



A BRIEF HISTORY OF GIRARD COLLEGE:

For Recipients of Girard College Student Archive Searches

Girard College opened its doors January 1, 1848 to “poor, white male orphans.” The school was established by the generosity and vision of Stephen Girard (1750 - 1831) who, at the time of his death, was the richest man in America. Girard was born in France, arrived in Philadelphia in 1776 and was granted American citizenship in 1778. He went on to become a highly successful merchant, mariner, farmer, banker and patriot.

Girard’s Will stipulated that students at his school should be trained in the “various branches of a sound education” so they could become productive citizens. Classes always included reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as natural history, astronomy, French and Spanish.

In the early years, Girard College assumed full legal guardianship of the boys, providing for their education, board and maintenance until the age of eighteen. Ordained clergy of all faiths were prohibited from entering the campus ensuring that one religion was not favored over another, and protecting the children from proselytizers. Girard students were instructed in a non-denominational Christian religion, attending chapel services every day. The students lived almost full time on the campus, and were permitted brief home visits only during summer months and holidays.

In those early days, when so few Americans attended college, many Girard College students were instructed in various trades and professions. Some left the College before the age of eighteen to be bound out as apprentices; these students were described as being on “the fifteen-year list.” During the twentieth century the apprenticeship practice was discontinued, and students were fully trained in various trades and given a strong academic instruction. This combination enabled them either to enter a trade or pursue higher education.

Today, the curriculum has evolved to provide intense college and technological preparation – skills that prepare the children to be productive, twenty-first century adults. Girard is still a residential school, but the off-campus privileges are more generous, with students going home for the weekends and all summer.

The College now admits qualified applications regardless of race, creed or gender. Admissions criteria still require that families demonstrate financial need and are headed by a single parent or guardian. The first boys of color were admitted to Girard College in September 1968, and the first girls in September 1984. The student body now consists of children of many races, evenly divided between boys and girls, in grades 1 through 12.

Most important, despite all the changes at Girard College throughout its 166 years, Stephen Girard’s fortune still provides the life-changing opportunity of education to children in need.

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