

**“Local African American Empowerment Through Huston-Tillotson’s Downs-Jones Library:
‘Beginning with Dr. Mary E. Branch and the Tillotson College Library’”**

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COURTESY HUSTON-TILLOTSON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, AUSTIN, TX, USA

Mary E. Branch, Tillotson College’s first African American Woman President, was instrumental in founding the institution’s first library through her outreach to national Congregational Churches and “contributions from friends”. Miss Branch’s appointment to the Tillotson College presidency by the American Missionary Association took effect on July 1, 1930. Her first impressions of the campus after arriving in Austin were “shock and disgust”. The college had suffered “years of declining enrollments and inadequate administration for some years”. Miss Branch and her Administration began a “five-year plan of development” beginning with the library. As an advocate of W. E. B. Du Bois’ philosophy regarding the “Talented Tenth” and her desire to attract the best African American women students, she knew it was critical to provide them with the best on-campus resources possible.

History

Tillotson College was founded on February 10, 1877 in central Austin, Texas at the beginning of the Post-Reconstruction period in the United States. The college’s original name was Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute, and named after ordained Congregationalist minister, Reverend George J. (Jeffrey) Tillotson of Hartford, Connecticut. Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute was supported by the Freedmen’s Aid Society and the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Churches (now known as United Church of Christ). The Bureau of Refugees,

Freedom, and Abandoned Lands or the Freedmen's Bureau was established by Congress.¹ "On March 3, 1865, Congress passed 'An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees' to provide food, shelter, clothing, medical services, and land to displaced Southerners, including newly freed African Americans."² The Freedmen's Bureau operated in Texas from late September 1865 until July 1870.³ Before the Freedmen's Bureau was dismantled in Texas in 1870, white and Black supporters believed in its purpose: "To supervise the newly freed slaves in the southern states"⁴ and provide Blacks with the tools they needed to function effectively in a literate society."⁵ It was white resistance to African American participation in the political and economic realms of southern society that led to the Bureau being dismantled in the South. But the seeds of Black education had already been planted in Texas, and specifically, Austin. The Texas State Charter recognized the institution as Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute on January 17, 1881. It was located at what is now known as "Bluebonnet Hill" on "23 acres bound by Mesquite Street (now E. 11th Street), Bois d'Arc (now E. 7th Street) Chicon Street, and Chalmers Avenue".⁶ On June 2, 1909, a new Charter was issued and the school was renamed Tillotson College, and its purpose was to train "teachers (for) the black community."⁷ Tillotson College was reorganized in 1925 as a Junior College. It became a Women's College in 1926. It became a Senior, Co-educational institution in 1935.⁸

Mary Elizabeth Branch Administration and the Tillotson College Library: 1930-1935

Mary E. Branch's experiences as a student and Faculty member began when she was Home Schooled by her manumitted parents, Tazewell and Harriet. She attended Virginia State College from 1895 through 1897, and became a Faculty member there from 1904 until 1925. Miss Branch continued her education at the University of Chicago where she received a B. A. in 1922 and a M.A. in 1925.⁹ She taught English at Sumner Jr. College in Kansas City, Kansas from 1925 through 1926, and was Dean of Women at Vashon High School in St. Louis, Missouri from

¹ Texas State Historical Association (website), "Freedmen's Bureau, accessed August 8, 2021 <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/freedmens-bureau>

² United States Senate Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866, accessed August 8, 2021 <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/common/generic/FreedmensBureau.htm>

³ www.tshonline.org page 2

⁴ Huston-Tillotson University, accessed July 19, 2021 <https://www.sutori.com/story/huston-tillotson-university>

⁵ www.tshonline.org page 2

⁶ www.sutori.com page 2

⁷ www.sutori.com page 4

⁸ www.sutori.com page 4

⁹ Mary Elizabeth Branch (1881-1944), accessed June 13, 2019 <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history>

