

BY CLAYTON H. RAMSEY

Bounded by Spring Valley Lane and University Drive in the tony Morningside neighborhood of Atlanta is a crescent of land that arcs through some of the most desirable property in the city. Populated by young professionals rocketing to the top and families who pass homes from one generation to the next, the community is close to the mansions and old money of elegant Druid Hills and within walking distance to Emory University. This is no marginalized district, but one of the epicenters of Atlanta influence and prestige. There are physicians here, professors, attorneys, tech experts, entrepreneurs. They are educated, connected, and affluent.

Lanier University of Atlanta had a brief and tumultuous run as America's KKK College.

It was a decade of ferment for institutions of higher learning in Atlanta. Agnes Scott Institute received a collegiate charter in 1906. Oglethorpe University was rechartered in 1913 and the cornerstone for the Peachtree Road campus was laid in 1915. Emory College would move from Oxford, Georgia, to Atlanta in 1919. Fully participating in what Walter P. Metzger called the “age of the university” between the Civil War and World War I, these colleges were beneficiaries of the social, economic, and educational changes that were taking place during these years and found fertile ground for growth in the capital of the “New South.” In order

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Many are unaware of an episode in the history of the neighborhood, a century-old secret embedded in the heart of the area that some residents have tried to scrub from memory. University Drive is one clue. Proximity to Emory would suggest the University memorialized in the street name would refer to that institution. It doesn't. The network of homes would imply some early urban planning for residential zoning. It doesn't either. Instead, this falcate tract was to be the campus of Lanier University, the brainchild of a Baptist minister and, for one year, owned and operated by the Ku Klux Klan.

The idea began with Charles Lewis Fowler, who was born on November 17, 1877, on a farm near Monroe, North Carolina, to Thomas Lafayette and Alice Riggins Fowler. After graduating from Weddington Academy, he earned a bachelor's degree from Furman University in 1904, followed by theological training at Newton Theological Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts. He was subsequently ordained to the Baptist ministry and served from 1907 to 1911 as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Clinton, South Carolina. In 1911, after only four years of parish ministry, he resigned his pastorate to become president of Lexington College in Lexington, Missouri. After a three-year administration, he shared a presidency at Cox College, a private women's college in College Park, Georgia, founded in 1842 as LaGrange Female Seminary and, after several name changes, moves, and closings, finally shutting the doors permanently in 1934. At Cox, he redesigned the curriculum according to his own pedagogical ideas and developed a vision of starting his own school. He left Cox in 1917 to do just that. Lanier University would be his contribution to the educational culture of the region.¹



to distinguish themselves and gain a market share as schools jostled for prominence and competed for students, Rev. Fowler proposed that Lanier would be the first coeducational Baptist college in Georgia, founded to “meet the needs of struggling young men and women of today.”²

Based on his proposal, he was successful in attracting the backing of some influential patrons in the city. A charter was obtained in which the Board of Trustees was to be composed of members in good standing of Baptist churches, and public bond sales could be secured with college property. Lectures for the more than 140 students who were enrolled in the inaugural class began on September 11, 1917, in nine

rented rooms at 614 Peachtree Street, a “handsome” one-time private residence. Two months later Rev. Fowler announced the acquisition of 56 acres worth \$250,000 near Emory's campus.

Asa Griggs Candler, founder of the Coca-Cola Company, had offered Emory College \$1 million in 1914 to ensure that it became a university and moved to Atlanta. Rev. Fowler thought Candler's largesse might extend to the nascent Lanier. Unsuccessful in wooing Candler's support, however, Fowler turned to the Georgia Baptist Association for funding. Baptist ministers supportive of his plans assisted with his capital campaigns to raise the money needed to plant a campus near Emory. But the Georgia Baptists, as a state organization affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, refused to accept Lanier into their system of colleges that included Mercer University, Brewton-Parker College, and Shorter College, among others. *The Christian Index*, the state Baptist paper, on June 28, 1917,

Lanier founder Rev. Fowler had Arlington Hall designed for the entrance to the campus. It remains intact today in the Morningside-Lenox Park neighborhood.

