Hey had to be at least 14 years old. They had to provide evidence of good moral character and physical development. They had to show competence in reading and writing English, as well as a familiarity with simple arithmetic, geography and North Carolina history.

Such were the requirements that the Board of Trustees of the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (A&M) set forth in 1889 for students to be accepted. Fifty-one young men from North Carolina showed up that October for the first weeks of class. During that first academic year, the class grew to 72, who each paid $20 in annual tuition, $8 a month for board, 75 cents a month for laundry services and $12.50 a year for books, stationery, fuel, lights and medical care.

Some members of the first class were the sons of merchants and farmers. Others were sons of Confederate soldiers. A few were first-generation Americans, born to immigrants from Germany and Scotland. Some, like Samuel Johnston Hinsdale, the 14-year old son of a Raleigh lawyer, were young teenagers whose matriculation would Seventy-two students made up the first class of the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in 1889. Some were just boys and some were men, but they all were a part of the land-grant college experiment that unfolded at NC State 125 years ago.

by Chris Saunders

READY TO GET STARTED

Seventy-two students made up the first class of the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in 1889. Some were just boys and some were men, but they all were a part of the land-grant college experiment that unfolded at NC State 125 years ago.

by Chris Saunders
A few sport heavy mustaches; others’ important business deal, some swallowed are dressed like they’re on their way to an faces stare seriously at the camera. All steps of what is now Holladay Hall. Their first image of that first class of students, give them an education and an exodus out of what united them was their willingness to gamble on the still-evolving commodity of land-grant education, set into motion by the 1862 passage of the Morrill Act. They took a chance on a campus composed of 66 acres, one building, one outhouse, a well and an old mule. A popular saying often uttered by antagonists of the college was, “I wouldn’t be an agricultural man for he isn’t worth a damn,” writes David A. Lockmiller in his History of The Carolina State College of Agriculture and Engineering of the University of North Carolina 1889–1939.

That school other sentiments thrown at A&M, like “Cow College.” That was, in large part, due to courses that were set up for students to study an agriculture or mechanics track, which they started pursuing their sophomore year. The school year was divided into fall, winter and spring terms. Agriculture students studied horticulture, arboriculture, botany, history, English and bookkeeping, and had to perform manual labor that served as a practical application of their discipline. By 1893, the curriculum grew to include more complex classes, like general geology and paleontology, road-making and horticultural construction, and commercial floriculture. The mechanics curriculum included math, chemistry, history, English and bookkeeping, but came to include the study of steam machinery, surveying and the study of bridges and roofs.

When time came for A&M’s first class to graduate in 1893, it was a three-day affair. It signaled the end of college life for 19 of the young men who had been a part of that first class, most of whom didn’t finish college. On the first day, June 9, several seniors delivered orations at the college chapel. Henry W. Battle, who went on to be one of the first native North Carolinians licensed to practice architecture in the state, delivered a speech called “Cranks and Fools,” in which he aligned cranks with science and indicted fools for being useless. Mathews told his classmates they should aspire to be noble men and to carry out the word of God.

Three days later, on June 12, Rev. Henry W. Battle delivered a baccalaureate address. Finally, on June 14, the graduation ceremony took place. More seniors were chosen to read their essays based on their academic standing. Robert Wilson Allen had started college four years earlier as a 20-year-old studying mechanics. At his commencement, he stood as senior class president, reading his essay “Science-
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Charles Burgess Williams was the man of firsts in the first class. Born in Camden County, he came to A&M at the age of 17 to study agriculture and chemistry. He was captain of the college’s first football team and graduated first in the Class of 1893, with an average of 89.3. Williams Hall was dedicated in his honor. Williams’ legacy transcended his alma mater’s campus. His contributions in the field of agriculture solidified his place as a leading scientist in the South during the early 20th century. He researched soils, fertilizers and how European conservation efforts could be used in specialization in types of farming in the U.S. Known as “Mr. Soybean,” Williams was a leading crusader for the soybean, recognizing that it could mean money for American farmers. He encouraged manufacturers to use soybeans to produce paints and varnishes. Following an announcement by the United States Department of Agriculture that more American land was in soybeans this year than ever before, agriculturists here recollect how Professor C.B. Williams, head of the agronomy department at State College, probably had done more to bring about the popularity of the legume than any other person,” The News & Observer once reported.

Another member of the first class who was celebrated for his research was Samuel Ersam Asbury. He was one of the later students to enroll in that first class, coming to A&M in January 1890 from Burke County, N.C., looking like an angel-faced cherub. He excelled in agriculture and chemistry and was instrumental in leading the Leazar Society, which was predicated on the notion that engineers and scientists needed to be well-rounded through reading, debate and oration.

