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Centennial Celebration, August 13-15, 1948, by
Charles Lee Lewis**

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Title: Burritt College Centennial Celebration, August 13-15, 1948

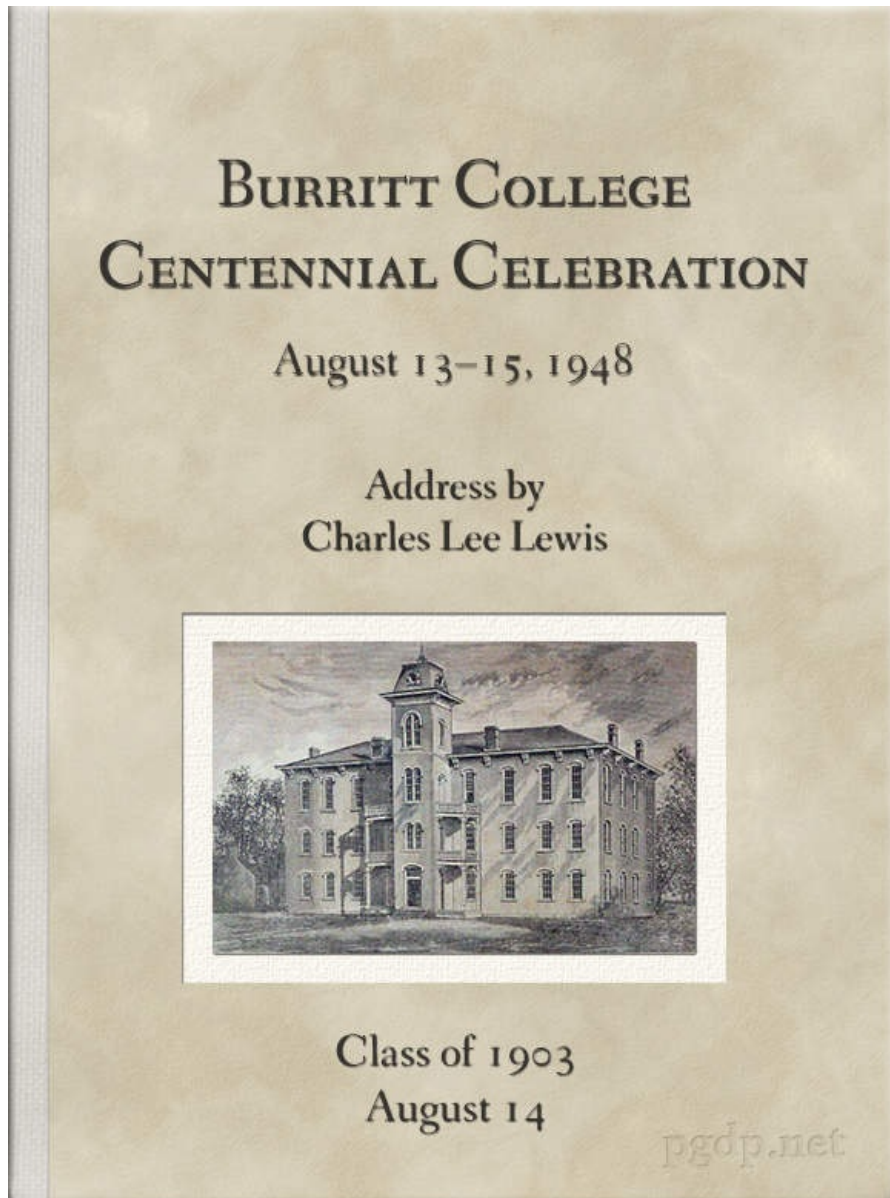
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Release date: March 21, 2014 [EBook #45185]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Stephen Hutcheson, Chris Curnow and the Online
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15, 1948 ***



Burritt College

Centennial Celebration

August 13-15, 1948

Address by
Charles Lee Lewis

Class of 1903
August 14



[3]

BURRITT COLLEGE CENTENNIAL ADDRESS

By CHARLES LEE LEWIS
Class of 1903

As Daniel Webster said in his famous speech on the Dartmouth College Case, so do we say of Burritt College, "Though it is a little college, there are those who love it." That explains why we have gathered here from far and wide to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of its founding.

