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JIM POLK GOES TO CHAPEL HILL

BY CHARLES GRIER SELLERS, JR.

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It is a singular fact that the two Presidents born in North Carolina and a third, whom the Old North State has always vigorously, if a bit dubiously, claimed, all arrived at the White House through careers in Tennessee. But at least one of the three, James K. Polk, had enough of North Carolina in his background to qualify as both "Tar Heel born" and "Tar Heel bred."

Sam Polk's oldest son was just eleven in the fall of 1806, when the family pulled up its roots in Mecklenburg County and made the trek across the mountains to settle on a farm in Maury County, Tennessee. A sickly lad, Jimmy did not take happily to the chores of the farm or to the arduous trips through the Tennessee wilderness with his surveyor father, when the boy was expected to take care of the pack horses and camp equipage and to prepare the meals.<sup>1</sup> He was continually bothered by grinding abdominal pains, which were eventually diagnosed as evidence of gallstone. When Jim was seventeen, Sam Polk took him 230 miles on horseback to Danville, Kentucky, for an operation by Doctor Ephraim McDowell, the pioneer surgeon in the West. Anesthesia and antisepsis were still unknown, but the operation was successful and brought about a miraculous transformation in the boy. Polk later acknowledged that but for McDowell he would never have amounted to much.<sup>2</sup>

As his vitality returned, however, Jim Polk showed no enthusiasm for farm work or the rough outdoor life of a surveyor, and his father, finally despairing of his son's following in his own footsteps, placed him with a merchant to learn the business. But Jim's eyes were fixed on the grand and alluring career of a professional man, and after a few weeks in the store, his father yielded to his entreaties that he be allowed to go to school.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John S. Jenkins, *The Life of James K. Polk, Late President of the United States* (Auburn, N. Y., 1850), 37-38.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel D. Gross, *Lives of Eminent American Physicians and Surgeons of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1861), 210-211, 221, 223, 229; Mary Young Ridenbaugh, *The Biography of Ephraim McDowell, M. D., "The Father of Ovariectomy"* (New York, 1890), 76-78; Archibald H. Barkley, *Kentucky's Pioneer Lithotomists* (Cincinnati, 1913), 38.

<sup>3</sup> [J. L. Martin,] "James K. Polk," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, II (1838), 199-200.

Polk had a good mind, but the training he had received was so meagre that at the age of eighteen he spelled badly and wrote in the worst style.<sup>4</sup> In July, 1813, he enrolled in the school at Zion Church, about three miles south of Columbia, the seat of Maury County. The school was taught by the Reverend Robert Henderson, one of the first Presbyterian preachers in that part of the country and a forthright and effective orator. Henderson had once won the respect of Andrew Jackson by preaching a sermon against cock-fighting to the general and a number of other prominent men who had gathered for a weekend of the sport. This was young Polk's first introduction to fashionable classical education; he commenced Latin grammar and for about a year "read the usual course of Latin Authors, part of the greek [sic] testament and a few of the dialogues of Lucian."<sup>5</sup> The whole experience was tonic in its effect. He was older than most of the scholars and worked indefatigably, making up for lost time. The teacher was not allowed to whip students, but once a week "Uncle Sam" Frierson, the patriarch of the community, came to the school, took wrongdoers down to the spring,

talked over their sins with them, and when necessary vigorously applied a birch from a nearby thicket. If such actions did not prove corrective "Uncle Sam" would proceed to pray over the misdoer long and loudly—something much more to be dreaded than three hard whippings.<sup>6</sup>

It is unlikely that Jim Polk ever required such treatment.

Sam Polk was so impressed with his son's accomplishments that he agreed at the beginning of 1815 to send him to a more distinguished academy, conducted by another Presbyterian, Samuel P. Black, at the newly established town of Murfreesborough, some fifty miles to the northeast. When Polk presented himself at the log building which housed the school, he was still small for his age. "His hair was much fairer and of lighter growth than it afterwards became. He had fine eyes, [and]

<sup>4</sup> Gross, *Eminent American Physicians*, 221.

<sup>5</sup> Certificate of Henderson, quoted in Eugene Irving McCormac, *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* (Berkeley, 1922), 3. See also Mary Wagner Highsaw, "A History of Zion Community in Maury County, 1806-1860," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, V (1946), 113; A. V. Goodpasture, "The Boyhood of President Polk," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, VII (1921), 47; S. G. Heiskell, *Andrew Jackson and Early Tennessee History* (Nashville, 1920-1921), III, 681-683.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Highsaw, "Zion Community," 113.

