 

When he finished, Gamble would pass a copy of his remarks to the news reporter, and the full version would subsequently appear in the newspaper.

Even as the portrait of George Armstrong was being dedicated in the entrance hall, an auditorium was architecturally compatible with the adjacent Armstrong home and provided adequately for the needs of stage productions. The white glazed brick chosen for the exterior walls was not a perfect match with the mansion, but it was close enough. The $60,000 budget would not allow for anything more expensive. Mrs. Trosdal offered to purchase at her own expense stage lighting equipment that she believed particularly desirable.

When completed, the new building included classrooms and offices, an auditorium and stage, and showers and lockers in the basement. The auditorium floor was flat and without fixed seating so that the large room might serve a variety of student activities. Student sentiment favored naming the building for Mayor Gamble, but the auditorium became Jenkins Hall in recognition of the work of Herschel Jenkins on behalf of the college.

Gamble received his special tribute on February 11, 1936, in the form of the Lucas trophy presented each year to a person responsible for a major achievement for the city. The presentation occurred at a Rotary luncheon at the DeSoto Hotel before a crowd of 250 guests, with the Armstrong faculty seated together at a special table. The occasion was made to order for Gamble’s love of speeches and surprises. After setting forth a stirring portrayal of the “Spirit of Savannah,” he began to point to greater things yet to rise from Savannah’s history of financial and commercial leadership.

The Armstrong College Commission, said the mayor, now dared to dream of a future School of Business in Savannah, a dream that was no longer a distant possibility but one that would be a reality in the fall term at the junior college. Through an intermediary, the mayor had brought his idea to the attention of a generous Savannahian, who promptly requested the mayor to find a suitable building, which the donor would purchase and remodel as needed. Gamble had found the place just west of the new auditorium in the former home of Judge George T. Cann. Slowly Gamble recounted each step of the story, leaving the donor unnamed until at last he pronounced that the new addition to the junior college would be the Mills B. Lane School of Finance and Commerce. The announcement turned the Lucas luncheon from a predictable ceremony into “a ‘wow’ of a meeting.” It also aptly mirrored Gamble, the public man of many words, and Lane, the private man of few words. 

According to Gamble, Lane’s only instructions were “proceed with the plan.” The idea that a junior college could have a School of Finance and Commerce did not seem at all odd to the mayor, who described it in the same breath with the Wharton School of Business and the business school at the University of Georgia. In fact, it exemplified exactly the attributes that the Lucas trophy honored: a pride in Savannah, its people, and its possibilities.

Lane, who now held the title of president, added a business instructor to the list of new faculty that he was recruiting for the coming year. A chemistry teacher, Foreman M. Hawes, joined the faculty in January of 1936 to complete the science offerings at the college, and four other new faculty members came on board the following fall. Ivy M. “Chick” Shiver, who was an old friend of Lowe from Athens and who had been the All-American football captain of the University of Georgia’s “dream and wonder team” of 1927, became instructor in physical education and director of athletics. John P. Dyer arrived with a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt to teach social science and bring its possibilities.
distinct programs of study: a two-year certificate in liberal arts, a two-year certificate in home economics, and a three-year diploma in finance and commerce.

Students began to establish their own "first things." As Gamble reminded them repeatedly, their new college was free from the shackles of history and had "no moss grown traditions…no ancient inherited prejudices, no old patterns." The students expressed the same sentiment in their own language: "everything we do is a first." In October 1935 they adopted maroon and gold as their school colors and began to discuss a name for their newspaper. Their first choice, *The Strong Arm*, was too sophomoric for the faculty, who thought it suggested the Arm and Hammer baking soda emblem. After further consideration, the students decided on *The Inkwell*. The first issue appeared November 15, 1935. When a new freshman class arrived in the second year, rat caps appeared as required headgear from September until the Christmas holidays; and during that same period of time, freshmen could enter and exit only through the rear door of the Armstrong building, leaving the front steps reserved for sophomores alone. A school song emerged haltingly. The first effort, a marching song to the tune of an old Welsh air, "March of the Men of Harlech," did not seem quite right to the college's music instructor, Miss Spencer, who challenged student Doris Falk to compose a set of words for Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." She did, and the results took root. As the first class of students approached graduation in 1937, they created their last new tradition, a yearbook. *The Inkwell* sponsored a contest to select a name, and perhaps remembering the experience of naming the newspaper, suggested a "return to simplicity," as in *The Armstrong Annual*. Regionalism prevailed instead, and the yearbook became the *Geechee*.

Along with these formal features, other informal rituals took shape. Although the grassy expanse of Forsyth Park lay just across Gaston Street, the students considered the front steps of the Armstrong house as...
The Christian Science Monitor provided a view of the backyard of the Lane building, noon tea between 4:00 and 5:30.30 An outside balcony it served hot lunches for 25 cents and offered after-

purchased for the business school. Christened “The

Feedery,”29 and offered a six ounce bottle of Coca

Cola for a nickel as well as assorted sandwiches. If

few of the post-game festivities were victory celebra-
tions as most of Georgia’s roads remained unpaved.

Three flat tires on a trip to Douglas required a call to

lenges as most of Georgia’s roads remained unpaved.

