

Revisiting President Robert E. Lee's Accomplishments at Washington College

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29 June 2022

In 1907, the centennial of Robert E. Lee's birth, public figures in America praised the general for promoting national harmony after the Civil War. They lauded his innovative contributions to college education in his native war-ravaged Virginia. "Once the war was over," President Theodore Roosevelt said, "he instantly undertook the task of healing and binding up the wounds of his countrymen, in the true spirit of those who feel malice toward none and charity toward all " Roosevelt added that General Lee devoted all of his power "to the reconciliation of all his countrymen with one another, and to fitting the youth of the South for the duties of a lofty and broad-minded citizenship."¹

Another supporter was Charles Francis Adams, Jr., the grandson of one president and the great grandson of another. He served as a colonel in the Union army and fought against Lee's forces at Gettysburg and elsewhere. In 1907 he travelled to Lexington, Va., and offered a superb tribute at the centennial. He applauded Lee's service during the Reconstruction period for helping to heal the Union. He said that "to overestimate it would be difficult."²

During the Reconstruction era prominent Northerners, who had led the opposition to slavery, endorsed Lee's efforts to promote education in the South and good will between North and South. One articulate backer was the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. His sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, had written *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the anti-slavery book that President Lincoln said: "Started this great war!" Beecher, himself an ardent abolitionist, reportedly hailed General Lee as "the very man to take charge of a great educational institution in the South." Beecher urged generous financial assistance for Washington College under Lee's leadership "in behalf of

¹ Theodore Roosevelt letter, "Robert E. Lee and the Nation," *Sewanee Review* 15:2 (April 1907), 173-76.

² *Baltimore Sun*, January 20, 1907, p. 8.

the common education of the whole people, for the sake of reconstruction, reunion, peace and love. . . .”³

In light of the praise General Lee received from contemporaries who were anything but die-hard Southern sympathizers, it is surprising that some present-day writers overlook Lee’s many positive contributions as president of Washington College. For example, Ty Seidule largely ignored Lee’s efforts to promote national reconciliation and improved education after the Civil War ended. But, Elizabeth Brown Pryor did acknowledge that while educational reform was not Lee’s specialty, he performed it conscientiously and “developed an innovative approach with far-reaching applications.”⁴ He raised funds for the college from donors in the North and the South, constructed new buildings, expanded enrollment, and revitalized the curriculum. By personal example he taught students honor, ethics, and tolerance.

One way to evaluate Lee’s performance is to compare his stewardship of Washington College with another troubled private college in the Old Dominion in the same period, the College of William and Mary (W&M). It was the second-oldest college in the country, one attended by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Marshall.

At the end of the Civil War both colleges were nearly bankrupt, and both selected graduates of West Point as their presidents. W&M chose Benjamin Stoddert Ewell, who had held the position before the war, and during the conflict served as a colonel in the Confederate Army. At W&M the college struggled to find students. Enrollment fell from 65 in 1865-66 to 20 in 1867-68 before the college shut down in 1869-70. During Ewell’s presidency, W&M never recruited more than 20 percent of its student body from outside Virginia.⁵

Meanwhile, Washington College flourished under President Lee, who had pre-war experience as superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Enrollment had averaged 88 students in the five years before the war. It quadrupled under Lee’s leadership reaching 410 in 1867-68. And nearly 80 percent of the students came from out-of-state in 1870-71. These 24

³ “Education at the South,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 46:10 (March 5, 1868), 78; *Brooklyn Union*, March 3, 1868, p. 2.

⁴ Ty Seidule, *Robert E. Lee and Me* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020); Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through his Private Letters* (New York: Penguin, 2007), p. 437.

