

## Larissa College: A Pioneering Institution with a Lyrical Name

by Scott Sosebee

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(Nov 28, 2022) Today Texas is a center of higher learning as the state is the location of 182 non-profit institutions, of which 107 are state or community supported and 75 are private schools. Those almost two hundred colleges and universities include world-class institutions, award-winning regional schools, and only California has more two-year schools. However, Texas as a leader of higher education is a recent phenomenon, something that has come with the state's phenomenal growth in the post-WWII years—and most of that increase has come since 1970. Before that, and particularly in the 19th century, the opportunities for Texans to attend institutions of higher learning were sparse, and the vast majority of those that existed were begun and funded by Christian denominations. One of those far-flung centers of learning was Larissa College, located in the Cherokee County town of the same name.

The first family to take up residence in the area that would become Larissa was the Killough family, who moved from Alabama to Cherokee County in 1837. Relations between the new European interlopers and the contiguous Cherokee—who had displaced other Native tribes of the region in the 1820s—was anything but harmonious. When rumblings of war between Whites and Natives began in 1838, the Killoughs retreated to Nacogdoches, but after meeting with a group of Cherokee, who gave their assurances that they would be able to at least return and harvest the crops they had planted, the family returned. However, the bargain didn't hold and in what has been termed the “Killough Massacre” a Cherokee party attacked the Killough's, killing some members and taking others captive.

The memory of the “Killough Massacre” was enough to keep migrants or any other Whites out of the region until 1846 when a group of itinerants from Tennessee, led by Thomas H. McKee, moved to the region. The residents christened their new home “McKee's Colony” but others came to call it “Talladega” after the town they came from in Tennessee. Frustrated and angry that a resident of Talladega had opened a saloon,

McKee's son, T.N., platted a town site nearby in 1848 and named it Larissa, after an ancient city of learning in Greece. The McKee's were Cumberland Presbyterians who believed that education and learning were the primary responsibility of a town's residents, so family patriarch Thomas McKee directed his son to immediately build a structure for educational instruction. The first such building was a simple log hut, but by 1850 there was a grand three-story academic hall, two dormitories, and another ancillary outbuilding that was by then christened as "Larissa Academy."

Larissa Academy was successful, attracting students from surrounding towns such as Nacogdoches, but operating a school is expensive and the venture quickly grew beyond the means of the McKee family, so in 1855 the Brazos Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church took over operation. They renamed the school Larissa College, and initiated classes for both males and females and also built a preparatory school. McKee and Nathaniel Killough both donated \$1,000 to the new institution and Franklin L. Yoakum took over as the Larissa's first—and as it turned out—only president. Yoakum led a drafting of an application for a charter from the state, one that contained a surprisingly unique for its type stipulation that there would be no "religious test" for prospective students. The state of Texas granted the charter to Larissa College in 1856.

The newly chartered Larissa College enrolled more than fifty students in its first class in 1856, one of which was Christopher Columbus (C.C.) Slaughter, who would go on to become one of the wealthiest men in Texas after establishing a number of successful ranches in West Texas. Enrollment grew to 150 in 1857, but that would be the peak of Larissa's population. Despite the generous early donations and Cumberland Presbyterian sponsorship, the school never really overcame its financial problems. Enrollment declined in 1858 and the school had to suspend the female department. Enrollment rebounded to 144 in 1860, they reopened the female department and, for the first and only time, balanced its budget. That would, unfortunately, be Larissa College's high point. The Civil War began in 1861 and with much of its male population trading in their school uniforms for the butternut gray of the Confederacy, the school closed. It reopened when the war ended, but the Brazos Synod withdrew its support when they decided to quit supporting several small schools and instead concentrate their funding on one large institution, Trinity University. The removal of Presbyterian financial funding ended the school's existence and Larissa closed in 1870. The shuttering of the school also spelled the end of the little town of Larissa as residents began to abandon the settlement. A meningitis epidemic in 1872 devastated the town, and when the Kansas and Gulf Short Line Railroad was built three miles east of the town in 1882, most of the remaining residents packed up and moved to Mount Selman, which was on the railroad. The little college, and the little town with the lyrical name was no more.