

Boys Will be Boys

A paper delivered to the Sphex Club of Lynchburg by Julius Sigler Feb 4, 2016

Lynchburg College is my alma mater, but the University of Virginia is my academic grandmother. Growing up in Florida, I must admit that I was completely unaware of the existence of the University before I came to Lynchburg. My first awareness of the University was in the form of empathy for the football team, mired in the middle of a 28-game losing streak. While the University of Florida never lost 28 in a row, they also rarely had a winning season. So it was comfortable for me to begin to follow their football misfortunes. As I prepared to attend graduate school, I applied to Virginia, Duke and Carolina. I received identical offers of support from all three and was torn. Mr. Jefferson's architecture and seeming presence on the grounds profoundly influenced my eventual decision to accept the Virginia offer.

As a graduate student, I turned to reading things other than physics to help preserve my sanity. I read a lot of history, clearing entire shelves in Alderman Library. It was impossible to escape Mr. Jefferson, since students and faculty spoke of him as if he were on the campus every day. So I became interested in Jefferson and the history of the University and read whatever I could find. At some point, I even fought my way through all five volumes of Phillip Alexander Bruce's formidable History of the University of Virginia 1819-1919. This talk is a result of the rekindling of those interests from my distant past. When I retired last summer, my colleague Sally Selden thoughtfully gave me three books. One of them, entitled Rot, Riot and Rebellion, by former Richmond Times Dispatch reporters Rex Bowman and Carlos Santos brought into sharp focus many things I had already known and provided additional insights for me. My comments tonight are largely based on that book.

Looking back from today's variety of institutions of higher education, it's difficult to realize just how bold and unique Mr. Jefferson's proposal for a state supported university were. Almost everyone knows something about the original "Academical Village," the centerpiece of today's UVA. But Jefferson was as interested in the curriculum as he was in the architecture. Other colleges and universities were closely tied to and supported by religious groups—and were strongly oriented toward preparing an educated clergy. This was as true of Harvard College as it was of the College of William and Mary.

In the 1818 Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia, Jefferson described his educational philosophy. He began with the need for public primary and secondary education, designed to create an educated citizenry with the skills necessary to transact business and understand his civic rights and obligations. He then moved on to the purpose of higher education:

"To form the statesmen, legislators and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend; To expound the principles and

structure of government, ...and a sound spirit of legislation, which...shall leave us free to do whatever does not violate the equal rights of another; to harmonize and promote the interests of agriculture, manufactures and commerce...; to develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order; to enlighten them with mathematical and physical sciences, which advance the arts and administer to the health, the subsistence and comforts of human life; and, generally, to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others and of happiness within themselves. These are the objects of that higher grade of education, the benefits and blessings of which the Legislature now propose to provide for the good and ornament of their country....

Encouraged, therefore, by the sentiments of the Legislature,...we present the following tabular statement of the branches of learning which we think should be taught in the University,...each of which are [sic] within the powers of a single professor:

I. Languages, ancient...

II. Languages, modern...

III. Mathematics, pure:

IV. Physico-mathematics...(applied mathematics), astronomy, geography

V. Physics, or natural philosophy, chemistry, mineralogy

VI. Botany, zoology

VII. Anatomy, medicine

VIII. Government,...History

IX. Law, municipal

X. ...General Grammar, Ethics,...fine arts”

Jefferson's entire persona compelled him to argue for a higher education based on scientific knowledge. His university would include neither clergy nor chapel nor a professor of divinity. Instead, the library, housed in the Rotunda, was to be at the center of the school. Jefferson believed that students should draw their own conclusions through daily interaction with faculty, from reading, observing nature, and conducting scientific experiments. He instituted an innovative elective system at the University of Virginia, rather than a fixed curriculum. He let students choose their courses. Rather than the usual classics curriculum, the University

would offer a menu of sciences, along with modern languages, as well as political economics. No degrees would be offered, nor was enrollment prescribed for any particular period. Students remained for as long as they (or their fathers) paid the tuition. Jefferson explained, "This institution of my native state, the hobby of my old age, will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind to explore and to expose every subject susceptible of its contemplation."

