

**Chris Dalton '97: Letter to Washington and Lee President Dudley, June 29, 2020.**

***Mr. Dalton, a US Marine Corps combat veteran, voices his strong belief that the name of the University should not be changed. Robert E. Lee's many outstanding contributions to the school distinguishes him as one of most influential leaders in the survival and reputation of the University. Mr. Dalton further advocates, for the University community, the confrontation of all biases through a study of its Founders' lives.***

Dear President Dudley,

I am a W&L graduate of the class of 1997, and I am writing to voice my strong opposition to changing the name of Washington and Lee University.

I recently read Dr. Rasmussen's email to you, and I agree wholeheartedly with his vitally important point that "the University community should not be concerned with Lee's Confederate past, which is not relevant to Washington and Lee; we should look only at his extraordinary performance while at the school." That performance was, indeed, extraordinary, and it certainly warrants the honor of the school bearing Lee's name.

I happen to be among the very small percentage of W&L graduates who served in the military; I am a United States Marine Corps combat veteran. I am keenly aware that, for four of his 63 years on earth, Robert E. Lee led troops onto battlefields to kill Americans who wore the same uniform I wore. I see no reason to celebrate that. But Washington College was not renamed Washington and Lee University because of Lee's service to the Confederacy. It was named for him to honor his service to our school. Not only did he save the school financially, strengthen the Honor System, incorporate the local law school into Washington College, and completely transform and modernize the school's curriculum, he (much more importantly) taught all of the college's students, and everyone else across the former Confederacy who sought and followed his example, that they were to move forward as Americans, to expend their efforts to rebuild and strengthen our reunited nation. After the Civil War, he served our school and the American nation well. All of that deserves to be honored.

Instead of tearing down the legacy of our namesakes, our university has a unique opportunity to instill in its students, through those men's legacies, the ability to

challenge their own biases and preconceived assumptions. That is a skill that is far too rare these days.

In that spirit, I believe W&L should institute a course, required for all freshmen, that covers the history of the university, with an emphasis on George Washington and Robert E. Lee and what each contributed to the school, with thorough discussion of the context in which they each lived.

Regarding Robert E. Lee specifically, I will admit that I knew far less about him when I was at W&L than I do now. Having read a great deal about him in the years since, I think W&L is in a profoundly unique position to allow (*i.e.*, require) its students to examine a complex American who did great things for the country (both before and after the war), led an honorable life, resurrected a university that we all love, but also chose the wrong side when faced with the most consequential decision of his life. Neither “side” in the surface-level debate about him is correct; he is not the “Marble Man,” but he is also not an evil man deserving derision.

How better to try to ensure that students learn to delve deep below the surface of the debates that rage around us than by forcing them to face the complexities of the men their school is named for? Sadly, America is becoming a country in which deep thought about difficult issues is becoming far too rare; far too many people are content to do nothing more than find and parrot rhetoric that confirms their own biases. A course that wrestles with the complexity of Washington and Lee, examining the good and bad in each man’s life (in the context that actually surrounded them) might make students think more than they otherwise would. I believe we’d produce even better graduates if we used our name and our history to force every student, no matter what biases they might show up with, to confront realities that contradict those biases. The complexities of Washington’s and Lee’s lives would likely do that.

I’m a pretty liberal guy, and I would, without hesitation, remove Confederate statues from public lands all across this country. The Confederacy does not deserve to be honored or celebrated, in my opinion. But I’m all for keeping the name Washington and Lee University. The two issues simply have nothing to do with one another.

Simply put, Washington's and Lee's contributions to the University warrant the honor of the school bearing their names. We will show our strength by demonstrating our ability to understand and explain nuance, rather than caving to the passions of the moment.

Thank you for your consideration.

Very respectfully,

Chris Dalton '97