

Fact or Fiction? W&L's Lee Chapel Announcement, Columns, dateline July 21, 2022

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Recent W&L Columns announcement, excerpted

“The renovation of W&L's University Chapel, [announced by the Board of Trustees in June 2021](#) is scheduled to begin in late Fall 2022.”

“The planned renovation will physically separate the original 1868 Chapel from the 1883 annex containing the Lee memorial sculpture and family crypt.”

FACT OR FICTION?

TGR has learned the following as of now:

1. A recent Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to City of Lexington, Building Inspections, the Fire Marshal and the Police Chief, indicates their combined objections concerning W&L's Lee Chapel interior wall proposal, citing occupant escape paths would be reduced in the event of fire or sudden violent event reasons.
2. City of Lexington officials indicate that W&L plans to present, through its architectural consultant Quinn Evans, another [4th] attempt to achieve a Lee Chapel interior wall construction to permanently separate the Auditorium and the rear area in view of the recumbent Lee.
3. In its latest Columns announcement W&L asserts approval of the interior wall plan by the National Park Service (NPS) and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR). Whether NPS or VDHR are aware of local

building code constraints is not mentioned in that announcement. Consequently, FOIAs have been sent to VDHR and to NPS to update them on local building code conflicts to ask for documents whether they were aware of this situation or not.

COMMENTS:

1. Recall this wall proposal is to make mandatory attendees 'comfortable' by not seeing the Lee memorial statue. W&L has used movable barriers in the past to conceal the Valentine recumbent statue from the auditorium.
2. Safety versus political comfort is what W&L proposes to force upon its own students and other visitors to Lee Chapel. Lexington inspector emails state that advertised attendance capacity for Lee Chapel with one adequate egress point remains a hazard, inasmuch as the rear stairwell as another emergency exit would be overstressed for the physical loading and narrow egress capacity.
3. City of Lexington planning has denied W&L's attempt to install its Institutional History Museum and parking deck on Lee Avenue per prior iteration of its master plan. Several W&L alumni and a current student either presented letters or spoke at the April planning meeting to oppose W&L's proposed Lee Avenue location on the Institutional Museum project.

A SENSIBLE PROPOSAL:

1. TGR PROPOSES THAT Washington and Lee University step back and realize their planning is wrong footed. They need to move all mandatory attendance out of Lee Chapel. Whether the wall is movable as has been used before, or permanent as proposed, all attendees will know what is behind the wall. Mandatory attendance of students and others to assuage their discomfort with Lee's legacy cannot be achieved in Lee Chapel.

2. W&L owns and can utilize land in the back campus area to serve both its goals of creating much needed large gathering venues. Starting fresh, it can build a premier facility to house the Institutional History Museum with adequate parking, ease of access, room for lectures and mandatory attendance, and critically needed storage and display space for numerous collections presently tucked away in various poorly controlled areas, at risk of fire and humidity damage.
3. Restoring Lee Chapel and Museum to former condition and interior without building a separation wall will isolate this structure for its use as a public museum and as a voluntary attendance gathering facility for elective events. This will also preserve a national historic landmark as it has been viewed for decades and retain its 40,000 annual visitor popularity with the public. This in turn will prevent traffic congestion as was proposed and denied on W&L's Lee Avenue Institutional History Museum project.

IN CONCLUSION:

Lee Chapel is a museum, a National Historic Landmark that has, for 150 years, memorialized the Civil War and Robert E. Lee's reconciling presidency. Not every student wants to enter the museum artifacts hidden behind a literal wall. This will not erase its history or perception. The practical solution, for both student comfort, and safety (as indicated by City of Lexington officials) is to leave the historic site alone and build a world class museum and 800-seat auditorium up by Liberty Hall ruins. So much of W&L's history is untold; let us stop dismantling what is already told and instead voice what isn't.

John Lane '1974