A hundred years seems a long time, even to some of us who first became students in this institution more than fifty years ago. Many changes take place in the course of a century. Let us turn back the clock of Time and take a bird's-eye view of the year 1848, the year when Burritt College received its charter.

Van Buren County had been formed from White, Warren, and Bledsoe Counties only about eight years previously, and Spencer had been settled shortly afterwards as the county seat. The little village was then quite isolated. The roads were rough, and a journey to Sparta or McMinnville, which now takes but a short time, then required several hours particularly on the return up the mountain. Though the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway was under construction in 1848, it was not completed until 1853, and the branch from Tullahoma to McMinnville was not finished until 1858. There were not many colleges in this part of the state. Irving College, rebuilt in 1845 and then chartered by the legislature, was flourishing, but the Cumberland Female College was not founded in McMinnville until 1850. When Burritt College was established, there was no Vanderbilt University, no University of the South at Sewanee, no University of Tennessee, no Peabody College. Tennessee had been a state only 52 years; Nashville had been the capital city only five years and the Capitol, which had been commenced in 1845 with official ceremony, was quite unfinished.

In January, 1848, peace was signed ending our war with Mexico. Also in January, gold was discovered near Sutter's Fort in California. Oregon was organized as a free territory in August, and Wisconsin was admitted [4] that year as the thirtieth state. At that time the only states west of the Mississippi River were Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa. That year Zachary Taylor was elected President of the United States. In Europe, 1848 was a year of political upheaval. There were revolutions in Austria, Prussia, Hungary, Spain, and Italy. In France, King Louis Philippe fled and Louis Napoleon became President of the Second Republic. Europe was in ferment then as now, one hundred years later; but then the United States was guided by the Monroe Doctrine, only recently promulgated, and was not burdened, like Atlas, with the world on its shoulders, as it is today.

In American literature, 1848 was the year in which Edgar Allen Poe ended his unhappy life; the year in which Emerson, Lowell, Irving, Longfellow, Parkman, Thoreau, and Whittier all published books. The following year appeared Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. In England, Dickens, Thackeray, Browning, Tennyson, Macaulay, Matthew Arnold, and Carlyle were flourishing, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* being published the year before 1848 and Dickens' *David Copperfield* the year following.

In the United States the year 1848 was a time of comparative peace and security, of bright hope and golden promise, with land for all who wished it, work and opportunity for the industrious and the ambitious. It was inspiring to live in such a country at such a time; it was likewise a propitious time for a college to begin a long and useful period of service.

"What's in a name?" Shakespeare has one of his characters ask, suggesting that a rose would smell as sweet by any other name. On the contrary, a name bestowed upon a person or institution, when its significance is rightly understood, becomes an important factor in the development of character and individuality. What a wonderful asset there is in the name of Washington and Lee University, bearing the names of two of the greatest men born on this continent! No other American college has such a heritage. Burritt College, however, is among those appropriately and honorably named.

In 1848, Elihu Burritt, for whom the college was named, had for several years been widely known as "The Learned Blacksmith." By the time he was thirty he was able to read more or less fluently about fifty [5] different languages. At his native town, New Britain, Connecticut, while he was working the hand-bellows to heat a piece of metal in his blacksmith shop, he studied from a book conveniently propped open. This is the reason the seal of Burritt College portrays a blacksmith at work at his anvil. Figuratively, Elihu Burritt had many irons in the fire. In 1848, he was the publisher of a weekly paper in Worcester, Massachusetts, called "The Christian Citizen," which was devoted to anti-slavery, temperance, peace, and self-culture. It was the first publication of its kind in America to give definite space to the cause of peace. In England in 1846, he drafted the plan for a society called "The League of Universal Brotherhood." When this college at Spencer was given his name in 1848, Burritt was in Brussels, Belgium, attending a congress of this "Brotherhood," where he presented a plan for "A Congress of Nations, for the purpose of establishing a well-defined code of international law, and a high court of adjudication to interpret and apply it, in the settlement of all international disputes, which cannot be satisfactorily arranged by negotiation." Accordingly, Burritt had the vision of what Tennyson some years later prophetically called, in his "Locksley Hall," "The parliament of men, the federation of the world." This was nearly a hundred years before the League of Nations, and the United Nations of our time.

