



## HISTORY in OBJECTS



On the second floor of the Asa Gordon Library is a quiet room with shelves full of acid free boxes waiting to be explored. Among the papers and photographs that comprise the archives, are displays featuring items from Savannah State's past. Each item reveals a chapter of the school's history. They tell stories to anyone who will take time to look and listen.

By **Meaghan Walsh Gerard**





## THE CANE

Richard R. Wright probably never leaned on anyone or anything else in his entire life. His cane, with a gold band engraved with his name, became a common sight in his later years.

Wright was born into slavery in 1853 (or possibly 1855). After the Civil War, he and his mother walked nearly 100 miles to enroll him into school — a school held in an abandoned train car. Wright never took the opportunity to learn for granted and spent the next four decades devoted to education for African-Americans.

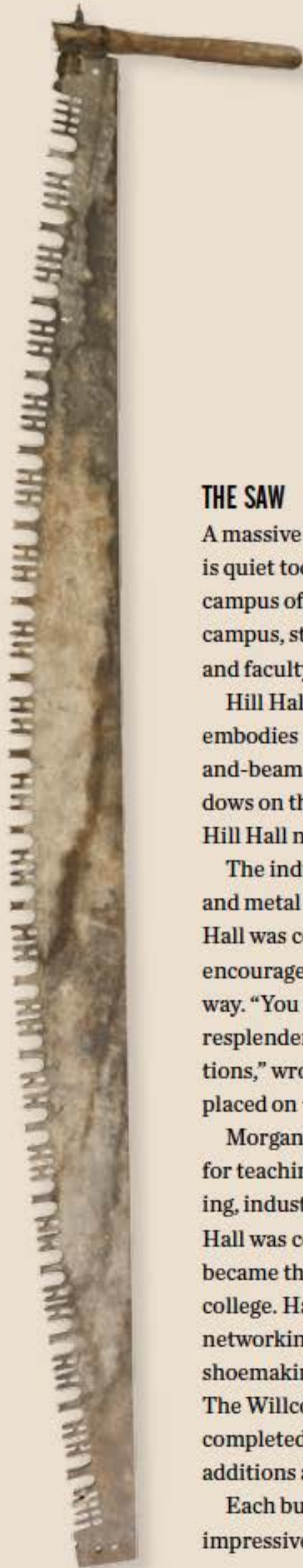
He served as the first president of Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youths — now Savannah State University — from 1891-1921. Well into his 60s, he left Georgia and joined his son in Philadelphia where he founded a bank.

After he graduated from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Wright opened the Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company on the northeast corner of 19th and South streets. At the time, it was one of the only African-American owned bank in the North. The bank survived the Great Depression and had assets of more than \$5 million when it was sold after Wright's death.

Wright was not idle in his retirement. In addition to acting as president of the bank, he also founded and ran the Haitian Coffee and Products Trading Company. He registered its copyright with the Library of Congress in 1935, encouraging shoppers to try “something new in coffee” and to “try genuine, unadulterated Haitian coffee.” Pictured here, Wright can be seen with his cane, boarding a plane to visit Haiti.

Wright's cane, never a crutch, remained at his side until his death in 1947.





## THE SAW

A massive crosscut saw, needing two men to work it, is quiet today. At one time, it was used to build the campus of Savannah State. Many of the buildings on campus, still in use today, were built by students and faculty.

Hill Hall, the landmark building on campus, embodies the history of Savannah State. The brick-and-beam edifice is tall and stately, with arched windows on the third floor. Built as a dormitory for boys, Hill Hall now houses administrative offices.