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ames K. Polk: A Political "A History of Zion Com- ty, V (1946), 113; A. V. al Magazine, VII (1921), Nashville, 1920-1921), III,

was neat in appearance."<sup>7</sup> He boarded with a family in town and worked hard at

English Grammar the Latin and Greek languages, Arithmetic, the most useful branches of the Mathematics, Geography, Natural and Moral Philosophy, Astronomy, Belles-letters [sic], Logic, and such other useful and ornamental branches of Literature.<sup>8</sup>

The school term was closed in October with an "exhibition," at which the students delivered orations and acted in portions of plays. Polk showed "the finest capacity for public speaking,"—he had probably learned more than Latin grammar from Parson Henderson—and a spectator remarked that he was "much the most promising young man in the school."<sup>9</sup>

Such was young Polk's progress at Murfreesboro that in less than a year he felt ready to enter college. It was only natural that he should choose the University of North Carolina, where his cousin, Colonel William Polk, was one of the most active trustees. Arriving at Chapel Hill in the fall of 1815, he was examined by the faculty on Latin and Greek grammar, Caesar's Commentaries, Sallust, Virgil, Mair's Introduction, ten chapters of Saint John's Gospel in Greek, and Murray's English Grammar. On the basis of this examination, he was given credit for all the freshman and half the sophomore work and was admitted to the sophomore class when the second term opened in January, 1816.<sup>10</sup> This is striking evidence of his intelligence and of the assiduity with which he had pursued his studies in the two and a half years since he had commenced them under Parson Henderson.

The University of North Carolina was the same age as Polk himself. Its early years had been neither prosperous nor distinguished, and in 1815 it had a faculty of only five. The Reverend Robert Chapman was president, but the real leader of the institution was the Professor of Mathematics, Doctor Joseph Cald-

<sup>7</sup> Samuel H. Laughlin, "Sketches of Notable Men," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, IV (1918), 77-78. See also Thomas B. Wilson, "Reminiscences of the Civil War," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, V (1946), 93-94; C. C. Henderson, *The Story of Murfreesboro* (Mur- freesboro, Tenn., 1929), 27-29; *Nashville Whig*, Oct. 25, 1814.

<sup>8</sup> Certificate of Samuel P. Black, Stanley F. Horn, ed., "Holdings of the Tennessee Historical Society: Young James K. Polk's Credentials," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, IV (1945), 339.

<sup>9</sup> Laughlin, "Sketches of Notable Men," 77-78.

<sup>10</sup> *The Laws of the University of North-Carolina. As Revised in 1813* (Hillsborough, N. C., 1822), 5. (Hereafter referred to as *U. N. C. Laws.*)

well, who was, like Chapman, a Presbyterian clergyman. In addition there was a senior tutor, William Hooper, later to be Professor of Languages, and two other tutors, recently graduated students, who lived in the dormitories, tried to keep order, and taught the lower classes. There were eighty students at the beginning of 1816, the number rising to ninety-one by the end of the year.<sup>11</sup>

However poor in some respects, the University had a magnificent situation, lying on a great ridge rising out of piedmont North Carolina, some thirty miles west-northwest of the capital at Raleigh. The whole countryside was heavily forested, cool, clear springs ran from the slopes around the sides of the eminence, and from Point Prospect, a promontory at its eastern end, one could look off for miles toward the coastal plain. The University buildings were set upon the highest point of the broad and gently rolling plain which was the top of the ridge. Old East, a two-story dormitory with sixteen rooms, had been constructed in 1795. At right angles to it was the recently completed Main Building (now South Building), a more pretentious structure with three floors and a cupola and containing classrooms, library, society rooms, and dormitory rooms. Stretching northward from the Main Building was the "Grand Avenue," a wide park of oaks and hickories with natural undergrowth. At the far end, some three hundred yards away, ran the main street of the straggling village of Chapel Hill, and hidden in the woods beyond was the small frame building which housed the University's preparatory school. Directly across the Grand Avenue from Old East stood the small, plain chapel, and in the opposite direction was the large, frame Steward's Hall, where many of the students ate their meals. Beyond the Steward's Hall and toward the east, another broad, cleared avenue ran along the Raleigh road to Point Prospect, affording a vista over the plain beyond. The tiny village itself had only thirteen houses, two stores, and a tavern.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Treasurer's Accounts, November 20, 1816, University of North Carolina Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina), hereafter referred to as U. N. C. Papers; University of North Carolina, Minutes of the Trustees, 1811-1822, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), 153, 159.