⁵ L. Neal Holly and Jeremy P. Martin, “Leadership in Crisis: A Historical Analysis of Two College Presidencies in Reconstruction Virginia,” *Higher Education in Review* 9 (2012), 37-64.

states included California, Idaho, New York, and Texas. There also were international students from Canada, France, and Mexico during President Lee's tenure.⁶

Where buildings and finances were concerned the story was similar. The W&M campus had been devastated by the war and the school was broke. The college was resurrected but closed again in 1881. President Ewell turned to the state for aid, and in 1888 W&M resumed operations with a state charter as a normal school.

In Lexington the charismatic Lee proved a successful fundraiser. According to two modern-day William and Mary historians, L. Neal Holly and Jeremy P. Martin, President Lee presided over a "fundraising juggernaut." In two years, Lee doubled the endowment. His fundraising attracted significant benefactors from among Northern cultural and business leaders, including international financier George Peabody; Tom Scott, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad; the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher; Peter Cooper, the industrialist and inventor; newspaper editor Horace Greeley; Warren Newcomb, the sugar merchant; banker W. W. Corcoran; and Samuel J. Tilden, the Democratic presidential candidate in 1876. As a result of Lee's efforts Virginia-born inventor Cyrus Hall McCormick and his family would contribute \$360,000.⁷

Successful fundraising enabled President Lee to construct new buildings and repair war damage. One of his priorities was a new college chapel, begun in 1867, which would become the final resting place of President Lee. It was built of brick and limestone in a Victorian pattern.

Whereas President Ewell sought to attract interest in William and Mary's traditional classical curriculum, Lee transformed instruction at Washington College. When Lee arrived in Lexington in 1865, the curriculum focused heavily on a classical education. Each student was required to study four years of Latin and Greek. He perceived the need to teach practical subjects that would prepare leaders for the new South. Under Lee's guidance the curriculum expanded to include electives, and established five new chairs – three in Applied Science, one of Modern Languages, and one of History and Literature. Students could study French, German, and Spanish.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44, 48. Washington College, *School Catalogues* (1866, 1869, 1870).

⁷ Holly and Martin, "Leadership in Crisis," 56-57; Ollinger Crenshaw, *General Lee's College* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 194.

In 1866 Washington College assimilated a Law School and organized a School of Civil and Mining Engineering. Soon Lee's college offered professional programs in engineering intended to meet the South's need for high-grade scientific instruction. There were programs in civil and mining engineering, and the college announced plans to teach mechanical engineering, applied chemistry, agriculture, and commerce.⁸

Lee added other programs intended to meet the needs of the South. In 1867 a Student's Business School was established, which would evolve into the Commerce School in the early 20th century. And in 1869 Washington College added a program in journalism intended to attract college graduates into the newspaper business. These programs were the first of their kind at colleges in the United States.

To staff these programs, Lee recruited some faculty with teaching experience at major colleges. One was Richard McCulloch, who had taught previously at Columbia and Princeton.⁹

No wonder Holly and Martin regard President Lee an "innovative college leader" and observe that the "curricular advances and exposure during Lee's administration secured the college's future" They say that "Washington College gambled on Lee's celebrity . . . and was greatly rewarded." He mobilized institutional resources to modernize the physical plant as well as the curriculum. He attracted out-of-state students and significantly increased enrollments. "Washington College under Lee's leadership was progressive, embodying a vision of a new South."¹⁰

This thoughtful assessment of Lee's leadership, published in 2012, comports with earlier positive assessments of Lee's presidency, including comments of the general's contemporaries. Virginia historian Marshall Fishwick wrote in glowing terms in 1950 about Lee's contributions to higher education. "Lee is the college president whose innovations gave new life to Southern education." Writing in 1981, Charles Bracelen Flood concluded that "Lee used his new position to create a model educational institution and to exemplify for a deeply wounded nation the healing powers of compassion, generosity, and conciliation." Perhaps the most enthusiastic of Lee's performance after the Civil War was offered by a biographer Philip Van Doren Stern. "What

⁸ *Abingdon Virginian*, April 1, 1870, p. 4.

⁹ *Memphis Daily Commercial*, June 23, 1866, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Holly and Martin, "Leadership in Crisis,"* 60-61.

