History

In the Beginning...

College of Engineering

EARLY DAYS

Dean Benton

The Florida Engineer
the year 1910 looked auspicious. Neon lights first 
brightened city nights. A tiny 
airplane made the first takeoff from a 
ship's deck. And 
Florida's first College of Engineer-
ing was launched with five faculty 
members and 48 students. John R. 
Benton, a University of Florida en-
gineering and physics professor 
since 1906, was named dean of 
these pioneers. 
By fall 1910, UF had graduated 
its first engineers, from the 
opening class of 1906: Ossian W. Drake, 
BSEE, Lakeland; Ralph D. Rader, 
BSEE, Miami; Harry L. Thompson, 
BSEE, Pensacola. The new college 
offered mechanical engineering for 
the first time, as well as improved 
studies in civil and electrical engi-
neering, for $120/year, including 
room, board, and heat. Admission 
required the equivalent of an 11th 
grade education.

Florida was still largely frontier 
in 1910. Jacksonville was the 
largest city, at 28,249 people, 
followed by Pensacola, Key West 
and Tampa. Tiny Gainesville had 
paved the road out beyond the 
edge of town to its prized new uni-
versity. UF was a typical new Flori-
da development - buildings 
scattered across an expanse of flat 
sand, wiry grass, tall pines and 
stubby shrubbery. The 1910 
yearbook speaks wistfully of newly 
planted hardwood trees that 
would provide abundant shade in 
a few years.

Florida itself was busy at the 
work of creating new societies 
- building infrastructure. Engineers 
were developing railroads, port 
facilities, highways, bridges, and, 
above all, drainage systems. 
Telephone, telegraph and electric 
power networks were beginning 
to find their way across Florida. 
The need for ice-making and cold 
storage plants was obvious.

At the university's dedication in 
October 1906, N.P. Bryan, 
chairman of the Board of Control 
(the early version of the Board of 
Regents), had spoken prophetical-
ly for students at the new College 
of Engineering. "The time is past 
when a soft hand in a kid glove is 
the badge of a gentleman. It is no 
longer undignified to labor." 

Engineering students had ample 
opportunity to practice the dignity 
of labor. The civil engineering 
department in 1909-1910 did 
extensive survey work on local 
county roads, and planned and di-
rected construction work on cam-
pus and in and around 
Gainesville. Students involved in 
the road survey work, and who 
liked the camaraderie, organized 
into the Transit Club. The Transit 
Club announced its aim in life in 
the 1910 annual: "To impress our-
selves and everybody else with the 
fact that as Civil Engineers are the 
Aristocracy of Practical Men, so 
Civil Engineering students are the 
natural leaders among those who 
do good things in the University. 
- Also, incidentally, to help each 
other land good jobs during vaca-
tions — and last, but not least, to 
have a good feed occasionally."

The first new engineering build-
ing was completed in 1911 at the 
urging of UF President Murphree, 
who had been complaining that 
UF lacked classroom space. Later 
named Benton Hall, it was located 
on the site of the current Griner 
Hall. The new structure had a few 
problems. For one thing, the build-
ing did not have a boiler for heat. 
Proving that engineers are 
problem solvers, Dean Benton 
 wrote, "For the present, we can 
heat the lecture rooms with cheap 
wood stoves, running the pipe out 
through the window by removing 
the windowpane at very little 
expense. With proper care and 
attention, which we shall provide, 
this could be done more or less 
safely."

Making do on a limited budget 
was essential in a state that, 30 
years earlier, had nearly ended 
public high school education in a 
cost-cutting move. Nor were facul-
ty overpaid. The average salary in 
1911 was $1,550 per year. UF 
Salaries in 1916 were still 44th in 
the nation - when there were only 
48 states in the union.

Nevertheless, the college was 
proud of its new headquarters and 
 bragged in the 1912 college 
catalog: "It is a 3-story brick build-
ing, 122 feet by 73 feet, with a one-
story wing for boilers and steam 
engine laboratory. It provides 
classrooms and drafting rooms for all 
of the engineering departments of 
instruction, and various special 
laboratories, such as the hydraulic 
laboratory, dynamo laboratory, 
steam engine laboratory, and labo-
atory for testing materials."

The college was ready to carry 
out its mission, as stated in the ca-
talog: Scholastic training alone 
cannot make a competent 
enGINEER...It can, however, fit a man 
to enter the profession of engineering: 
and it is an important element in ul-
timate success in that profession. 

The engineering students were 
finding their identity, too. In 1914, the 
Transit Club and the Kelvin 
Engineering Club consolidated to 
form the Benton Engineering Soci-
y. The student newspaper report-
ed that, "The Engineering College 
met Monday evening (May 20) 
and accepted a constitution for its 
future guidance. This organization 
shall be known as the Benton Engi-
neering Society and was organized 
for the purpose of participating in 
debates and to promote social 
functions for its members."

By 1915, the college had 35 
graduates, with 23 actually 
employed in engineering. The 
college was expanding its 
facilities, asking for a forge and 
foundry, estimated at $4,000, and a 
wood and machine shop, estimat-
ed at $21,000. 

On the eve of U.S. entry into 
World War I, the college had 104 
students and chemical engineering 
was added to the curriculum.

The college had begun to notice 
competition for students, 
commenting in the 1917 Universi-
ty Record: "Due to lack of advertis-
ing facilities, an aid so much 
employed by most colleges, many 
young men of our state are 
ignorant of the remarkable oppor-
tunities offered by their own home 
institution, and enroll elsewhere 
for a technical training."

A different kind of student 
arrived at the college in 1918 for 
the Army training school and the 
war-measures school for radio 
operators. The college felt ready for 
the challenge, stating in The 
University Record, "In the present 
great war of nations, the most im-
portant branch of the service is 
that of the engineers, and the war 
department is almost daily 
sending admonitions to the 
student engineers to complete 
their courses so as to be of the 
most benefit to the government. 
After the war it will depend 
largely on the quality of the 
practicing engineers as to how 
soon the stricken parts of Europe 
are rebuilt and the world set on its 
feet again."

Certainly, by 1919, the college 
needed to expand the engineering 
building again. A south wing was 
completed that year, for use as a 
woodshop, a forge, and a foundry. 
Funds had been appropriated to 
cover both construction and equip-
ment, but costs were climbing and 
the funds turned out to be enough 
for construction only. It was hoped 
the legislature would appropriate 
the money for equipment that 
year.

So, the pattern was set. 

Demands for new technology 
spurred new engineering studies, 
which attracted more students, 
who required more facilities. 
The college was growing.

In the next issue of The Florida 
Engineer, we will trace the path of 
the college through the '20s.

Editor's Note: This is the first in a 
series of articles on the history of 
the College of Engineering. We 
would like very much to hear from 
alumni, faculty, and friends who 
remember some special event or 
person, and would like to share 
their memories with us. While each 
magazine article will be fairly brief, 
we are planning to expand this materi-

al into book length. We hope to 
publish this book in the year 2000. 
That's not very far away, folks, so 
we need to start collecting your sto-
ries right away. Any pictures you 
want to share will be welcome, too, 
and will be returned. Our surface 
mail and e-mail addresses and tele-
phone numbers are on the inside 
front cover.