

## The Bell Building 1904

The single taxers provided the first school for students in 1895. It was located downtown on the corner of Fairhope Avenue and Section Street. Students of single taxers were charged fifty cents and others a dollar. The initial enrollment was 26. In 1904, with the population of Fairhope eclipsing 400, a new school building was constructed, "with two splendidly lighted rooms and a hall ten feet wide through the middle." (*Fairhope Courier*, 2/3/05). Because of its belfry, the school became known popularly as the Bell Building.

Education in Fairhope was changed forever with the arrival of Marietta Johnson in 1902. A native of Minnesota and graduate of St. Cloud Normal School, Johnson assumed duties as a teacher in Fairhope. Her philosophy had been profoundly affected by several books which stressed the education of the whole child: body, mind, and spirit. Called "Organic Education," this approach was used by Johnson beginning in 1907. Her school, located in the home of Samuel and Lydia Comings and known as the Gables, was free to locals and distinguished by the lack of formal academic strictures. By 1908 there were 50 students.

In 1910 the Bell Building was purchased for the Organic School, and soon a ten-acre campus was provided by the Single-Tax Colony on the southeast corner of Fairhope Avenue and Bancroft. "Six women were the incorporators: Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Clara M. Gaston, Mrs. L. A. Powell, Mrs. Minnie Brown, Mrs. D. K. Bancroft, and me," wrote Lydia J. Newcomb Comings. Initially it was called Comings Memorial College of Organic Education after the school's benefactors. The name was shortened to School of Organic Education, and the school began attracting boarding students from other areas of the country.

A proponent of a unique philosophy of progressive education, and a contemporary of Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori, Marietta Johnson created a school that had no examinations, no homework, and no possibility that a child would fail. The school was a laboratory for ideas that were considered radical at the time, but have become more valid with each passing decade. Mrs. Johnson was one of the first to advocate the prolongation of childhood - a period of intense, natural education - so that the desire to learn would extend to the whole of life. She also believed that physical education should take the form of dancing and creative games, and often said, "the greatest minds are those able to use the spirit of play in their work."

Johnson's school received enthusiastic praise from all over the country. John Dewey profiled it in his *Schools of Tomorrow* (1913). Together with *The Fairhope Courier*, the Organic School became closely identified with the Single-Tax experiment.

In 1986, the city of Fairhope purchased the school campus and buildings.

The Marietta Johnson School, including the bell in the belfry, was moved to an eight-acre plot of land on Pecan Street where it continues in its educational roots.

The Bell Building downtown became the home of the Fairhope Historical Museum from 1992 to 2008. Today the building continues in its educational roots. Art classes are held in the original building. The Marietta Johnson Museum is housed in the rear addition and is open by appointment.

## Description

"The building is a thoroughly well-constructed one, 21 x 71 feet, with two splendidly lighted rooms 21x32 feet each a hall ten feet wide through the middle. The exterior is finished with 'novelty' siding and the interior with a yellow-pine wainscoting about three and half feet high, and corrugated iron above, including the ceiling. The interior pine finish is nicely oiled, and the iron painted a pleasing tint." (*Courier*, 2/3/1905) The much-needed addition, which houses the Marietta Johnson Museum, was completed in 1910.