Lee did on the field," Stern concludes, "made him famous, but what he did afterwards in civilian life made him great."¹¹

Lee brought with him elements of the West Point Honor System which he had known as a cadet and as Superintendent. This included the single sanction and a student run system which was fully in place at Washington College before his death. Most important, Lee also epitomized the honor system in his own life and character. This is demonstrated through his maxim that "every student should behave as a gentleman." Thus, there can be no doubt that the honor system of today is the direct legacy of Robert E. Lee.¹²

Lee also impressed his students, many of whom were the sons of those who had served with him in the military. Sidney Dyer McCormick, a Kentucky student who enrolled at Washington College in 1866, recalled that no student could forget his first meeting with President Lee, the "feeling of awe in his presence" that was soon replaced by one of confidence. Lee projected dignity, grace, and courtly manners. "His face was an index of the nobility of character" What particularly impressed young McCormick was Lee's memory. He never forgot a name or a face. Lee said that he had never been introduced to a soldier of the Army of Virginia whose face and name he could not instantly recall.¹³

In reflecting on Robert E. Lee's contributions as an educator and leader in the post-Civil War period, it is worth emphasizing that the Southern economy was in ruins. The rail system was shattered and agriculture in shambles. Farmers lacked work animals for plowing fields. Many former soldiers had few marketable skills. Some needed remedial education. Under Lee's direction Washington College provided learning opportunities. For the benefit of young men who had been prevented by the war from obtaining adequate preparation for college, the college even offered elementary instruction in Latin, Greek, mathematics and English.¹⁴

At Washington College Lee drew on his experiences at West Point and adapted education to the needs of the South as a whole. By helping to educate a new generation of leaders, Lee did much to facilitate recovery and help the South rejoin the national economy. Progress was slow.

¹¹ Marshall Fishwick, "Virginians on Olympus. II. Robert E. Lee: Savior of the Lost Cause," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 58:2 (April 1950), 180; Charles Bracelen Flood, *Lee: The Last Years* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1981), front jacket; cited in William W. Hassler, "Robert E. Lee: The Educator," *Georgia Review* 21:4 (Winter 1967), 507.

¹² See Neely Young, *The Evolution of the Honor System at Washington and Lee University* (2021).

¹³ Sidney Dyer McCormick, "Robert E. Lee as College President," *Outlook*, July 17, 1897, p. 684.

¹⁴ *Abingdon Virginian*, April 1, 1870, p. 4.

But repair to the transportation network and infrastructure gradually attracted northern investment. Graduates of programs set up under Robert E. Lee became leaders in the professions of law and medicine, and as businessmen they created jobs and employment opportunities for individuals of all races. No wonder then that Robert E. Lee was widely admired for his post-Civil War contributions to education. In November 1870, immediately after his death, the trustees of Washington College honored him by changing the name to Washington and Lee University.

Should contemporary concerns about race and slavery in the 19th century tarnish Lee's post-war contributions to higher education? Readers should recall that Lee, and George Washington, were products of a different era, when personal property included slaves. Over time Washington became uneasy with slavery, and provided for the emancipation of his slaves upon his death. Lee also expressed misgivings about the "peculiar institution," the term that many white southerners employed for slavery. Lee deplored the agitation of Northern abolitionists for aggravating tensions between North and South. But, according to a son, he liberated three or four slaves that he inherited from his mother several years before the Civil War on his own volition. In 1857, as the executor of George Washington Parke Custis' estate (his father-in-law), Lee took charge of a more complicated situation involving an indebted estate and a large number of slaves. Custis' will stipulated that the slaves were to be manumitted within five years of his death. Despite the disruption of war, and his commanding Confederate forces, Lee apparently succeeded in emancipating all of the slaves by January 1863.¹⁵

