

# **First Blackburn College Commencement Was Held 150 Years Ago On June 9**

by Tom Emery  
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CARLINVILLE - Though this year's Commencement was altered by the COVID-19 crisis, the ceremony is usually a visual spectacle on the Blackburn campus. The first Commencement, though, was quite different from those of today.

June 9 marks the 150th anniversary of the first graduation ceremony in Blackburn history, held at the still-unfinished Macoupin County courthouse on that date in 1870. The exercise not only marked the end of the college careers of the first Blackburn graduates, but was also a watershed in the tumultuous early history of the school.

Though Blackburn was officially founded in 1837, financial and legal woes plagued the first years of the institution, and classes were not offered until 1858. The school was

then briefly closed during the Civil War. As a result, the inaugural Commencement ceremony was not held until 1870, thirty-three years after the College was born.

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Today, the final ceremonies in a Blackburn academic year are mostly condensed into a couple of days, with Baccalaureate on Friday evening and Commencement the next morning, on Saturday. The graduation ceremony normally takes around an hour and a half.

It was a far different story in American education in early eras, even in Carlinville, and the exercise must have been exhausting. The process began with the “examination of class” on Thursday, June 2, which apparently went very well. The Carlinville Democrat reported that “we cannot recall...an examination in which classes acquitted themselves with more credit.”

The next day were the oratorical exercises in the College Chapel, a lengthy event highlighting declamation and elocution, blending public essays and speaking. That preceded the Baccalaureate Ceremony at the courthouse at 2:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoon.

The people of Carlinville joined the events, which were conducted in front of sizable crowds. The Democrat praised nearly every aspect of the Baccalaureate, except for one unfortunate episode. The paper derided the “frequent interruptions from some acrobatic individual, who endeavored to frighten our good citizens by his exhibitions in the dome. For this little pleasantry, he was lodged in the calaboose. Serves him right.”

Wednesday was Class Day, an annual event at Blackburn for decades, “devoted to exercises by the Senior Class.” The proceeding was held in the College Chapel, and “consisted of orations” that took plenty of time. First on the docket was something called “Our City Foxes,” followed by the “History of the Class” by Harlan Carson, one of

Then came the lecture “Prophecy,” which was followed by a poem, then an oration called “Old Age” by William Minton, another graduate. As if that was not enough, a lecture was held at the courtroom that evening.

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Finally, Commencement arrived the next day, described by the Democrat as “the great event in College life.” It opened with a “student dress parade,” and the Democrat was ready with maudlin praise, writing that “the town was never so neat and beautiful, its

daughters never so winning, its citizens never so cordial and genial as when this lovely, leafy month of June, with its blue sky, its bright stars, and rose-scented zephyrs, ushered in the festivities.”

The passage was long, but the class was small. Six men and one woman received degrees, but there was plenty to keep them busy. Each had to deliver a lengthy oration, and the Democrat took it upon itself to offer constructive criticism.

Carson’s lecture, “Monuments,” was noted by the paper for its “delivery (which) is somewhat defective,” while Duncan McMillan “probably spoke too rapidly” during his oration, “The Actual and the Possible.” McMillan, however, apparently had little problem with that in his career, as he became a foremost member of the clergy.

In a time before movements for equality, the female graduate, Orlena Dawes, was something of a curiosity to the Democrat, which wrote, “the appearance of a lady as a candidate for graduating honors was ‘something new under the sun.’” However, the “fair essayist,” as the Democrat called Dawes, provided a lecture “replete with gems of thought” and a “clear, cutting quality that enables one to be heard over a large audience.”

Music and prayers were sprinkled throughout the ceremony, like most other occasions during the week. In all, the Democrat termed Commencement “a grand success.”

But the graduates were still not finished. That evening, the faculty and trustees threw a “grand reception” for the graduates and their family and friends. The Democrat reported, in the most flowery sense, that the College Chapel became “the social Pantheon for the evening, wherein the stars and satellites of our city society gathered to honor the lions, otherwise gods, of Blackburn.”

Guests were received at the reception until 9 p.m. At 9:30, Professor John Bailey, who would ascend to the College Presidency the next year, addressed the gathering. That was followed by a talk from John M. Palmer, a Carlinville product and the sitting governor of Illinois, who was a Blackburn trustee from 1857-98.

More lectures followed, including a return to the podium from Bailey. Finally, the Democrat reported that, at “12 o’clock (midnight), whether from...enjoyment, fatigue, or fear that the moon would be the first to retire, members left.” After that kind of a day and week, it would seem that “fatigue” was the obvious reason.

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