

# Designing the Spelman Seminary Grounds

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In researching the history of Spelman College, I came across references to Manning Brothers, a landscape architecture firm that played a significant role in shaping the grounds of the college, southwest of Atlanta. Eager to find out more about the landscape and its designers, I contacted the Library of American Landscape History and learned about the Warren H. Manning Research Project. The staff was immediately interested in the Spelman commission, a project known only as #359 on Manning's client list. After our conversation, I visited the Spelman Archives and discovered extensive correspondence between Warren Manning's firm and Harriet Giles, president of Spelman Seminary, documenting their unique collaboration in the design of the campus. The letters between Giles and Warren Manning and J. Woodward Manning (Warren's partner at the time) offer insight into the histories of both Spelman College and the design firm during these early years.

Giles and her former teacher and mentor, Sophia B. Packard, moved to Georgia from Boston, and founded the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in the basement of

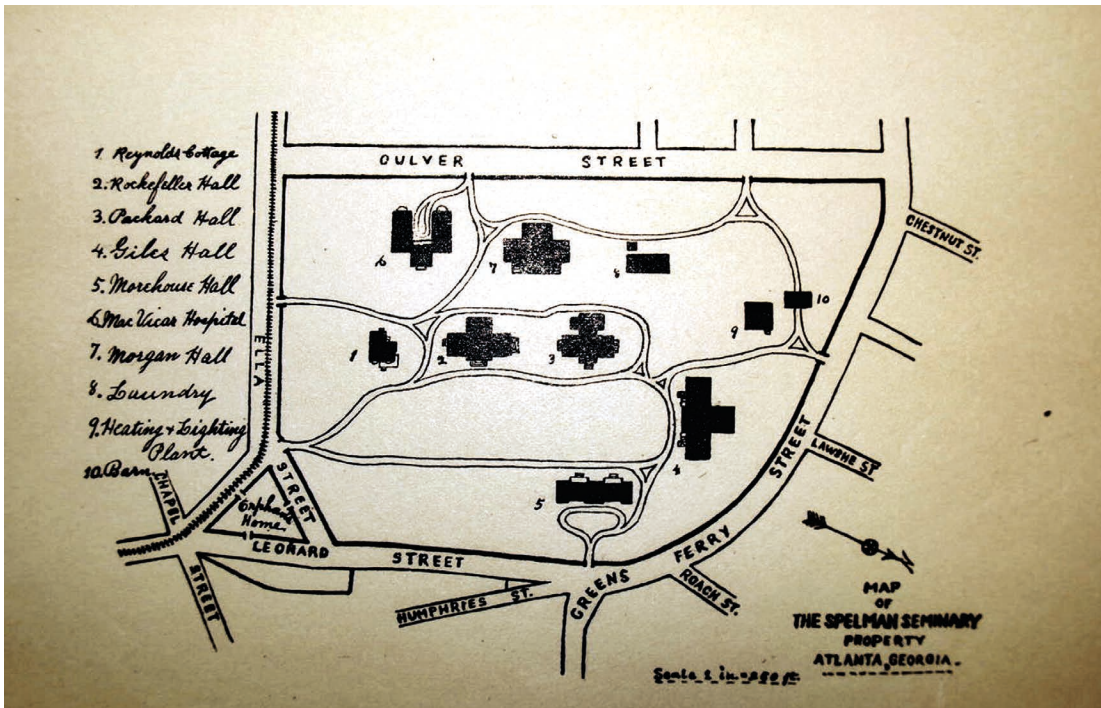
the Friendship Baptist Church on April 11, 1881. With limited financial support from the Women's American Baptist Home Missionary Society and other church groups, the two women taught for more than a year in the crowded basement, attracting more and more African American women students. Taking notice of the founders' success, the Society made a down payment in late 1881 on nine acres in the "James Place" subdivision as a permanent site for the seminary. James Place was the former site of McPherson Barracks, a U.S. government military post, closed in 1881.

Packard and Giles occupied the existing wooden structures on the former military post in early 1883. They soon began a letter writing appeal to pay off the mortgage on their property. John D. and Laura Spelman Rockefeller, who had previously contributed to the seminary through their American Baptist connections, visited Atlanta in 1884 and were impressed by what they saw. The Rockefellers paid off the mortgage and became the seminary's major benefactor. The name of the school was changed to Spelman Seminary to honor Laura Spelman and her parents, longtime antislav-

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OPPOSITE: Spelman Seminary grounds, c. 1883; Spelman Seminary map, c. 1904; students gardening, c. 1900. Courtesy Spelman College Archives.







ery activists in Ohio. By the 1890s, the seminary had built three red brick buildings but was still using five wood frame structures. The bleakness of the landscape was magnified by the raw terrain and unpaved streets. Giles continued to request additional support from the Rockefellers, who sparked a major expansion and transformation of the campus grounds in 1900 with a gift of \$100,000.