<sup>12</sup> Archibald Henderson, *The Campus of the First State University* (Chapel Hill, 1949), 15, 25n, 42-43, 45, 60, 65; William D. Moseley to Professor Elisha Mitchell, August 15, 1853, University of North Carolina, Letters, 1796-1835, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina).

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<sup>16</sup> John Y. Mas

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From its earliest years the infant university had been under strong Presbyterian influences and had tried to model itself upon Princeton. It was ordained that a student who denied the being of God or the divine authority of the Christian religion should be dismissed, and the entire student body was examined periodically on the Bible.<sup>13</sup> The bell on top of the Main Building was rung at six in the morning, and fifteen minutes later another bell summoned to morning prayers in the Chapel; prayers were held again at five in the afternoon, and on Sunday students were required to attend public worship clad in "neat black gowns." The bell was rung again at eight at night in the winter and nine in the summer, after which students were supposed to repair to their rooms for study. The year was divided into two terms, with vacations between, one of a month during December, and the other of six weeks in the summer. Each term was concluded by a public examination, the one in November by the faculty and the one at commencement in June by a committee of the trustees. In addition to their regular studies, the students were required to give orations following evening prayers, two or more each evening as their names came up alphabetically, and seniors were required to deliver two original orations during the year, one of them at commencement.<sup>14</sup> Tuition was \$10 and later \$15 a term, and room rent was \$1.<sup>15</sup>

Polk's health was still feeble, but he threw himself with his usual energy into the sophomore studies<sup>16</sup>—Cicero's Select Orations, Xenophon's Cyropoedia, Homer, geography, arithmetic, and Murray's Grammar. The classics were less important after July, when he entered upon the junior course—elements of geometry, algebra, trigonometry, logarithms, mensuration, select parts of the classics, and the inevitable Murray's Grammar.<sup>17</sup> The extensive training in mathematics was given by Doctor Caldwell, while William Hooper, "tall and erect, polished in manners, gentle in disposition, and a ripe scholar," a rigid disciplinarian,<sup>18</sup> was responsible for the classical work. Caldwell

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Chapel Hill, 1949), 15,  
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<sup>13</sup> U. N. C. Laws, 10; University of North Carolina, Reports from the Faculty to the Trustees, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), December 6, 1816.

<sup>14</sup> U. N. C. Laws, 4, 7-8, 10, 17-18; U. N. C. Trustee Minutes, 131-132.

<sup>15</sup> U. N. C. Laws, 16; U. N. C. Trustee Minutes, 154.

<sup>16</sup> John Y. Mason, Address before the Alumni Association of the University of North Carolina, Delivered in Gerard Hall, June 2, 1847. The Evening Preceding Commencement Day (Washington, 1847), 7.

<sup>17</sup> U. N. C. Laws, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Edward J. Mallett, Address to the Graduating Class at the University of North Carolina, at Commencement, June 2d, 1831 (Raleigh, 1831), 3.



had composed his own geometry text, which was then copied in manuscript by the students. The copies were, of course, filled with errors.

But this was a decided advantage to the junior, who stuck to his text, without minding his diagram. For, if he happened to say the angle at A was equal to the angle at B, when, in fact the diagram showed no angle at B at all, but one at C, if Dr. Caldwell corrected him, he had it always in his power to say: "Well, that was what I thought myself, but it ain't so in the book, and I thought you knew better than I." We may well suppose that the Dr. was completely silenced by this unexpected *argumentum ad hominem*. You see how good a training our youthful junior was under, by a faithful adherence to his text, to become a "strict constructionist" of the constitution, when he should ripen into a politician.<sup>19</sup>

At the semiannual examination in November it was found that "James K. Polk and William Moseley are the best scholars" in the class, and the entire class was highly approved.<sup>20</sup>