The auditorium best as the home of The Savannah

Playhouse, the college-community theater group initi-
ted and directed by Stacy Keach. Recognizing the limitations that a small student body presented for a theater program, Keach opened his productions to the talents of the community, as had been his experience at Northwestern. Students and non-students served on the theater board, and every phase of production mixed townspeople with students in a forty-sixty ratio tilted toward the college. The curtain rose on February 4, 1937, for the opening performance of Three Cornered Moon. A small audi-

eance, elegantly attired in black tie and evening dress, found their seats with the assistance of student ushers in tuxedos, and the word began to spread about

Armstrong’s talented drama instructor.35 Playhouse productions became a community highlight. Keach made full use of Mrs. Troldal’s light board and from the beginning presented a repertoire that included unconventional and experimental techniques. In the spring of 1938, he selected The Summation of

Everyman to introduce Savannahians to the starkness of “space stage” theater, using lights alone to define space and circumstance with minimal sets or props. A
devil moral play that Keach deemed appropriate to the Lenten season, the drama used only a Gothic arch and black drapes to set the stage, while lighting created all other effects.36 Keach’s wife, Mary Peckham Keach, also directed Playhouse performances, making her directing debut with the chilling psychological mystery drama, Night Must Fall, in which Keach himself made his first acting appearance at the Play-

house. For years after-

ward students shuddered to remember the tension and terror created by his portrayal of Danny the bellhop.37 By 1941, the Playhouse had 3,000 season ticket holders for its productions.38 With the technical skills of his craft and an engaging manner of showmanship,
Pre-War Sports at Armstrong

Basketball team. Balkans 1937.

Women's riflery. Georger 1939.

Golf team. Georger 1938.

Swim class at the DeSoto Heated pool. Georger 1941.

Football team. Georger 1939.

Coach Chick Shupe. Georger 1941.

Tennis team. Balkans 1937.
Keach enjoyed great popularity with students, colleagues, and Savannahians. When theater-goers arrived in the lobby of the auditorium, he would often be present to greet them; and after the performance a radio reporter would gather comments from the audience and from the actors, using questions and a script prepared in advance by Keach.41

The academic life of the college centered on the general education curriculum of the humanities and sciences with home economics and the finance program in place around the edges. Miss Ennis had a broad view of home economics. In addition to sewing and cooking and hosting the college's receptions, she asked the ladies on the Commission to help her students visit the fine homes and gardens of Savannah.42 And each year she led a caravan out of town to view homes in Midtown, Charleston, or St. Augustine. For balance, she took her sociology class on a weekend trip to see the Norris Dam TVA project near Knoxville and the Technical Housing Project in Atlanta.43 In 1940 and 1941, Tom Askew's course in Contemporary Georgia sent students to photograph the full range of housing in Savannah, from the homes of Ardsley Park to the slum tenements of the inner city.44 The resulting album, "Living in Savannah: A Survey in Pictures," gave the students a close look at poverty in St. Augustine. For balance, she took her sociology class prepared in advance by Keach.41

President Lowe never envisioned a School of Finance comparable to the Lane School of Finance.46 The program remained small, but from 1939 to 1944, twenty-two students graduated with a diploma in finance and banking.47

In the fall of 1936, Armstrong introduced an evening program for adults that provided general education courses from the daytime curriculum as well as courses designed for employees of local banks and insurance companies. The daytime faculty taught the basic courses, and Mr. McNeill covered the business offerings. The banking classes, endorsed by the local chapter of the American Institute of Banking, attracted a particularly strong cohort of evening students.48 The additional revenue helped the college budget, and Lowe considered the enrollment a gratifying indication of support from the city's businesses, which encouraged and often paid for their employees to attend.49

The spring enrollment of 1937 showed 214 day students and 123 evening students. By the fall of 1938, the enrollment of day and evening students, excluding the bankers, was 594, the highest number for the pre-war years.50

In the spring of 1937, Gamble announced that Charles Holmes Henry, a pioneer in industrial chemistry for wood and paper products, would help the college develop its chemistry department (which consisted of Mr. Hawes) and also offer general lectures on the importance of chemistry to the South. Savannah and the whole southeastern region of the United States, said Gamble, stood poised on the brink of enormous industrial development. To support this new industrial growth, Armstrong could develop a major School of Chemistry comparable to the Lane School of Finance. Gamble invited Savannah's industrialists and others interested in education to step forward with suggestions and financial assistance.51 Over the course of the next year, Henry became a familiar sight at the college, speaking to student assemblies, visiting Mr. Hawes or President Lowe, presenting the awards at the Honors Day ceremonies in June 1937 and June 1938, and generally providing the inspirational presence that Gamble envisioned.52

But laboratory science courses required more than encouragement and inspiration. They required specialized facilities and equipment not well suited to the existing college buildings. The Commission had decided against outfitting any of the classrooms in the instructor's building. Keach also produced a film, "Geechee 1941."43

In the spring of 1937, Gamble announced that Charles Holmes Henry, a pioneer in industrial chemistry for wood and paper products, would help the college develop its chemistry department (which consisted of Mr. Hawes) and also offer general lectures on the importance of chemistry to the South. Savannah and the whole southeastern region of the United States, said Gamble, stood poised on the brink of enormous industrial development. To support this new industrial growth, Armstrong could develop a major School of Chemistry comparable to the Lane School of Finance. Gamble invited Savannah's industrialists and others interested in education to step forward with suggestions and financial assistance.51 Over the course of the next year, Henry became a familiar sight at the college, speaking to student assemblies, visiting Mr. Hawes or President Lowe, presenting the awards at the Honors Day ceremonies in June 1937 and June 1938, and generally providing the inspirational presence that Gamble envisioned.52

But laboratory science courses required more than encouragement and inspiration. They required specialized facilities and equipment not well suited to the existing college buildings. The Commission had decided against outfitting any of the classrooms in the auditorium building for laboratory use, leaving science instruction to the various rooms of the Armstrong and Lane Buildings. Each year the first challenge for science students was to find the new location of their science classes. Lowe told the Commission in July 1937 that the biology lab had moved three times in two years in an effort to find an appropriate home. A year and a half later he brought the problem up again and reported that chemistry was being taught in two small, inadequate labs located over the garage and in the former kitchen of the Armstrong mansion.53 The college needed a science building.