It is worth remembering that Lee was ahead of his times when it came to the education of Blacks. The prominent Black leader of the late 19th century, Booker T. Washington who was born into slavery, would later praise Lee for his efforts to educate Negroes, through the medium of the Sunday School. He said that Lee was one of "the first white people in America, certainly the first in the South, to exhibit . . . interest in . . . reaching . . . the Negro and saving his soul."¹⁶

As president of Washington College, Lee promoted reconciliation and racial tolerance. When on several occasions students scuffled with Blacks in the Freedmen's program, Lee promptly investigated and expelled the offending students. Lee's contemporaries insisted that he maintained the policy of expelling any students who might participate in attempts to punish Ne-

¹⁵ See Pryor, *Reading the Man*, pp. 260-75, 452-54; Robert E. Lee, Jr., to Thomas Nelson Page, Dec. 14, 1908, and Robert E. Lee to Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, Jan. 8, 1863, both Lee Family Digital Archive.

¹⁶ Louis Harlan and Raymond Smock, *Booker T. Washington Papers* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981), vol. 10.

groes. When Lee heard a report that students might attempt to lynch a Black, involved in a shooting, the general urged students “to abstain from any violation of the law.”¹⁷

A student who knew Lee well, because they shared a common interest in good horses, later wrote that Lee did not treat lightly “disorderly orgies” of college students. The general would caution students who “became remiss, or careless, or dissipated,” and if they did not change their behavior, he would write to the parent. “And the student would disappear, not to be seen again.”¹⁸

In seeking to downgrade Lee for his actions, or inactions, on racial issues while president of Washington College, critics overlook over an important point. Many colleges and universities across the eastern U.S. have discovered unpleasant ties to slavery and the slave economy among their leaders and benefactors. Ephraim Williams, the New England businessman, for whom Williams College is named, owned slaves. Benjamin Bates (Bates College) bought cotton grown by slave labor for his textile mill. Elihu Yale (Yale University) was a British imperialist and slave-trader. The family for whom Brown University is named, were slave traders. John Hancock, the Boston merchant, who helped fund the American Revolution, and signed the Declaration of Independence in large letters, owned slaves. One could compile a long list of educational leaders and benefactors who had ties to slavery, and/or the opium trade in East Asia. Dartmouth, Harvard, Columbia, and Princeton would be high on that list. Also, the list would include the Jesuit leaders of Georgetown University who have admitted that their institution owned slaves until 1862.¹⁹

Nor were some of these colleges quick to admit Black students after the Civil War. A Black first entered Williams College in 1885. The first Black graduated from Bates in 1874, from Brown in 1877, and from Princeton in the 1890s.

Regrettably, “great” institutions and “great” people show all forms of frailties in their ascent to eminence. So, do we ignore, and seek to erase, the contributions of our forebears because some actions do not conform to contemporary standards? That is presentism in its most extreme

¹⁷ Edwin Mims, “Five Years of Robert E. Lee’s Life,” *Outlook*, Nov. 26, 1904, p. 784; Captain Robert E. Lee, *Recollections and Letters of General Lee* (Doubleday, 1904), pp. 299-301; Robert E. Lee on student behavior, March 30, 1869, Lee Family Digital Archive.

¹⁸ McCormick, *Outlook*, July 17, 1897, p. 684.

¹⁹ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (Bloomsbury, 2013); *Baltimore Sun*, September 2, 2016, p. A11.

form. It flows from a faulty understanding of the past, and it often leads to a feeling of moral superiority over flawed personalities of any given era.

A better approach is to learn from history and to encourage greater discussion of previous generations and their times. Washington and Lee University is uniquely qualified to lead that discussion, having distinctive ties to our country's first president and to Robert E. Lee, the general and educator who married Washington's step great-granddaughter. The Civil War offers a prism through which to view complex issues of race and slavery, war and peace, political compromise and partisanship, gender, disease, education, ethics, law, finance, and economic development. Such an approach accommodates multiple points of view. It allows us to move forward without succumbing to the false god of presentism. And it permits us to explore the strengths and shortcomings of our past in ways that befit a serious college education.

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