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Amazing Grace: Reflections on the John Allen Legacy

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Reflections on the John Allen legacy

BY JIM SCHNUR

GRACE ALLEN REMEMBERS it all. Like it was yesterday. A warm summer day in 1957. Riding in a car down a narrow, two-lane, dirt road known as Fowler Avenue. Her husband, John Allen, was driving. He had just been selected as the new president of the University of South Florida.

"People said we must want to be missionaries," Allen recalls. "Of course there was nothing on the land...the ruts were so deep we didn't stop for fear we'd be mired in the sand. And when we got out here, he waved his hand in the general direction of the campus and he said, 'This is it.' And he always claimed that I said, 'Is that what we're coming here for? It just seemed to me that it was a wilderness for a long time. Until Mr. Hamilton, who was a campus planner, came down from the University of Florida, and one evening he set up an easel in our room in the hotel and there he sketched, in blue and yellow and green and so on, the campus. Then all of a sudden the whole thing came to life. I realized we were dealing with something that was really alive."

It was only a month earlier that the Cabinet and the Board of Education chose this 1,700-acre scrub area in Temple Terrace, the former site of Henderson Air Field, as the location of Florida's first metropolitan university. During the spring of 1957, lawmakers allocated $8.6 million for site preparation and construction. The University of South Florida was the first university of its kind to be conceived, designed and constructed from scratch in the 20th century.

A false start

This was not the first time state officials had approved an institution with this name. The University of South Florida almost became a medical school in Miami. In June 1943, state Senator Amos Lewis of Marianna proposed a $2-million appropriation to create a medical, pharmaceutical and dental school to be called The University of South Florida in the Miami area, primarily for doctors who sought to eradicate tropical diseases.

Legislators mandated that this proposed USF serve a coeducational population, a highly progressive idea for its day. At that time, the three existing Florida state universities—University of Florida (UF); Florida State College for Women, the forerunner of today's Florida State University (FSU); and the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College (FAMU)—were segregated by gender or race.

The governance structure for higher education differed greatly from today. An aptly named Board of Control supervised activities at UF, the State College and Florida A & M, as well as the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind (in St. Augustine). Interestingly, this administrative body also doubled as the State Plant Board. Critics of the Board noted that its members often spent as much time debating fire ants as they did discussing the needs of overcrowded schools. The Board of Control was replaced by the Board of Regents during the mid-1960s, a time when reapportionment, constitutional revision and other legislative reforms reshaped higher education and life in Florida.

So, what happened to this first University of South Florida? Although lawmakers approved Lewis's bill to create this medical school, allocations fell apart in the face of World War II. By war's end, this early "University of South Florida" remained nothing more than an annotation in a dusty law book.

A road less taken

The postwar era brought dramatic changes to higher education. The G.I. Bill of Rights had opened doors of higher education to veterans and their families throughout the nation. Florida's population soared. Newcomers migrated to urban areas in central and southern Florida. Schools located in Gainesville (UF) and Tallahassee (FAMU and FSU) could not adequately serve the bustling peninsular population. Recognizing this problem, the 1953 legislature made...
provision for a comprehensive study of Florida's post-secondary educational system.

During this time, U.S. Congressman Sam Gibbons and Representative James Moody (of Plant City) developed a proposal for a new public university in Hillsborough County. Delegates in Pinellas County lobbied for a new university to be placed in Oldsmar, or at the former U.S. Maritime Service Base along Bayboro Harbor. State officials sided with the Hillsborough delegation. In June 1955, Governor LeRoy Collins signed House Bill 1007 to establish a university in Hillsborough County.

But where would the school be located? Some officials proposed the University of Tampa as the site. The plan to purchase UT failed in March 1956 after that school's Board of Governors refused to sell and state officials realized that the UT campus could not readily accommodate future expansion.

**Getting started**

At their June 27, 1957 meeting in Jacksonville, members of the Board of Control selected John S. Allen as USF's first president. An astronomer and academician, Allen had previously taught at Colgate University and had served as director of New York state's Division of Higher Education and as vice president of the University of Florida.

"When talk was going around that there was to be another university, some men of the Board of Control came up to John and said save yourself for this job. At that time we were considering three other offers. I don't suppose there would have been anyone who would have had a broader background than John," says Allen, remembering her late husband. "Because he had taught, he had been a dean, he had done research and then at the time of the war he was interested in getting the colleges started for veterans returning. And then he had 10 years experience at Florida. And worked with the Board of Control. So he was well prepared."

**From sand dunes to classrooms**

Allen welcomed the challenge. In the summer of 1957, shortly after assuming the presidency, Allen described his vision for the new institution to an enthusiastic audience. "We have an opportunity to start something new and great here," he said. "There are no fences, no boundaries holding us and limiting our search for knowledge or our methods of teaching knowledge." Allen had his work cut out for him: In 1957, he told one reporter that the weeds, scrub oak and swampland he inherited were better fit for ants and alligators than for students and faculty.

