



# 1924: Scarritt Moves to Nashville

## Background Info for 100th Anniversary

By Sue Thrasher

On October 1, 1924, Scarritt College for Christian Workers, a newly chartered senior college and graduate school, welcomed its first students. The “campus” consisted of nine houses that served as administrative offices, classrooms, and dormitories until new college facilities could be built. The costs for each student that fall totaled \$100 per quarter. Room and board was the big ticket item at \$66; the matriculation fee was a modest \$5, but laundry cost \$12. The remaining \$17 covered the Library, medical attention, book store, student organization, and athletics.

The move to Nashville and the closing of the Scarritt Bible and Training Center in Kansas City, MO had its origins in 1917, when Belle Harris Bennett, the President of the Women’s Missionary Council of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, returned from a trip to mission fields in East Asia. The trip had convinced her that in order to meet the needs on the mission field, training should include specialists in industrial and community work. The aim should be not only to spread the Gospel, " but the development of strong Christian leaders among the people of each nation."

The ensuing story of the development of Scarritt College is one of great intrigue involving a unique partnership between Bennett and Jesse Lee Cuninggim, the man she handpicked as the college’s first president. Together, they navigated competition among agency boards, geographic rivalries, and the antagonism of the heirs of the Nathan Scarritt family to the move. Underlying this drama was the ongoing struggle of women in the church to attain equity and fairness – even as they were paying the bills. There was also the implicit assumption by the church's male leadership that the seminaries were the best place for educational training, even if it meant admitting women. Both Bennett and Cuninggim proved adept at negotiating these minefields. Cuninggim, in particular, used this time to clarify the kind of institution needed and the constituency it would serve. He enlarged Bennett's vision of missionary training to an expansive program for training lay leaders that was academically rigorous and targeted to the needs of the whole church as well as international missions.

Bennett's first order of business in 1917 was to improve and professionalize the offerings of the Scarritt Bible and Training Institute. She wanted a new President who could develop the academic side of the institution and she was certain that a revitalized Scarritt meant a move to a more central location that provided the opportunity for partnership with another leading educational institution. Unfortunately, these moves meant a change of leadership and a reorganization of the school's staff and faculty. Maria Layng Gibson who was serving as the Principal of the school accepted a redefinition of her duties, and to her credit, continued working for the school, playing a major supportive role even after the move to Nashville.



Dr. Edmund Cook, formerly an officer of the ME Church Board of Missions, and a Professor of Missions at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, was chosen as the new President in 1918. Dr. Cook accepted the offer on the condition that the Board of Managers commit to a policy of expansion that involved higher standards of admission and an enlarged and strengthened faculty. He arrived in Kansas City as President in the fall of 1918, but his tenure was short. He was hired away from Scarritt in 1921 to become the Associate Director of the General Board of Education. Before he left, however, Dr. Cook added new faculty and reorganized the curriculum to higher academic standards. He increased the enrollment at the school dramatically, admitting 48 students in the fall of 1918, 64 in the fall of 1919, and 92 in the fall of 1920.

During his first year as President, Dr. Cook proposed to the Scarritt Board of Managers and the Executive Committee of the Women's Missionary Council three options for meeting the long term goals of a revitalized and professional educational institution: moving Scarritt to either Dallas or Atlanta for cooperation with either SMU or Emory, the two major seminaries of the ME Church South; moving to Nashville and a partnership with Peabody College; or remaining in KC and radically enlarging the facilities with new buildings as well as an increasing the faculty. His proposal set in motion the long series of surveys, institutional visits, and inter-agency jockeying that can best be described as both cooperative and competitive. A few other sites surfaced over the next four years, but the primary issues to be hammered out was what role the seminaries would play in mission training, what kind of advanced education was needed for mission training, and where it would be located.

Bennett had made up her mind early that the school should relocate to Nashville and seek a partnership with Peabody College. She submitted a resolution to this effect following the first committee report to the Board of Managers of Scarritt Bible and Training School as early as January 1921. Seeing there was no agreement, she withdrew that resolution and called for further study of the institutions that were interested. Bennett's preference for Nashville was completely understandable. It offered the possibility of a partnership with Peabody College, a teacher's training college when teachers were primarily female. But a move to Dallas or Atlanta meant running the risk that Scarritt, which had by this time trained well over 1000 women for church service, would be subsumed under the ministerial training programs of the male seminaries.

The Presidents of the institutions were then invited to meet with the Scarritt Board of Managers at a meeting in Nashville in March. Representing SMU at this meeting were the President and Vice President. In addition to the President of Peabody College, Nashville was represented by the President of the Commercial Club, the forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, someone from the Board of Health, the Presidents of Ward-Belmont College and the YMCA Southern College. Bennett again submitted a resolution that "in view of the exceptional educational opportunities offered by the George Peabody College for Teachers" that Scarritt relocate to Nashville. The vote was not in favor.