The college also needed a better library. Like the science classes, the college library moved continuously during Armstrong's early years, from a first floor reading room to the third floor ballroom and then into the Lane Building. Both the collection and the budget remained small. The initial outpouring of book donations from the personal libraries of Savannah's citizens established an opening day collection, especially in literature, but many of the gifts were more suitable for recreational reading than for academic studies and ended up in the basement activity room of the Armstrong mansion.54 As Lowe looked toward accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the three primary issues would be a science building, library resources, and financial stability.

Mayor Gamble had procured the college's first three buildings: the mansion given by Mrs. Moltz, the auditorium built with WPA funds, and the residence purchased by Mills B. Lane, Sr. for the program in finance and banking. All three buildings extended college property westward on Gaston Street, and only the auditorium required additional funding from the city. Maintenance, of course, especially for the mansion, became a major budget item along with operational expenses for salaries, equipment, and library books. Gamble always predicted that the college would become self-supporting, but for the next five years from $58,625 for 1936 to $51,542 for 1940, revenues from tuition and other fees provided roughly half of the needed amount. The rest came from the city.55

Even as Lowe made his prediction of the college's future needs, overall city spending came under attack in the fall of 1936. The college was not the target of the attack but the mayor was, as Gamble found himself on the wrong side of local politics. In October 1936, former city attorney Marvin O'Neal sued the mayor and the city for spending beyond the legal limit.56 Gamble justified the city's borrowing by pointing to decreased income from real estate taxes and increased spending for unemployment relief, care for the sick and disabled, and the city's share of WPA projects. The heated exchange between the mayor and his critics occurred just as the college completed construction of the auditorium building, and the college Commission quietly decided that it was "not desirable at this time to dedicate the new building." Gamble considered the attack as a ploy coming from the political machine of John J. Bouhan, which was supporting incumbent U.S. Senator Richard Russell in the fall primary. Gamble had broken ranks with the local power brokers by publicly endorsing Governor Eugene Talmadge's bid for the office.57 When the Bouhan group nominated Robert Hitch for mayor in the upcoming election, the newspaper observed that the
The Savannah Playhouse

Stacy Koech, Sr. initiated The Savannah Playhouse at the Armstrong theater program. It combined student and community talent.

"Night Must Fall," with Stacy Koech, center, as Danny the Bellhop.

A full house at The Playhouse.

Stacy Koech, left, in "You Can't Take It With You."

"Paths of Glory."