Asbury left North Carolina to take a job as a chemist at Texas A&M University in 1902 and flourished as a Renaissance man in College Station, Texas, until he retired in 1945. “Doc” Asbury became one of Texas A&M’s most celebrated professors, studying fertilizers and rose cultures. But he also loved poetry, music and Texas’ state history, even going so far as to compose a musical based on the Texas Revolution of 1836. When Asbury died in 1952 at the age of 89, he willed a collection of books on roses and one on Texas history to Texas A&M, along with a musical library containing five grand pianos and 700 classical records.

and Character.” Charles Duffy Francks, the top student studying mechanics, read his essay “The Rising Motive Power.” President Alexander Holladay read the honor roll. The seniors then received their degrees as their names were announced with their thesis topics. [See list of topics, p. 24.] Commencement ended that night with their thesis topics. [See list of topics, p. 24.]
Much of NC State's story is built upon research, as its members had to complete an undergraduate thesis to receive a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (BS) or a Bachelor of Engineering (BE). Below is a list of the graduates and their respective thesis topics.

**B.S. DEGREES:**
- "Nitrogen in its relation to agriculture," Samuel Ervon Ashby
- "Seedlings," George Percival Gray
- "The development of fruits or cuttings," Frank Theophilus Meacham
- "Creamery advantages in North Carolina," Charles Edgar Seymour
- "Lime and its relation to agriculture," Charles Burgess Williams

**B.E. DEGREES:**
- "Water supply for the city of Raleigh," Charles Bolling Holladay and James William McKoy
- "Design of a 30-horsepower boiler," Henry Emil Bonitz
- "Plans and specifications for a bridge on West Morgan St., Raleigh over S.A.L. R.R.,” Samuel Marvin Young
- "Plan for heating by steam the buildings of N.C. College of A. and M. Arts," Carl D. Sellers
- "Plans for heating by steam the buildings of N.C. College of A. and M. Arts," Robert Wilson Allen
- "A report on the water power in the Neuse River at Milburnie, Wake County," Edward M. Gibbon
- "Design of a Pratt truss bridge," Frank Fuller Floyd
- "Design of a 24-horsepower horizontal engine," William McNeill Lynch
- "Design of a condenser," Buxton William Thorne
- "The turbine water wheel," Louis Thompson Yarborough
- "Design of electric light plant," Walter Jerome Mathews
- "The indicator," Charles Duffy Francks

Most of the inaugural class made their careers in North Carolina. Frank Theophilus Meacham spent time at the Biltmore Dairy in Asheville, N.C., working for the Vanderbilt family. William McNeill Lynch was principal owner and operator of the Laurinburg Machine Company, which repaired machinery, after an early career on the Florida railroads. Others, like Ashby, left the state. Edward Moore Gibbon became a city engineer in Jacksonville, Fla., and an engineer in Memphis, Tenn., where he died in 1912. Frank Fuller Floyd left for Knoxville, Tenn., where he worked for the Knoxville Sentinel for 11 years before breaking into the coal industry with Jellico Coal Mining Company in 1905. He eventually began his own company, Floyd & Montgomery Coal Company.

Some of the Class of 1893 never left Raleigh. Samuel Marvin Young owned and ran the S.M. Young Hardware Store on Martin Street for a number of years. He was the last surviving graduate of the Class of 1893, dying in 1968. Louis Thompson Yarborough, who had come to the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts as a boy of 26, worked as a state engineer in the North Carolina swamplands and the Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company before finally taking a job for the U.S. Postal Service, where he worked for 17 years. On campus, Yarborough Drive shares his name as does Mary E. Yarbrough Court, named for his daughter, who was one of the first female graduates from NC State. He left his family’s farm in New Bern, N.C., to attend A&M. He didn’t graduate, but returned to that farm and expanded it to about 1,200 acres and even built a cotton gin. In 1906, he scraped his leg on a buggie he used for transportation and died of blood poisoning. But his grandson, Earl McIewean ’58, continued his grandfather’s movement by coming to NC State. Earl, 77, often looks at that picture of his grandfather and his first classmates and wonders what they thought at the outset of the college.

"We were some of the co-builders of this College movement. We received much and gave much. The giving, to say the least, was our presence, for without students the movement could not have been started on the basic principles that resulted in its present success."

—Louis Thompson Yarborough, 1943, NC State Alumni News

**Editor’s note:** The author used many sources in this story including letters, newspaper clippings, alumnus communications, obituaries, alumni records and past articles from the alumni magazine. The North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts’ course catalogs from the 1890s also proved an invaluable source. Two books provided necessary history and context. They were David A. Luckenbill’s History of North Carolina State College of Agriculture and Engineering of the University of North Carolina 1889–1939 and Alice E. Baggett’s North Carolina State University: A Narrative History.