Spotlight on Special Libraries

Examine Life at the Saul Building Archives Museum

by Otis D. Alexander

In 1888 Saint Paul Normal and Industrial School was founded by the former slave James Solomon Russell in Lawrenceville, Virginia. At that time, this member of the Protestant Episcopal Church started the institution with no more than twelve students. While the curriculum explored the basics, the students were enthusiastic. In 1941 Saint Paul Normal and Industrial School was changed to Saint Paul’s Polytechnic Institute. This was done when the Commonwealth of Virginia granted the institution authority to offer a four-year curriculum. The first bachelor’s degree was awarded four years later.

A collegiate department of teacher training began in 1922, and four years later it was accredited by the Virginia State Board of Education. This teacher training program supplied a large percentage of the teachers in elementary and secondary schools of Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. Saint Paul’s College also supplied ice for the Southern Railroad operating between Danville and Norfolk, Virginia, and water and electricity for the town of Lawrenceville.

Today, St. Paul’s College serves hundreds of students. Archival materials from the college’s history have always been housed in the James Solomon Russell Memorial Library and have always been open to the entire community.

Now, the archival materials have been given a special home in which they will be exhibited: the Saul Building. This building is part of the repository of archival materials and museum artifacts for Saint Paul’s College.

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The Saul Building was built in 1882¹ as a classroom space for the growing student population of the Protestant Episcopal School when they had outgrown the vestry room in the first Saint Paul’s Memorial Chapel. It was created with a sizable financial source from the Reverend James Saul of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Classes began in this building in 1888 when the college opened.²

Now the Saul Building has been historically renovated with a grant from the United States Department of the Interior through the National Park Service. This project was spearheaded by William Herrington, Vice President for Institutional Advancement, and Claudia D. Cochran, Associate Director of Sponsored and Federal Programs, and was completed the summer of 2012. It cost $349,706. Today, the Saul Building is a member of the American Alliance of Museums and the Association of African-America Museums. It has a staff of two archivists and a curator, and there are four other committee members on the college campus.

Tours are available when the facility is open on Mondays and Wednesdays from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Appointments are encouraged to tour the facility, and may be obtained by contacting the James Solomon Russell Memorial Library at 434-848-1837. Already, more than 200 people have toured the site.

The only drawback of creating the archival museum facility on campus is that funds can be cut during periods of tight budgets. This has been seen in many archival museum programs throughout the nation, and the college realizes that it must begin partnering early with other local agencies. By working with agencies such as the Brunswick County Tourism Association and by engaging in other similar partnerships, cultural centers will be able to support each other to ensure their future survival.

The Saul Building Archives Museum is responsible for establishing Records Retention Schedules and records management procedures so that College Records are handled in an appropriate manner throughout their life cycle.

Collections and manuscripts are selected for preservation in the College Archives primarily because of their historical research value. Materials accessioned will generally document the history of the Saint Paul’s College and the Lawrenceville community. Historical collections and manuscripts accessioned by the Saint Paul’s College include records, realia, photographs, maps, graphic materials, and other historically significant materials in any format. These historical resources are available for public use only on the campus during regular business hours, unless otherwise specified.

Visitors are encouraged to come to the Saul Building Archives Museum and examine life for themselves. If you come, you will know why “…the unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, Apology, section 38a).

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