He also ruled out appointing a president. Ever the democrat, he wanted professors to engage the students, not—as was the custom—to read to them. He wanted his students to govern themselves." This turned out to be a serious mistake.

Jefferson had formulated his ideas on education over a lifetime. He believed strongly that the future of the nation resided in an educated citizenry—even though that citizenry excluded many citizens. But his political career had created many enemies—both in Virginia and across the nation. In addition to the Federalists, he had angered many, if not most, in the religious community. At one time, he had tried to change the curriculum at the College of William and Mary to reflect his own design. While he did succeed in weakening the Anglican presence, the College remained essentially as it had been when Jefferson studied there.

The rhetoric surrounding his campaign for the presidency reflects the hostility, much of it engendered by his arguments for church and state. It appears that Jefferson was the lightning rod for this criticism, since others of the founding fathers who held similar religious views were not subjected to the same levels of scorn. I've read accounts of women hiding their Bibles when he was elected president because they were convinced that he would take them away. Locally, he had angered the Episcopalians considerably with his calls for change at William and Mary. The Presbyterians, who controlled Hampden Sidney College and the institution that would become Washington and Lee University, were at best threatened by his proposal to locate a state university in the Charlottesville area and at worst offended by his proposal for a secular university. And, of course, his political enemies were all too happy to cause him whatever misery they could.

So, when he returned to Monticello following his two terms as President, he turned his efforts to realizing his dream of a new kind of university—with very little hope of success. His opponents easily defeated a series of proposals for state support of a centrally located university. The actual flow of the debates is interesting in its own right and would be a suitable subject for another paper. In essence, the university would not have been created as it was if not for the efforts of one man—a younger politician and good friend. We heard much about him two weeks ago from Tom Ledford. Joseph Carrington Cabell. Cabell first met Jefferson in 1806 and the two became good friends. By the time Jefferson was concentrating his efforts on founding a university, Cabell had been elected to the House of Delegates and then to the state senate. He had become a well respected and powerful legislator—and he enthusiastically supported his hero's proposals. While the task was not easy, Cabell almost single-handedly was able to convince the legislature to pass a resolution guaranteeing state

support for a state university. Jefferson did have other friends—James Madison and James Monroe were neighbors, and the Board of Commissioners created by the legislation was friendly to Jefferson and recommended that the institution be located in Charlottesville.

The experiment began on March 7, 1825, when the University opened its doors with 63 students and seven faculty members. Five of the faculty were European. The faculty and their families were housed in the Pavilions, in the midst of student accommodations. In 1825, neither Charlottesville nor the University were the attractive places we envision today. Imagine accepting a job halfway across the world and moving to a backwoods town to teach students whose culture was quite foreign to you. These seven were tough individuals, in addition to their unquestioned academic preparation. You may have seen prints of the early University. The lawn was essentially dusty clay with spots of grass and weeds. In addition to students, it was populated by a variety of animals—from chickens to hogs, from horses to dogs and cats. Every room had its fireplace, so in the winter, wood smoke was everywhere. Roads were not paved. I could go on, but you get the general idea. It was not a pleasant place.

The future of the university was at best uncertain. His political enemies were waiting for the opportunity to withdraw state support. He was regarded as the devil himself by many members of the clergy. Supporters of other colleges such as Hampden Sidney and Washington College were suspicious that the university would affect their institutions negatively. Still others were offended by the hiring of European professors, seeing that as an insult to existing American institutions.

Most of the students were from Virginia—almost all in this first class and over the next two decades close to 75%. All but two were from the South and by the fourth or fifth year, all were from the South. Most were privileged sons of wealthy families—planters and merchants. And most, though certainly not all, were not particularly interested in learning. In fact. If I were to tell you about a school where students loved to party, to drink excessively and might even engage in extramarital sex, you might guess that the school is the University of Virginia.

During the first two decades of its existence, most University students were totally disinterested in study; rather, they preferred to consume excessive amounts of alcohol, to wander the lawn in large mobs., to fight—which in that era, in the South, often meant to duel—and to rebel against authority. Professors were threatened and sometimes beaten, their homes were vandalized; some feared for their lives. Students arranged for ladies of the night to reside on campus, during which time these visitors became acquainted with a goodly number of youthful scholars.

