

# Student Activism on FSU Campus

## A Walking Tour

by Tara Benton

### Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, some considered Florida State University to be the “Berkeley of the South.” Although this campus escaped the violence that plagued many universities in these turbulent decades, students on FSU’s campus were involved in the struggle for many issues, such as equal rights for women and minorities, the anti-war movement, and freedom from censorship. Throughout the years, Florida State University students, faculty, and administration struggled through these issues, eventually causing FSU to become the more diverse and open campus that it is today.



### 1) Westcott Building

The tour begins at the fountain in the plaza of the Westcott Building, on the west side of Copeland Street. Westcott began serving as the home to the administration of this university when it was built in 1910. It has been the site of many instances of campus unrest since that time.

In 1968, student James R. Caudle submitted a short story titled “The Pig Knife” for publication in *A Legend*, a university literary anthology. The story, concerning the death of an African American soldier after his return home from war, and told through the dialogue between two African American acquaintances of his, contained a racial slur and curse words that the administration found objectionable. Though the Board of Student Publications approved the story, as did several faculty members of the English Department, President John Champion banned the story from the publication, stating that as University President, he was the official publisher of all University publications, and he found the material to be inappropriate.

In May 1968, students began a week long vigil outside Westcott to protest the censorship of the story, with several hundred students in attendance. Though tension had been rising between Champion and some of the faculty prior to his censorship of this story, his refusal to approve the story resulted in a major outcry from students and the Arts and Sciences faculty, which led President Champion to resign. Following his resignation a group



of over 1,000 students met on Landis Green for a rally to urge the president to rescind his resignation. President Champion did rescind his resignation three days later but in February 1969, he again resigned, being replaced by President J. Stanley Marshall. Students eventually did publish "The Pig Knife" after obtaining private funding and promising not to include the University seal or copyright.

In February 1969, students from the group Students for a Democratic Society held a rally on the steps of Westcott, in response to the Board of Regents policy which upheld the administration's decision not to recognize SDS as a student organization on FSU's campus. SDS was an anti-establishment student group founded in Michigan in 1960. SDS adopted its manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, in 1962. In this statement, the group criticized the United States government for failing to properly address the issues of civil rights and for failing to achieve international peace. It also urged participatory democracy by means of non-violent civil disobedience. Though the group later split apart and some of its members turned to violence, at its origins it was a non-violent advocate for social change. However, FSU administration did not believe the group to be non-violent and refused to recognize them as a student organization. While SDS membership numbers on FSU's campus were small, they were the source of many disruptions and controversies on campus.

In April 1971, a group of black students occupied President J. Stanley Marshall's office in Westcott to discuss issues on which the University was not making progress. The issues included the unfair treatment of black cheerleaders, and charges that were levied against two black students who had allegedly assaulted a white student. The occupation was non-threatening and did not end in any violence. The University did continue to work towards more equality for black students, though the struggle continues. As of 2004, African Americans comprise approximately 12% of the student population at FSU, with other minorities comprising an additional 13%.

## 2) DeGraff Hall

From Westcott, follow Copeland Street North to Tennessee Street and take a left. Cross Dewey Street, and stand on the Tennessee Street side of the Conradi Building. Directly across Tennessee Street is the construction site of the new DeGraff Hall. DeGraff Hall, a female dormitory, was originally constructed in 1950. The original structure was demolished in Summer 2006, and the new building should be completed and open to new residents in August 2007.



In 1970, the Board of Regents ended all curfews for women on campus. Regent Elizabeth Kovachevich was displeased with the students' desire to have more relaxed visitation rules. In a May 1971 speech to a Rotary Club in Clearwater, Kovachevich stated that college dormitories were becoming "taxpayers whorehouses." Though the BOR Chairman took offense to the statements, it outraged students at FSU. Female students at DeGraff Hall hung signs such as "Please Pay When Served" and posed as prostitutes mocking Kovachevich's statements. Kovachevich's statements so outraged students around the state that on May 21, 1971, hundreds of students marched on the Capitol in protest.

## 3) Bellamy Building



Walk one block south on Dewey Street to Call Street. Take a right; the rear of Strozier Library will be on your left. Just past Strozier, on the left, is the entrance to the Bellamy Building.

In April 1969, the National Secretary of the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) faction of SDS gave a speech to around 200 students in front of Bellamy urging true communist revolution. In 1969, the SDS split into two emerging factions, the RYM and the Worker-Student Alliance of the Progressive Labor (PL) faction. This split led to the eventual demise of the SDS.