In 1902, J. Woodward Manning wrote a letter to Giles introducing Manning Brothers and offering its services. The letter touted the Boston-based landscape firm's experience at Tuskegee Institute and Princeton University in its pitch to "improve" Spelman's new campus. Manning's timing was perfect—Giles was in the midst of a campaign to expand and beautify the college grounds. With grading finished, she wrote, "now we wish to set out trees and shrubs, and are at a loss how to proceed, as it seems to us that there should be a plan before us for this to which we may gradually move." Rockefeller had continued his support by donating con-

siderable funds for plantings, "but nothing that we may use for forming our plan of setting them out." One of the teachers at the seminary suggested "employing professional skill."<sup>1</sup>

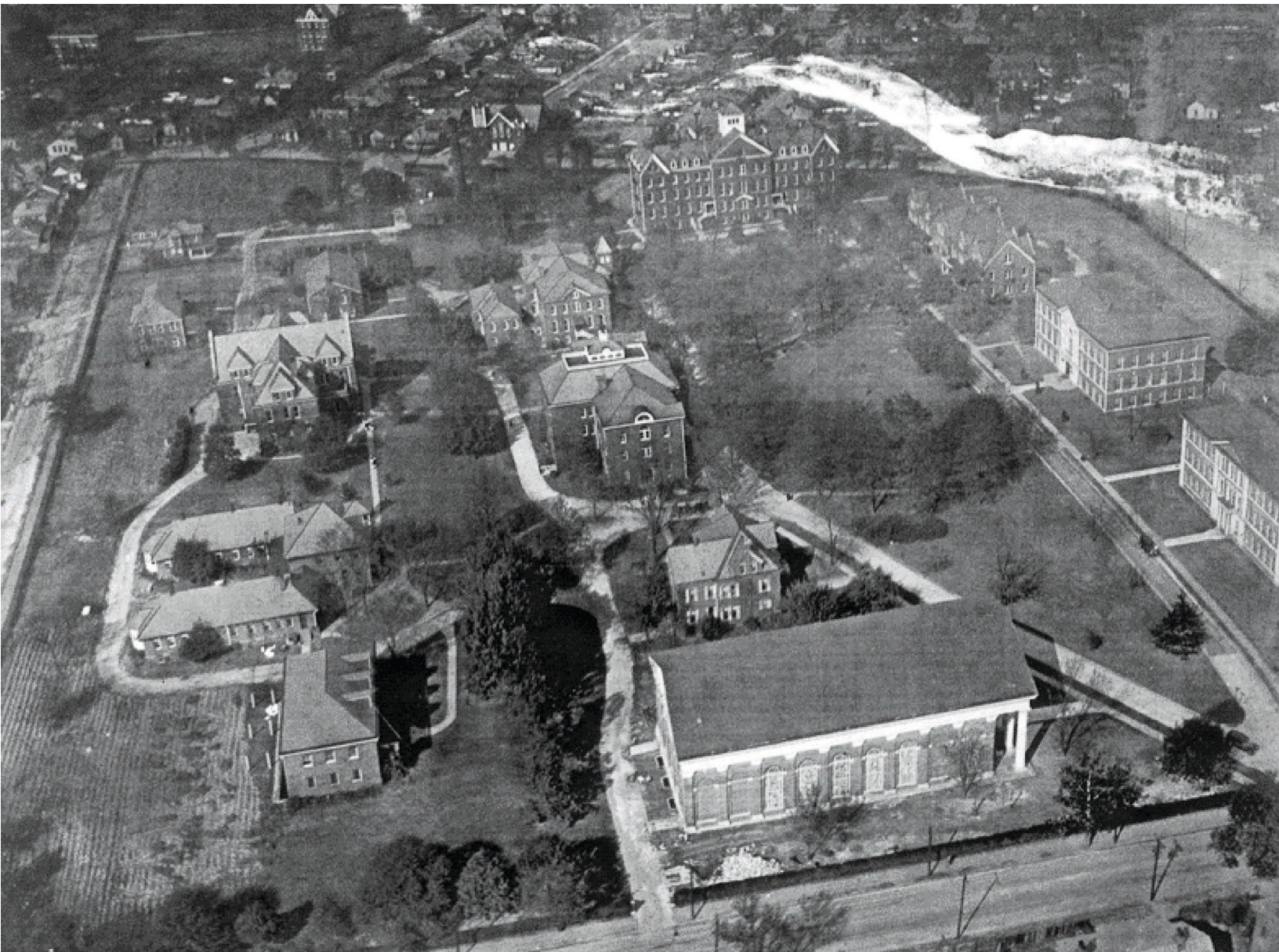
When Warren Manning visited Spelman Seminary in early March 1902, the twenty-acre grounds had seven red brick buildings. The wooden structures and old Leonard Street had been demolished, the site regraded to eliminate open ravines, and underground lines installed to capture run-off. An iron fence and gate constructed on Ella Street provided a new entry to the campus. Existing plantings included flower beds, roses, and vines growing on the brick facades, as well as cork elms, evergreens, sweet gums, and magnolias, but a general landscape plan was still needed to guide the seminary's new plantings.<sup>2</sup>