"When he first came, he was invited to every civic club and organization to speak because people were anxious to know about the university," Allen says. "And he would tell them in 10 years this place was going to be over 10,000 students and they would gasp and say, 'Well, you're just dreaming.'"

Allen quickly set up shop. He settled into his office at the Hillsborough County Courthouse on August 6 with pencils, a notepad and great hope. On September 1, he hired Elliot Hardaway to serve as head librarian and the university's first professional staff member.

In May 1958, university employees moved from their cramped courthouse office to new headquarters at 349 Plant Avenue. The groundbreaking ceremony took place on September 5, 1958, as Governor LeRoy Collins led a delegation of dignitaries who dug sand at the Temple Terrace site.

During his tenure as Florida's thirty-third governor, Collins championed a number of platforms that benefitted higher education in general, and the University of South Florida in particular. After retiring from political life in 1968, Collins donated his political papers to the USF Library.

"Governor Collins had a very intense interest in the university," says Allen. "He caught the vision of what could be here. He agreed, for instance, on the name the University of South Florida. We were anxious to have a name to indicate we were a true university. That we were not just a liberal arts college. So Governor Collins agreed to that. And the color of the buildings. It was decided we should have buildings that would look like south Florida. I remember one member of the Board of Control said, 'Oh no, you can't have a university without red bricks.' And Collins said, 'Oh no, we aren't going to have that. We're going to make it look Southern.' He and John got along just beautifully. They seemed to understand each other."

In the summer and fall of 1959, Allen recruited faculty from throughout the United States. Nearly all charter faculty members were young and held doctoral degrees. Their average age was 39.
A cool school

In September 1959, USF received permission from the state Capitol to become Florida's first fully air-conditioned university. This led to protests by UF and FSU students, many of whom resided in sweltering dorms that were cooled only by squeaky fans. Indeed, even as the Board of Control approved air conditioning in the new USF dormitories, it made no provision for air conditioning at a new dorm planned for the University of Florida. To pacify frugal lawmakers, Allen assured state officials that air-conditioned dorms would reduce the need for lounge and study space since the students could learn in their comfortable, climate-controlled rooms. By late September, USF accepted applications for its charter class. Barbara Holley Campbell became the first student accepted at the university. Within a year nearly 2,000 others would follow. On April 26, 1960, university officials moved their operations to the Temple Terrace site, then a handful of buildings amidst ever-shifting sand dunes and ever-present sand spurs. Although classes did not officially begin until the fall semester, more than 75 students took advantage of two education courses during the summer, becoming the first students who earned college credit toward their USF degrees. On September 1, more than 130 charter faculty reported for orientation sessions. A formal opening convocation followed on September 26, when Governor Collins addressed an audience of nearly 6,000.

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"Governor Collins, of course, spoke at the convocation. For me, the high point was when Governor Collins said 'I now declare the University of South Florida officially open.' And he put the medallion around John's neck and I knew then we were married to USF. What always amazes me is that on opening day, after the convocation, students could go directly to classes. There was a teacher waiting for them. The bookstore was open. Completely staffed. Everything was there. And on the day we said we would open, we opened."

Accent on learning

One of the advantages of building a university from scratch is the freedom from burdensome traditions. Allen and his charter faculty and staff devised the "All-University Approach," a balance between liberal and professional education that sought to extend learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

During the first few years, members of the USF community were encouraged to read "All-University Books" that allowed members of the academy to discuss and share ideas across academic disciplines. USF's size even permitted retreats at Chincoteague, where all of the instructional and administrative faculty could congregate to discuss policy and resolve differences.

"We had no difficulty getting strong faculty. The idea of the university and its newness, the chance to institute new programs. For faculty, there was an amazing esprit d' corps because every single one of these faculty had come from good jobs. They had come from institutions that had a name. And here they were, coming to a place that was brand new, with no reputation. So every man and woman was putting his or her career on the line. And it meant that they had to work very hard to make this thing go. And so they did. They just put forth tremendous effort. As a result, things got off to a very good start. And that continued through the years."

No shorts, no sports

The university's dress code and a lack of intercollegiate athletics created the greatest controversy during the school's first year of operation. Administrators became concerned when students appeared on campus in bermuda shorts and knee-length skirts during the fall of 1960. While cooler weather solved that problem, at least until the following spring, the student body's call for competitive athletics fell upon deaf ears. Though the first "football" game of sorts came to campus in November 1960, it was little more than touch football between a group of freshmen known as the USF "Desert Rats" and fraternity boys from Florida Southern College in Lakeland. The Desert Rats lost the scrimmage by a score of 33 to 20.