Burritt began to lecture when about thirty, his first subject being "Application and Genius," in which he sought to prove that what was generally thought to be genius was not something peculiar and native but merely the result of long and persistent application. Though he had an international reputation, he was devoted to his native town and the friends of his youth. In the nineteenth provision of his will, he wrote: "Having thus disposed of the property which a kind Providence has put in my possession, in a way which I hope may testify my gratitude for such a gift, I bequeath to this my native town the undying affection of a son who held its esteem and special tokens of consideration above all the honors which he received elsewhere." I believe you will agree with me when I declare that we have reason to be proud of the name of Burritt College, given in honor of [6] such a scholar and generous-hearted idealist. In one way or another, his ideals became the ideals of the college bearing his name,—true scholarship, the dignity of labor, and service for humanity.

The charter for Burritt College was secured by a board of thirteen trustees. They apparently were not superstitious regarding the number thirteen in those days. This board, of which John Gillentine was the chairman, obtained money for the erection of a college building from citizens of White, Warren, and Van Buren Counties and probably elsewhere. Nathan Trogdon was employed as contractor and builder. The building, a two-story brick structure, a drawing of which appears at the top of the early diplomas, stood about midway between the present main building and Billingsley Hall. Its original foundation could be partly traced when I was a student at the College.

The first president was Isaac Newton Jones. He and W. B. Huddleston were the chief promoters of the college. President Jones, born at Calhoun, McMinn County, Tennessee, was only twenty-six years old when he accepted the presidency of Burritt College. Being the first graduate of Irving College in Warren County, he was both a scholar and a gentleman and a man of great energy. From the beginning, the curriculum of Burritt stressed Greek and Latin, Moral Philosophy, Mathematics, Logic, Natural Philosophy, and Evidences of Christianity. For at least sixty years, little change was made in these courses of study, except by addition of other subjects.

After one year, Jones resigned and went to Bedford County where he married Mary Ann Davis. In 1873 he became president of Waters and Walling College in McMinnville; after three years he was elected to the presidency of Manchester College, which he held for five years. He continued to reside in Manchester until his death in 1898. He is remembered in his later years for his venerable appearance, his long white beard covering his chest and reaching almost to his waist.

Jones was succeeded as president of Burritt by William Davis Carnes. In 1809, young Carnes had come, when only four years old, with his parents from South Carolina to McMinnville, where his father Alexander [7] Carnes engaged in the mercantile business. William Carnes completed his education at East Tennessee College (now the University of Tennessee), where he finished the four years' course in three years. Here he was called "Pop Carnes" as he was already married and had three children. After graduation, he became the principal of the Preparatory Department and continued his studies, receiving the A.M. degree two years later. He then became professor of English Language and Literature in the college. A serious illness caused him to return to his farm in Sequatchie Valley; and after his complete recovery here, he was offered the presidency of Burritt College.

President Carnes introduced two reforms. The first was coeducation, then a novelty against which there was much objection. He met this by building a dormitory for girls as an annex to his residence and by making his daughter Mary head of the Female Department. The other reform was the introduction of scientific physical culture. Both of these are now, a hundred years afterwards, considered necessary in modern education.

The second year Carnes sold his farm and mill, and invested the money in building brick dormitories for the

growing student body, who came during his presidency from all the Southern states except Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, older States which had good colleges. His greatest problem was drunkenness, for which many students were expelled. Finally Carnes went to Nashville and with the assistance of organized temperance forces he secured the enactment of a law by the legislature prohibiting the sale of intoxicants within four miles of a chartered institution of learning except in incorporated towns and cities. This aroused a great deal of feeling against him. One of the distilleries in the vicinity of Spencer is said to have been owned by a preacher. Carnes' home, including the girls' dormitory, was burned. At this time he was invited by the board of trustees of East Tennessee University to become president of that institution. They assured him that a gymnasium would be built, that the sentiment in favor of coeducation was growing, and that the municipal government of Knoxville would prevent the sale of liquor to students. He accordingly accepted the invitation, and resigned the [8] presidency of Burritt College, a position he had held for eight years.

Carnes was succeeded by John Powell who continued to be president of Burritt until 1861, when most of the male students left to join the armies in the War between the States. During the war the college premises were used as an encampment for soldiers, and the buildings were greatly abused and damaged, the dormitories being used for stables for horses.