The course of study in the final year was natural and moral philosophy, chronology, select parts of the Latin and Greek classics, and, again, Murray's Grammar.<sup>21</sup> At the midyear examination this time, the faculty was able to pronounce

only a general sentence of approbation. Distinctions might be made in scholarship, but it would be difficult [to know] at what point to stop. They are all approved. And this class is especially approved on account of the regular moral, and exemplary deportment of its members as students of the university.<sup>22</sup>

The faculty was strengthened in the second half of Polk's senior year by the addition of Elisha Mitchell, fresh from Yale, as professor of mathematics. Polk was "passionately fond" of this subject, and under Professor Mitchell his was the first class at the University to study such advanced geometry as conic sections. The class was unfortunate in just missing the teaching of Denison Olmstead, another Yale man, who had been hired along with Mitchell to teach chemistry but who stayed at New Haven for an additional year of advanced study under Benjamin Silliman before coming to Chapel Hill.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> William Hooper, *Fifty Years Since: An Address, Delivered before the Alumni of the University of North-Carolina, on the 7th of June, 1859. (Being the Day before the Annual Commencement)* (Raleigh, 1859), 23.

<sup>20</sup> U. N. C. Faculty Reports, December 5, 1816.

<sup>21</sup> U. N. C. Laws, 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> U. N. C. Faculty Reports, January 4, 1818.

<sup>23</sup> U. N. C. Trustee Minutes, 145; W. D. Moseley to Professor Elisha Mitchell, August 15,

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As in most colleges at that time, much of the important training was received outside the classroom, through the "literary societies." At Chapel Hill most of the students were members of either the Dialectic or the Philanthropic Society, between which there was the keenest rivalry. Polk became a member of the former during his first term.<sup>24</sup> The societies met weekly in their own halls in the Main Building, with a topic arranged for debate at each meeting. Each member was required to participate in the debates every other week and to present compositions at the alternate meetings. The best compositions were filed in the society archives, eight of Polk's being so honored, two of which are still extant.

The first of these, written in 1817, an argument against "The Admission of Foreigners into Office in the United States," was filled with the spread-eagle patriotism characteristic of the expanding America which emerged from the War of 1812. Polk feared that foreigners would be imbued with aristocratic or monarchical ideas, or that they would try to establish a state church. Nor did he show much faith in the ability of the people to make correct decisions. So soon as foreign influence insinuates itself into the favor of a credulous populace, he said, "party is established and faction is founded, yes, faction, that destroyer [of] social happiness and good order in society, that monster that has sunk nations in the vortex of destruction."<sup>25</sup> Twenty years later Polk would have thought such a sentiment clear evidence that its author was either an aristocrat or a Bank hireling, but in 1817 government was entrusted by almost common consent to Republican elder statesmen, and parties were often considered not only unnecessary but highly dangerous.

The second composition, an effusion of schoolboy enthusiasm "On the Powers of Invention," reflects all the winds of thought which blew upon students at Chapel Hill in the early nineteenth century. Based on John Locke's analysis of human psychology, it showed that Doctor Caldwell's lectures on "moral philosophy"

1853, U. N. C. Letters.

<sup>24</sup> University of North Carolina, Dialectic Society, Minute Book, 1812-1813, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), January 25, 1816.

<sup>25</sup> Composition of James K. Polk, University of North Carolina, Dialectic Society, Addresses of the Dialectic Society, First Series, MS. Vol. IV, P to Y (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina). There is a "List of Compositions and Addresses now in the Archives of the Dialectic Society" in University of North Carolina, Dialectic Society, Temporary Laws, Etc., 1818, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), which lists eight Polk compositions, only two of which seem to have survived.



had left a strong impress of the Age of Reason on his hearers. Polk's theme was a profound faith in the powers of human reason and an ecstatic view of man's progress, through reason, from ignorance and superstition to where "he sits enthroned on the pinnacles of fame's proud temple." But by 1817 reason had its limits, and the youthful writer regrets that the noble works of invention have been "basely used by a Paine a Hume and a Bolinbroke [*sic*] as the harbinger of infidelity." The influence of romantic thought was also beginning to be felt, and the romantic hero appears: "St. Helena blooms with nature's richest production wafted to her shore by the winds of adversity and though fallen yet noble, debased yet acting with philosophical composure." Romanticism is even more evident in the full-blown style and bombastic exaggeration, characteristics which are in striking contrast with everything else Polk is known to have said or written. The composition closes with an apostrophe to America, which is forging ahead of Europe "under the happy auspices of an equilibrium in government."<sup>26</sup>

