At first, the story of Peabody Demonstration School follows the story of Peabody College, which began to take shape when Bruce Ryburn Payne became its president in 1911. To fulfill his plans for reforming education in the South, he had to have a demonstration school.

PDS (and USN) Forever

Earliest Days of PDS

In the summer of 1915, the embryonic Demonstration School, kindergarten through seventh grades, began to meet in the brand-new Jesup Psychological Laboratory.

That first elementary school, “eight grades organized in four rooms,” drew a hundred children from Nashville’s public schools. Thirty came to kindergarten. Through those four rooms in Jesup, which still smelled of paint and varnish, traipsed 3,000 visitors that first summer, teachers from all over the South.

“Dr. McMurry, Mr. Thomas Alexander, and Miss Frances Jenkins used classes from the demonstration school to illustrate the principles which had been developed in the courses they were offering” and to show Peabody students “how good teaching should be done.”

Summer school at Peabody College seems to have been a chautauqua for the benefit of the entire neighborhood. In summer evenings the “twilight play hour” drew neighbors of all ages, who “entered into the spirit of the playground with hearty abandon.”

That first summer, the fifth and sixth graders performed an outdoor play on campus, “the children’s own dramatization of the story of King Alfred.” Even in 1915, Demonstration School principles were in effect: “the small playwrights and actors were allowed full freedom and initiative in working out their own ideas in shaping the play, conducting rehearsals, and staging the scenes.

The members of the demonstration rural school were the invited guests composing the appreciative audience.”

“Quiet Freedom and Happy Ease of Atmosphere”

Somehow, word of this new and promising school spread across Nashville. In fall 1916, children from kindergarten through the ninth grade made their way to the Jesup Psychology Lab. Their parents paid tuition of forty dollars for a thirty-six week term.
“Boys and girls who care whole-heartedly for school do not work with less interest and effort but surely with more.”

(“The first installment, twenty dollars, must be paid on the day of entrance.”)

Thomas Alexander’s vision for the Demonstration School promised “to insure a happier and richer childhood and youth and a more truly efficient manhood and womanhood.”

Farewell to the old ways. “Traditional education concerned itself too largely with mental training at the expense of body training, heart training, and hand training,” Alexander says in the 1916 Bulletin of Peabody College.

“Our aim is to have our pupils grow power, power in every direction; power to think, to feel, to do, to be,” he writes a century ago. “School life should be through all its years a happy earnest living through which there may be happy, earnest learning. Boys and girls who care whole-heartedly for school do not work with less interest and effort but surely with more.”

All that has set PDS and USN apart from other schools can be found in Thomas Alexander’s vision. “Wherever possible, responsibility is thrown upon the pupils for the general outcome of conduct,” he writes. “Good discipline is not external control. It is classroom atmosphere and spirit determined in large measure through sympathetic insight on the part of the teacher and mutual understanding.”

“Good learning and good teaching” mean “quiet freedom and happy ease of atmosphere in which pupils feel fully encouraged toward self-expression and achievement.” The teachers’ relationship with their students “shows helpfulness, kindliness, consideration, and natural friendliness.”

Other tenets of “Dr. Alex’s” educational philosophy:
- Our greatest concern must be for what the child is and is becoming from day to day rather than in what he just knows.
- If we succeed in giving the love of learning, the learning itself is sure to follow.
- To do a mechanical or artistic piece of work thoroughly is much more than the material operation. It is a moral achievement.
- The ability to do a thing well is the basis of all active morality.
From the beginning, Bruce Payne intended the demonstration school to have a home of its own, completing his campus plan by facing the Social Religious Building across an expanse of green. Getting the money for this building took years.

The Legend Comes True

In the early 1920s, PDS students wondered if the new building they had been promised would ever become a reality. Writing in The Volunteer literary magazine in 1924, Robert Ross talks about the “vague rumor that Peabody was to have a new building, a building all her own, for the Demonstration School, where the college might not penetrate.”

“Despite a shortage of funds, money was raised, the work continued, and next year, they tell us, the building will be finished and ready for occupation.” He writes, “No more were we to be inconvenienced by the college and in turn disturb them. We could swim, eat, and play at our pleasure. Nor should we receive lectures weekly at assembly for taking up more than half the walk, or otherwise misbehaving toward college students.”

Swim at their pleasure? Despite the enforced cost-cutting, PDS got its swimming pool, thanks to the Peabody Woman’s Club’s Auxiliary (“girl graduates of the Demonstration School”). This group committed to raise the $7,000 needed by holding the Mardi Gras ball, “one of the outstanding social events of the winter season in Nashville,” at the Hermitage Hotel. Tickets cost $1, and Francis Craig’s Orchestra played, as it would not be an “outstanding social event” otherwise.

In 1925 Peabody College celebrated its sesquicentennial with alumni, “the British ambassador, various professors and Supreme Court officials, and other celebrities.” Though the role of Demonstration School students in all this glory was “to stand off and respectfully admire,” they were a key part of one event in the panoply: “the dedication of the new Peabody Demonstration School Building, with a speech by Dr. Thomas Alexander,” who was visiting from his new job back at Teachers College, Columbia University.

It was Thursday, February 19 at 2:00. Sam Caldwell ’25 writes that the “beautiful new auditorium, seating over six hundred people, overflowed” and that the “fine, large stage held two or three hundred P.D.S. students and alumni.” Payne presided over a program of music and
speeches that heightened audience anticipation of Alexander’s address.

“There was the same old Dr. Alex, just as he used to be in the classroom—perfectly at home, speaking with snap—frank, plain, ironic, almost sarcastic when he wished, and withal almost as humorous as a sensible man might possibly be.” Alexander said he had been preparing the speech for ten years. “He told of the dark days when classes were held in basements, when College people complained of the ‘noisy Demonstration School bunch,’ and when ‘Keep off the Grass’ signs frowned forbiddingly from every green spot. He repeated the old ‘New Building’ legend, which for a while had been relied upon by some, then cast aside by all....”

Afterwards seniors, alumni, and former teachers went to the big new gymnasium, where the principal “Mr. Yarbrough industriously wended his way about, spreading free ice cream and much satisfaction in his wake. Then, after a few tours about the building to see how truly fine it was, the party broke up.”