

ECLECTIC HOUSTONIANS



The A. D. Bruce Religion Center serves as a focal point for many on-campus religious and spiritual activities. Its educational programs and activities focus on religious issues with an emphasis on interfaith dialogue. Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

Lt. Gen. Andrew Davis Bruce: Mixing Military and Education

By Jesse Nagelberg

The campus-wide “Student Activities” page in the Student Life section of the University of Houston website reads, “Wherever your passions lie, you’re sure to find a match among UH’s 400+ organizations, fraternities, leadership programs and other groups.” Passion, defined by *Merriam-Webster* as a strong feeling of enthusiasm or excitement for something, obviously is alive and well at the University of Houston. Passion has long been a fixture at the university, dating back to its founding, and a passion to provide the university’s students the opportunity to develop all aspects of themselves is what inspired Lieutenant General Andrew Davis Bruce, just a few weeks after starting his term as the university’s third president, to note that the university was missing a fundamental institution—a campus chapel for student use.¹ Fifty years after its opening, the A. D. Bruce Religion Center stands prominently in the center of the residential portion of campus, a symbol of the significant impact A. D. Bruce had and continues to have on the University of Houston.

Andrew Davis Bruce was born to John Logan Bruce and Martha Washington Smith in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 14, 1894. As a child, he moved with his family to Texas, where he later attended the



Lt. Gen. Andrew Davis (A. D.) Bruce became the third president of the University of Houston in 1954 and its first chancellor in 1956. He retired in 1961.

Photo courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston.

Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now Texas A&M University) and earned a doctorate of laws in 1916. While at Texas A&M, he was a member of the Corps of Cadets, an experience that became the precursor to his long military career and the impetus for his joining the U.S. military in June 1917 as a second lieutenant in World War I.²

Bruce’s military career began with him serving in the First Officer’s Training Camp at Leon Springs, Texas, and continued with his being sent into combat in France as part of the 2nd Infantry Division’s 5th Machine Gun Battalion. He participated in numerous battles in France before hiking with his division into Germany to be a part of the occupation force. In his first three years in the military, in addition to achieving the temporary rank of lieutenant colonel at

the age of twenty-four, he earned a number of medals and commendations, including the Legion of Honor, three Croix de guerre medals, and the fourragère, all presented to him by the government of France, as well as the Distinguished Service Cross, which is the second highest military award presented to members of the U.S. Army.³

Upon returning home in 1920, A. D. Bruce married Roberta Linnell Kennedy and moved to Bryan, Texas. Over the next two decades, he focused on raising his three

children and incorporating his love of education into his continued service in the Army. He did this by teaching military science and tactics at Allen Academy in Bryan, serving with the 33rd Infantry in Panama, participating in historical work at the United States Army War College, and serving on the War Department general staff revising textbooks on military doctrine.⁴

It was also during this period that Bruce furthered his own education. He studied military tactics at the United States Army Infantry School, the United States Army Field Artillery School, the United States Army Command and General Staff College, the United States Army War College, and the United States Naval War College; he earned a master's degree from Boston University.⁵

As World War II broke out, Bruce put his academic ambitions on hold and returned to the military full time. In 1942 he was tasked with organizing a new tank destroyer center, which he opened in Killeen, Texas, and named Fort Hood in honor of Civil War hero, General John Bell Hood. His involvement in the establishment of Fort Hood earned him a promotion to the rank of major general on September 9, 1942. In 1943 he was assigned to command the 77th Infantry Division, with which he led campaigns in Guam, the Ryuku islands, and in Leyte, an island in the Philippines. For his command of the 77th Infantry Division, the government of the Philippines awarded him the Philippine Liberation Medal and the Philippine Legion of Honor; he also received the United States Presidential Unit Citation. He gained notoriety in the military community for burying the body of Scripps Howard newspaper columnist Ernie Pyle after a sniper shot him while he was reporting on the war in the Pacific.⁶



Lt. Gen. A. D. Bruce commanding troops during World War II.

After the surrender of the Japanese, Bruce served as the military governor of the Japanese island of Hokkaidō before being assigned to command the 7th Infantry Division in Korea. Upon returning to the United States in October of 1947, his passion for education was incorporated into his assignments as he became the deputy army commander of the Fourth Army in Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, and later as the com-

mandant of the Armed Forces Staff College, located in Norfolk, Virginia.⁷ His position in Virginia, which earned him a promotion to lieutenant general on July 30, 1951, was his last as he retired from the army after thirty-seven years on July 31, 1954. Upon his retirement, in addition to the medals he had received during the two world wars, he earned a Bronze Star Medal, an Air Medal, and the Purple Heart.