At the close of the war the College was reopened under the presidency of Martin White. He was a relative of the John White for whom White County was named. The family was from Virginia, where Martin White was educated. After three years his health was impaired and his physician advised him to leave the high altitude of Spencer. He was succeeded by John Powell, who became president for a second time. He, in turn, after two years, was followed by Carnes for a second term which lasted for six years.

As president a total of fourteen years of the first twenty-three years of Burritt College's history. Carnes was largely responsible for setting its standards, intellectual, moral, and religious. The school day was a long one, extending from five in the morning to nine in the evening. The schedule required the students to awake and leave their beds at the ringing of the bell at that early hour during all seasons. There was no daylight saving in those days. An hour of study was required before breakfast. The students marched into the chapel at eight o'clock for a short religious service. This was followed by recitations interspersed with study periods until about four o'clock in the afternoon, except for an intermission of an hour and a half for the noon meal and two brief periods for exercise during the morning and afternoon. Two hours of study were required in the evening. All lights were to be extinguished at the ringing of the bell at nine o'clock. There were strict rules and regulations against fighting and carrying deadly weapons; against swearing and the use of obscene language; against gambling, card playing, and other behavior "calculated to corrupt the morals of youth"; against using tobacco and drinking intoxicating liquor. There were many other rules regulating the relationship between the [9] male and female students, behavior on Sunday, the care of College property, and the avoidance of indebtedness.

Life at Burritt was somewhat austere and simple but it was on a very high intellectual and religious plane,—a good example of the ideal of "the Attic soul in a Spartan mould," a combination of what was best in the two somewhat contrasting Spartan and Athenian cultures of ancient Greece. The most important extracurricular activity centered around the two literary societies, Philomatheian and Calliopean, founded early in the history of the College. They afforded the students opportunities for development in written and oral expression. Many later eloquent and effective public speakers thus secured their first experience and training. The programs of these societies were composed of recitations, orations, and debates. Girls were admitted to membership in 1884, and it then became apparent that they were a healthful factor in the social as well as intellectual development of these organizations. Later in the new college building each society was given a special room for its meetings and for housing its library, each having as many as 800 volumes by 1895. The College curriculum also provided for weekly exercises in public speaking on Friday afternoons, and in later years introduced a department of elocution, or expression as it was also called.

When Carnes retired from the presidency in 1878 at the age of 78, he was succeeded by Dr. T. W. Brents. Like Elihu Burritt, Brents when a young man became a blacksmith by trade and developed a robust, powerful physique. He later studied medicine, and taught anatomy and surgery in Macon Medical College in Georgia previous to the War between the States. Then he returned to Tennessee where he divided his time between the practice of medicine and preaching and the mercantile business. During his four years as president of Burritt he completed the raising of money for the construction of a new three-story building. This was a large, commodious, elegant building which stood for twenty-eight years until it was destroyed by fire in 1906. After rendering this great service to Burritt, Dr. Brents retired from the presidency to devote himself to writing [10] and preaching, becoming widely known as the author of *The Gospel Plan of Salvation* and as a very successful debater who exposed scriptural error with merciless logic. I recall hearing him preach at Spencer only once, when I was impressed with his scholarship and forceful delivery, his dignity, and his long beard which gave him a patriarchal appearance.

Dr. Brents was followed, in turn, by A. T. Seitz, A. G. Thomas, and W. H. Sutton, who served as president for four, one and two years respectively. Seitz, a native of Warren County and a lawyer by profession, was baptized into the church by President Carnes. After leaving Burritt, Seitz went to Italy, Texas where he established a successful school and also devoted himself to preaching. Thomas came from Georgia and brought his faculty with him. He was unsuccessful, the student body of seventy being reduced to thirty-five by the middle of the fall term. One of his students characterized him and his faculty as being "kid glove." William Howard Sutton had been a student at the College of Manchester, Tennessee, while Carnes was its president just prior to his return to the presidency of Burritt. He then had studied in the Business Department of Cumberland University and had later taught there and in Bryant and Stratton's Business College in Nashville. Before becoming president of Burritt, he had been a professor in that institution for six years. He resigned the presidency after two years to devote his life to preaching, in which he was eminently successful. As H. Leo Boles has written, "Every one who knew him called him 'Brother Sutton.' He had a kind word for everybody and his friends were numbered by his

acquaintances. For the length of time that he lived, labored, and loved, possibly no other man ever did more good than did Brother Sutton. Many who were blessed by this good man are still living and cherish sacred memories of him." As one who was "blessed by this good man" through whose preaching I became a member of the Church of Christ, I wish to pay tribute to his warm friendliness, his spontaneous humor, his earnest eloquence, and his practical Christianity.

