THE REVIEW
NORTH ADAMS STATE COLLEGE
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Editorial & Design
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Up Front
3 Item!
10 Short Takes
12 Sports

Alumni Notes
28 News
28 Oldest Alumna: Mary O'Hern
29 Weddings and Births
30 What North Adams Meant for Joseph Fortier
32 Claire Dignan's Guatemalan Experience
33 In Memorium

Features
14 A Century of North Adams History

Faculty Profiles
22 Life of a Botanist: Barre Hellquist
24 Making a Difference: Roselle Chartock
27 Intellectual Activism: Susan Coutin
THEN AS NOW:
LOOKING
TOWARD THE
FUTURE

The North Adams State College of the 1990s is the product of the dedicated efforts of earlier generations to continually expand the school's mission and services to meet the demands of a changing world.

Life has changed dramatically since the 1890s. So has North Adams State College. When North Adams State Normal School opened in 1897, it was a tiny campus with two buildings and 34 students. The school's mission was very specific: train teachers, especially for remote one-room schoolhouses and other public schools in western Massachusetts.

Today, NASC is a modern educational complex with over 20 modern buildings and a geographically diverse student body of 1600. It has grown to become a multi-faceted comprehensive College offering liberal arts and professional education in many different fields.

Just as the original campus still symbolically stands at the College's entrance today, however, the current drive to move NASC to the forefront of higher education has many parallels in the past.

The NASC of the 1990s is the product of the dedicated efforts of earlier generations to...
A science classroom (above) at the State Normal School in 1920 included glass cases of preserved insects and instructional charts on the walls.

An English class (right) at the Normal School with 24 teachers-to-be.
continually expand the school's mission and services to meet the demands of a changing world. That has been a recurring theme throughout NASC's history.

EARLY YEARS

In 1838, the Massachusetts legislature accepted Boston businessman Edmund Dwight's offer to contribute $10,000 to fund training schools for public school teachers if the state would match his gift. This led to the creation of a system of "normal schools" around the state.

By the 1890s it was decided to add four more normal schools to this system, including one in western Massachusetts. North Adams decided to seek this prize. Several communities, including Pittsfield and Greenfield, were also being considered.

North Adams campaigned hard to be selected. In a booklet called "Reasons Why," the community forcefully stated the case that a normal school was most needed in the northwest section of the state, which was furthest away from the existing normal schools. The community also offered a site and brand new building worth $50,000 for the school.

The campaign was successful, and the legislature passed an act on June 6, 1894, establishing North Adams State Normal School along with three others in different sections of the state. The first task was to construct the original two buildings for the new school: College Hall (now Murdock Hall) and the Principal's House (Smith House).

In 1896, Frank Fuller Murdock, who had been on the faculty of Bridgewater Normal School, was given the job of guiding the new North Adams school as its first president (then called principal). With the basic elements now in place, North Adams Normal School opened on Feb 1, 1897.

The normal school contracted with the community of North Adams to operate the adjacent public school, Mark Hopkins School (originally the Church St. School), where local young people would be taught by a staff of demonstration teachers and normal school trainees.

The first graduation at North Adams Normal School was held in 1899; 53 students received diplomas. The Alumni Association was formed that same year.

The traditions of student life were also taking shape in the early years. Although males were always accepted at the school—the vast majority of students in the early decades were women. The first class had 32 female and two male students. The first campus dormitory building, Taconic Hall (which has since been torn down), was completed in 1902. Students organized a dormitory student government in 1909.

Bells guided the lives of students. They signaled classes, meals and other daily routines. The campus included a tunnel from the dorm, which allowed students to walk to other buildings protected from the harsher side of Berkshire weather.

The job of North Adams Normal School was to train teachers—the school's 1900 annual report noted that all of the school's graduates that year had secured teaching positions.
Tuition was free to students who promised to teach in Massachusetts public schools. For others, it was $30 a year.

The importance of providing a broadly based education was recognized from the beginning. Early catalogues of the North Adams Normal School reflected this policy, stating that its primary mission was "...to change the student's point of view from that of pupil to that of teacher, to inspire him with the spirit of the true teacher, to train him in the noblest ideals and the best habits of personality, thinking, teaching and social service."