1926 until 1930.¹⁰ Mary Crayton Williams May wrote in "Miss Mary E. Branch, The Great Designer" in *The History of Tillotson College, 1881-1952*: "The American Missionary Association had the answers. They invited Miss Mary E. Branch to become president of Tillotson College"¹¹ Miss Branch arrived in Austin in 1929 at the beginning of the Great Depression.¹² The experienced educator had been appointed the first African American Woman President of Tillotson College—a Women's College—on July 1, 1930. Her first impressions of Tillotson College were "shock and disgust."¹³ President Branch and her administration began a "five-year plan of development" during her first year in office.¹⁴ "The library facilities received immediate relief from the worst of the situation when she implored generous contributions from friends. Representatives of the school besieged second-hand bookstores which were a reservoir of used local college and university books. They took a practical look at everything and sought the means of relief. From this point on the library grew steadily to twenty thousand volumes in 1944 under Miss Branch's encouragement."¹⁵ The Branch Administration began its campus revitalization campaign with the library. President Branch placed an advertisement in the *Congregationalist*.¹⁶ George F. Work responded to her request.¹⁷

¹⁰ Staff, MSRC, "Branch, Mary E. (2015). *Manuscript Division*. Paper 16. https://dh.howard.edu/finaid_manu.16

✓ ¹¹ Mabel Crayton Williams May, "Miss Mary E. Branch, The Great Designer" in *The History of Tillotson College, 1881-1952*. (thesis, Texas Southern University, 1967, A#, Box Number 1, Folder #], Huston-Tillotson University Archives, Downs-Jones Library, Huston-Tillotson University, Austin, TX. May, 91; *Informer* (Houston), July 15, 1944, 1.

¹² May 97.

¹³ May 97.

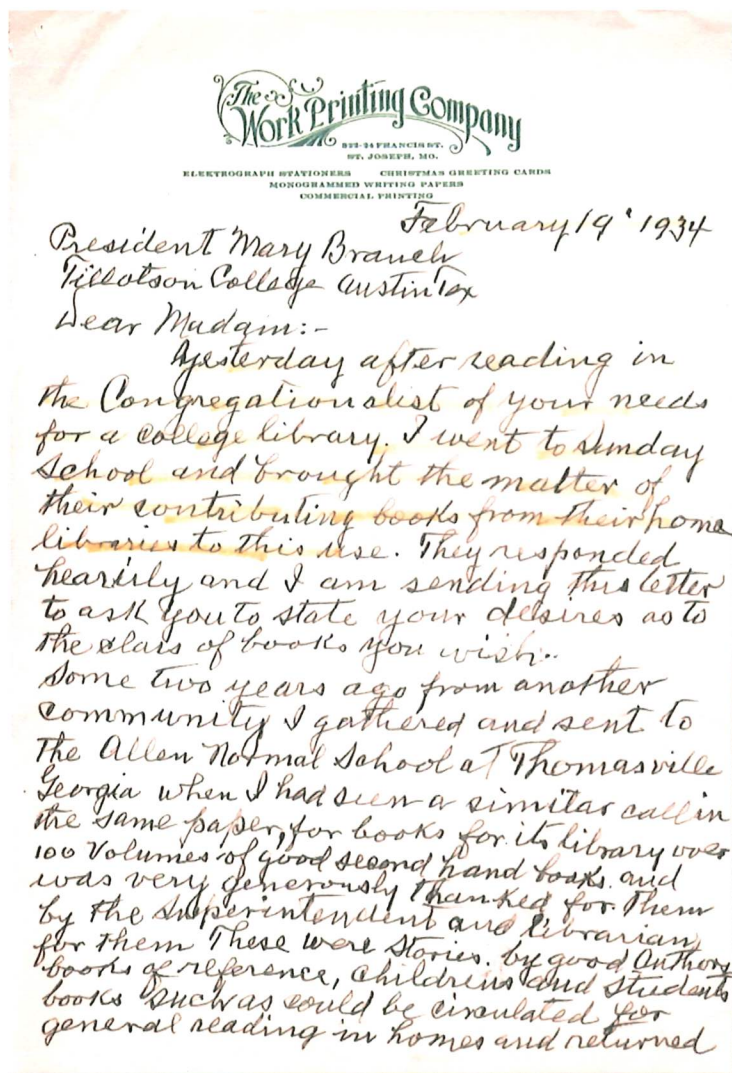
¹⁴ May 98.

