



New Lights in the Valley: The Emergence of UAB

Tenant S. McWilliams

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A scholarly narrative of UAB from its nascent beginnings through the mid 1990s.

While the economy and culture of the post—World War II South changed from an era of material capital (e.g., cotton and iron ore) to a period of social capital (intellectual development and networked approaches to social change), one of the most important components of urban life, the university, emerged as both a creator and a reflector of such modernization.

This is the case with Birmingham and its youthful institution of higher learning, the University of Alabama at Birmingham. From its early days as a struggling offshoot of the capstone campus in Tuscaloosa, UAB's journey to its current status as a major university has been a bumpy but interesting one. Tenant McWilliams, a longtime UAB history professor, explores the whole range of historical considerations, including UAB's similarities and connections to trans-Atlantic civic universities; the irony of the shift from Big Steel to Big Medicine in Birmingham; the visionary administrations of Joseph F. Volker and others; and the evolving decision to make non-medical life at UAB less of a commuter experience and more of a traditional campus experience.

McWilliams does not palliate the missteps and disputes that have, from time to time, impeded the institution's progress. But he explains why, despite various hurdles and distractions, UAB has risen to be Alabama's largest employer and can rightly boast that its complex of health care services, especially organ transplantation and neuroscience, as well as such fields as philosophy and psychology, are among the best in the nation.

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