From Rogers to Netherton:
A Heritage of Baptist Presidents
Newman College’s First and Only:
W. T. Russell, A.M.

“Young ladies: By the consent and authority of the Trustees of Newman College, I present to you these diplomas in testimony that the degree of A.B. is conferred upon each of you. This day ends your study as students of your Alma Mater and you go out to occupy a new sphere. You are at the threshold of new opportunities and increased responsibilities, and this parchment implies only the possibility of success. Your success or failure is in your own hands. Each of you is the mistress of her own destinies. Self dependence, self help is the only sum condition of success. This is an age, an hour, calling not for weaklings, but for noble, consecrated souls, resolute heroic souls, that neither fail nor falter in the presence of difficulties and hardships. Expect to be something and to do something.”
(Note of 1889 address given by W. T. Russell, President of Newman College to the last graduating class.)

Often overlooked in Carson-Newman’s presidential role call due to his leading the female Newman College, W. T. Russell served both institutions with distinction during their independent existence and then after uniting.

William Thomas Russell was born February 22, 1848 near Athens, TN to James Sterling Russell and Maldonetty C. Cate of McMinn County, the fourth of nine children. Of Scotch-Irish descent, James Sterling Russell had been born October 10, 1822 in Jefferson County (the second of nine children) and married Miss M. C. Cate in 1842. J. J. Burnett notes that he had built up a “handsome estate” of 700 acres as well as holding stock in the First National Bank of Athens and the Athens Woolen-Mills.

About this time he felt the call to preach and was ordained in 1857 or 1858 by Zion Hill Church. He pastored several churches in Monroe and McMinn counties and succeeded his father as pastor of Shady Grove Church where he would serve for twenty-six years. His father - Elder T. J. Russell – had pastored there for the previous twenty-five of his fifty plus years in the ministry.

Not much is known about W. T. Russell’s early years. Records show that he and his brother T. R. Russell graduated from Mossy Creek College in 1869. This was the first graduation held since the Civil War when the college was closed from 1861-1868.

Later that year President Jesse Baker asked Russell if he would join the faculty that September and teach mathematics and mechanical philosophy.
When the young ladies of the Seminary collect into one company upon Sabbath morning, robed in various and splendid colors, and begin their line of march to the church, they form a very attractive procession. The young men of Carson declare that Switzerland, with all its delightful and picturesque scenery, could not so charm the eye.

The Carson Index Oct. 15, 1882

He accepted and would go on to teach all subjects in mathematics until 1882. His brother T. R. would also become a professor. The two were largely responsible for keeping the college running during the school year 1869-70 as President Baker was on his legendary 3,500-mile horseback campaign raising money to free the school from debt.

On June 5, 1871 Russell married Amanda Josephine (“Josie”) Harris, daughter of Temple Harris of Dandridge, one of the county’s wealthiest citizens and a college trustee. They would lose a boy and a girl in infancy and Josie would die August 31, 1889 at the age of thirty-seven.

For some time there had been talk regarding the need for improvement in women’s education. In 1870, the Masonic lodge opened Mossy Creek Masonic Female Institute in the newly constructed Mason Hall. While information is limited, it appears the Branner Institute (a boarding and day school for young ladies) also operated from probably 1876-1879 in what is now Glenmore Mansion.

The 1879-80 Carson Catalog notes the following: “With the concurrence of the Board of Trustees, the Faculty of Carson College have rented the Masonic Female Institute, and have had a female school in successful operation during the last academic year. This school has no organic connection with Carson College, further than that it is under the general supervision of the same Faculty. It is conducted in a separate building [the Masonic Hall] under different teachers. The curriculum of study, with a slight abridgment, is the same. On completion of the course prescribed, young ladies will receive the degree of M.A.” At this time the school also went from being an “institute” to a “college.”

In 1882 the female program was relocated. With Carson College having moved onto the Mountcastle property six years earlier, the original campus was left abandoned. Carson College’s trustees voted to move the women into these facilities and rename it The Seminary for Young Ladies. In 1855 the seminary was chartered as Mossy Creek Female Academy but later named (by trustee resolution) Newman Female Seminary in honor of the Newman family. In time it would become known as the more familiar Newman College.

A Carson Index’s June 15, 1882 article read in part: “The school has opened with flattering prospects. At an expense of several hundred dollars Profs. RUSSELL and NEWMAN have converted the old college grounds and buildings into new ones. Graded and graveled walks extend in every direction and surround the boarding houses. All the buildings have been repaired and newly painted. Indeed the spade, the joiner’s plane and the brush have converted this into a place of charming beauty.”

At this point W. T. Russell was named president. While teaching the young ladies metaphysics and pure and applied mathematics he continued to serve Carson College as one of five supervisors of the ministerial fund (acting as secretary and treasurer) as well as a trustee for both colleges.

In 1889 the historic “wedding” of Carson and Newman Colleges took place. Russell became vice-president under W. A. Montgomery and resumed part-time teaching duties along with helping with financial matters. In 1893 he resigned to pursue business opportunities, although continuing his work as a trustee and with the endowment and ministerial fund.

During this time Russell was married to
Nannie Lillard, an 1889 Newman College graduate. They too, would lose two children in infancy while Nannie would die in 1904 at the age of thirty-five.

From 1901-03 Russell served as the first mayor when Mossy Creek was incorporated as Jefferson City. He also served the community on the Board of Aldermen, as president of Mossy Creek Bank, and as Sunday school superintendent and chair of the deacon board at First Baptist Church.

W. T. Russell died on March 15, 1919. He was buried in Jefferson City’s Westview Cemetery next to Nannie. On April 1 the college’s Orange and Blue ran an article noting his passing. The author wrote: “His life was self-realized. His education was well-rounded. He had developed within him the finer sensibilities and elements of culture that make the refined gentleman. His life was characterized by service to others . . . He was devoted to the Kingdom’s work . . . He was always faithful, devoted, and true. His life will be missed in every phase of life of Jefferson City and Carson and Newman College. Of himself he might have said: ‘I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.’”

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