There were also pragmatic reasons for the school's emphasis on providing a wide-ranging education. Many normal school graduates would be running isolated one-room schools in rural western Massachusetts, so they had to be equipped with the skills to lead rigorous, self-sufficient lives, as well as to teach their own pupils, which translated into a curriculum combining academics and classroom training with a variety of specific practical skills—from housekeeping to blacksmithing.

Required courses in the early core program included pedagogy, psychology, geography, natural science, math, music, drawing, painting, English, physical expression and culture, elocution, household arts, and manual training.

To provide experience in the one-room school environment, outlying rural training schools were established: Briggsville School in Clarksburg and Broad Brook School in Williamstown in 1907, and Bishop Rural School in Clarksburg in 1913.

The combination of academics and other training enlivened life at the school in many ways. Because of the connection with Mark Hopkins School, studies and other facets of campus life often overlapped. Gardening, for example, was added to the elementary curriculum at Mark Hopkins School in 1903. A former dumpsite on the normal school campus was reclaimed and cultivated as a small garden plot by students and teachers. The garden continued to grow, and by 1917, three acres of the 4-1/2 acre North Adams campus had been transformed into a garden.

The arts and culture also bloomed at the normal school. A campus Glee Club was organized in 1898; the school's theatrical tradition started in 1905 with a drama program and entered a new era with the founding of a dramatic club in 1927. Normal school students and faculty often held plays and pageants, in which pupils at Mark Hopkins School also participated.

The drive to extend the school's services beyond the campus and the core of full-time students also started early.

To provide additional professional training for current teachers, a winter vacation short course was added in 1900; correspondence courses were initiated in 1911; a one-week summer program was launched in 1912, which became a full summer session in 1922.

The relationship between the normal school and the surrounding community also grew. In 1914, the school offered a sewing course for women of North Adams and opened the school's gymnasium to local residents.

Although the normal school did not originally grant college-level degrees (which were not then required for teaching) the seeds of the expansion to higher levels of education were also planted early. The original two-year core curriculum was augmented by a three-year program.

THE REVIEW 17
President Murdock retired in 1921 and was succeeded by Roy Leon Smith, who had joined the faculty at the school in 1912.

By 1929, the school's enrollment had reached a peak in its early history with 146 students and 12 teachers, and the total number of graduates since North Adams Normal School's founding had reached 1,677.

DEPRESSION YEARS

During the 1930s, the school was moving forward academically to a new level. The pressures of the Depression, however, threatened its existence. Many students also were experiencing the pressures of the Depression, and President Smith worked hard to find employment for them so they could continue their studies.

President Smith died after a stroke in 1932 and was succeeded by faculty member Albert Gould Eldridge, who continued President Smith's work of trying to find employment for the students.

Also in 1932, the legislature elevated the state's normal schools to the status of four-year colleges. North Adams awarded its first bachelor of science degree in education in 1934.

Reflecting its new role, North Adams Normal School was given a new name: State Teachers College at North Adams.

While the role of normal schools was being elevated, however, the future of the North Adams campus was becoming more uncertain. Early in the decade, a statewide teacher surplus and the financial strain of the Depression prompted Governor Joseph Ely and others in Boston to propose closing the remote school.

The College and community mobilized to fight this proposal, and in 1933 a delegation of 125 people from the school and community traveled to Boston to lobby legislators. They argued that, despite its small enrollment, State Teachers College at North Adams had the highest percentage of teacher placements in the system. The legislators agreed to keep the College open and to spread the cutbacks evenly among all of the state teachers colleges instead.

President Eldridge, who suffered from poor health, died in 1936 at age 52.

In 1937, Grover Chester Bowman, who had been superintendent of the North Adams public school system since 1922, became the College's new president. He was a leader in the local community and was highly regarded among educators. During his tenure, State Teachers College at North Adams became one of the few state teachers colleges to be accredited by the New England School and College Association.