Perhaps this doesn't sound too different from some of today's universities, but many of these students brought African-American slaves to make their beds and empty their chamber pots. Many were pampered sons of plantation owners with an exaggerated self-importance. and "a sense of honor easily bruised,.

Almost immediately Jefferson's idea of student self-governance clashed with the culture of honor. The honor I'm talking about is not the honor embodied in the Honor Code of today's University. Two hundred years ago, it was an unwritten code of conduct under which men of the upper class functioned in society. It not only defined appropriate conduct; it also embodied rules for the resolution of conflicts. While it was meant to control behavior, it often resulted in fighting, where many students used the code as an excuse for violence—and to shield those who broke the rules, since the code, as they interpreted it, would not allow them to inform on their classmates.

The first decades of the University's existence are fraught with examples of conflict—conflict between students, between students and faculty, between students and rules and even between students and civil authorities. Rot Riots and Rebellion provides numerous detailed examples of each of these. I will briefly describe three of them—just to give you the flavor. The first happened a few months following the University's opening. It began when a student tossed a bottle of urine through the window of Professor Long's pavilion. The following day, masked students caroused on the Lawn, drinking to excess. Professors Tucker and Emmett tried to calm the disturbance. Professor Tucker grabbed one of the masked students who tore away from him. In the process, the student's shirt was torn. The student rallied the other carousers, claiming that his honor had been breached—after all, no one grabs a gentleman's collar. In the resulting melee, bricks and sticks were thrown at the two professors. Although the incident had involved only 14 students, more than 50 students signed a statement of support for the offended student. The following day, seven angry professors demanded justice, which led to Jefferson's attempt to address the student body on the third of October in the Rotunda. Jefferson was so choked with emotion on seeing his institution in such disarray that he began to weep and could not speak. In the end, three students were expelled—one of them, Wilson Miles Cary, was his grand nephew. Subsequently, the Board of Visitors enacted a series of new rules intended to improve discipline. This would become a pattern—students disobeying rules, faculty begging for a semblance of control, enactment of new rules, easing off of new rules to appease students and a seemingly never-ending cycle of conflict—with student perceptions of honor mixed throughout.

Two of the most egregious rules were the “Early Rising Law,” and the “Student Uniform Law.” The former, enacted in 1827, stipulated that the Rotunda bell would be rung at dawn from April through July and that students would be in class by 5:30 am, six days a week. The latter, enacted a few months following the above-mentioned incident, spelled out in great detail the allowed attire for University students.

“The Dress of the students, whenever resident, shall be uniform and plain. The coat, waistcoat & pantaloons, of cloth of a dark gray mixture, at a price not exceeding \$6 a yard. The vest shall be double breasted, with a standing cape, & skirts of a moderate length with pocket flaps. The waistcoat shall be single breasted, with a standing collar and the pantaloons of the usual form. The buttons of each garment to be flat and covered with the same cloth. The pantaloons and waistcoat . . . may vary with the season; the latter of which,

when required by the season, may be of white; the former of light brown cotton or linen."

You might wonder why such a rule came to be.

In a letter to his mother, student Robert Lewis Dabney wrote. . .*"I will give you a list of part of one of their wardrobes, which I am acquainted with. Imprimis, prunella bootees, then straw-colored pantaloons, striped pink and blue silk vest, with a white or straw-colored ground, crimson merino cravat, with yellow spots on it, like the old-fashioned handkerchief, and white kid gloves (not always of the cleanest), coat of the finest cloth and most dandified cut and cloth cap, trimmed with rich fur. They do not think a coat wearable for more than two months, and as for pantaloons and vests. The number they consume is beyond calculation. These are the chaps to spend their [money] and learn about three cents worth of useful learning and enough rascality to ruin them forever."* I quote this passage both to give you a sense of student extravagance and to let you know that some students were there for the education.

During the first two decades following the founding of the school, several confrontations which could only be described as riots erupted. Most of these followed a familiar pattern. A rule was imposed and students demonstrated their displeasure. Alcohol and a heightened sense of honor were also at the core of these confrontations—many of which caused faculty members to arm themselves. The misbehavior often led to serious and potentially life-threatening confrontations between faculty and students. Most of these were confined to the grounds—or at least to the Charlottesville community—and thus largely escaped public scrutiny. However, in 1836, an incident escalated into the nation's consciousness.

