



North Carolina's Oldest Non-Public School

The History of Salem Academy

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Founded four years before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Salem Academy commenced instruction in April 1772, when Elisabeth Oesterlein received permission to open a "school for little girls." Despite such travails as the Civil War and a measles epidemic in the 1800s, the Academy has never closed its doors in the more than two centuries since those first classes were held.

The town, which gave its name to the Academy, was established by members of the Moravian Church in 1766 as Salem, which means "peace." The Moravians, one of the earliest Protestant denominations, trace their beginnings to 15th-century Europe and their settlement in the new American colonies to the mid-1700s.

At a time when few girls in the South received a formal education, the Moravians were determined to establish a tradition of learning that would endure. Their commitment to educating girls continues to flourish. For more than two centuries, the Moravian habits of enterprise, independence, excellence, and resourcefulness have influenced the lives of Salem students.

Within less than two decades of its founding, the reputation of the school for girls had spread throughout the South. By the turn of the 19th century, the school had begun to accept boarding students, and in 1805, South Hall on Salem Square was constructed to provide additional dormitory rooms. Enrollment grew so rapidly in the ensuing years that the principal of the school took out advertisements requesting parents NOT to send their daughters!

By the middle of the 19th century, the Academy had expanded threefold: The 1805 building had been enlarged, the "Inspector's House" (the residence and office of the principal) had been built and expanded, and the Gemein Haus (congregation house) had been renovated and given over entirely to the school. In 1856, the students and faculty of the Academy moved into the newly constructed Main Hall, and in 1888, Annex Hall -- subsequently the residence of the president of Salem Academy and College -- was built to house two additional "room companies" of students.

As the enrollment continued to grow so, too, did the academic program. During the 1860s, college-level courses were added to the curriculum. Reflecting changes in its character and mission, the institution's name was officially changed in 1907 to Salem Academy and College. Less than 30 years later, a new and wholly separate set of facilities for the Academy was built on the eastern perimeter of the campus, and the existing buildings on Salem Square were given over to the College. From modest beginnings, Salem has evolved into a girls' preparatory school of national standing and a women's college of genuine distinction.

To discover the special character that is Salem's is to discern the worth of a school for girls that is unexcelled in location and heritage, accomplished in its educational mission and distinguished in its commitment to excellence and achievement. Having withstood the test of time, Salem Academy reflects the best in college preparatory education.