

Zoe Sherlock  
MSCM2205  
Mar. 15, 2018

### Saving Atkinson Hall

MILLEDGEVILLE, Ga. – Atkinson Hall is considered by many to be Georgia College’s most prized possession. What many do not know is the building would not be standing today if not for a student-lead protest in the 1970s.

J. Whitney Bunting served as the president of the university from 1968-1981 and he wished to create a more modern and contemporary campus. Starting with the construction of the Maxwell Student Union (MSU) in 1972, which has been renovated since, his next plan was to tear down Atkinson Hall and replace it with a newer, more modern building.

Atkinson originated as a dormitory when Georgia College was still known as Georgia Normal and Industrial College.

The Victorian style of the building featured intricate trimming with large porches and balconies. It was later remodeled to resemble a style similar to the old Chapel Hall, which was reconstructed in 1963.

This newer look gave Atkinson its powerful presence on front campus. It included the columns that have become a staple in many of the buildings on campus, and even influenced the name of the school newspaper, The Colonnade, according to GC historian Bob Wilson.

Wilson also recalls the harsh architecture of MSU and divulges his distaste for the former structure.

“Faculty, students and alumni thought the design of MSU was not fitting to the style of the campus,” he says.

Therefore, it was easy for locals, students and faculty to become concerned when they learned of Bunting's plans for the demolition of Atkinson Hall. They initiated a protest that students later dubbed the "Save Atkinson Project."

While faculty supported this cause, they were encouraged by Bunting to keep their opinions to themselves. Therefore, the protest was largely lead by students and alumni. Professor Cliff Wilkinson of the political science department attended GC during this time and served as vice president and president of the Student Government Association.

He – alongside several peers – played a major role in this protest, even going as far as making T-shirts to promote the cause.

"We were able to do it as just students," Wilkinson says, "and I say 'just' students because that's the way we were often looked at."

Wilkinson recalls working with Culver Kidd, then Baldwin County's state senator, who set up multiple meetings with the General Assembly. These meetings involved students having hearings about the issue with members of the Board of Regents. During the hearings, students argued that the funds raised by alumni should be both moved to the top of the list and allocated towards restoring Atkinson instead of demolishing it.

Mary Lawrence Kennickell, another Student Government Association leader, worked tirelessly against the administration to maintain the building.

"As a campus leader at the time, I was actively involved in promoting the preservation of our architectural history and integrity on main campus," she said.

Local alumni donations amounted to roughly \$300,000 and Kennickell recalls as many as 100 students giving \$100 towards the cause.

Kennickell's passion for restoring art has contributed to her career choice as an artist in Savannah.

Students at the time were driven by their passion for political science and were greatly influenced by professors within the department. Kennickell's mother, Dorrie Neligan, was also the alumni chair for the university and maintained good alumni relations. She listened to their objections against the razing of Atkinson and brought them to SGA and Kidd.

The determination of alumni and student government finally paid off in March of 1978. The Board of Regents allocated \$3.5 million to the renovation of Atkinson Hall, which was used to completely gut and restore the building.

Now students regularly lounge on front campus to study, pass time with friends and enjoy the beautiful front campus that surrounds them.

## Sources

Bob Wilson: 478-445-3515

Professor Clifton Wilkinson: 478-445-0958

Mary Lawrence Kennickell: [studiomlnk@gmail.com](mailto:studiomlnk@gmail.com)

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