Scrapbook of the Savannah Playhouse at Armstrong Junior College, 1939. Special Collections, Laney Library, ASU.
To distance Armstrong from Savannah politics, Commission Chairman Pratt Adams proposed that the Commission become the governing authority of the institution rather than the city. Although no political influence had yet been brought to bear on the college, Adams felt that “under our present organization such influence would be inevitable at some future time.” Under new legislation that revised the original act empowering the city to found the college, the Commission now became a smaller body of eight members and handled all college funds. The college president submitted an annual budget to the Commission indicating projected expenses and the amount of funding needed from the city, and the Commission then sent a proposal to the mayor and aldermen for approval. The city distributed an allocation to the college at designated intervals throughout the year. At Armstrong’s first graduation exercises in June of 1937, Robert Hitch sat on the stage as mayor while Gamble took his seat as the newly elected chairman of the Commission. In January 1939, Gamble returned to city hall as mayor once more. Early in 1939, President Lowe began the process of getting Armstrong accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). A college could not be accredited until it had graduated three classes, and Armstrong would meet that goal in June 1939. The accreditation announcement arrived in the spring of 1940, with a comment that SACS considered Armstrong the best junior college reviewed in 1939; the report expressed concerns about the three troublesome issues: financial stability, library holdings, and science facilities. Lowe renewed his request to the Commission for a new science building. Lowe opposed the purchase of any more residential buildings as inappropriate for the needs of science instruction. In fact, two other buildings had been donated to the college but had not been found suitable to its purposes. In 1937, the college had received a bequest of a home on the southeast corner of Jones and Drayton Street, but the distance from the core of college buildings and legal difficulties with the bequest resulted in the property being sold and the funds held in trust until the court proceedings were resolved. Also in 1937, the trustees of the Lawton Memorial building offered to donate that facility to the college. But again, it was some distance from the rest of the college’s buildings and the college now had its own auditorium and did not need another similar structure. The two opportunities showed, however, that the college had caught the attention of potential donors, and Mayor Hitch encouraged other Savannahians to do likewise: For a century or more it has been almost a disgrace for a wealthy Bostonian to die without leaving something to Harvard University, and I hope it will become a custom and a fashion for the wealthy men and women of Savannah to deal generously with the Junior College during life and in remember it in their wills. Lowe continued his search for a science building and saw an opportunity across the street in Forsyth Park. If the college could acquire the World War I dummy fort, it might become the place to build a combination science building and physical education building. The Confederate Veterans Association and others objected, and the college judiciously withdrew the proposal. Monterey Square offered a more promising prospect on the trust lot occupied by First Presbyterian Church. The church building had not been used for services since 1935 when the congregation moved to Washington Avenue. In June 1940 Gamble raised the idea of acquiring the site for a science building. He proposed to ask for a $125,000 bond and for federal assistance to purchase the lot and construct the building. The bond issue passed in December 1940, and in May 1941 Levy and Clarke architects presented the Commission with plans for a three-story brick building that would “fit in with Middle Savannah or Early Savannah types” and would be “in harmony with the surroundings.” When the first bids exceeded the funds available, new plans cut the length of the building by about a third, leaving the east end of the lot for future expansion, and reduced the height to two floors, still designed to be in keeping with the three-story residences of the neighborhood. The revised building, said the newspaper, would present “a handsome appearance.” The expansion of the college beyond its initial core of adjacent buildings marked a small rite of passage as Armstrong entered its sixth year in the fall of 1941. Other changes were in evidence as well. In June 1941, President Lowe announced his decision to accept a position with the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company in Birmingham. He had served the college for its first five years and in 1939 had received the Lucas Trophy in recognition of the contributions that he and the college made to the life of the city. At Lowe’s departure, Thomas Askew assumed the office of president.
of president, which he combined with his duties as dean. By the summer of 1941, many of the first faculty had left for other positions or for marriage. Coach Shiver had become head coach and social science teacher at Savannah High, and Armstrong dropped its football program along with credit courses in physical education. Stacy Keach took a year’s leave of absence to accept a scholarship from the National Theater Conference to direct the Pasadena Playhouse. New faculty arrived to fill the vacancies: tall Bill Dabney from the University of Virginia to teach history, Kenneth Duffy with a Ph.D. from Pittsburgh to teach Spanish and Latin American history, and Ben Painter with a Ph.D. from Harvard to teach biology. All of the changes occurred smoothly, and the college even experienced a happy moment of national publicity when student Maree Helmken appeared on the cover of Life magazine, as part of a feature story on “stylish cotton.” Elsewhere in higher education in Georgia, the news was not good. In 1941, the Southern Association removed the accreditation of ten institutions in the University System, including the University of Georgia, because of Governor Eugene Talmadge’s “unprecedented and unjustifiable interference” in the state’s schools. Talmadge had forced the resignation of three members of the Board of Regents and persuaded the altered Board to remove ten persons of various ranks from System institutions, including a college president, two deans, three faculty members and a vice chancellor. The Southern Association issued its scathing report on December 3, 1941. The Savannah newspaper assured its readers that Armstrong would not be affected by the upheaval since the city junior college was not part of the University System. The announcement appeared in the Sunday morning paper on December 7, 1941.

WAR
Like everyone else, Armstrong students remembered exactly where they were and what they were doing when news of Pearl Harbor transfixed the country. They were doing the things that students did on a Sunday afternoon, winding up the weekend’s social activities or finishing homework assignments for Monday. One student learned the news as she walked down the curved stairway of the Armstrong building after an afternoon of studying in the third-floor library. On Monday, December 8, students and faculty crowded into The Nut to listen in silence to the radio broadcast of President Roosevelt’s address to the joint session of Congress. In the days that followed came the news that a young Savannahian was among those killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor. His younger brother was a student at Armstrong Junior College. The possibility of war had hovered around the edges of college life ever since the opening day, and small steps toward military preparedness began to appear early. After the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, the Civil Aeronautics Authority offered to pay the college to provide a program of flight instruction by an approved instructor consisting of one month of ground school followed by the required number of hours in the air. The program took off in the late fall of 1939, and by January the students were ready to fly, with President Lowe and Dean Askew on hand to watch. In the fall of 1940, the city leased its airport to the government for an army airfield; and three nights a week, large army trucks rumbled up to the front door of the college to unload their passengers for classes in math and English. Lowe reported to the Commission that a mood of restlessness prevailed among the male students. Stacy Keach chose a war drama, Paths of Glory, for the first production of 1940. Based on a novel by Humphrey Cobb and adapted by Sidney Howard, the play presented an anti-war statement and drew its title from a line in Gray's Elegy: "paths of glory lead but to the grave." The drama recalled an actual World War I court-martial of French soldiers whose failure to capture an assigned objective frustrated their commanding officers’ greed for glory. Keach’s “space stage” technique used no curtain and no props other than steps leading up to an immense stone monument. On the dark stage, a spotlight moved slowly up the monument to reveal the words “To the War Dead,” then dropped back to the foreground, where the action took place under the shadowed inscription. Keach ordered authentic military uniforms from a theater in New York and borrowed guns and other equipment from Camp Stewart. He told an interviewer, "I don’t believe Savannah audiences have ever seen anything quite like it, its dramatic punch, its human appeal, the
Dyer also expressed his views in the columns of *The Inkwell,* but the Armstrong students who wrote for the college newspaper had been expressing their own opinions about war since the second issue of the publication in December 1935, before either Dyer or Keach had been hired. Perhaps because the first class at Armstrong included a number of older students in their mid-twenties, many of the early *Inkwell* often carried serious articles, such as the December 1935 editorial entitled simply “War.”

