

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Coates College for Women

From 1885 through 1897, a small private college occupied 13 scenic acres on Strawberry Hill of Terre Haute's south side. Its exemplary reputation added to the community's rank as a flourishing education center.

Coates College for Women was the vision of Jane Patterson (McBeth) Coates, a resident of Greencastle. In early 1884 Coates enlisted Terre Haute



lawyer Bascom E. Rhoads to organize an academy with her \$20,000 endowment. In addition to incorporating the school, Rhoads helped her select initial trustees: Charles W. Conn, Sidney B. Davis, William Riley McKeen, Elijah M. Mering, Rev. George R. Pierce, Dr. Josiah T. Scovell, Samuel Cary Stimson, Leslie D. Thomas and Harry P. Townley. Though the college was nondenominational, the by-laws mandated two-thirds of the board to be Presbyterians and the Bible to be "the chief textbook."

To accommodate the school, the trustees purchased the late Judge Samuel B. Gookins' residence on forested terrain between what is now Fourth and Fifth streets and Osborne and Hulman streets for \$10,000 on March 17, 1885. They hoped to acquire adjacent ground, including a public garden west of the school maintained by Herman Hulman, during future expansions.

Dr. Laurence G. Hay was chosen first president and professor of philosophy. Dr. M. Stanley Coulter was named professor of physics and mathematics. Professor E.C. Kilbourne, Mary A. Cox, Mary E. Saunders and Emily S. Allen were on the faculty when school started Oct. 6, 1885, with an enrollment of three students: Esther Barth, May Davis and Frances Haberly. Renowned artist T.C. Steele agreed to teach but was not enlisted when no one signed up for his art class. Enrollment gradually increased. Hay resigned in June 1888 and was succeeded by John Mason Duncan, a stimulating educator from Cumberland, Md., who yearned for Coates to be "The Wellesley of the Midwest." Enrollment passed the century mark in 1889-90 and three bachelor's degrees were offered. Janet Scudder, who later achieved prominence as a sculptor, was engaged to teach woodcarving. A Coates College education was portal to any graduate school in the country, including the University of Chicago. Commencements were held at Central Presbyterian Church and later at Washington Avenue Presbyterian Church.

The financial panic of 1893 and a will contest after Mrs. Coates' death on Aug. 22, 1891, are cited as reasons for the college's inability to continue. The sixth annual commencement June 9, 1897, was its last. The alumnae became community leaders; reunions were held regularly into the 1930s. Trustee McKeen bought the property and subdivided it as "College Place."

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