In 1890, William Newton Billingsley became president of Burritt College, where he had graduated in [11] 1873. Never were the man and the position better suited for each other. Since his graduation at Burritt, he had taught at Eaton Institute and Onward Seminary in White County, whose Superintendent of Public Instruction he had been for four years. President Billingsley was an excellent scholar and an extraordinarily skillful teacher, also a careful administrator and disciplinarian. He was an eloquent and effective lecturer and preacher. He taught his students much more than the subject matter in the textbooks and the courses of study. He taught them by precept and example the fundamental moral and religious principles of right living and honest thinking—the best preparation that young people can have for the battle of life. I owe to him as teacher and friend a debt of gratitude for knowledge and inspiration which for many years I have attempted to repay by trying to pass on to others the lessons I learned from him,—the kind of repayment which would be most pleasing and satisfying to such a man.

The period of the twenty-one years of Billingsley's presidency was the most noteworthy during the history of the College. Upon the solid foundations already laid, he built with a sure hand a beautiful and imposing superstructure. For many years I have preserved a copy of his address to the graduating class of Burritt on May 22, 1903, of which I was a member. It is entitled, "No Excellence without Great Labor," a theme on which he often spoke, as it was the keystone in the arch of his philosophy of education and of life. May I quote the concluding paragraph as an example of his eloquent, sincere, and inspiring leadership?

"You have all heard," he declared, "the story of the stone-cutter in a strange city who had no greater ambition than to earn a humble living for his dear ones. This was his joy, his life. Faithfully and conscientiously he does his allotted work with patience and care. Today he carves a leaf, the next a flower, hour by hour bringing some new beauty out of the rough stone or marble before him, not knowing what was to be its use. One day, however, when walking quietly along the street, he came to a large building of stone rising loftily and grandly [12] above its surroundings. He stopped to admire it and, on drawing nearer, recognized his own work. All unconsciously he had helped to rear a monument that would be as lasting as time, that would be an example and joy in ages to come. So it is with our lives; if we are engaged in honest work, we shall go on from day to day, all unconscious of the monuments which we are building, the fabrics which we are weaving. The day may often close and leave us discouraged and dissatisfied, feeling that little, if any, good has been accomplished; but let us remember that, if we have worked faithfully and honestly, in the fabric we have woven there will be many bright shining threads—threads of gold and silver, mingled, they may be, with the darker ones of sorrow, disappointment, and failure, yet all so interwoven as to form a pattern of grace and beauty. In cheerfully, patiently doing what our hands find to do with Christ for our foundation, we can build monuments of worth,—yea, of eternal glory."

How often did we hear Professor Billingsley, as we called him, declare, "There is no royal road to learning" and "Knowledge is power" and quote these inspiring lines by Longfellow:

"The heights by great men reached and
kept
Were not attained by sudden flight;
But they while their companions slept
Were toiling upward in the night."

In March, 1906, Burritt College suffered a great disaster when the main building was destroyed by fire. But through the energetic leadership of President Billingsley money was raised for the reconstruction of the building. After being closed only one term, the College continued its useful educational service. Burritt, Phoenix-like, had risen from its ashes.

Billingsley by this time had become an important figure in education in Tennessee, having served as President of the State Association of Public School Officers, and of the State Teachers' Association as well as a member of the State Textbook Commission and of the State Board of Education. In 1911 he was, accordingly, invited to join the faculty of the Middle Tennessee State Normal School at Murfreesboro.

Unfortunately death came to him the following year just after he had entered into this broad field of [13] usefulness. I remember, with what a feeling of personal loss, I read the news of his death which reached me some weeks afterwards in Constantinople, Turkey, where I was then a teacher.

"There has not lived another man in this portion of the State in the last forty years," declared the Sparta *Expositor*, "whose influence has been more widespread and powerful for good than was his. Earnest, honest, modest, clean, wholesome, highminded, honorable, tireless, and unceasing in the discharge of his duty, a well grounded scholar, a wise counsellor and true friend, he has inspired thousands of young men and women to lead the life that is worth while."