The industrial department — masonry, woodwork and metal work — began construction in 1900. Hill Hall was completed in 1901. Local papers at the time encouraged neighbors to watch the building underway. “You must go and see the new dormitory building resplendent in its beauty and importing in its proportions,” wrote the *Savannah Tribune*. In 1981, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Morgan Hall, opened in 1936, housed classrooms for teaching trades such as carpentry, drafting, painting, industry, shorthand and bookkeeping. Adams Hall was constructed between 1929 and 1931 and became the kitchen and dining area for the entire college. Hammond Hall, now the headquarters for networking and computer technology, was home to shoemaking, tailoring and, later, home economics. The Willcox-Wiley Physical Education Complex was completed in 1936 and has undergone numerous additions and renovations since.

Each building is a tangible demonstration of the impressive ingenuity of Savannah State.



Hill Hall



Hammond Hall



Masonry class





## THE UNIFORM

Savannah State has fielded sports teams and promoted extracurricular activities since its inception.

In 1921, the university won the state championship in football under the guidance of Coach Waters. The Willcox-Wiley Physical Education Complex, opened in 1936, was known to be the best indoor basketball facility in the state and hosted a high school tournament each spring. Students from Augusta, Atlanta, Macon and beyond attended.

Ted Wright came to Savannah State in 1947 and developed the university's first varsity track and field team. He also coached the men's basketball team to 10 conference championships between 1948 and 1962. Savannah State is now home to 15 men's and women's teams that compete in NCAA Division I, including tennis, cheerleading, golf, football and basketball.

Savannah State wasn't only known for its talent on the field.

In its early days, Savannah State also built on the school's reputation as an agricultural college. President Wright led an initiative to host a state fair. The group, known as the Georgia State Colored Agricultural and Industrial Association, was founded in 1906 and sponsored the annual demonstration. It was an immediate success. Shareholders were paid 5 percent dividends the first year.

Savannah State — then Georgia State Industrial College — sent delegates and projects from the agricultural, sewing and industrial departments, including wagons and buggies, shows, suits, brickwork and produce.

These and hundreds of other efforts served to enrich the education and lives of the students and the surrounding community.







## THE SKYHAWK

Near the main entrance to Savannah State University is a mounted fighter jet. The bright blue plane is an A-4 Skyhawk, outfitted in the colors of the special Naval division known as the Blue Angels.

Lt. Cmdr. Donnie Cochran graduated from Savannah State's NROTC program in 1976 with a civil engineering degree. He went on to become the first African-American commander of the Blue Angels.

The university has a long history of military service.

In August 1898, President William McKinley approached and requested Richard R. Wright Sr. to act as paymaster of United States Volunteers in the United States Army. He was the first African-American to serve as an Army paymaster. Earning the rank of Major,

he was the highest-ranking African-American officer to serve during the Spanish-American War.

In the years preceding America's entrance to World War I, Savannah State was one of a handful of institutions contracted by the United States government to train African-American soldiers for posts in the Army. The vocational instruction included mechanical repair, electrical work and plumbing, and contained an option for academic studies as well.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. entered World War II. Savannah State students once again took up the cause. In addition to those who trained for combat, many chose vocational paths on the home front. The business department trained scores of women to be typists and secretaries and to run

small businesses while the men were away. Young men learned trades like ship building, arc welding and radio repair, all greatly needed during World War II.

The current NROTC program was established at Savannah State in 1971. Since then, the unit has commissioned nearly 300 officers into service as Navy Ensigns and Marine Corps Second Lieutenants.







## THE OLYMPIC COSTUME

On display from time to time is a circular, surreal black and gold costume. It was designed by Peter Minshall, a noted international carnival designer. Minshall was hired to create the costumes for the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. The costume is housed in the Savannah State archives because it was worn by Loris Boyd-Johnson, then a dance instructor and director of the SSU Dance Ensemble.

Boyd-Johnson was invited to participate in the opening ceremonies for the centennial games, quite literally bringing Savannah State's presence to a global stage. "The Olympics is such a worldwide event that you may get to be a part of only once in your life," she recalls.

From the premier international event to individual experiences world wide, these vibrant international connections are an inherent part of Savannah State.