¹⁵ May 98; *Tillotson College Bulletin*, 3.

✓ ¹⁶ Source

✓ ¹⁷ George F. Work was born on March 1, 1839 in Harrison County, Ohio. He was 22 years old when he resided in College Farm, Iowa. He enlisted in the army as a Private on June 24, 1861. He was wounded on September 19, 1862 in Luka, Mississippi. Work was promoted to Corporal on November 24, 1861, and then Captain on September 24, 1863. As Captain, he led Co. E. 60th USCT Infantry. After the war he lived in Nebraska. He died on December 4, 1937, and is buried in Parkview Cemetery, Hastings, Nebraska. History George F. Work American Civil War Research Database www.civilwardata.com

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per 1/20/12



President Branch received a letter from George F. Work dated February 19, 1934.¹⁸ "Dear Madam: Yesterday after reading in the *Congregationalist* of your needs for a college library, I went to Sunday School and brought the matter of their contributing books from their home libraries to this use. They responded heartily and I am sending this letter to ask you to state your desires as to the class of books you wish."¹⁹ President Branch was an advocate of W. E. B. Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" philosophy, and wanted to attract the "best female students."²⁰ She responded to Work in a letter dated February 21, 1934.²¹ "I was very happily surprised in receiving your letter this morning, and to know that you are thinking about us in our efforts to build up our library. We shall be very grateful for whatever books you can collect and send us. Please express my pleasure to the Sunday School of the Congregational Church."²² "We need any books that will be useful in a college library, any fiction which young women would be interested in, biography, or in fact, any type of book that would suit college students."²³

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¹⁸ George F. Work to Mary E. Branch, 19 February 1934 Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University.

¹⁹ May 99.

²⁰ May 100-101.

²¹ Mary E. Branch to George F. Work, 21 February 1934, Mary E Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

Just such books as I presume you need to put on your shelves and aid in increasing your present collection, so that you may be enabled to reach the Classification Class A you desire, and will kindly advise me I will gladly undertake to send them to you as soon as they can be collected and forwarded. This may take a few weeks for I will also have to write to the A.M.A. to get their endorsement of the shipment so we may have their advantage in cheaper than ordinary freight rates.

I am personally interested in doing this for the colored people, both from the fact that they as a class ^{are} so prejudicially mistreated by the states of the South, especially in Texas, where I understand no colored person is allowed to enter a public library, and also because of my personal contact with the race, having been a Captain in command of Negro soldiers during the Civil War. On the first day of March prox I will celebrate my 45th birth day.