It is the young men, the college men, who give their lives in war in order that a few financiers and munitions makers, sitting back in easy chairs, can make their six or eight million and retire. It is the young men of America who come back from war, horribly maimed, ruined in mind and body, to live out their remaining years in poverty and hardship. It is the young men who in the “glory” of war, live in mud-filled trenches and eat food not fit for rats. It is high time that American college students should make their influence felt, and force the nation to realize that the men who will have to fight the next war are in favor of peace.

In the March 27, 1936 *Inkwell,* student editor Hinckley Murphy reviewed the anti-war novel *All Quiet On The Western Front,* and told his readers that it would cause them to “ask questions for which there are curious answers.” In the fall Murphy published an imaginary dialogue entitled “Oscar and the Unknown Soldier,” describing the senselessness and callousness of war. And for the Christmas issue of 1936, he chose the title ‘Holy Night, Silent Night’ for a series of images of Polish peasants, newreels of the civil war in Spain, country barns, southern hymns, and always the dark ships at sea. He opened the new year with thoughts of a play that might be entitled “We Who Are About to Die.”

Other opinions about the war came from the stage of the Armstrong auditorium in the annual Institute of Citizenship initiated by Dean Askew as a two-day forum of presentations by noted speakers on various topics of interest. Members of the Savannah community shared the stage with visiting dignitaries and served as moderators or participants in the discussion. In February 1940, immediately preceding Keach’s anti-war production, Assistant Secretary of State Henry F. Grady spoke on the topic, “The United States in a World at War.” Isolationists and anti-isolationists aired their opinions in the comments that followed.

In the spring of 1941, an *Inkwell* reporter drove to Hinesville to see the new army installation at Camp Stewart. He described for his readers the rows of tents constructed on wooden bases, housing six to eight men each, and he watched as an air raid drill threw searchlight beams against the night sky to practice spotting intruding aircraft. After Pearl Harbor, the fear of air attack shaped the college’s actions of military preparedness. A “Defense Committee” identified safe areas. The *Inkwell* urged students to “Know Your Air Raid Rules” and published instructions on what to do in the event of incendiary bombs. Each building had a designated air raid warden, a first aid kit, and a flashlight. Three short rings on the bell would sound an alarm. The faculty learned how to use gas masks.

Along with the rest of the country, Armstrong offered its full resources to serve the war effort. Its greatest resource was its men and women. Even before Pearl Harbor, four former Armstrong students were flying military aircraft, two in the U.S. Army Air Corps and two in the Royal Air Force. Mr. Gignilliat was the first faculty member to leave the college for military service, having been called to active duty by the Army Reserves before the fall term of 1940. Six months into the war, *The Inkwell* paid tribute to the first two alumni to die in the war.

For those students who were still in school when war broke out, selective service registration forms arrived in February 1942. In April, the Navy announced the V-1 program under which college freshmen and sophomores seventeen to nineteen years of age could enlist as apprentice seamen in the Naval Reserve with a two-year deferment from active duty. By September 1942 all of the service branches were sending recruiters to the college to explain the requirements and options of their different reserve programs. Seventy percent of the male students enrolled. When the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor came around in December, the call-up age had dropped to eighteen. Winter registration proceeded with the hope that students would be able to finish the winter term before being summoned, but for many the notices came early. The major exodus began in the spring of 1943, and the editors of the *Geechee* dedicated the yearbook to the 218 Armstrong alumni in the various branches of military service.

In addition to sending her men and women to war, Armstrong adjusted the curriculum and the calendar to serve the needs of the country. Summer vacation was no longer justifiable. In May 1942, Askew told *The Inkwell* bluntly that “our enemies will not play this summer.” The college *Bulletin* for 1942-1943 delivered the same message in the words of the Secretary of the Navy: “The country can no longer afford to have young men proceed with their education at a moderate tempo.” Two new programs appeared in the catalog (Liberal Arts: Pre-Med or Scientific, and Liberal Arts: Technical), and new courses for summer and fall of 1942 included stenography, physics, navigation, map reading, mechanical drawing, trigonometry, and quantitative analysis.

The new science building, dedicated as Thomas Gamble Hall on June 16, 1942, opened just in time. Here at last were laboratories designed to be
A. Candler Hospital came for science instruction. Mathematics courses emphasized math needed by aviators. Meteorology and nautical astronomy joined the curriculum. French classes added “wartime French” to the syllabus, and English classes included the study of military terminology. Lowe had expected that war would steer junior colleges toward vocational training, but he consistently maintained that Armstrong should stress a general education program. Special courses might develop as additions to the general education curriculum but they should not replace it. President Askew affirmed that opinion and renewed the college’s commitment to the liberal arts. Armstrong’s primary purpose, he told the Commission, would continue to be “to help preserve the best thoughts and traditions of our age in the face of war.” The person who most clearly embodied that liberal arts commitment joined the college faculty in the summer of 1942. Holding two master’s degrees from Emory University, W. Orson Beecher became a mainstay of the liberal arts at Armstrong for the next forty years. In the memories of the wartime students, “Mr. Beecher taught everything.” Most often, he taught French, Spanish, and history. The history courses naturally turned toward recent events, with special emphasis on preparation for officer candidacy tests. The School of the Citizen Soldier became a primary text in the required class in American history, and wartime topics dominated the lectures of the Institute of Citizenship, which Beecher now directed.