Savannah State currently has 32 memorandums of understanding with foreign universities in 14 countries. And with the newly opened Confucius Institute, students can learn Chinese language and culture from native speakers and special guests.

Each year, SSU welcomes students from around the world. In fall of 2014, 47 students from abroad chose to study at SSU for at least a semester.

The English Language Institute was established at SSU to help international students with language skills and with the transition to a new country. Students are able to practice their English with native speakers and visit nearby cultural sites.

Throughout the year, SSU leads trips abroad. Students learn outside the classroom in places like Vietnam, Paris, Liberia, the United Kingdom and China. They come back with credits toward their degree, a stamp in their passport and so much more.







### OF MICROSCOPES, SCALES AND GENERATORS

Since its founding, Savannah State has engaged in cutting-edge research. Early classes included agricultural and technical training. The college had a working farm that investigated the best fertilizers and crop seeds. Students learned how to work with stone, build electronics and conduct experiments.

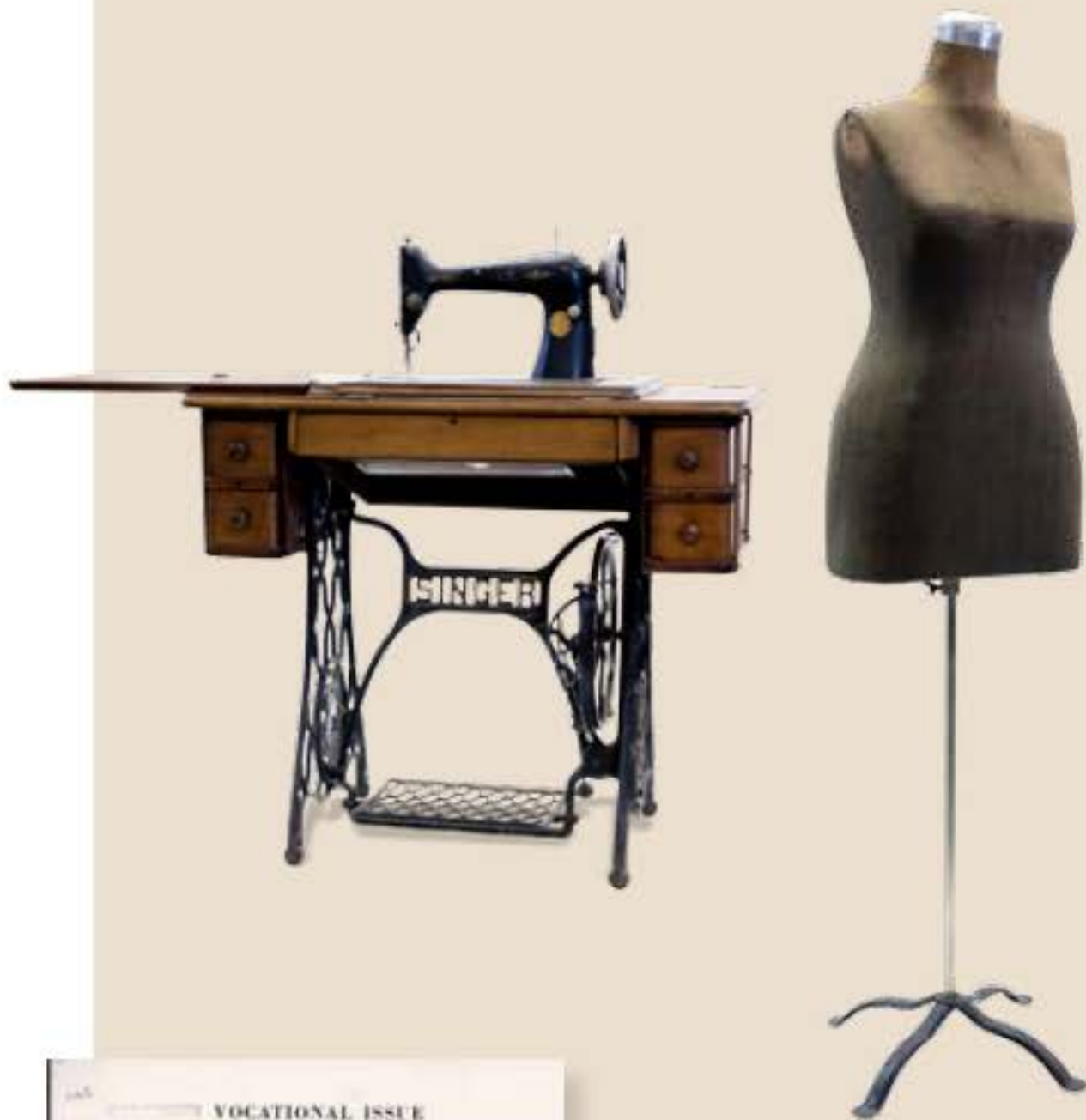
Curriculum adapted to the needs of the era. During WWII, radio repair was a main course offering.

