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Students gather at the Log Cabin on the ABAC campus in 1954. The Log served as a gathering place for students from 1933 to 1962.
ABAC Celebrates 108th Birthday on February 20

TIFTON – It was 108 years ago on Feb. 20, 1908 when a special train rolled up the railroad tracks from downtown Tifton for opening day ceremonies at the Second District Agricultural and Mechanical School. Today that school is known as Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.

“It’s always a great day to celebrate another birthday,” ABAC President David Bridges said. “ABAC today is much different than it was in 1908 but let’s give credit to all the faculty, staff, administrators and students who set the foundation for the success story that ABAC is today.”

City officials declared a holiday when the school opened in 1908. As a result, downtown stores and the public school were closed on that special day. Some 1,200 people attended the opening day ceremony. A total of 27 students walked up the Tift Hall steps to attend classes. Lewis Hall and Herring Hall, adjacent to Tift Hall, served as the dormitories for boarding students.

Residents of Tifton started getting excited about the new area high school on Nov. 23, 1906 when Tifton won the bidding process for the site of the school over Albany, Pelham, Camilla, and Ashburn. Captain Henry Harding Tift, founder of Tifton, led the delegation and personally financed a portion of the bid, which was successful on the eighth balloting. The Tifton Gazette proclaimed “The Hallelujah Day Has Come, Tifton Lands the A&M School.”

“It has been another great year for ABAC with more bachelor’s degree graduates than ever before,” Bridges said. “We still maintain those core values from 1908 and the promise of a
quality education for every student who walks in a classroom on our campus. We prepare these students for life.

“Our new strategic plan is titled Destination ABAC for a reason. We want prospective students to think of ABAC as a true destination college where they can start and finish their college degree. We want alumni and friends to consider ABAC as a destination that they can continue to associate with in a number of meaningful ways.”

Bridges, who took office on July 1, 2006, speaks from a unique historical perspective since he is the only ABAC president who is also an ABAC graduate (Class of ’78).

Professor W.W. Driskell was the first principal of the Second District A&M School. The first class to graduate on June 14, 1910 included Joel Davis and Maude Paulk from Tift County and Charles Hinson from Grady County.

Today, Tift Hall houses administrative offices, the George T. Smith Parlor, and the ABAC History Room which is open to the public from 8 a.m. until 5:30 Monday through Thursday and from 8 a.m. until 3 p.m. on Fridays. Lewis Hall is home to the Stafford School of Business, and Herring Hall is the location for the admissions and business offices.

The Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village is now a part of the ABAC campus as well as the Forest Lakes Golf Club. ABAC also enrolls students for classes at ABAC on the Square in downtown Moultrie. A recent study showed the impact of ABAC on the South Georgia economy to be over $261 million on an annual basis.

ABAC now offers bachelor’s degrees in Diversified Agriculture, Turfgrass and Golf Course Management, Biology, Business and Economic Development, and Natural Resource
Management which features Forestry and Wildlife options. The Rural Studies bachelor’s degree is the only one of its kind in the United States and offers options in Social and Community Development, Politics and Modern Cultures, Writing and Communication, and Ag Communication.

The roots of ABAC extend to Aug. 18, 1906 when the Georgia General Assembly enacted Public Law 448. This bill established a state-run Agricultural and Mechanical School in each of Georgia’s 12 congressional districts. The schools were designed by a single architect so the main campus buildings statewide were almost identical. They were actually college preparatory boarding schools and included students from the ages of 14 to 21.

The course work contained agriculture classes for boys and home economics classes for girls. At the Second District A&M School, only boys were allowed to board during the first term. Students lived in Herring Hall and Lewis Hall and attended classes in Tift Hall.

In 1924, a bill passed the Georgia legislature to change the Second District A&M School to a college called the South Georgia A&M College. S.L. Lewis, who had been the principal at the high school on two different occasions, was selected as the first president of the college.

In 1929, the name of the college was changed to the Georgia State College for Men. Dr. Frank G. Branch was the first and only president. GSCM had a broad range of athletics including a football team which recorded back to back wins over the University of Miami, 13-12 in 1931 and 19-6 in 1932.

In 1933, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia was formed and changed the name of the college again, this time to Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. It
became a two-year college named after Abraham Baldwin, one of only two Georgia signers of the U.S. Constitution. Dr. J.G. Woodroof was the first president of ABAC.

ABAC returned to four-year college status on May 16, 2006 when the Board of Regents named it a State College of the University System of Georgia. Junior and senior level bachelor’s degree classes returned to the campus curriculum on Jan. 7, 2008 when 41 students enrolled in those courses. Today, over 1,400 students major in bachelor’s degree programs.

During the 2015 fall term, ABAC enrolled 3,393 students from 153 of Georgia’s 159 counties, 25 states, and 22 countries. Almost 1,400 students live on the ABAC campus in modern housing complexes at ABAC Place and ABAC Lakeside.

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