Sympathetically yours

I am a member of the 1st }
Cong. Ch. of St. Joseph }
A.M. } address above

Geo F. Work

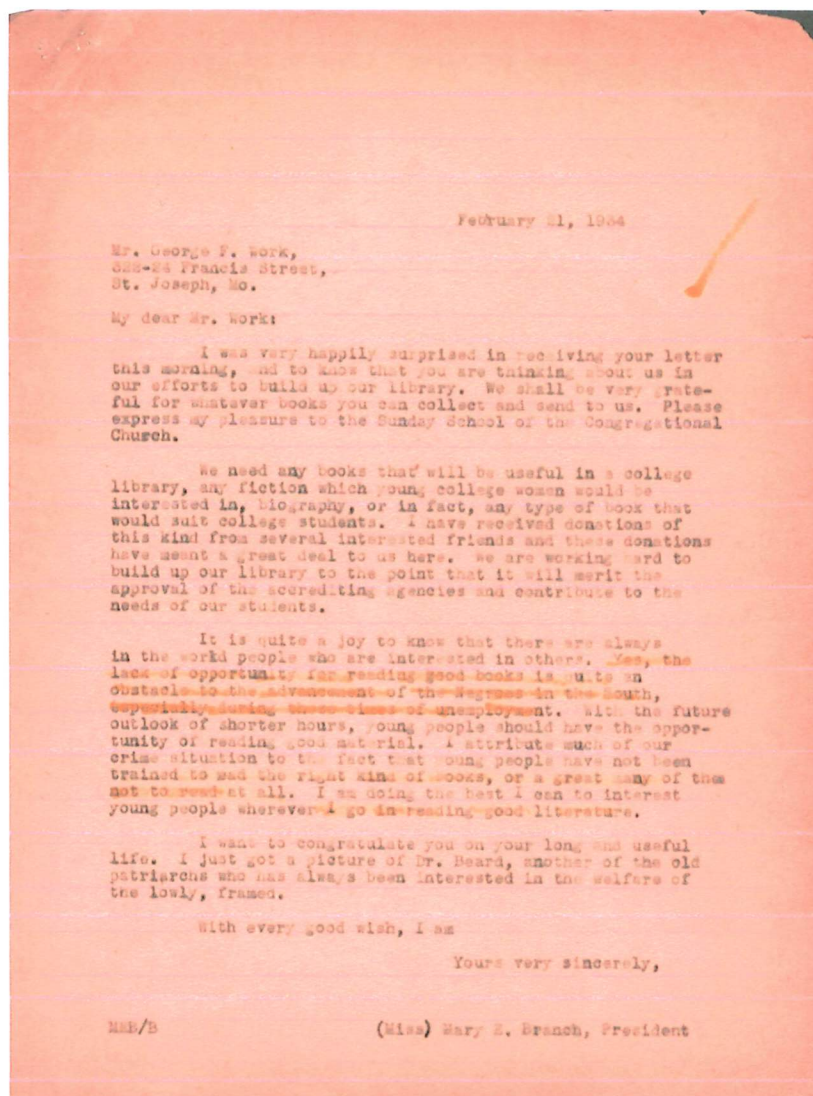
Work joined forces with President Branch to build Tillotson College's library because he wanted to help "the colored people". "I am personally interested in doing this for the colored people, both from the fact that they as a class are so prejudicially mistreated by the states at the South, especially in Texas, where I understand no colored person is allowed to enter a public library, and also because of my personal contact with the race, having been a captain in command of Negro soldiers during the Civil War."²⁴

²⁴ George F. Work to Mary E. Branch, 19 February 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University.

Recognizing Work's willingness to help her fulfill her mission of racial upbuild through education, President Branch responded: "It is quite a joy to know that there are always in the world people who are interested in others. Yes, the lack of opportunity for reading good books is quite an obstacle to the advancement of the Negroes in the South, especially during the times of unemployment. With the future outlook of shorter hours, young people should have the opportunity of reading good material."²⁵ "I am doing the best I can to interest young people wherever I go in reading good literature."²⁶

President Branch wanted "good reading material" and "good literature" for her female students so having the best library possible was necessary.

The Tillotson College library would be central to the students receiving a classical education—the kind W. E. B. Du Bois advocated. President Branch was an advocate of Du Bois' "Talented Tenth" philosophy regarding leadership in African American communities. It was Tillotson College's mission to train African American Women to become teachers and Community leaders in the Central Texas area. There was no better way to develop a classical education than to have



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²⁵ Mary E. Branch to George F. Work, 21 February 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University.

²⁶ Ibid



ELECTROGRAPH STATIONERS CHRISTMAS GREETING CARDS
MONOGRAMMED WRITING PAPERS
COMMERCIAL PRINTING

My Dear Miss Branch March 5th 1934
 you do not know the
 pleasure your nice birthday card
 gave me. One reason is because it was
 so unexpected and so lovely.
 I am grateful for your good wishes
 yesterday at Sunday School I had
 your letter read. It will start the
 work of collecting the books. also our
 Ladies Missionary Society will take
 a hand in the work by appointing a
 committee at their meeting this week
 and I am hoping for a successful cam-
 paign so that in course of two or three
 weeks we may be able to ship them.
 I am enclosing a copy of a short
 notice and my picture published in
 one of our city papers about my
 Birthday.
 Sincerely Yours
 Geo. F. Work

books that "would suit college students" to fulfill that need.²⁷ It was Mr. Work's service in the Northern Army during the Civil War where he commanded "Negro Soldiers" that provided him the insight into their willingness to still fight for a Nation that enslaved and discriminated against them. Mr. Work, like President Branch, knew education was a means toward self-improvement and success.