Jefferson had provided for military training from the beginning of the University. Initially, a professional instructor led the drills. The state provided muskets which were to be checked out for the drills and returned to the Charlottesville jailer following each drill session. Eventually, the instructor, who was to be paid by the students, left for lack of pay. The militia became a student-run military company—the "University Volunteers"—that was allowed to exist and drill so long as they followed university rules, one of which is no drilling without faculty permission. In 1836, students began to drill without the permission of the faculty, claiming that they did not need the permission of the faculty to drill. The faculty were firm in their insistence that the Volunteers did need faculty sanction to drill. During the ensuing riots, muskets were fired throughout the university—at the walls and at faculty residences. Once again, the faculty armed themselves and insisted that those involved be expelled. Seventy students were identified as participants and were expelled. Soldiers were stationed on the grounds, especially to guard the Rotunda. Two members of the Board of Visitors, one Jefferson's grandson, tried to mediate the dispute. The expelled students began a publicity campaign, claiming that no shots had been fired and that the faculty had overreacted. Eventually, the faculty was convinced to allow most of the expelled students to return, but significant damage had been done to the university's reputation.

In 1839, during a student celebration of the 1836 musket riot, a masked student shot and

fatally wounded Professor John Anthony Davis, who had been in the University's first class and returned to teach law. This time, the students worked to identify the perpetrator, one Joseph Semmes. He was caught and jailed in Charlottesville, but his family had to means to gain his release on bond and he disappeared. He was never prosecuted for the crime. This was the first time the student body seems to have taken responsibility and it seemed to signal a shift in attitude—by students and faculty.

Students continued to fail to live up to Mr. Jefferson's expectations. They gambled and drank and abused slaves. Any real or imagined slight could erupt into violence. One student tried to blow up a professor with an improvised bomb—twice! In 1841, the Board of visitors filled three vacant faculty positions, naming Henry St. George Tucker as the Professor of Law, replacing Professor Davis. Tucker, a distinguished jurist, held views on human nature that were sympathetic to those of the founder. Shortly after his appointment, the faculty asked the Board of Visitors to repeal the Early Rising Law as well as the uniform law and other rules the students considered egregious. With Tucker's leadership, the faculty initiated a new approach to student behavior. Following a brawl at a local tavern, the faculty asked the offending students to pledge on their honor not to repeat the offense. Also, in order to be reinstated the offending students would have to get three classmates to pledge on their honor to report any repeat of the misbehavior. This was a beginning, but not the end of controversy.

Students continued to drink, to carouse, to gamble, and to skip classes. Their misbehavior often spilled over into the town of Charlottesville, whose citizens were often appalled. According to faculty minutes, in 1842 one S. Dexter Otey of Lynchburg was expelled for stabbing another student. A quick Internet search led to a WikiTree article, from which I quote.

"Dexter, as he preferred to be called, served as a 2nd Lieutenant in Co. B of the 2nd Virginia Cavalry for the Confederate Army during the Civil War. He enlisted on 13 May 1861 at Lynchburg;; but, apparently resigned by August of 1861

The family Bible states that Dexter died "by the hands of another". He is buried in the Spring Hill Cemetery in Lynchburg, Virginia, along with his first wife and several infant children. The name of his second wife may have been "Mary" as recorded by Diuguid Funeral Home Records.

The article provides a short note from the Lynchburg Republican, dated August 21 1863,

"The community was much shocked yesterday afternoon on learning that a rencontre, with knives, at the Norvell House, between Mr. Dexter Otey and Lieut. Leonard S. Lyne, C. S. Navy, the former was severely cut in the abdomen, from the effects of which he died in about fifteen minutes after. Lieut. Lyne was also badly cut in the breast, but at present his wounds are not considered dangerous."

In the winter of 1844, all of this misbehavior came to a head when the state legislature formed a committee to investigate the university with the aim of determining its viability going forward. The threat was to discontinue the \$15000 state appropriation to the fledgling university.