In January 1943, President Askew was called to active duty by the Navy Reserves. The Commission granted him a leave of absence and appointed chemistry professor Foreman Hawes as acting president with Reuben Holland as his assistant. Holland also became registrar and treasurer as the college began to economize its staffing of administrative and instructional positions. When Stacy Keach decided not to return to Savannah, the Playhouse was suspended until the end of the war. Physical education courses returned to the wartime priority for physical fitness, but classes were taught by instructors at the YMCA. When the business professor left for active duty, part-time instructors from local banks and businesses taught the courses as needed. The various staffing adjustments helped the college maintain a balanced budget, but they could not address the problem of the plummeting enrollment. Enlistments and new wartime job opportunities cut deeply into the college age population. One of the early concerns of college administrators was to counsel students to stay in school in order to acquire the skills that would be of greatest benefit to their military service and their future employment. That argument lost its persuasiveness as the draft age dropped to eighteen and the war effort intensified. In World War I, colleges had opened their doors to high school students who passed admission tests after completing their junior year. The Armstrong Commission looked at this option in early 1942, and when the lowered draft age brought matters to a critical point in the fall, the Commission entered into discussions with public school officials to consider the possibility of admitting qualified high school students into Armstrong classes. The school board rejected the proposal in December 1942, and enrollment at Armstrong continued to fall. After the spring exodus in 1943, acting president Hawes presented the Commission a sobering chart showing the decline. The enrollment for spring was at an all-time low of 101 students. Hawes’s conclusion was grim: “If the present trend continues, the college has one more year to operate.” An enrollment of less than 100 students would create serious morale problems. Teaching four to five students in a class did not stimulate either the students or the teacher. To keep the college alive, the Commission launched a major recruitment effort. During four middlesummer weeks, the newspaper carried a quarter-page Armstrong advertisement provided by publisher Herschel Jenkins at no cost to the college. It worked — or something worked. Fall enrollment took an upward turn and 311 students registered for classes in September 1943. That number remained stable for the following fall as well.

But the number of male students remained down, way down. Only four men graduated with the class of 1944. The change in Armstrong’s social life was dramatic. For the first two years of the war, the social events of the college followed the general pattern of the pre-war years, with the addition of patriotic bannernes. 


Gamble Hall, a new science building for the college, 1942. Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society.
and themes. The attack on Pearl Harbor did not deter Armstrong freshmen from electing a freshman Queen, and the homecoming festivities included the usual Christmas reception even in the absence of football. The students dressed up for the first formal dance in two years to honor a King and Queen of the college. The Jimmy Reed Orchestra played, and admission cost twenty-five cents, a “defense tax” to support the war effort. Marine posters, tacked to the auditorium walls, added a patriotic tone.

In April 1942, Mayor Gamble organized a Marine Appreciation Week. Three Armstrong co-eds, a queen and two maids of honor, all identified as “Marinettes,” rode in a motorcade that drove from the college to the Lucas Theater, where speeches and patriotic music by the Marine Corps band from Parris Island led up to the coronation of the queen by none other than Governor Talmadge, an unexpected guest to whom Gamble yielded the honor. During the winter and spring of 1942, small notices of “quiet weddings” began to appear on the society page of the newspaper, as students and former students took their vows before leaving for war.

Two class presidents for 1943 and 1944 reflected the varied experiences and backgrounds of Armstrong students during the war years. The president of the sophomore class of 1943 was Alvie Smith, a small, wiry student whose prospects for college had been virtually non-existent. His father was a double victim of the Depression, jobless and alcoholic. The family tumbled into the welfare caseload of Lillian Spencer, an activist social worker who, with her husband, Frank Spencer, spoke out strongly on behalf of the needy citizens of Savannah. For Alvie Smith, the Spencers offered a lifeline to college. They personally intervened to secure for him a two-year Pilot Club scholarship to Armstrong. He had to take additional course work during the summer to meet admission requirements, but Mrs. Spencer told him that on the basis of need he had won the scholarship “hands down.” Smith’s classmates knew or guessed the severity of his personal circumstances, but his energy and talent for leadership led to his election as class president during his sophomore year. Lacking any family assistance at home, he supported himself by working forty hours a week for the Savannah Morning News as a cub reporter, and his by-line articles about the college appeared frequently in the columns of the newspaper.
that he should also work on The Inkwell. Along with many of his classmates, he went to war in the spring of 1943, two and a half months shy of his diploma. The sophomore class president for the following year, the college's greatest symbol of upbeat confidence during the war continued to be Mayor Gamble, and Christmas homecoming for 1943 saw the mayor in attendance for the festivities in the lobby as usual. He came prepared with a surprise Christmas gift. Creating a special moment as he loved to do, he called the crowd to a hush and built the suspense of his announcement. A generous donor had requested that the mayor suggest a suitable memorial for her husband, “a memorial that would not be of transitory nature; a memorial that would serve Savannah in a genuinely worthwhile way; a memorial whose value would not lessen as the years pass; a memorial whose fruits would serve to continuously enrich the life of our city.” Gamble suggested that no memorial could be more fitting than the establishment of an Armstrong Scholarship Fund. Other donors, he reminded his listeners, might consider the satisfaction to be gained by making similar gifts. Building to a climax, Gamble revealed the identity of the generous benefactor, Mrs. Arthur Lucas, whose gift of $10,000 would provide student scholarships in memory of her husband.