During their correspondence, J. Woodward Manning and Harriet Giles discussed many aspects of the landscape plan, including the use of native plants. Giles requested "one specimen each of a number of shrubs



Students in the Historic Oval on Spelman Founder's Day, 1930. OPPOSITE: Exercises in the Oval, Founder's Day, 1951; aerial view of Historic Oval, 1926. Courtesy Spelman College Archives.









Processional, Founder's Day, 1967. Courtesy Spelman College Archives.



Aerial view of Spelman College campus, 2016. Courtesy J and D Images.



that are native to this region, such as the Halesia, a native to the Eastern United States” and asked if this addition would “interfere with the general design.” The younger Manning thoroughly approved, and suggested creating “an arboretum of these shrubs and trees that are native to your region.” He added, “We will be glad to introduce this into the general design.” Practical aspects were also considered. Giles expressed the concern of Mr. Tucker, her superintendent of grounds, who worried that “shrubbery near the buildings may serve as a hiding place for evil minded persons.” Manning assured her that this had been considered, noting that “the thorny character of the greater part of this planting has been introduced largely to prevent this.”<sup>3</sup>

None of the firm’s plans or drawings have come to light, but the Mannings’ vision for the landscape appears to have been supported by Giles, who proved to be an astute, demanding, and well-informed client. In one letter, she suggested removing cape jessamine from the plant list, noting that the species was more suitable in places “a little further south, or a little lower in altitude.” And, although “much pleased with the recommendations,” she was hesitant to plant “until the fall or another spring,” she wrote, “as the ground cannot be prepared in some places soon enough.”<sup>4</sup>

The long-awaited landscape plan arrived on February 18, 1903—and Giles graciously noted that it came “as promised and in season,” in time for the trustees’ winter meeting to be held five days later. She embraced the “essential elements of the design” and promised to “carry them out as far as practicable.” An order was placed with Fruitland Nurseries in Augusta, and she anticipated “much work this spring toward carrying out the plan.”<sup>5</sup>

The cover of the *Spelman Messenger*’s February 1904 issue featured a map of the campus, the first record of the property following the improvements suggested in the Manning Brothers’ plan. Buildings line an oval space that emerges as the focal point of the landscape. The seminary soon began using this central green in new

ways, for gardening and exercise, and students walked the encircling roadway to chapel services every morning. Over the next four decades, additional brick buildings were constructed around the loop road, their entrances fronting on the green. In 1923, the seminary was re-

named Spelman College, and as time passed, memorials and other markers of important events in the life of the institution were located on the green. Now known as the Historic Oval, the green today is partially covered with a tree canopy of live oaks, red oaks, elms, and conifers lining the roadway. Harriet Giles, in collaboration with Manning Brothers, erased all traces

Warren Manning’s firm received commissions for design and planning work at dozens of college and university campuses throughout the country over the course of his long practice. The new LALH volume *Warren H. Manning, Landscape Architect and Environmental Planner* (University of Georgia Press in association with LALH) features essays on several examples, including Greensboro (N.C.) Normal and Industrial College; Massachusetts Agricultural College, Amherst; University of Virginia, Charlottesville; Lake Forest (Ill.) University; and Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. The information in the new book will undoubtedly lead to additional discoveries in Manning’s campus work.

of the military outpost, transforming “James Place” into a world apart from urban Atlanta. Spelman’s historic core is now a part of the Atlanta University Center Historic District, placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.<sup>6</sup>

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1. J. Woodward Manning to Harriet E. Giles, Spelman Seminary, February 4, 1902, and HG to Manning Brothers, February 6 and 26, 1902. Manning’s client list includes project #1446, completed for Princeton University in 1925, but there is no mention of earlier work on the campus.
2. *Spelman Messenger*, May 1898.
3. HG to Manning Brothers, March 26, 1902; WJM to HG, March 31, 1902.
4. HG to Manning Brothers, March 26, 1902. She was likely referring to *Gardenia jasminoides*, a native to South China in use at this time.
5. Correspondence between JWM and HG, February 18 and 26, March 2 and 13, 1903.
6. National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, Atlanta University Center District, January 21, 1976, p. 6, item 8.