The Dialectic Society was strict in enforcing its rules, attendance was required, and Polk was a half dozen times among those fined for absence. He was also penalized a number of times for "irregularity" and once for "gross irregularity." Whether these fines were levied for keeping library books out too long, spitting tobacco juice on the floor, or for some other impropriety has not been determined, but they do dissipate the myth of Polk, the superhumanly correct student, who never failed in the punctual performance of every duty. The debates at Society meetings were often hotly contested, and one evening a member was fined ten cents for using threatening language to James K. Polk, and Polk was fined a like sum for replying.

Many of the debates were on questions with which Polk had to deal in his later public career. The record for the evening of his admission to the Society unfortunately does not show whether Polk voted or argued on the side of the negative majority on the question, "Would an extension of territory be an advantage to the U. S.?" The decision was again negative on, "Would it be justifiable in the eyes of the world for the United States to assist Spanish America in deffence [*sic*] of their

<sup>26</sup> Ten-page MS. in Polk's hand, Dialectic Addresses.

liberty?" On debate," it was the pure precision in the debate judgment or a when the decisions politicians also able to that serious, as well beneficial to imagined.<sup>27</sup>

Each of the university's meetings, 1,623 volumes, "Williams' Fences," and interest in his elementary record which indicated David Ramsay's its innumerable the members for the education no other means.

Polk was : monthly term secretary and end of his journey and the following mark of respect

<sup>27</sup> Dialectic Minute Dialectic Society, Copy of the University of <sup>28</sup> *Catalogue of Books* (Hillsborough, N. C. Carolina, "Library of the University Demerit Roll", Library of the University of N. C. 1818, MS. vol. (No. 207-208).

<sup>29</sup> University of N. C. (North Carolina College March, 1817, for Polk's Dialectic Individual Dialectic Society, Transactions, Library of the University of N. C. August, 1816-March, 1817, <sup>31</sup> Dialectic Minute

liberty?" On still another occasion, after "warm and animated debate," it was decided that the practice of law *is* congenial to the pure precepts of Christianity. Polk's later views triumphed in the debate over, "Ought a representative to exercise his own judgment or act according to the directions of his constituents?" when the decision was in favor of the latter. These aspiring politicians also decided that the life of a statesman was preferable to that of a warrior. But not all the questions were so serious, as witness, "Is an occasional resort to female company beneficial to students?" the outcome of which may well be imagined.<sup>27</sup>

Each of the two societies had a library superior to the University's meagre stock of books. To the Dialectic collection of 1,623 volumes, Polk contributed a set of "Gibbon's Rome," "Williams' France," "Darwin's Memoirs," "Addison's Evidences," and John H. Eaton's recent biography of Jackson. The interest in history indicated here is shown also by the fragmentary record of books taken from the University library, which indicates that Polk borrowed Gibbon's *Rome* and one of David Ramsay's works on the American Revolution.<sup>28</sup> Among its innumerable activities, the Di also included philanthropy; the members taxed themselves two dollars per term for a loan for the education of one of their fellows who seems to have had no other means of support.<sup>29</sup>

Polk was an active leader in the society. He served two monthly terms as treasurer and held other offices, principally secretary and chairman of the executive committee.<sup>30</sup> At the end of his junior year he was elected president of the society, and the following spring was chosen for a second term, a mark of respect without precedent.<sup>31</sup> This mark of confidence

<sup>27</sup> Dialectic Minutes, January 25, 1816-May 20, 1818, *passim*; University of North Carolina, Dialectic Society, Committee Minutes, 1816-1824, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), February 24, 1817.

<sup>28</sup> *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Dialectic Society, Chapel-Hill, February, 1821* (Hillsborough, N. C., 1821), 4; Dialectic Minutes, October 16, 1816; University of North Carolina, "Library Books Borrowed, August 26, 1817-March 25, 1819," MS. bound with University Demerit Roll, October 26, 1832-September 18, 1840, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina).

<sup>29</sup> University of North Carolina, Dialectic Society, Treasurer's Individual Accounts, 1811-1818, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), 207-208.