On June 16, 1954, the Board of Regents of the University of Houston appointed A. D. Bruce to be the third president of the university. They explained their choice of Lt. Gen. Bruce by describing him “as a top educator in the Armed Forces” and emphasizing his administrative talents. He replaced acting university president Charles Fleming McElhinney, who had served as the business manager of the university before being asked to take over for Dr. Walter W. Kemmerer, who had resigned to accept a key position with the proposed Houston World’s Fair.⁸

Within his first few months as president, Bruce, who was referred to around campus as “The General” noticed that the university did not have a chapel for its students to practice their religion. He had seen the importance of having a chapel at almost all military institutions and considered religion an essential piece to a student’s full education. He commented to the director of religious activities, “Exclude religion entirely from education and you have no foundation upon which to build moral character.” Instituting a religious space on campus fell into Lt. Gen. Bruce’s plan to create the best students through the best form of education. In a speech to the Baytown Rotary Club, where he was advocating for state support of the university, he is recorded as saying, “We must have economic power, political power, social power, scientific power, psychological power, spiritual power – all based on sound education.”⁹



Lt. Gen. A. D. Bruce, shown here discussing a model of the university, organized a board of governors, composed of university regents and prominent Houstonians, which sought state support for UH. During his tenure, the university’s curriculum standards and faculty improved and the university became better-known.

Photo courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston.



UH students, faculty, and staff often use the A. D. Bruce Religion Center for programs and special occasions, including weddings, quinceañeras, baptisms, funerals, memorials, recitals, and lectures. Here UH alums Samantha and Gabe Castaneda exchange wedding vows.

Photo courtesy of Samantha Castaneda.

While the campus lacked a chapel at the time The General arrived, religious organizations and institutions had long been interwoven into the fabric of the University of Houston. When the University of Houston (formerly the Houston Junior College) opened its doors for its first academic year in 1927, two of the founding twelve faculty members, H. F. Ander and Wallace E. Miner, were clergymen. Ander instructed biology in addition to serving Lutheran congregations around Houston and Miner had received a bachelor of divinity from Drew Theological Seminary before becoming an instructor in government and history.

The Baptist Student Union was chartered in 1936, becoming the university's first religious organization, followed by the Catholic Club for Roman Catholic students in 1939. Once World War II began and the G.I. Bill was passed, religious organizations at the university began to multiply and develop as the number of students on campus increased. In 1946 and 1947 alone, The Canterbury Club for Episcopalian students, the Christian Science Organization, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, the Wesley Foundation for Methodist students, and the Westminster Fellowship for Presbyterian students were all established on campus. Together, they created the Religious Groups Council, founded "to coordinate the religious activities of the campus and to stimulate campus wide functions of religious nature." Student participation and interest in campus religious activities started conversations among university administrators

about the proposed construction of a religious activities building, which board members discussed at a meeting on September 15, 1948. Not until A. D. Bruce arrived on campus seven years later did the idea of a building for religious organizations and a chapel on campus return to the limelight.

A. D. Bruce and the Board of Regents began investigating interest in such a building from the various campus religious groups and were surprised to find mixed reactions to the proposal of a shared chapel. Many of the groups had already begun planning for off-campus buildings to serve students. In addition, each of the groups had individually expressed concerns over sharing religious space with groups of other religious denominations. Instead, they stated that they truly wanted new office space and areas for counseling and meetings. Taking their concerns into consideration, Bruce decided to continue discussions with the religious groups about developing a religious space on campus.

He encouraged support from each of the religious groups by proposing a "military solution." He advocated for the model of the Armed Forces Base Chapel, where numerous faiths shared one chapel space, which was considered "neutral" when not in use by another group. He also pushed hard for each religion's organization to accept the proposal for a building because plans for a chapel and religious center were already in the works at Rice Institute (now Rice University). On April 8, 1957, the Religious Groups Council met and decided to support

A. D. Bruce and the administration's plans for a religious center and chapel. The university quickly took action to find an architect, and the Board of Regents selected Frank Dill to begin preliminary sketches that included a chapel, main lobby, lounge area, a director's office, conference room, restrooms, storage and workroom, and sixteen rooms for religious organizations.

The next challenge was for the university to find the funds with which to build the religious center. Bruce formed the Religious Advisory Committee and worked with it to launch a fundraising campaign in the fall of 1958. Instead of calling upon the university's normal pool of donors, Bruce and the committee decided to raise the funds by approaching Houston's religious communities, which were aligned with the religious organizations on campus, to ask for funds and donations. However, the campaign that Bruce thought would be over fairly quickly was long and drawn out for several reasons. Funds had to be returned to organizations after pledges were not met, doubts arose about how long various organizations could stay in the new center, donors were slow to send money, and the various religious denominations disagreed about which artifacts, objects, and designs could or could not be included in the chapel design. Yet, five years after the initial blueprints were drawn, with all conflicts settled, and the final monies needed to begin construction coming from an anonymous donation of \$85,000, construction began on the religious center and chapel in 1963.¹⁰

While the debates over the religious center were taking place, A. D. Bruce stayed busy working hard for the university. His storied military career immediately brought attention to UH, and the changes he brought to the institution brought notoriety and national recognition. He was appointed the first chancellor of the University of Houston System in December of 1956, and with his added title, he increased public knowledge about the university, which had the second largest student population of any university in the state with 13,000 students. He created the Board of Governors, and in 1959 it sought state support for the university, further increasing its prominence and ability to provide a quality education to its students.¹¹ He also advocated for tax support for the university as well as strengthening the standards of the faculty and curriculum during his tenure as president and chancellor. Yet, when he retired from the chancellorship in 1961, construction had not even begun on the religion center.