Architect's rendering of the planned Lanier University campus. Only Arlington Hall, at the far right, was actually completed.



made the distinction that Lanier would be recognized as a “Baptist Institution,” but not one “organically connected.”³ So Rev. Fowler tried to pull together revenue from other sources and decoupled the school from official affiliation with the Baptists. It would henceforth be an “All Southern” college, a designation he had rehearsed at Cox, not a school primarily for religious development, but one that celebrated and preserved the history and culture of the American South. The college had in fact been named for Sidney Lanier, veteran of the Confederate Army and celebrated Southern poet, and from start to finish it would be a Southern school.

To that end, Atlanta architect A. Ten Eyck Brown planned to fill the campus with replicas of famous Southern buildings, like Washington’s Mount Vernon and Jefferson’s Monticello. A copy of Robert E. Lee’s Virginia mansion that Rev. Fowler named Arlington Hall was designed to sit at the entrance to the campus and remains intact today in the Morningside-Lenox Park neighborhood.

Apart from the architecture, the curriculum was a particular interest of Rev. Fowler. When the doors opened, there was a range of subjects offered, but the most popular were concentrated in their Conservatory of Music. Concerts and recitals were important platforms for performance, and the focus was reflected in the profile of the graduating class in 1918: twelve of the sixteen graduates received the degree of Bachelor of Music. There were also two literary societies, as well as dramatics, debates, and other outlets for the students. Rev. Fowler was especially creative with the academic offerings, with a summer term that effectively made the instruction year-round, night

classes for working students, and correspondence classes for those who could not relocate to Atlanta.

Sports did not play a significant role in campus life, in part the result of the minority of men in the student body. A football game against Marist College on October 7, 1920, was lost 72-0, as the school’s first dalliance in athletics. The team played three games in nine days, the extent of its involvement in football. The team lost its final game, against North Georgia Agricultural College, 171-0. The college also dabbled in basketball, but it was clear the emphasis was on other pursuits.⁴

The worm in the apple was a course in Civil War and Reconstruction history taught by the school’s “special lecturer in southern history,” Colonel W.J. Simmons, who, at the time of his employment at Lanier, was the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and responsible for the emergence of the second era of Klan history.



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William Joseph Simmons was born in Harpersville, Alabama, on May 6, 1880, to Dr. Calvin Henry and Lavonia Davis Simmons. A veteran of the Spanish-American War, William worked for the Methodist Episcopal Church, South before he was dismissed for “inefficiency” in 1912. Bouncing between churches and fraternal organizations (one of the fifteen with which he was associated, the Woodmen of the World, conferred the title of “Colonel” on him), he was inspired to revive the Klan by Thomas Dixon’s “historical romance,” *The Clansman* (1905), and D.W. Griffith’s deeply racist adaptation of the novel in the silent movie *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), screened in President Woodrow Wilson’s White House as the first movie of any kind to be shown there.

On Thanksgiving night 1915, Simmons planned a cross burning on the top of Stone Mountain with fourteen other white-robed men. Appropriating the imagery and ideology of the movie, he anointed himself the “Imperial Wizard of the Invisible Empire of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan” and began to build a fraternal organization that was opposed to blacks, Jews, Catholics, Eastern and Southern European immigrants, and others who were not American-born, Protestant Anglo-Saxons. His philosophy, defending white supremacy and “One Hundred Percent Americanism,” was passed to his students at Lanier as “Southern history.” Several reputed Klansmen joined the Board and there were rumors that even Rev. Fowler had donned a white hood as a member of the organization.