<sup>30</sup> University of North Carolina, Dialectic Society, Treasurer's Book, 1807-1818, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), August, 1816, and March, 1817, for Polk's accounts as treasurer; his individual accounts with the Society are in Dialectic Individual Accounts, 1811-1818, 221, 260, 307, and University of North Carolina, Dialectic Society, Treasurer's Individual Accounts, 1818-1821, MS. vol. (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina), 29; Dialectic Committee Minutes, August, 1816-March, 1818, *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> Dialectic Minutes, May 8, 1817, and April 29, 1818.

may have been the result of Polk's efforts to preserve the honor of the society by pushing the impeachment of a member accused of stealing some tongs and a shovel from another member, letting himself "be publickly kicked in one of the passages of the main building . . . without making any honorable resistance," charging \$25 worth of books to the Society and then presenting them to the Society as his own gift, leaving Chapel Hill without paying his debts, claiming to have a large estate with the intention "of imposing himself upon some too credulous one of the female sex," and permitting himself to be called a liar without doing anything "to vindicate his character." Polk industriously collected evidence against the villain, who was expelled by a unanimous vote of the Society.<sup>32</sup>

Polk's second inaugural address, on "Eloquence," shows that he already had an eye to politics. You may, he told his listeners,

be called upon to succeed those who now stand up the representatives of the people, to wield by the thunder of your eloquence the council of a great nation and to retain by your prudent measures that liberty for which our fathers bled. It may be a delusive phantom that plays before my imagination, but my reason tells me it is not. For why may we not expect talents in this seminary in proportion to the number of youths which it fosters, and with the advantages which have been named may we not expect something more than ordinary. But even if it were visionary I would delight to dwell for a moment upon the pleasing hope. . . . Although our body resembles what Rhetoricians would term a miscellaneous assembly your proficiency in extemporaneous debating will furnish you with that fluency of language, that connexion of ideas and boldness of delivery that will be equally serviceable in the *council*, in the *pulpit* and at the *bar*.

That his own technique was already well developed is indicated by his further remarks:

I cannot but remark two very fatal and opposite faults that prevail in the exercises in debating that are exhibited in this body. The one is looseness of preperation [sic] before assembling in this Hall. The other is writing and memorizing your exhibitions in which there is often too much attention paid to the elegance of language and too little to the ideas conveyed by it. The former so far from making you fluent and bold, will only

<sup>32</sup> Hardy L. Holmes to James K. Polk, November 12, 1817, "James H. Simeson's Impeachment & Expulsion, January 21st 1818," Dialectic Society Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina).

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<sup>33</sup> H. Simeson's Impeach-  
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tend to corrupt language and embarrass your address. The latter will **make you timorous and unprepared** to engage in an unforeseen discussion. A due degree of attention should be given to the subject under consideration. The several heads upon [which] you mean to touch should be distinctly arranged in the memory, but the language in which your ideas are expressed should not be elaborate, but that which is suggested at the moment of delivery when the mind is entirely engrossed by the subject which it is considering. The attention of your hearers will not then be diverted from the merits of the question by the studied metaphors and flowers of language.<sup>33</sup>

Such a concept of forensic technique was not very common in the nineteenth century and indicates a bold and original mind. Polk's assiduity in applying and developing it in the debates of the Society and later were to make him a formidable foe on the stump in Tennessee and in the give and take of the House of Representatives. It would have been hard to improve on the Dialectic Society as a school for statesmanship.

Many of Polk's fellow students did indeed rise to eminence. William D. Moseley, with whom he roomed on the third floor of Main Building, later became governor of Florida. In after years he recalled to Polk the "many tedious and laborious hours" they had spent together, "attempting to discover the beauties of Cicero and Homer and the less interesting amusements of quadratic equations and conic sections."<sup>34</sup> John Y. Mason, who later became a United States Senator from Virginia and a member of Polk's cabinet, graduated during Polk's first year at Chapel Hill, while John M. Morehead, subsequently governor of North Carolina, was in the class ahead of Polk. In his own class of fourteen there were, besides himself and Moseley, a future Bishop of Mississippi, William Mercer Green, the first president of Davidson College, Robert Hall Morrison, and a president of the North Carolina senate, Hugh Waddell. William H. Haywood, to be a United States Senator from North Carolina, was among the younger boys at Chapel Hill in Polk's time.<sup>35</sup>

Life at "the Hill" was not all serious, however. Much of the time was spent in sports, excursions through the surrounding

<sup>33</sup> MS. in Dialectic Addresses.