In August 1961, Allen reaffirmed his belief that athletics could never come at the expense of academics, when USF indefinitely ruled out intercollegiate football and basketball. While some early campus plans called for an athletic complex and sports stadium near the present site of the colleges of Medicine and Public Health, for the time being, students had to confine their participation to physical education classes and intramurals.

The debate raged throughout John Allen's term as president. As Allen continued to stress intramural activities over intercollegiate sports, student leaders even appealed to members of the Board of Regents to override the president.

The Board and Allen refused to budge. Money was tight. While students clamored for football, Allen had to cope with nearly $200,000 less in library funding and no increases in operating and capital outlay budgets at a time when USF's facilities had to absorb an increased enrollment of 2,000 students. Though USF finally gained admission into the NCAA in mid-1968, its students would have to wait nearly three decades to see their dreams of intercollegiate football realized.

A cock and bull story

Even without a football team, students entered a contest to select a mascot for their young university during the fall of 1962. The two finalists were the "Buccaneer" and the "Golden Brahma." An October tally recognized the Buccaneer as the contest winner. However, some students remained bullish for the bull, prompting one member of the campus community to suggest a facetious compromise: a peg-legged bull with a patch over one eye. Indeed, students on the selection committee changed their minds once again in November when they christened USF as the home of the Golden Brahma.

But their plans for a mascot nearly flew the coop as representatives from the cattle industry immediately told students that they had committed a bovine blunder. Although the word "brahma" may
Breaking barriers

While the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down the so-called “separate but equal” schools in its landmark 1954 "Brown versus the Board of Education" decision, Florida followed other Southern states in maintaining segregated facilities. Ironically, at a time when lawmakers often scaled back university programs in the name of fiscal austerity, they also sanctioned the creation of 12 “Negro” community colleges rather than permit integration. Although African Americans did gain admission to graduate programs in the name of fiscal austerity, they also sanctioned the creation of 12 “Negro” community colleges rather than permit integration. Although African Americans did gain admission to graduate programs at UF by 1960, undergraduate facilities—and nearly all public primary and secondary schools—remained racially segregated into the 1960s.

When Ernest P. Boger Jr. submitted his application to USF in March 1961, the senior from Blake High School in Tampa made history. With nearly perfect scores on his college placement tests, Boger had received scholarship offers from four universities. When he began classes during the fall semester, USF became the first white state university to integrate its facilities at the undergraduate level.

Boger entered USF the same year another African American, James Meredith, faced hostility at the University of Mississippi. Boger attributed his peaceful arrival at USF to the school’s newness. Without any longstanding traditions to challenge, he did not feel that he was breaking any barriers. To Boger, entering USF was not a political statement, but simply a way to take advantage of educational opportunities on his doorstep.

Other African Americans soon followed. In September 1962, Henry Wallace Smith and Verlee Fort, graduates of Gibbs Junior College in St. Petersburg, became the first students to transfer from Florida’s segregated “Negro” junior colleges to a white state university.

The witch hunt

In 1956, lawmakers created the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC). Commonly known as the Johns Committee after namesake member Senator Charley E. Johns, the FLIC attacked organizations it considered subversive, not unlike the McCarthy communist purges of the 1950s. With support from the Board of Control, the FLIC soon began covert investigations of students, faculty and curricula at the state universities.

According to testimony, the committee surmised that USF’s curriculum corrupted students through the use of “trashy and pornographic” works such as The Grapes of Wrath and Brave New World and that some faculty were not qualified to teach because they introduced evolution into their lectures in biology classes.

“A representative of the Johns Committee, I think Senator Johns himself was involved in this, was taking students to a motel on Dale Mabry late at night and asking them all kinds of questions and really frightening them,” recalls Allen. “When we learned that, John decided that he could not do away with a committee that had been established by the Legislature, but he did insist that if they were going to be questioned, they come to the campus and do it in the open. The investigation, of course, went on for days. It was a very uncomfortable time, because they interviewed students and faculty and with all of this they found nothing that was derogatory.”

Growing pains

In January 1964, the Board of Control granted USF permission to offer advanced degrees, beginning with a master’s degree in elementary education. Eight months later, USF witnessed a 30-percent increase in its fall enrollment, as almost 6,000 students attended classes.

New buildings dotted the landscape, as concrete and grass quickly covered the sandy terrain. Structures built during this period included the first Engineering building (at a cost of $2.5 million), the Science Center ($2.5 million), the Social Science building ($2 million), the Education building ($1.5 million), and Business Administration (now the Human Services building, $1.5 million).

On July 1, 1965, USF took control of the old Maritime base at Bayboro Harbor, a site once proposed as its main campus. At first, the St. Petersburg campus offered lower-level courses to accommodate the overflow. By 1968, however, the campus converted into an upper-level institution that served as the prototype for regional campuses throughout the State University System.