The gift was not only a vote of confidence in the college’s future but also a practical aid for recruitment as enrollment hovered around the 100-student danger mark. Gamble’s optimism about Armstrong never wavered. In the summer of 1944, an un-named friend of the college commissioned a portrait of the mayor to be hung over the mantle in the lobby of the Armstrong house. Painted by Savannah artist Emma Wilkins, the portrait showed the mayor with two books on a table by his side and a rolled manuscript in his hand, portraying him as a scholar, researcher, and historian. The rolled manuscript looked suspiciously like a speech ready to be delivered; but the portrait took its place above the great fireplace without any ceremonial occasion at all. In September 1944, Armstrong began its tenth year with 139 students. The numbers suggested that the college would be able to survive the war. When Tom Askew, who had been on leave since January 1943, submitted his resignation as president, the Commission appointed Foreman Hawes to become his official successor. Hawes and the Armstrong faculty now renewed their discussion of the post-war direction of the college. What kind of programs would work best for veterans and their needs? Should the college continue its liberal arts emphasis or develop technical and terminal programs not directed toward senior college work? Union Bag and the Herty Foundation were interested in courses for pulp and paper technicians. Could the college support technical programs and also maintain its general education emphasis?

Financial resources and expanded physical facilities would be necessary for either eventuality. Christmas 1944 brought a $20,000 gift from the Savannah Morning News for the Armstrong Endowment Fund, and Mrs. Lucas added $5,000 to her previous year’s gift. In June of 1945 the college acquired its fifth building, the large Dуб residence just north of the Armstrong house on the corner of Bull and Gordon Streets. The returning veterans would need all of the space that the college could find.

One major change in the post-war world for Armstrong would be the absence of Mayor Gamble. On July 13, 1945, while vacationing on Signal Mountain outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, Gamble suffered a fatal heart attack. He was seventy-seven years old. The city and the college mourned. Seven years earlier, for his seventieth birthday, the college faculty had given the mayor a book entitled The Tyranny of Words. No one missed the humor of the title. In words and deeds, Thomas Gamble had promoted the well-being of Armstrong Junior College throughout its first decade. He founded the college, he supported it enthusiastically, and he persuaded others to do the same. In reviewing Gamble’s life and service to Savannah, the newspaper described the college as his most significant accomplishment, “a monument to man and his persistence for decent things.”

At Gamble’s death the war in the Pacific was not yet concluded. Scores of Armstrong students came of age, figuratively and literally, while fighting in that conflict. Twenty-three of them did not return home. Sammy Reed, the trumpet player with the Reed family orchestra, was one who did not return. On a bombing mission near Okinawa just before the end of the war, his plane flew in low to target a Japanese ship. But the bomb hit the water at a freak angle, skipped up like a flat rock and exploded, taking the aircraft with it. Twenty-two year old Sammy was the plane’s bombardier and navigator. He had enlisted on his twentieth birthday in December 1942, at the end of his fifth quarter at Armstrong. Assigned to basic training at Keesler Field near Biloxi, Mississippi, he took his trumpet with him. There, in the swamps and pine trees of southern Mississippi, the last sound to be heard at the end of the day came from Sammy Reed’s horn, echoing across the empty evening air.
Chapter 3 Notes

1. Alexander C. Ormond interview. Ormond was a graduate of Savannah High School, having begun his education at the one-room school at the Savannah Sugar Refinery where his father was chief engineer. He had applied to Georgia Tech but was told he could not be admitted until he was sixteen. Armstrong had no minimum age requirement. Ormond transferred to Georgia Tech after his first year at Armstrong.

2. SMN, 17 September 1935.

3. SMN, 1 September 1935. Lowe planned to teach a course on contemporary economic problems.


6. President's Report, December 1939, Armstrong College Commission Minutes and Reports. The Armstrong Commission minutes are collected in two large notebooks in the Armstrong Atlantic State University Archives. The collection appears to be copies of the original documents, typed as a complete body at a later date. All indications are that they are faithful to the originals, which apparently no longer exist.

7. SMN, 14 July 1935.


10. Commission Minutes, 12 February 1938. President Lowe reported the fall enrollment for 1935, 1936, and 1937. The names listed in the college Bulletin for 1935-1936 show 178 freshmen for 1935-1936. Either Lowe's count was in error or ten students enrolled after the fall term. The college dropped "Memorial" from its official name in July 1935. It never appeared in any college publications.


13. Preq, 22 October 1935. During the first year, forty-three students dropped out, about half of them for academic reasons. As Lowe explained this unexpectedly high percentage to the Commission, a number of poorly qualified students had been "swep[t] into the institution by the wave of publicity attending our opening," and other students had mistakenly expected easy work. President's Report, Commission Minutes, 9 April 1936.

14. Marion Lockwood Cope interview.

15. William Boyd interview.

16. Osmus Lanier interview.

17. SMN, 9 January 1936.

18. Margaret Fortson Stephens interview.


21. Inkwell, 27 March 1936, 28 October 1936. The auditorium carried no name until 1942, when it was formally named Jenkins Hall. See Commission Minutes, 6 March 1942.

22. SMN, 12 February 1936. The Lucas Trophy was instituted in 1927 by Arthur Lucas, an enthusiastic supporter of the city.

23. Lowe had originally carried the title of dean of the college. In December 1935 the Commission awarded him the title of president and Thomas Askew became dean.

