



The Launching of Duke University, 1924-1949

Robert F. Durden

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In this rich and authoritative history, distinguished historian Robert F. Durden tells the story of the formation of Duke University, beginning with its creation in 1924 as a new institution organized around Trinity College. As Durden reveals, this narrative belongs first and foremost to Duke University's original President, William Preston Few, whose visionary leadership successfully launched the building of the first voluntarily supported research university in the South. In focusing on Duke University's most formative and critical years—its first quarter century—Durden commemorates Few's remarkable successes while recognizing the painful realities and uncertainties of a young institution.

Made possible by a gift from James B. Duke, the wealthiest member of the family that had underwritten Trinity College since 1890, Duke University was organized with Few as president. Few's goal was to turn Duke into a world-class institution of higher education and these early years saw the development of much of what we know as Duke University today. Drawing on extensive archival material culled over a ten-year period, Durden discusses the building of the Medical Center, the rebuilding of the School of Law, the acquisition of the Duke Forest and development of the School of Forestry, the nurturing of the Divinity School, and the enrichment of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

It was also during this period, as Durden details, that such treasures as the Sarah P. Duke Gardens were created, as well as some near treasures, as seen by the failed attempt to start an art museum. Although the story of the birth of this University belongs largely to William Preston Few, other people figure prominently and are discussed at length. Alice Baldwin, who led in the establishment of the Woman's College, emerges as a fascinating figure, as do William H. Wannamaker, James B. Duke, William Hanes Ackland, Robert L. Flowers, Justin Miller, and Wilburt Cornell Davison, among others.

Although impressive growth occurred in Duke's formative years, tensions also arose. The need to strike an institutional balance between the twin demands of teaching and research, of regional versus national status, combined with continual shortages of funds, created occasional obstacles. The problem of two sets of trustees, one for the university and another for the Duke Endowment, loomed largest of all. As Few himself said, during these early years Duke successfully embarked on a long journey, for it was not until after World War II that Duke University consolidated the growth begun in the inter-war years.

An important contribution to the history of Southern higher education as well as to Duke University, this book will be of great interest to historians, alumni, and friends of Duke University alike.

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