Following President Cook's resignation in June of 1921, the Scarritt Board of Managers identified three men as potential candidates in order of preference. The first two declined, and Bennett approached Dr. Jesse Lee Cuninggim, a member of the faculty at SMU. Cuninggim, a native of North Carolina, received a BD from Vanderbilt in 1895, followed by four years of graduate work at the University of Chicago. From 1902-1915, he directed the Vanderbilt Correspondence School for Pastors of the ME Church South and was in charge of ministerial supply and training. Although his focus had primarily been on ministerial training, he had a longstanding interest in lay education.

He was offered the position by Bennett and accepted in August of 1921. He arrived in Kansas City that September with the understanding that he had been brought on board "primarily for the purpose of moving and reorganizing the institution to meet the needs of more thorough training for missionary workers." For the next three years, he kept a grueling schedule that involved endless meetings to finalize the shape of a new college and the far more loaded question of where it would be located. He was also attentive to hiring new faculty and continuing the focus on a more rigorous curriculum that Dr. Cook had started.

The school had 108 students that year, the largest enrollment of its history, primarily due to the efforts of Dr. Cook. But as the uncertainty about Scarritt's future in KC became clearer, enrollment dropped to 69 before the school moved in 1924. The Nathan Scarritt family heirs continued to support the school financially during this time, even developing a potential endowment fund. However, they were radically opposed to moving the school to another city, and withdrew their support once the decision was made to move to Nashville. Bennett and the Women's Missionary Council had maintained a commitment to keep the name Scarritt in the new college, so relationships were not severed entirely. One member of the family, Charles Scarritt continued to serve on the Board of Trustees until his death, and other members of the family visited the new institution in Nashville.

As promised, Cuninggim pulled together representatives from the Board of Missions, the Sunday School Board, the Board of Education, and the Women's Missionary Council. This conference of agencies, meeting in Nashville in November of 1921, established a committee on Missionary Preparation, and extended invitations to the Deans of Candler, SMU, and Vanderbilt School of Religion, as well as the administrative secretaries of the Board of Missions. It outlined specific types of professionals needed for both foreign and domestic mission fields. The committee's report was first submitted to the various boards and eventually referred to the Women's Missionary Council and the Board of Missions. The final report recommended broadening the scope of mission training at Candler and SMU and the need for a "separate school, centrally located, designed for and adapted to the religious training of lay workers for various types of service at home and abroad."



Bennett died in July of 1922, and her death solidified the resolve of the Women's Missionary Council to move Scarritt to Nashville, which had always been her preference. SMU, the other major contender for the site, had made plans for a School of Missions under a special board that provided for only one member of the Women's Missionary Council. Acceptance of this plan would mean relinquishing control of the institution they had founded, funded, and that had already trained over a thousand young women. Fortunately, for the Council, the Bishop of the Dallas area, a member of the board and Executive Committee of SMU, also opposed Scarritt becoming part of the institution out of fear "the university would become too largely a women's Institution."

There was a last minute attempt to envelope the new Scarritt into Candler Theology School, but a final strong report from the joint committee of the Women's Missionary Council and the Board of Missions affirmed that plans were too far in advance to accept such an invitation. The report also expressed gratitude to Kansas City, but strongly favored moving the school. Perhaps as a way of soothing feathers with the male dominated seminaries, the report expressed support for expanding mission training at the theological schools and even offered money to support such efforts. The bottom line of the report, however, was a) that Scarritt be moved, b) that the name of Scarritt be retained, c) that the organization of the new institution be sufficiently broad and representative of the church so as that all agencies interested in the training of lay workers could cooperate; d) that the proper legal provision be made whereby the financial assets of the present Scarritt which have been contributed for the use and benefit of women's work shall be safeguarded in perpetuity for that purpose, and likewise that the Belle Harris Bennett Fund have a part in the institution and be safeguarded; and e) similar provisions be made to funds contributed by other sources as designated by the donors. The report acknowledged that such an institution would need the support of all agencies of the church interested in training lay workers and pledged monetary support and encouraged the Board of Missions to do the same.

This report was sent to the Board of Missions for its meeting in May 1923, where clearly more political jockeying occurred. First an amendment was made to affiliate the school with Candler at Emory and second, the report was brought forth late in the session, allowing little time for discussion and deliberation. The amendment for relocation to Emory was revised to read that the Scarritt Board of Managers would report their plans for relocation "both as to place and other institutions of learning" at its next session. And with that the Board approved donations to both SMU and Candler for expansion of their mission programs.

The question of location still remained, however, and the Executive Committee of the Council and the Board of Missions met with the Scarritt Board of Managers on May 5, 1923, as a joint committee on relocation. In addition to the type of school most needed, a new consideration was raised about the "distribution of church membership" in the proposed locations. Even at this late stage facts were gathered from several new communities including Augusta, Birmingham, Washington, DC, Memphis, Durham, Louisville, and St. Louis as well as Dallas and Atlanta. The committee spent considerable time discussing the "type of school" it should be, eventually recommending a senior college and graduate school, sighting Peabody College's targeted training of teachers as an example.