In Work's final letter dated March 5, 1934, he wrote: "Yesterday at Sunday school I had your letter read. It will start the work of collecting the books, also our Ladies Missionary Society will take a hand in the work by appointing a committee at their meeting this week and I am hoping for a successful campaign so that in course of two or three weeks we may be able to ship them."²⁸

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²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ George F. Works to Mary E. Branch, 5 March 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University.

Another reader of the *Congregationalist*, Mrs. Charles L. Viles of Waltham, Massachusetts, responded to President Branch's request for books.²⁹ In her letter dated March 4, 1934, Mrs. Viles wrote: "In a recent issue of the *Congregationalist* I read a short article entitled: 'When Books are Scarce.'"³⁰ "This Article stressed the need of good books for high school girls as well as for your college library. In our church school,—the First Congregationalist of Waltham—there are a few books which might be of use to you."³¹

Mrs. Charles L. Viles
33 Howard Street
Waltham
Massachusetts

March 4, 1934

President Mary Branch
Tillotson College
Austin, Texas.

My dear Mrs. Branch;
In a recent issue of the *Congregationalist* I read a short article entitled: "When Books are Scarce."

This article stressed the need of good books for high school girls as well as for your college library.

In our church school,—the First Congregationalist of Waltham—there are a few books which might be of use to you. Besides that our young people might be able to furnish a

list. I could give a some

Mrs. Charles L. Viles
33 Howard Street
Waltham
Massachusetts

idea of the type of books which are most desirable? We have a few French and German books which we could send if of any use to you.

Imagine that you people in Austin have little conception of snow as we have had it this winter in old New England. Last week we had fifteen inches in one storm and the wind blew it into fine to eight foot drifts, so men had to work all day to open the streets! It is a beautiful sight, but makes very hard conditions for those who must get out into it. We up here know nothing about

Waltham is only 100 miles from Austin

COURTESY HUSTON-TILLOTSON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, AUSTIN, TX, USA

Mrs. Charles L. Viles
33 Howard Street
Waltham
Massachusetts

Austin or about your college. We would be very glad to hear about your work, and something of the life plans of your girls.

I wonder if you already have one of the *Tenten* booklets? Also I will enclose one of our church Bulletin and the program of our *Tenten* mid-week services.

Our snow storm, with the hard walking they make, keeps many of our older people from attending the evening services.

Hoping to hear from you at your convenience, and with cordial greetings from snowy New England,

(No. 4)

Very sincerely,
Mrs. C. L. Viles

COURTESY HUSTON-TILLOTSON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, AUSTIN, TX, USA

ESY HUSTON-TILLOTSON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, AUSTIN, TX, USA

The kind of reading material Mrs. Viles offered to send to Tillotson College included "French and German" books, which suggests her educational views were similar to President Branch's—that her girls should have a Classical Education. Then interjecting a tone of friendship and familiarity, she mentions the weather in Massachusetts, and how Austinites have "little conception" of

²⁹ Clara Wright Berry was the second wife of Charles Lowell Viles (1846-1913). They were married on January 15, 1889 in Waltham, Massachusetts when she was 28 years old. Mrs. Viles was a schoolteacher. www.wikitree.com.

³⁰ Mrs. Charles L. Viles to Mary E. Branch, 4 March 1934, Mary E. Branch Papers, Huston-Tillotson University.