After the reanimation of the Klan east of the city, the Klan leadership bought a permanent headquarters in Downtown Atlanta and called it the “Imperial Palace.” This was not the first Klan, begun in the years after the Civil War to oppose Reconstruction and frighten newly emancipated African Americans with lynchings and other acts of terror away from enfranchisement and full participation in national life. Claiming to work for social order, public morality, and the best version of America, the first Klansmen represented one reaction to the painful, complex environment in the South after the Civil War.

But the Klan’s second iteration was different. Members openly displayed the accouterments of the Griffith movie, including burning crosses and white robes and hoods, selling the latter to their members. They had a political and hierarchical organization on the local and national levels, not just the impromptu posses formed by the first Klan. They actively recruited new members with the strategies of professional publicity agents. They took out advertisements in newspapers, held parades in broad daylight, elected members to public office. Under the six ideological pillars that upheld the organization—“racism, nativism, temperance, fraternalism, Christian evangelicism, and populism”—the second Klan had a heyday of popularity and widespread civic acceptability in the 1920s.⁵ Members thought it would be their key to social mobility, a megaphone to shout their grievances about the changing complexion of American society, their chance to affirm their commitment to a United States ruled by Christian white men, and

their opportunity to belong to a social movement that matched their world-view.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, America was going through enormous changes, and the Klan claimed to offer a respectable response, wrapping its beliefs in patriotic and religious language. It was a dangerous combination, and all efforts to shrink its influence failed; even the U.S. House of Representatives hearings on the Klan in 1921 served only to encourage applications for membership. Four years later, the Klan reached the height of its influence with an estimated five million members.⁶ The famous 1925 photo of ranks of robed Klansmen marching down Pennsylvania Avenue with the dome of the U.S. Capitol in the background suggested that the Klan was an unstoppable force moving through American society, tapping into deeply rooted elements in some quarters of the American psyche as members sought to defend their conception of God and Country.

Lanier operated until August 1921 under the leadership of Rev. Fowler. But even though there was a chapter of the Baptist Young People’s Union on campus and he himself was an ordained Baptist minister, the school did not receive funding from the state association and it struggled to keep the bills paid. Declining enrollment, an economic downturn, and the questionable status of land gifts and bequests pushed Lanier into financial peril. Faced with insolvency, the school was sold to the Klan.

The announcement was made on September 10, 1921. Colonel Simmons would act as president of the “Klan Kollege” and Nathan Bedford Forrest II, the grandson of the famed Confederate General who served as first Grand Wizard of the KKK, would be secretary and business manager. The 19th Commander-in-Chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and Grand Dragon of the Georgia KKK, Forrest had extravagant expectations for the school, telling the *New York Times*, “The central idea...is to do what few universities are doing in this country, and that is to teach pure Americanism,” adding, “Most of our large universities now are turning out Socialists, cynics, and atheists.”⁷ With the anticipation of 2,000 students, a proposed \$1 million building plan, expansion of the campus, and the very best teachers, Forrest promised the college would be different.

With the change in ownership and leadership came a change in the Board of Trustees, now representing the Klan hierarchy, and the shedding of any residual affiliation with the Baptists. The children of Klansmen were of course admitted without reservation, as were “real American” students whose fathers were not members but who still exhibited the ideological commitments that appealed to the KKK. Two classes were mandatory: one studying the U.S. Constitution and the other focused on “Biblical literature.” The other courses would be consistent with Klan philosophy. They would be “non-sectarian,” but still unequivocally Christian. No more than twenty-five young Americans registered the first, and only, year to study at the reconceived Lanier University. By August 1922, bankruptcy papers were filed with the courts and the Klan moved their

activity elsewhere.