Final approval for Scarritt's move to Nashville came on September 12, 1923 when the Board of Missions accepted the recommendations of the Women's Missionary Council. Nashville had broad support from the educational and business communities and the possibility of course arrangements with Peabody.

The work done by Cuninggim and the Women's Missionary Council to shepherd this process through the relevant boards and agencies of the church had finally resulted in a plan that achieved all the things that Bennett and the Council wanted for a revitalized Scarritt -- a centrally located senior college and graduate school that would serve the entire church with expanded course offerings through its partnership with Peabody College. In addition, thanks to the work of their new president, the nature and character of the new college and graduate school had become much more explicit, particularly in its push for academic excellence. Moreover, Scarritt would remain an independent entity rather than being subsumed by one of the church's two theological seminaries.

Work began immediately to establish the new college. Subcommittees were appointed to find property, to establish a charter, and to begin fundraising. Numerous properties were considered including some far from the town center, but it was not until the committee explored the land between 18th and 19th Avenue and found that it was available that the committee unanimously selected Scarritt's current location on Nov 9, 1923. The committee also obtained adjacent lots on the west side of 19th so that the space between Scarritt and 21st could be held as open space. Additional lots were later purchased on 21st and 18th to provide space for recreational fields.

Prior to the move, the Nashville Chamber of Commerce had guaranteed a donation of \$25,000 and a number of Methodists in the city had agreed to match that amount. As a result, the college received a total of \$65,000 to help with its establishment in Nashville. The Women's Missionary Council provided additional funds through its memorial to Belle Harris Bennett that raised \$46,000 by the time of the opening.

A primary concern for the new charter was the question of ownership. Scarritt Training and Bible School was owned by the Women's Missionary Council, but with the move to Nashville, "requirements in the Discipline of the M.E. Church, South" meant ownership could not remain with the Council. The goal had always been an institution "to serve the whole church" and there were two possibilities: the Board of Missions and the General Conference.

The decision was made to place ownership with the General Conference to ensure that it remain a center of training for the whole church and not one agency. This decision, no doubt, had much to do with the fraught relationship between the Women's Missionary Council and the Board of Missions as the women struggled for equity within the church hierarchy.



The decision to keep the name Scarritt had already been agreed to, and in order to distinguish the new institution from the many colleges sponsored by Methodist annual conferences, Scarritt College for Christian Workers was chosen. Even President Cuninggim recognized that "for Christian Workers" was awkward and academically undesirable, but maintained it was important to recognize the "unique character" of the college.

Henry Hibbs, a Nashville architect, was hired by Cuninggim to design the new campus. In addition to asking what facilities were needed for how many students, Mr. Hibbs also inquired about the "character" of the college. Dr Cuninggim responded that if the architecture is rightly to express the character of the institution, the social must be combined with the educational, the domestic and the religious emphases. He maintained that the campus should emphasize hospitality, fellowship, service, brotherhood, and international friendship.

The cornerstone for the Belle Harris Bennett Memorial and Administration Building was laid on January 26, 1926, a little over two years from the final decision to move to Nashville, and eight years after Belle Harris Bennett had determined to move the school and professionalize its curriculum. Bennett's commitment to Scarritt reflected her deep belief about the leadership role women could play in the church and therefore the need for training and education. Her impact on the school is so profound that one might be forgiven for thinking that is how she spent all of her time. But her accomplishments transcend Scarritt. In 1892, the same year Scarritt opened its doors to three students in Kansas City, Bennett's sister, Sue, died. Four years later, Sue Bennett College opened in London, Kentucky, the home state of the sisters. She was also instrumental in establishing Gingling College in Nanking, China, Woman's Christian Medical College in Shanghai, Bennett College in Brazil, an over 40 community centers in US cities. She was involved in the suffragist movement as early as 1895 as one of the leaders of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association. As early as 1910, Bennett began organizing for the General Conference to grant women full rights and privileges as laity; it was the first time in history that a woman was allowed to speak at General Conference. It took Bennett's two more attempts before the 1918 General Conference voted in favor, a move that was promptly vetoed by the College of Bishops. The measure was then sent to the 40 conferences and passed in 1919.

Jesse Lee Cuninggim served as President of Scarritt from 1924-1943. The chapel, the social rooms, Susie Gray Hall, and Gibson Hall were all built under his presidency.\* The Vanderbilt Alumni magazine described him as a man who built a "chapel-size college with a cathedral proportioned dream." During his presidency, he was the driving force behind creating the Joint University Center and a joint school of graduate social work, which later became the University of Tennessee School of Social Work. He wrote several books, most notably *The Family of God*, published after his retirement in 1948 (Nashville: Parthenon Press), which contains his philosophy of education.

This article has relied heavily on Jesse Lee Cuninggim's *History of Scarritt College*, which was published after his death in 1950, and other papers in his archival collection.

\*Fondren Hall may also be in this list; not sure when it was erected.