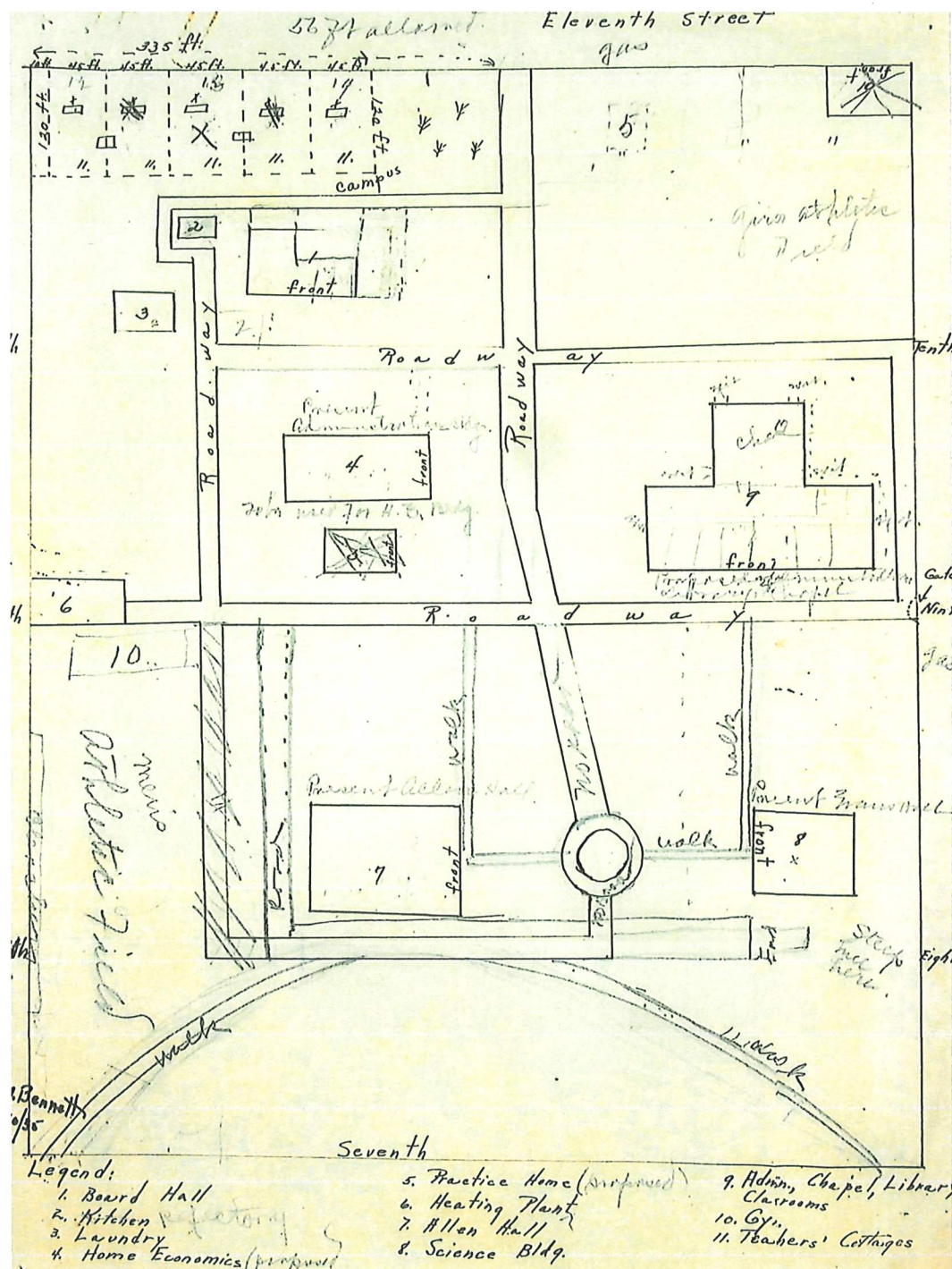
³¹ Ibid

snow and how little Bay Staters know of Austin. “We up here know nothing about Austin or about your college. We would be very glad to hear about your work, and something of *the life plans* for your girls. Hoping to hear from you at your convenience, and with cordial greetings from snowy New England, Very Sincerely, Clara W. Viles.”³² (my italics)

Readers of the *Congregationalist*, such as Mr. George F. Work of Nebraska and Mrs. Charles L. Viles of Massachusetts, responded to President Branch’s “When Books are Scarce” by pledging to send books to Tillotson College. These donations helped build Tillotson College’s library, and most importantly, supported President Branch’s mission for the institution.

