



University of Tennessee: Northern ties to a Southern school

The history of University of Tennessee goes back further than you might realize. And its fans might be surprised to learn the real reason it's based in Knoxville instead of another part of Tennessee.

The school traces its origins to Blount College, which was founded in Knoxville back in 1794. Knoxville was a pretty rough and rugged place back then. In fact, to put this in some context, only a year after Blount College was organized, the settlement of Knoxville was attacked by Native Americans.

Blount College wasn't like most colleges today. There were few students and no sports teams. And like most colleges of that day, it taught the "classics" — subjects like Latin, Greek, logic and philosophy.

One other thing about Blount College: it was co-educational, which means women could take classes there just like men. This was pretty unusual back then.

In 1807 Blount College became known as East Tennessee College and then later East Tennessee University. It moved from what is now downtown Knoxville to the present location of the school in 1828.

Like so many other Southern institutions, East Tennessee University was devastated by the Civil War. Although many of the students fought for the Confederacy (Southern states), most of its trustees were loyal Unionists (supporters of the Northern states). And when the war ended, a staunch Union supporter named Rev. Thomas Humes became president of the university.

This ended up being very important. When the war was over, the federal government reimbursed East Tennessee University for \$18,500 in damage done to its campus during the war (but did not do the same for any other college in the South).

After the war, Congress passed the Morrill Law, creating a system of land-grant colleges that emphasized agriculture, the mechanical arts and military science. In 1868, the Tennessee General Assembly began debate on where to put its primary land grant college. There were two main contenders: Murfreesboro and Knoxville.

At the time, Tennessee's governor was Parson Brownlow, a Unionist and Methodist newspaper editor from Knoxville. The legislature was dominated by people who had favored the Union cause during the Civil War (in fact, most Confederate veterans had not been allowed to vote in 1867).

Largely because of the university faculty's union ties, the state government chose to put its main land grant college in Knoxville. A few years later, East Tennessee University changed its name, and since then it has been known as the University of Tennessee.

Question of the Month from www.tnhistoryforkids.org

In what year did Knoxville host the World's Fair?

HINT: Go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org and find the Knoxville page.

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of Tennessee History for Kids, an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.