<sup>34</sup> William D. Moseley to James K. Polk, November 29, 1832. James K. Polk Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress); William D. Moseley to Professor Elisha Mitchell, August 15, 1853, U. N. C. Letters.

<sup>35</sup> "Catalogue of Students (copied by Wm. D. Moseley)," U. N. C. Letters; *Catalogus Universitatis Carolinae Septentrionalis* (Raleigh, 1817), 14-16; Kemp Plummer Battle, *History of the University of North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1907, 1912), I, 258-259.

forests, or deviltry. Playing ball against the walls of the buildings got to be such a nuisance that it had to be prohibited by the trustees.<sup>36</sup> Swimming in nearby ponds was a favorite in the summer. Bandy, or shinny, the most popular game, was rough and dangerous. Hygiene and sport were combined at the "Twin Sisters," two small brooks on the north slope of the campus, whose waters had been channelled so as to provide a natural shower bath. More exciting were midnight marauding and such standard college pranks as tying a cow to the bell or building rude fences across the village streets. President Caldwell was in the habit of making midnight excursions of his own and was so fleet of foot and adept in the apprehension of wrong-doers that he was dubbed "Diabolus," usually shortened to "Bolus." Youthful energy occasionally got completely out of hand, as in 1817 when the trustees were so infuriated by "the late outrages on the buildings of the University & grove," that they ordered the faculty to prosecute the offenders in the courts.<sup>37</sup>

It is doubtful whether Polk's health permitted him to engage in the more strenuous diversions, but he got abundant exercise in the walk of a mile or more down a long, steep hill to the farmhouse in the valley north of the village where he took his meals during a part of his stay.<sup>38</sup> There were also vacation excursions with Moseley and others to Raleigh, where the boys stayed at the home of Colonel William Polk, and probably, also, visits to the homes of classmates during the longer summer recesses.<sup>39</sup>

The most stirring event which occurred during Polk's residence at Chapel Hill was the rebellion of 1816. College life in those days exhibited a perpetual warfare between the students and their preceptors. Even the punctilious Polk had advised his fellows to "stoop not from the true principles of honor to gain the favour of the Faculty and thus succeed in your views of promotion."<sup>40</sup> President Chapman had been an opponent of the War of 1812, and the University had long been suspected in the state of being

<sup>36</sup> Resolution of the Trustees, December 6, 1817, U. N. C. Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Resolution of the Trustees [December, 1817,] U. N. C. Papers. See also Henderson, *Campus*, 57, 110; Hooper, *Fifty Years Since*, 25-31; W. D. Moseley to Prof. E. Mitchell, August 15, 1853, U. N. C. Letters. Caldwell had again become president of the University in 1816.

<sup>38</sup> William Hillyard to John Haywood and others, December 6, 1816, U. N. C. Papers; John D. Hawkins to John Y. Mason, April 17, 1847, photostatic copy (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina).

<sup>39</sup> William Hillyard to John Haywood and others, December 6, 1816, U. N. C. Papers; John D. Hawkins to John Y. Mason, April 17, 1847, photostatic copy (North Carolina Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina).

<sup>40</sup> James K. Polk, "Eloquence," M.S. in *Dialectic Addresses*.

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under Federalist domination. One evening in September, 1816, after prayers, the customary oration was given by William B. Shepard. He had submitted his address, as was the rule, to Chapman, who had made certain changes. But in delivering it, he defied the president and gave it as originally written. When ordered to sit down, he persisted, to the enthusiastic applause of the assembled student body. Afterwards there was "great noise and riot" in the dormitories for most of the night, and the next morning twenty-seven students, mostly members of the Philanthropic Society, answered a call for a meeting in the Chapel to support Shepard.

The harassed faculty retaliated at once. Shepard and two of his principal encouragers were suspended forthwith. Those present at the student meeting who would sign a recantation, among them William Moseley, were forgiven, but the rest were likewise suspended. Meanwhile the incident was becoming a state-wide political issue. The Republican papers denounced the tyranny of the faculty, while the Federalist organ printed Doctor Chapman's claim that he had ordered Shepard to delete only passages smacking of infidelity—though the bitter criticisms of Great Britain in the offensive passages were doubtless primarily responsible for arousing the president's choler. The Phi Society, reduced to thirteen members by the suspensions, bitterly accused the Di men of promising to attend the student meeting then failing to appear, a charge which was hotly denied.