Such extensive growth in a short period of time led Allen to describe the university as the “campus where the concrete never sets” in an October 1968 interview.

In December of that year, the Board of Regents set USF’s ideal enrollment at 18,000 students. With Florida’s dramatic growth, the university quickly surpassed those projections. While a 1961 report assumed nearly half of USF’s students would live in dorms, the school was quickly turning into “Drive-Thru U,” with 12,000 cars competing for only 7,000 parking spaces during the 1968 school year. With enrollment ever increasing, officials examined a number of alternatives, including shuttle buses, moving sidewalks and monorails.

“Oh, yes there were parking problems,” remembers Allen. “And there was much discussion about a parking garage. And it was considered very seriously. But at that point, to have built the building, our budget was so tight that we would have had to rent space at a higher price than students were willing to pay. And so the parking garage idea was dropped. You could say it was like a child growing too fast. The need was here and the demand was here, so you always had to be planning for future buildings. You had to have lead time to plan your buildings.
and figure out the budget, and have it ready to go before the Legislature, years before you were going to put the first spade in the ground."

Berkeley of the South

Protests erupted on college campuses throughout the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many students and faculty questioned American involvement in Vietnam. Others advocated economic redistribution, equal rights for women, empowerment for African Americans and similar causes. While USF lacked the uprisings found on other college campuses, a growing number of students and faculty did call for reform.

In June 1968, Allen announced firm guidelines governing student protests. He warned that USF "will not negotiate with any group or make any change in policy under conditions of duress such as unauthorized occupation of university property." Only a month earlier, Allen had gained some student support for refusing to establish a Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) at USF. Later, when shootings at Jackson State in Mississippi and Kent State in Ohio rocked college campuses throughout the nation, USF agreed to halt visits by military recruiters.

In March 1969, approximately 200 students wielding forks, knives, ketchup and steak sauce marched on the Administration building. Singing "We Shall Eat Allen," they went to President Allen's office, only to find the door locked. Other students brought large placards with images of Alka-Seltzer, with hopes of preventing indigestion.

Identifying themselves as members of the Committee to Eat President Allen (CEPA), these protesters had serious goals for their frivolous activity: CEPA members questioned guidelines established by the Board of Regents that curtailed clubs and organizations. They called for a relaxation of restrictions that had prevented new political and activist organizations from forming on campus.

Later that spring, a number of students demanded that the university increase its commitment to ethnic minorities and develop an Afro-American studies curriculum. Some walked out of a black studies class taught by two white instructors. In October, anti-war demonstrators blanketed Crescent Hill, now the site of the Special Events Center, for Moratorium Day activities that included a peace rock concert and a teach-in at the University Center.

Allen experienced growing pressures to step aside by the end of 1969. A student-faculty coalition wanted to oust Allen from the university Senate. By May 1970, Student Government officers voted 25 to 9 in favor of forwarding a letter to the Board of Control asking for Allen's dismissal.

In this time of uncertainty and turmoil, Allen thought it was best to step aside. He tendered his letter of resignation on July 4, 1970. In his letter, he stated that USF's continued progress "is assured and so I desire to be relieved of the day-to-day pressures of the presidency."

The legacy

"The very purpose in the beginning was to maintain an institution that would rank with the best in the country in academic levels," says Allen, "and I think that emphasis has continued. And I'm real pleased about that. I think that's very important and I'm pleased that the same academic level is attained in the professional schools, business, medicine, nursing and so on. All of the professional schools emphasize high quality. The university has been good for the community. It's enriched the community in a good many ways. That was a part of the vision of the university, that we would not only educate students, but that we would enrich the area where it was located."

In less than 20 years, the University of South Florida had transformed from an idea into a marketplace for ideas. At the time of John Allen's departure, the school had more than 16,000 students and 800 faculty (far exceeding any original projections). On the drawing boards were the colleges of Medicine and Nursing, as well as proposals for future campuses in the Sarasota/Manatee area and Southwest Florida. Such growth was evident to those who attended the 1969 commencement ceremonies, which was held in St. Petersburg's Bayfront Center. The university conferred over 2,500 baccalaureate and 360 master's degrees before a crowd that exceeded 5,000 persons.

Indeed, during Allen's last semester as USF's president, he could rightfully claim that his school was the largest in Florida. The summer 1970 enrollment of 8,900 students topped both Florida (8,866) and Florida State (6,991). As USF sought a new president, alumni predicted that USF would permanently surpass UF as the state's biggest university.

As the university now enters its fifth decade, Grace Allen admires USF for maintaining its focus on academics. Though much has changed since her husband's retirement and subsequent death in December 1982, USF still places the accent where it belongs: on learning.