President Bowman pushed to bolster the liberal arts side of the College. He believed strongly that the College should give students the base of a "general cultural education" in addition to professional teacher training. He initiated courses in classical literature and philosophy and made it clear that he expected students to attend them.

In a precursor of the later community-college movement, Bowman also believed State Teachers College at North Adams should offer local residents the opportunity to take basic college-level courses as preparation for advanced college studies. Nevertheless, the role of teacher education remained a priority.

Pagents provided some of the lighter moments for North Adams students throughout the school's early history.
In 1937, graduate courses for a master's in education were added, and in 1946 President Bowman established a summer school at Pittsfield High, which offered a variety of advanced professional-development courses for current teachers.

Campus life was given a new dimension in 1937, when a program to recruit more male students was launched. While this transformation into a co-educational institution started gradually (and was slowed by World War II), it had obvious effects on social life and other aspects of the College. The first move toward men's sports was made in 1938, when a men's basketball program was organized, followed by the Men's Athletic Association in 1939.

As World War II loomed on the horizon, however, the idea of closing the College resurfaced in Boston in 1939. Once again the school's supporters rallied. Among other activities, a bus caravan was organized to take supporters to Beacon Hill to show support for the College. Their efforts again won a reprieve for the school.

POSTWAR PLANS
As the nation geared up with the return of soldiers from World War II, education ascended on the nation's agenda.

By the 1940s, refurbishing the worn, old North Adams campus—which had not been enlarged or significantly upgraded in decades—had become a priority, an effort that eventually mushroomed into a major push to renovate the College's existing facilities, enlarge the campus and add new buildings.

The first tangible step was taken in 1951, with an allocation of $252,500 for renovation of existing buildings. That year, President Bowman announced an ambitious ten-year building plan, and the state Education Department called for a new $1 million science building.

These initiatives established the basis for the College's physical transformation over the next 30 years—from an antiquated three-building campus into today's modern, 21-building educational complex.

In the early 1950s, however, the school once again had to steer a course between the momentum of growth and the possibility of elimination, with new periodic calls in Boston for its closing. There was also talk of other ideas, such as moving the school to Pittsfield to be absorbed into the new Berkshire Community College.

But college leaders, Berkshire politicians, and community supporters continued to successfully defend the school, and by the late 1950s its future was on firm footing. Among its more ardent and politically powerful supporters was then State Senator Silvio O. Conte from Pittsfield, who promised an Adams audience in 1953 that as long as he had any influence, the College "will never be closed."
President Bowman retired in 1954 and was succeeded by Eugene L. Freeh, a former lawyer who had become a member of the psychology faculty at North Adams State in 1949.

The momentum of growth began to gain speed up in the mid-1950s. In 1955, the College had 167 students, 15 faculty members and four administrators. By 1966, there were over 600 students, a faculty of 32, and 10 administrators. (The school reached the position of having its first waiting list of would-be students in 1958.)

During President Freeh’s tenure the foundation was laid for the College’s subsequent surge of construction—the school received approximately $9 million for renovations, new construction and land. A major breakthrough occurred in 1957 when Senator Conte and Representative Roger A. Sala of North Adams, secured $1.5 million for the long-awaited new science building, which included a gymnasium and auditorium. Ground was broken for Venable Hall in 1958, and it was dedicated in 1960.

The stage was also being set for the school’s transformation into a multifaceted liberal arts college. In 1955 the school only offered bachelor’s and masters degrees in education.

A symbolic step was taken in 1960 when the name State Teachers College at North Adams was changed to the broader State College at North Adams. In 1965 the Massachusetts Board of Trustees of State Colleges gave state colleges the authority to grant degrees in non-education fields.

The first bachelor of arts degree was awarded at the College in 1966, as was the first bachelor of science degree in a non-education profession: medical technology. BA, BS and MS degrees were now available in nine majors.

President Freeh retired in 1966 and was succeeded by Andrew S. Flagg, who had attended State Teachers College at North Adams to study for a master’s in education in the 1930s and remained with the school for most of his career. He was a popular artist and instructor and eventually became dean of students and dean of men. He served as president for four years.