24. Thomas Carr interview.

25. SMN, 5 June 1938.


27. Inkwell, 27 March 1936, 22 May 1936.

28. SMN, 12 December 1936. In 1994, when Doris Falk Stillman, Professor Emeritus of English at Rutgers, discovered to her horror that her "excellent set of rhymed clerihews" was still in use, she pleaded with the college to replace her hasty improvisation and "clear my name of this ignominy." Letter from Doris Falk Stillman, 4 January 1994. Stone files, Armstrong Archives (AA). To change a tradition, however, no matter how embarrassing to the author, is very hard to do. The Alma Mater is sung at every graduation, with Spencer and Falk identified as the authors.


30. Inkwell, 29 October 1937.

31. The memory of these tea dances is very strong among Armstrong alumni despite numerous Inkwell comments and occasional presidential reports about small attendance.

32. Robert Gordon interview.

33. 'Greco, 1940.

34. Robert Gordon interview.

35. Edward Morgan interview.

36. Harriet Konter interview.

37. Preq, 5 February 1937.

38. Inkwell, 25 February 1938. See also Savannah Playhouse Scrapbook. The scrapbook contains a collection of photos and programs of Playhouse productions.


40. SMN, 18 April 1941.

41. A script for one of these post-performance interviews exists in the Playhouse Scrapbook.

42. Marion Lockwood Cope interview.


44. Inkwell, 8 May 1940. The album can be found in the Armstrong Archives.

45. President's Report, Commission Minutes, 9 April 1936, 8 October 1936, 12 February 1938. The early planning for the 1936 budget preceded Mr. Lane's gift and did not include a business instructor.

46. See the list of graduates in the college Bulletin for 1939–1944.

47. SMN, 24 September 1936.


49. Commission Minutes, 6 March 1937, 9 December 1938.

50. SMN, 8 March 1937.

51. Inkwell, 19 April 1939. He died in July 1938.


53. Inkwell, 23 October 1936, 22 September 1939.

54. Commission Minutes, 8 October 1936.

55. Commission Minutes, 6 April 1936, 15 December 1939.

56. SMN, 30 October 1936. O'Neal had initiated his lawsuit the previous year. SMN, 16 October 1935.

57. SMN, 5 September 1936.

58. SMN, 15 November 1936.

59. SMN, 15 November 1936.

60. Commission Minutes, 8 October 1936.


62. President's Report, Commission Minutes, 18 April 1940.

63. The bequest came from the will of Miss Carrie Colding. By the court's ruling, Armstrong shared the proceeds of the sale with the other claimants.

64. Preq, 1 October 1937. Armstrong never took possession of the property, which subsequently became the home of St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church.

65. Preq, 1 October 1937.


67. SMN, 16 June 1940.

68. Commission Minutes, 10 May 1941.

69. SMN, 3 September 1941.

70. Preq, 19 June 1941.

71. SMN, 29 December 1939. After the successful accreditation report, Lowe had suggested that the Commission consider carefully the future direction of the college and whether he was the person to continue to lead it. President's Report, Commission Minutes, 18 April 1940. Lowe did not have an advanced academic degree.

72. Commission Minutes, 2 June 1941.

73. Mr. Boyd left for medical school. Mr. Dyer took a position with radio station WSAX. Miss Fortson and Miss Ennis left for marriage, the latter leaving town. Miss Fortson would later return as Mrs. Hugh Stephens to Ennis left for marriage, the latter leaving town. Miss Fortson would later return as Mrs. Hugh Stephens to Armstrong.

74. SMN, 29 December 1939. After the successful accreditation report, Lowe had suggested that the Commission consider carefully the future direction of the college and whether he was the person to continue to lead it. President's Report, Commission Minutes, 18 April 1940. Lowe did not have an advanced academic degree.

75. Mr. Boyd left for medical school. Mr. Dyer took a position with radio station WSAX. Miss Fortson and Miss Ennis left for marriage, the latter leaving town. Miss Fortson would later return as Mrs. Hugh Stephens to Georgia. Under Sixteen Administrations, 1785-1955, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1956), 187-194.
Chapter 4 Notes

1. SMN, 11 September 1946. The lively meeting received extensive coverage in both the morning and evening paper. The term "stooge" was a frequent slur in political campaigns and reflected the well-known fact that hands behind the scenes shaped Savannah politics. See R. M. Charlton, "Savannah's Political Complexion," paper delivered to the Cosmos Club, May 8, 1946, Georgia Historical Society, Collection 974, Box 1, Item 7. Charlton's preferred subtitle for his topic was "It Stinks."

2. SMN, 19 August 1946.


7. Martha Fay interview.

8. Robert Strozier interview. Bob Strozier's memories of Armstrong as a student and a faculty member are rich, vivid, and numerous. This history is particularly indebted to his sense of detail and imagery.

9. Lee Goodwin Alexander interview. Lee Goodwin passed her luncheon test unknowingly by ordering a Manhattan, the only drink she could think of at the time. Hawes later told her it was a good choice.

10. Lilla Mills Hawes interview.

11. Lilla Mills Hawes interview; Bob Strozier interview. 

12. Harriet Davis Killorin interview. Harriet Davis was the public relations officer for the college during the late 1940s.


15. Martha Fay interview.

16. Joe Killorin interview. See also Joseph I. Killorin to Foreman Hawes, 17 August 1947, AASU Archives (hereafter AA), Box 23, file 13.

17. Lee Goodwin Alexander interview.