

Mount Zion Institute



The History of Mount Zion

The Mount Zion Society was formed at Charlestown on January 29, 1777, and on February 13 following was incorporated for the purpose of "founding, endowing and supporting a public school in the district of Camden." Thus, Mount Zion Institute was conceived, and thus for the first time, perhaps, Low Country and Up Country in South Carolina engaged in a common scheme for the general welfare. This purpose of unity in the colony is nowhere expressly stated in the Articles of Incorporation, but it is strongly implied in the personnel of The Board of Directors of thirteen members: seven of these were from the up country, and six from the city of Charlestown. The first President of the Society was John Winn of Winnsboro, the wardens, General Strother and Captain Robert Ellison. The relation of education to religion appears by implication in the preamble to The Constitution: "Arise! Shine! For thy light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called the trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord that he might be glorified."

This identity of Christianity with education is shown, too, by the close relationship that existed between Mount Zion Society and Sion Presbyterian church in Winnsboro. Those early men of vision saw very clearly what many modern educators have forgotten—education without religion is vanity. Thus, in the very beginning they inculcated the spirit that has always animated Mount Zion throughout her long and honorable history.

Before the Society built a school in Winnsboro, perhaps as early as 1767, a certain William Humphrey held classes in a small building located, probably, near where the post office now stands. It is likely, however, that Humphreys became the employee of the Society. At any rate, instruction went regularly on until the British army under Lord Cornwallis occupied Winnsboro in 1780. This event disrupted classes, but in 1783 the Society met, reorganized, and continued its work. In 1784 Rev. Thomas Harris McCants was placed in charge of the institution. He was an able man, and with the assistance of W. S. Yongne, W. M. Davy, and William Humphreys, he enlarged and improved the school. In 1785 the General Assembly of South Carolina granted, on the same day, charters to three colleges, one of which was "Mount Zion College at Winnsboro." Mount Zion never, perhaps, functioned under this charter, but the people of Winnsboro still call Mount Zion "The College."

From the re-opening of the school after the departure of Lord Cornwallis until 1834 nothing noteworthy happened. Able teachers during the period enlarged and improved the school, quietly and inconspicuously. Among them was a Mr. Fitz, "a northern man, but a fine teacher and scholar," Mr. Robert Munforce, and a Mr. Stafford of North Carolina. Among the trustees of this period were such familiar names as John McMaster, David Aiken, John Buchanan, P. E. Pearson, Caleb Clark, and William Moore. It was