From the federal research program on phosphates in the 1930s to the solar project of the 1970s with the U.S. Department of Energy to faculty-led biochemical experiments that traveled onboard the International Space Station, SSU has brought together curious minds and leading science.

Currently, students and faculty are studying under more than \$10 million in grant-funded research. The findings are reported to partners like the U.S. Department of Defense, NASA, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Science Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.







## WITH A DRESS FORM AND A SEWING MACHINE

The idea of home economics is unfamiliar to today's students. For years, it was a staple of the curriculum in nearly every school. It went far beyond housekeeping. Students learned how to can food and make preserves, how to sew, how to host a guest and how to maintain clothing.

These skills became significant during the Great Depression and on into the 1940s. Knowing how to run a household efficiently, help save money and perhaps even sell small homemade goods was meaningful work.

The coursework was first offered in 1898 and called Domestic Science, and it was required of all female students, even those majoring in another topic. Initially, the focus was dressmaking and sewing and included the study of cloth, seams, hems, patches, drafting patterns, constructing dresses, embroidery, millinery (hat making) and interior design.

In 1909, cooking was added. Students were taught the science of proteins, starch, carbohydrates and digestion, in addition to ventilation, drainage, plumbing and waitressing standards.

These women were able to find careers, and in some cases bring in a second income for their families.

The class of 1900 was the first to include female graduates. ■



The marketing and communications staff thanks **Ann Ogden**, archivist in the Asa Gordon Library Special Collections, for her tireless efforts and assistance in creating this article. She has held numerous positions at SSU. She is now responsible for all of the artifacts, documents, photographs and more that are being preserved for future generations.



# IMPRESSIONS

Impressions is published by University Advancement, which includes alumni relations, marketing and communications, special events, and development.

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## Savannah State University Mission

Savannah State University, the oldest public historically black university in the State of Georgia, develops productive members of a global society through high quality instruction, scholarship, research, service and community involvement. The University fosters engaged learning and personal growth in a student-centered environment that celebrates the African American legacy while nurturing a diverse student body. Savannah State University offers graduate and undergraduate studies including nationally accredited programs in the liberal arts, the sciences and the professions.

An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). A unit of the University System of Georgia.

[www.savannahstate.edu](http://www.savannahstate.edu)



**O**n behalf of Savannah State University, I am proud to introduce the new edition of the SSU magazine: *Impressions*. Our students, faculty and staff are seriously impressive and we are excited to bring you their stories.

Since 1890, we've prepared smart, bold students to succeed in their world. This year marks the 125th anniversary of the founding of Savannah State, and we are taking this opportunity to look back on our past and celebrate the vitality of our present.

In this issue we examine how SSU is working to preserve Gullah Geechee heritage, the legacy of Savannah State families, the revival of teacher education on campus and the fond memories from community members.

We hope you enjoy the updated magazine. We aim to impress.

Sincerely,

**Phillip D. Adams**

Vice President for University Advancement