On the other side of town, and a world away from the Klan-dominated Lanier University, was the Summerhill neighborhood. Summerhill, due south of the city center and close to what is now Center Parc Stadium of Georgia State University, had been founded by William Jennings at the end of the Civil War and became a magnet for freed slaves and Jewish immigrants as one of Atlanta's oldest communities. In 1887, Congregation Ahavath Achim was established in this south-side area to serve the poor, Yiddish-speaking, Orthodox immigrants who were settling there. In 1902, members of Ahavath Achim who rejected the severity of Orthodoxy formed Congregation Shearith Israel. Eight years later, they called Rabbi Tobias Geffen to serve as their leader in this area where the majority of Atlanta's Jewish population lived. He was with the Congregation until 1970. A remarkable guide for the Jewish people of Atlanta, he organized the first Hebrew school in the city in his home and, in a move that no doubt pleased Atlanta Jews, certified Coca-Cola as kosher in 1935.

After World War II, the landscape was changing. Roadway construction by the Georgia State Highway Department, begin-

ning in September 1948, the post-war economic boom, and other changes to the city prompted Rabbi Geffen and the congregants of Congregation Shearith Israel to move to Morningside and purchase the Lanier University property from the estate of Walter E. King in 1949. Given its former association with the Klan, the purchase was particularly redemptive. Neither racists nor bigots could keep them from their new home.

The property had fallen into disrepair and with some effort the second floor of Arlington Hall was restored to serve as space for religious services, while the first floor was renovated for educational purposes. After several years of maintaining both properties in Summerhill and Morningside, the congregation eventually sold the former to settle in the latter. In 1957 a larger structure was built behind the original hall, which the Atlanta Hebrew Academy refurbished and used until 1961 as a "Day School." After that point Shearith Israel moved back into the Lanier building and used it for classroom instruction. Further restorative work was done on the facilities two decades later and the newly reconditioned buildings were dedicated in August 1981. The Canterbury School, a private pre-school, has used Arlington Hall since 2009, and the synagogue uses the other

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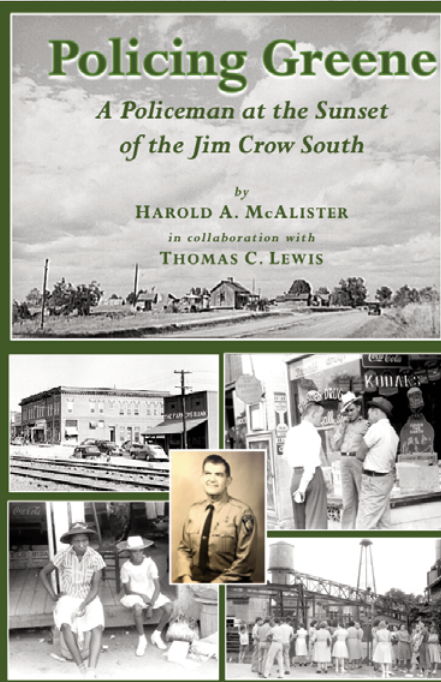
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structures on the property.⁸

Shearith Israel purchased the remnants of Lanier University. The Venable House on Ponce de Leon Avenue, home of the family that owned Stone Mountain until 1958 and was deeply involved in Klan activities, is now St. John's Lutheran Church. Other symbols of intolerance in the city have been coopted by agencies of reconciliation. Atlanta, once the center of the revived Ku Klux Klan, is now the "city too busy to hate," the home of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and the headquarters of the "National Anti-Klan Network," founded by Rev. C.T. Vivian. Step by step, we move forward. ▀

Clayton H. Ramsey, a freelance writer and former president of the Atlanta Writers Club, lives in Decatur.

Endnotes

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3. Craig Strain, "Shearith Israel Renovates... 'All Southern' Lanier University," *Virginia Highland Voice*, January 1981, reprinted in Morningside/Lenox Park Association Newsletter, June 1982, <http://www.tk-jk.net/mlpadotorg/History/fog0000000080.html>, accessed September 22, 2022.

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5. Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Company, 2017), 25.

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8. Strain, "Shearith Israel."



Colonel W.J. Simmons, who, at the time of his employment at Lanier, was the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and responsible for the emergence of the second era of Klan history.