The last three presidents of Burritt College were W. S. Graves, serving twice, H. B. Walker, and H. E. Scott. For several years the College continued to prosper. President Billingsley bequeathed the most of his estate as an endowment for the benefit of Burritt College and the Church of Christ in Spencer and for the preaching of the Gospel in backward communities. A new dormitory, called Billingsley Hall, was erected and also a gymnasium. But certain developments in education began to make it difficult for Burritt to make progress. The first was the establishment of county high schools throughout the State, with free tuition, which took away a large number of

students from the Preparatory Department of the College. The second adverse development was the increase in the facilities of the University of Tennessee and the establishment of State Normal Schools and other state schools on the college level. Burrirt could not successfully compete with such institutions in which tuition was free. As a private school Burrirt could have survived only with a large endowment, and that was not to be secured. No Vanderbilt, Duke, or Peabody came to the rescue of Burrirt.

The scientific age, then far advanced, and the growing emphasis on athletics demanded laboratory equipment and gymnasiums and fieldhouses which cost much money. The old claim that a log with Mark Hopkins sitting on one end with a student on the other constituted a college was long out of date. Under such conditions it was only a question of time until Burrirt ceased to function in the form in which it had had a remarkable [14] influence for good for nearly one hundred years.

We have all watched the deterioration, decay, and death of our beloved institution with painful forebodings but without power to help. God grant that the College is not actually dead but only sleeping, and that we may hear soon of its awaking to a new life as fruitful of good as it was in the past.

Joseph Conrad declared, "The dead can live only with the exact intensity and quality of the life imparted to them by the living." The truth of this, as applied to man, is open to serious doubt, but it is applicable to institutions like Burrirt. Our College can never really die as long as there are those who love it and who live by the high intellectual, moral, and religious principles learned within its walls. Burrirt College lives in the influence still alive in the hearts and minds, and spirits of its alumni scattered far and wide.

That we still love the old College is evident by our presence here on this historic occasion. We are here to drink from a kind of Ponce de Leon "Fountain of Youth." We would not drink, as did the characters in Hawthorne's "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," of a magic elixir that would make us physically children again "just for tonight." But we may be restored imaginatively to that golden youthful period of life, and the imagination works more easily and effectively in the physical surroundings of our youth.

I question the truth of Robert Browning's lines in "Rabbi Ben Ezra,"

"Grow old along with me;
The best of life is yet to be."

As I grow older, this seems to me like the whistling in the dark I used to try when passing a country churchyard to keep my courage up. No, from my vantage point, I hold rather with Wordsworth who declared in *The Prelude* with regard to his youth:

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding
ways
Of custom, law, and statute took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!" [15]

Ah, yes, "to be young was very Heaven!" As we look upon these scenes of our early recollection, we are "softened and subdued into a sweet, pensive sorrow, which only the happiest and holiest associations of bygone years can call into being." These last words are from the lecture on "Visions and Dreams" by the eloquent, tender-hearted Bob Taylor. "O beautiful isle of memory," he continued, "lighted by the morning star of life, where the roses bloom by the door, where the robins sing among the apple blossoms, where bright waters ripple in eternal melody! There are echoes of songs that are sung no more, tender words spoken by lips that are dust, blessings from hearts that are still!"

I hesitate to break the charm cast over us by such a beautiful expression of truth and feeling. But I must end our imaginative rejuvenation and backward turning to the days of our youth at this dear College. In conclusion, may I quote the closing paragraph of President Billingsley's address to the graduating class on May 19, 1911, the last speech of this kind he delivered at Burrirt. May it be a benediction to us as we return to our homes and the duties of life, which we have laid aside, for a time.

"I desire to speak a word of congratulations to you," he declared, "for your success in completing the prescribed course of instruction in this institution with so much honor to yourselves and pleasure to your instructors. Right nobly have you performed your parts, and the impressions you have made upon us will not be forgotten.

'The echoes roll from soul to soul,
And are not lost forever.'

"Scattered though you may soon be from the Atlantic to the Pacific, whether in the remotest West, where the weary sun sinks nightly to his ocean bed, or in the golden East, where the gates of the morning unbar [16] their shining folds to let in the day god's flashing beams, wherever you may be, let the thought of the love of Burrirt College cheer and comfort you and be an inspiration to you to always be the noblest and do your best."

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