Opponents and critics were delighted—newspapers across the Commonwealth editorialized pro and con, depending on their republican or federalist leanings. Speaking for the faculty, Professor Rogers argued that the faculty pay was in line with faculty in other state-supported institutions, including the United States Military Academy. Further, he argued that the state appropriation of \$15000 was a bargain—the same as LSU and one fourth that of Harvard College. His report was accepted by the House of Delegates, but in the midst of the political debates, the students once again rioted—this time simply out of a sense of mischief. As the violence escalated, the sheriff called in 200 armed deputies to restore control. The students were insulted and approximately two thirds withdrew rather than face punishment. Thomas Jefferson's bold experiment was in danger of termination.

Throughout the spring and summer, the debate continued in Richmond and on the pages of the state's newspapers. The Board of Visitors acted to combat some of the criticism. In response to concerns that the University was available only to the wealthy, they proposed that a student from every senatorial district in the Commonwealth receive a free education so long as the state paid for his board. When two professors resigned due to age, they named an alumnus, John Minor, to the post of Professor of Law—a position he would hold for more than half a century. They also named William Holmes McGuffey as Professor of Moral Philosophy. Both were regarded as moral giants. A group of seven highly regarded alumni of the University drafted a powerful statement arguing for its continuation. When a group of legislators was sent to the campus to investigate, the students once again rioted, showing their defiance. Jefferson's old friend, Joseph Cabell, brought his still considerable influence to bear once more on the political debate. on its behalf. In the end, despite noting its ongoing concerns, the General Assembly voted to continue support for the fledgling school.

At least in part, the General Assembly recognized the beginnings of something that would bring considerable recognition to the Commonwealth. Their final report concluded that the University of Virginia was an “ornament” to the state and served a “noble purpose.” Many in this room are grateful for that decision.

Jefferson died on July 4, 1826 and was spared the agony of watching his creation struggle. He died without knowing of its eventual success. Because of his vision, Joweph Cabell's political acumen, and the work of some incredibly tough-minded faculty members, the University not only survived, but grew into the great public university that exists today. Public universities have become secular. Other colleges and universities turned to lecturing to students instead of reading from a book, to encouraging faculty to interact with students, turned to elective education to conform to students' interests, and many have emulated the University of Virginia's code of honor. I felt privileged to study at Mr. Jefferson's University.

“Boys will be Boys.” Abstract

Our speaker began his talk by describing his introduction to the University of Virginia. Almost immediately, he revealed that he would speak about the early history of that institution.

He first described Thomas Jefferson's vision of a secular, state-supported university—one that would be very different from the universities and colleges of the day. He described that vision using Jefferson's own words as critical to the future of the young nation. He then briefly described the struggle to actually create the school. The difficulties included the ongoing efforts of the former President's many enemies to discredit him—these included clergy who described him as the devil incarnate because of his arguments for the separation of church and state. They included the Federalists, who despised his republican political leanings and they included supporters of other Virginia colleges who saw a future threat to their own existence if a new state university were to be created.

But our speaker also noted that Jefferson had friends, many of whom wielded substantial political influence. In addition to his neighbors, James Madison and James Monroe, both of whom were involved in the effort to create the university, his younger friend and powerful political ally Joseph Carrington Cabell would play a critical role in the eventual political outcome.

The bulk of the talk dealt with the nature of the students of the early university—mostly privileged and wealthy sons of southern plantation owners and merchants who came to the University to drink and party—and to cause trouble. He described the role that the prevailing code of honor played in the ongoing series of conflicts between these students and those who attempted to wield authority over them.

The speaker detailed a series of incidents that escalated to full-scale riots and threatened the lives and property of the faculty. During the first two decades of the University's existence, these incidents created widespread public concern and condemnation of the University itself. One led to the murder of a faculty member by a student.

Following a series of student riots, the state legislature created a special commission to decide the future of the school. While the commission provided a platform and opportunity for the critics of the university to make themselves heard, it also provided a platform for alumni and faculty to make their case for its continuation. Despite the continuing student misbehavior, the General Assembly, with the strong support of Joseph Cabell, decided to continue the annual state contribution and the university somehow survived.