During this time, a newly reorganized state board of trustees was putting plans in place to further enlarge the scope of the state colleges. President Flagg drew up a ten-year plan for the trustees in 1967. Although the plan’s specifics did not match precisely later realities, it reflected closely the scope of ambitions for the College at that time. It outlined a vision of State College at North Adams as a comprehensive, liberal arts college, with 60 percent of its students enrolled in non-teaching professions and an enrollment of 2,500 students by 1987.

The goal was to make the school a “round-the-year and almost around-the-clock college,” and a “compact, high-rise campus,” President Flagg told the Berkshire Eagle.

Meanwhile, the long-planned building boom on campus was moving into the bricks-and-mortar stage. Hoosac Hall, a new eight-story women’s dormitory—then the tallest building in Berkshire County—was completed in 1968. Construction was beginning on other new structures, including the library, classrooms, and administration buildings.

Student life, meanwhile, was affected by a drastic swing in the nation’s mood in the 1960s. Young people across the country turned to activism and protest, long hair, and the lifestyle of the counterculture.

This ferment brought a rise in political awareness and activism to the NASC community, and the feistiness of the times could be felt on campus, along with the new lifestyles and values. There were episodes of protest, such as a campaign to relax the College’s dress code and a vigil following the killings at Kent State University in Ohio. But, as the student newspaper The Seed noted in 1970, the College did not experience the same level of confrontation and turmoil that had swept other college campuses.

James T. Amsler was appointed president
of North Adams State in 1969. He had been a member of the faculty at Salem State College and an official with the state college system before coming to North Adams. By then, the seeds planted earlier were sprouting prolifically.

In 1970 Bowman, Freel and Eldridge halls were opened in a joint dedication ceremony. The Berkshire Towers dorms were opened in 1973. Ground was broken in 1971 for the new Campus Center, which opened in 1975.

The building expansion was paralleled by the school's academic expansion, as an array of new programs and subjects were added and existing ones bolstered, which included a program that would quickly assume a major role in the school's emerging new identity: In 1972, the first bachelor's degree in business administration was awarded.

The rapid pace of growth and diversity in academic programs at NASC were vividly illustrated by the changes in the degrees awarded in 1968 and in 1977.

In 1968, a total of 159 degrees were awarded. Of those, 48 were BS degrees in education, and 30 were master's in education. The balance of bachelor degrees included: 2 in medical technology, 9 in biology, 4 in chemistry, 13 in English, 30 in history, and 14 in mathematics.

The College's administration and management structure became more formalized during the 1970s, reflecting the growth of the College and the complexities of modern life. Academic departments replaced the old divisions, and a collective-bargaining process for contracts was initiated.

The nationwide social turmoil subsided in the 1970s. One effect, however—the back-to-the-land movement—was reflected in a program founded at NASC in the 1970s: the Center for Resourceful Living, a farm in Clarksburg where students learned sustainable agriculture and other environmentally oriented skills. The Center harkened back to the school's earliest emphasis on agrarian self-reliance, but did not survive past the early 1980s.

President Amsler left in 1979 to accept the presidency at Salem State College. By that year, the student body had grown to 2200, and ten new buildings had been added to the campus during the previous ten years.

College Presidents William P. Haas (1979–1983) and Catherine Tisinger (1984–1991) helped guide the College through the boom-and-bust cycle of the '80s. They strengthened the College's position as an institute of higher public education, and Tisinger placed a major emphasis on putting the College in the forefront of economic revitalization efforts in the northern Berkshires.

Once again, however, the College was confronted with rumors and discussions from Boston that North Adams State College might be closed as part of the state's drastic budget cuts. Although it survived the state's budgetary axe, the College's budget was drastically cut.

The arrival of President Thomas D. Aceto, formerly vice president of the University of Maine, helped inject a new sense of energy to the campus. Initiating efforts to further diversify the campus, raise academic standards and broaden the College's mission as a public liberal arts college, Aceto is laying the groundwork for the college as it enters its second century.