#### 4) Student Union

From Bellamy, walk back north toward the Rovetta Business Building. To your left, you will see the Oglesby Student Union complex.



The Student Union was site to many demonstrations and tensions in the 1960s. An early event was the peaceful October 1964 Vietnam demonstration mounted by the Students Act for Peace. Students marched from the Student Union through Downtown Tallahassee, and the demonstrations continued through December 1964.

A less peaceful, and far more memorable event at the Student Union was the March 1969 “Night of Bayonets.” Newly appointed President J. Stanley

Marshall University continued to refuse to recognize Students for a Democratic Society as a University sponsored organization, as he believed that the national SDS openly advocated violence. As they were not a registered student organization, President Marshall would not allow the group to have meetings on campus. In defiance of this ruling, SDS decided to hold a rally in the Student Union at which they would have the SDS National Secretary speak. President Marshall got a court injunction against the meeting; however, SDS members still met in the Union for the rally. Approximately 300 students showed up for the rally, but when the campus police read the injunction and told the students to disburse, all but about 50 of them did so. The remaining students were met with Leon County Sheriff’s Department deputies, who had unadvisedly affixed bayonets to their weapons. The remaining students were arrested. Although there was no violence or bloodshed, the image of the students facing off against the police armed with bayonets remained a vivid one in the minds of all present and catalyzed further activism.

In May 1969, for instance, military recruiters were positioned in the Student Union, and two SDS students were arrested for harassing them.

#### 5) Harpe-Johnson Building

Walk through the Student Union breezeway to Woodward Avenue, then take a left. Follow Woodward until you see the student parking lot on the left. Walk between the parking lot and the Rogers Building, past the Duxbury Nursing Building, until you see the Harpe-Johnson Building, which is home to the University’s ROTC.



In May 1970, students occupied the first two floors of the ROTC building for three days in protest of the Vietnam War. Thankfully, as with all of the protests on FSU’s campus, this one ended peacefully.

## 6) Black Student Union

From the Harpe-Johnson Building, walk East, past Mendenhall, to Wildwood Drive. Go right on Wildwood to Park Avenue. Take a left on Park, then a right onto Woodward Avenue. Approximately one block down on the right is the Black Student Union House.

The Black Student Union was first proposed as a campus organization here in 1968. The primary goal of the BSU is to promote and provide for the social welfare of the Black Student Body at the University. Black and white FSU students have long been involved in the move for civil rights for African Americans, cooperating in the 1956 Tallahassee bus boycott by offering rides; picketing the Sweet Shop and other non-university run businesses on campus for their segregationist policies in 1963-1964; and in 1970 participating in a large demonstration against the US Supreme Court nomination of Harrold Carswell, a Floridian judge who had expressed racist views. In 1962, FSU admitted the first African American student, and by the 1970s, this university had more African American students enrolled than all the other non-historically black state universities in Florida combined. As of 2004, FSU ranked third in the nation among non-historically black colleges in the number of African Americans who graduate with a bachelor's degree.

## 7) Landis Green

Continue on Woodward to Jefferson Street, where you will take a left. Continue on this scenic route down Jefferson Street for two blocks. Take a left past Dorman Hall; Deviney will be directly ahead. Take a left on Magnolia Way. Landis Hall will be on your right, and then Landis Green will stretch out in front of you between Magnolia Way and Dogwood Way.



Landis Green has long been a gathering place for students, both for recreation and demonstration. On October 15, 1969, approximately 3,000 members of the University community, including students and faculty, participated in the Vietnam Moratorium march, which was led from Landis Green. Participants took a candlelight march from Landis through campus, then returned to Landis Green for an all night vigil. This was followed by faculty teach-ins in the morning.

Landis Green is also where 1,000 students met in 1968 to urge President Champion to rescind his original resignation.

On a lighter note of student "protest," Landis Green was home to the streaking frenzy that swept FSU in 1974. The Green was officially opened to streakers for 24 hours in March 1974.

## Conclusion

FSU students were very active and vocal about Civil Rights, freedom from censorship, and the Vietnam War. However, FSU did not deserve the name “Berkeley of the South.” While some of the activism for student and human rights at Berkeley ended in violence, most of the activism on this campus was peaceful and did not result in the disruption of education.

## Suggested Further Readings

Caudle, James R., “The Pig Knife,” A Legend, June 1968, Special Collections, FSU Stozier Library

Marshall, J. Stanley, *The Tumultuous Sixties*, (Tallahassee, Florida: Sentry Press, 2006).

Morrison, Joan, Morrison, Robert K. (ed.), *From Camelot to Kent State : the sixties experience in the words of those who lived it*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).