The Original Seventeen

Accounts differ on exactly who arrived in Parkville first. What can be confirmed is that during the first few weeks of April 1875, Rev. John McAfee, his wife, his six children, and 17 students converged on Parkville in preparation for the opening of the newly-created institution.\(^1\) T.D. Roberts, his wife Emma, Lizzie Adams, and John Rulo arrived by train during that time, while another group of students arrived in a covered wagon bearing the words “Parkville or Bust.” The McAfee family and the remainder of the seventeen students arrived by train on April 13, 1875.

After the McAfee family and Park College’s first students (nicknamed the “Original Seventeen”) arrived, they immediately began cleaning and fitting the hotel for habitation and rudimentary classrooms. This “Augean task” took an entire month, as the building was in shambles. “The Park College Record” described the building thus: All possibility of meaningful commerce had been destroyed by the border conflict and by the Civil War. Horses had been stabled in the cellar during the war and other parts of the basement had been used to store ice for Parkville’s many saloons, one of which had been in the hotel. No one had bothered to remove the rotted manure and sawdust. Descriptions vary, but the tenants included one family, the M.E. Church, a store and shipping room for fruit and vegetables and

\(^1\) Rev. John A. McAfee was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Divinity by Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, in 1886.
countless rats. Ceilings had collapsed and debris was everywhere, inside and out. In addition to the poor condition of the hotel, the group was forced to deal with the 1875 grasshopper plague that decimated crops in much of western Missouri.

By May 12, 1875, part of the structure was habitable, and classes began on a day which has been traditionally referred to as “Founders’ Day.” Most of “The Original Seventeen” were the remnants of the aborted work program that Rev. McAfee had initiated at Highland University. Most enrolled in college level classes, and four of them (three women and one man) were ready to graduate in 1879. As planned in the founders’ agreement, the three men wrote a charter, in which they shortened the name to “Park College,” then appointed a board and formally inaugurated the college.

Whether they were part of the graduating class of 1879 or a subsequent year, the Original Seventeen all benefited from Rev. McAfee’s vision for a college “where ordinary people could come and work to earn an education” as long as they were willing to work. Park College was the product of the forward-thinking nature of Rev. McAfee in an age when only the wealthiest young adults attended college.

Park College Family Self Help Work Program

The Family was a particularly unique element of Park College. It was maintained separately from the college and governed by rules that did not apply to the paying student. Most students were members of the Family in the early days, as few could fully afford tuition, room and board. Three different Families existed at one point (based on how much a student could pay), posing bookkeeping and financial complexities for the administration.

One of the principles upon which Park College was founded originated during Rev. John McAfee’s time as a professor at Highland University in Kansas. He maintained that every
student should have the opportunity to earn an education as long as he or she was willing to work. Because of this guiding belief, students of limited means took the place of hired labor at Park College, which lessened the costs of their educations.

The early students of the college performed nearly every job needed to maintain the facility, including constructing buildings, farming, cooking, cleaning, and performing other tasks common to rural households of the day. Family members depended on each other to perform tasks, and labor was considered part of the educational ideal that Rev. McAfee held dear. While work was a choice in the College’s earliest years, it later became required for all who wanted to live on campus.

Despite the program’s popularity, attracting hundreds of students over its years of operation (1875-1909), the Family caused considerable friction between the college’s co-founders. Rev. McAfee headed the Family until his death in 1890 and kept it entirely separate from the college trustees. George Park felt that the Family was too expensive, practically ordering McAfee to accept more paying students and going so far in 1889 as to create a separate department to accommodate them. As years progressed, the Family program became a point of contention between the two men as they fought often over these plans. Many believe that this constant battle contributed to both of their deaths.

Numerous alumni reflected on the Family with fondness, noting how such work brought them closer together. Even though the school’s co-founders argued over the future of the program, the Family evolved over the years in order to meet changing times. Still, even to this day, Park University provides access to a work program which helps alleviate students’ costs.
Religious Purpose and Academic Excellence

Life for Park College students in the earliest days primarily consisted of classes, or “recitations,” for half the day and labor for the other half. Students were prepared “for service in teaching, the ministry and in home and foreign missions through rigorous academic and religious curricula.” They attended daily chapel services, with an additional two services on Sunday. Religious service and teaching were essential to developing young men and women who exemplified the Park College tenets of Faith and Labor.

A proponent of a Classical curriculum, Rev. McAfee stressed the importance of students taking Greek, Latin and Mathematics all four years. He also supported English, Sciences, and various kinds of Philosophy. In addition to Rev. McAfee, who taught Biblical Exegesis, Sabbath School, and Lay Work (as well as acting as president), the 1886 faculty of the college were Edward Fitch (Professor of Greek), Lee S. Pratt (Professor of Latin Language and Rhetoric), William B. Fenn (Professor of Mathematics), William H. Tibbals (Professor of Natural Science and Philosophy), and Ida M. Owen (Instructor in English). Generally speaking, Park was in step with the academic trends of the late 1800s.

In addition to the typical subjects of a classical curriculum, other subjects such as music played an important role in the academic and religious life of students and faculty.