³² Ibid

Sketches of Tillotson College: 1935

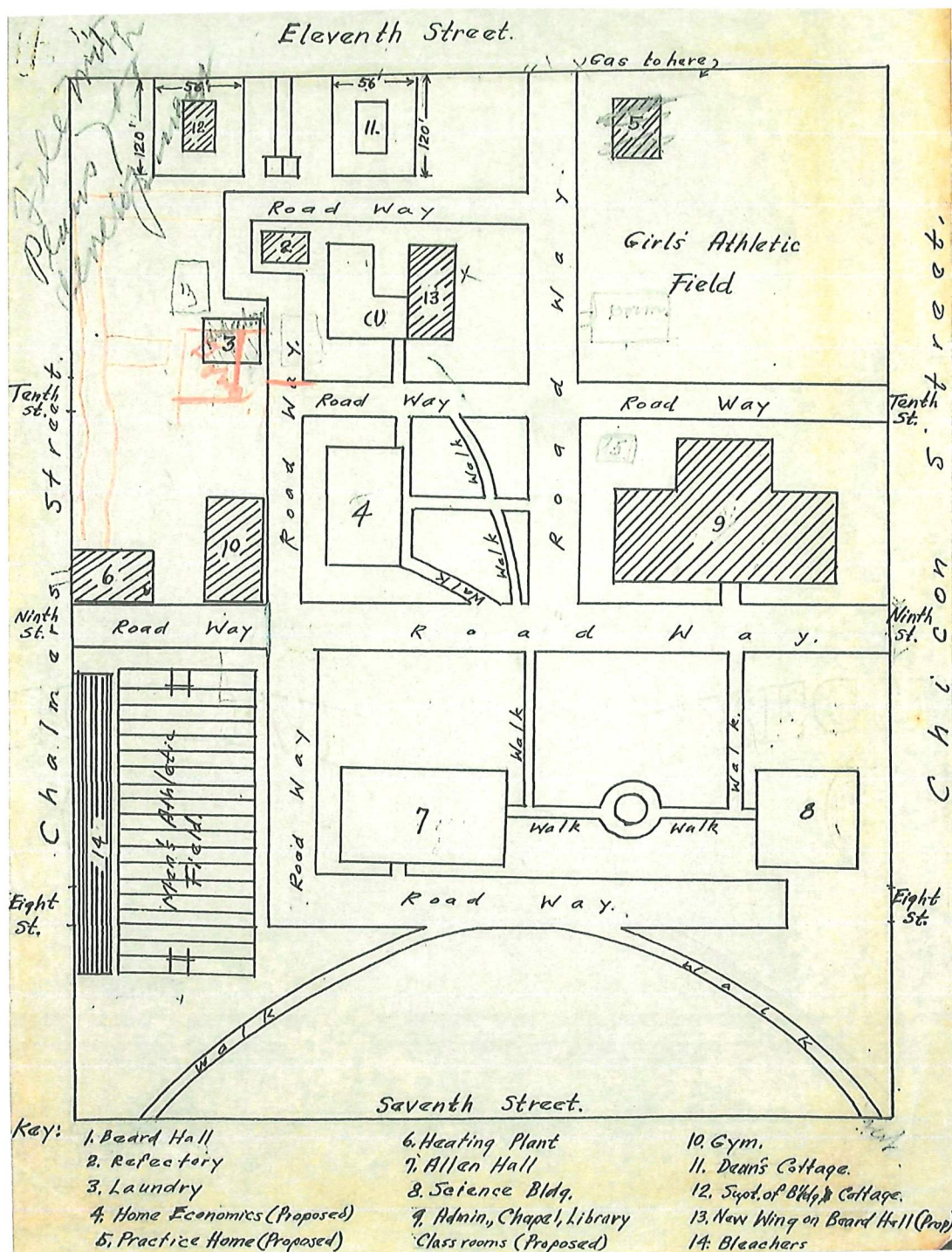


This is Sketch 1 of the Tillotson College campus including the library.³³ Sketch 1 is dated August 30, 1935 and initialed by L. M. Bennett.³⁴ There are illustrations of the different buildings on campus including the library. At the bottom of the sketch is a Legend identifying each building. Building 9 includes the Administration, Chapel, Library and Classrooms.

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³³ MEB Archives Box 1 Folder 1

³⁴ Sketch 1



This is Sketch 2 of the Tillotson College campus including the library. Sketch 2 is more detailed than Sketch 1. At the bottom of the Sketch is a key identifying each building. Building 9 includes the Administration, Chapel, Library and Classroom.

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