Four years later, Bruce traveled from North Carolina, where he had moved after retiring, back to Houston to join dignitaries, clergy, faculty, students, and community members at the dedication ceremony of the University Religion Center that he had worked so hard to build. On August 5, 1969, the Board of Regents voted to change the name of the University Religion Center to the A. D. Bruce Center to honor The General after his death on July 28, 1969. The following October, the Religion Center Policy Board requested that the word "Religion" be included in the building's name, and on December 3, the name officially became the A. D. Bruce Religion Center.¹²



Students gather for lunch in the Hillel Lounge in 1982, Rabbi Shaul Osadchey, far right, was the first full-time Hillel director, serving from 1979 to 1983.

Photo courtesy of Houston Hillel, University of Houston.

Today, fifty years after the dedication of the A. D. Bruce Religion Center, anyone walking on campus might be surprised to find that much about the building remains the same. The chapel, built to service all religions and all denominations, is still full most evenings with students attending worship services of all varieties. Anyone roaming the halls will hear voices echoing out of the various rooms where each organization has its own dedicated space. Students barely notice that the building with the enormous glass windows nestled in the woods and surrounded by residential life was not even in existence fifty years ago.

The religion center represents "old world" values existing in an area of campus where almost everything is new. New dormitories and cafeterias have risen in recent years, some replacing older buildings and others as brand new additions. Even the Quadrangle, the oldest group of dormitories on campus, which surrounds the religion center, is scheduled to be torn down and rebuilt in the coming years. As the university continues to grow and more and more students make their home there, the number of students who make use of the religion center's chapel and rooms continues to grow even as the center itself has not changed. In 2010, the religion center came under the auspices of the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Services. Currently twenty-four religious organizations on campus are represented in the center's spaces, with an ever-growing number of new religious organizations seeking ways to get involved every year.¹³

Rabbi Kenny Weiss, the executive director of Houston Hillel and the past president of the Campus Ministries Association, remarked, "The Campus Ministries Association enhances spiritual life on campus, but that is very anecdotal... because what it's really about is affecting individuals."¹⁴ Rabbi Weiss mentioned that one of the benefits of having a religion center on campus with all of the various religions represented is that more interfaith activities and dialogue are taking place, setting the stage for more individuals to get involved.



◀ *Hillel students in the fall of 2013 standing in front of a Sukkah, a temporary “dwelling” that is built annually during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, the holiday of booths, to commemorate the Israelite people sleeping in huts while they walked through the desert. Pictured from left to right are Joy Lester, Michelle Blumenthal, Jesse Nagelberg, Daniel Smith, Alex Cherem, Michael Leytman, Cesar Morales, and Lucas Aisenberg.*

Photos courtesy of Houston Hillel, University of Houston.

A. D. Bruce was adamant in his belief that the only way to successfully educate students was to add a focus on their moral character through spirituality. Rabbi Weiss echoes Lt. Gen. Bruce when talking about the purpose of a religion center on a college campus. “Universities are supposed to develop the entire student, not just teach them something that will then go on a diploma, and I think that spiritual life is a significant part of that for many students if not most students. And so it makes sense for the university to be able to address all aspects of the student’s life.”¹⁵

Fifty years after the A. D. Bruce Religion Center was erected on campus, its original purpose still rings true through the efforts campus ministers are making to connect with students on an individual basis as well as through the interfaith interactions that the building promotes. With all of the expansion happening in and around the University of Houston, there is good reason to believe that in another fifty years, the A. D. Bruce Religion Center will still be nestled amongst the trees, offering students any spiritual connection they desire.



▲ *Sukkah, 1981.*

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Thank you ...



Director of the Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative and editor of Houston History, Joe Pratt; founder and director of the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, Captain Paul Matthews; with Distinguished UH Alumnus and Houston History supporter, Welcome Wilson Sr. at the spring launch party.

Houston History thanks Captain Paul Matthews and the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum for hosting the launch party for our spring issue, “Military Might.” Everyone had the opportunity to see the exhibits, watch a film on the Buffalo Soldiers and museum, and visit with Capt. Matthews and authors of the magazine articles. The museum outgrew its original space on Southmore (*Houston History* v.7 n.2) and moved into the Houston Light Guard Armory Building, a City of Houston Protected Landmark, on Veterans Day 2012. See the article on page 30 in this issue to learn more about the museum.

We are also grateful to our board members Betty Chapman and Anne Sloan, who provided food and set up the table service at the event, and to Susan Bischoff, Barbara Eaves, Bill Kellar, and Yolanda Black Navarro who contributed refreshments.