The students were outwardly cowed by the disciplinary measures, but the explosion of a bomb, made of a brass doorknob, in front of the room of one of the tutors showed the depth of their resentment. And they eventually triumphed. The trustees, sensitive to public opinion, forced President Chapman to resign a few months later and replaced him with Doctor Caldwell. In the interest of discipline, though, they were finally forced to expel Shepard and the chief promoter of the student meeting. Six months later, with enrollment down to sixty, the University was still suffering from the effects of the incident.<sup>41</sup>

See also Henderson, E. E. Mitchell, August University in 1816. U. N. C. Papers; John H. Carolina Collection,

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<sup>39</sup> Battle, *U. N. C.*, I, 231, 235-239; John Patterson to Thomas T. Armstrong, September 24, 1816, typed copy, and William M. Green to Martin W. B. Armstrong, October 17, 1816, typed copy, bound with U. N. C. Faculty Reports; *Minerva* (Raleigh), October 18, 1816; *Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette*, October 4, 1816; Thomas B. Slade to Alfred M. Slade, October 9, 1816, U. N. C. Papers; William Hooper to Walter Alves, March 6, 1817, copy, J. C. Norwood Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina); U. N. C. Trustee Minutes, 122, 133, 136.



On the last Wednesday in May, 1818, a committee of the trustees arrived in Chapel Hill to spend a week examining the students preparatory to commencement.<sup>42</sup> This annual event was one of the state's outstanding social occasions, and its high point for the students was the ball held in the dining room of the Steward's Hall. A member of the Class of 1818 later recalled:

At commencement ball (when I graduated) my coat was broad-cloth of sea green color, high velvet collar to match, swallow tail, pockets outside, with lapels and large silver plated buttons; white damask vest, showing the edge of a blue undervest; a wide opening for bosom ruffles, and no shirt collar. The neck was dressed with a layer of four or five cornered cravats, artistically laid and surmounted with a cambric stock, pleated and buckled behind. My pantaloons were white Canton crape, lined with pink muslin, and showed a peach blossom tint. They were rather short, in order to display flesh colored silk stockings; and this exposure was increased by very low cut pumps, with shiny buckles. My hair was very black, very long and *queued*. I would be taken for a lunatic or a harlequin in such costume now.<sup>43</sup>

On the last day of the festivities, each senior delivered an oration in the chapel, and Polk, graduating with the "First Honor," gave the Latin Salutatory before a large company of the first men of the state.<sup>44</sup> Commencement was a proud occasion for Polk; but also part of it was the sadness of taking leave of good friends and pleasant associations; mementos were exchanged, Polk presenting his friend Moseley with a breast-pin which the latter cherished for years.<sup>45</sup>

Polk's precarious health had again been impaired by the pressure of studies and activities as his senior year drew to a close, so he did not return immediately to Tennessee, but spent a few months resting and visiting friends in North Carolina. He was doubtless in Chapel Hill for the wedding of one of his classmates two weeks after commencement and was back again in August, when he drew some books from the University library. Finally, in the fall, he turned homeward.<sup>46</sup>

It was only five years since Jim Polk had entered Parson Hen-

<sup>42</sup> *Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette*, May 1, 1818.

<sup>43</sup> *Memoirs of Edward J. Mallett, a Birthday Gift for Each of His Children. May 1st, 1830* (n. p., n. d.), 38-39.

<sup>44</sup> *Battle, U. N. C.*, I, 258.

<sup>45</sup> William D. Moseley to James K. Polk, December 1, 1830, Polk Papers.

<sup>46</sup> *Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette*, June 19, 1818; "U. N. C. Library Books Borrowed," entries for August 15, 22, 1818; Goodpasture, "Boyhood of Polk," 48-49.

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 head of the University's graduating class. These were the five  
 years that had made the man, and of the five the latter ones,  
 spent at Chapel Hill, had been by far the most important.

*His Children. May 1st, 1880*

Polk Papers.  
 "U. N. C. Library Books  
 of Polk," 48-49.