









An address of Prof. A. L. Nelson before the students of G. & L. University, at one of the weekly morning lectures, in the Chapel of the University, Lexington Va.  
(Delivered in 1900)

I had the honor one day last session of giving from this platform some account of the earlier history of Washington College, as it came under my observation.

These reminiscences came down to the time when Gen. Robt. E. Lee rode into Lexington to assume the duties of President of Washington College. He had ridden all the way from Powhatan County on his famous war horse Traveller.

It was on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of September 1865, that Gen. Lee arrived in town. It was near sunset of a pleasant autumnal day, and a few of the citizens, not distinguished for great business activity, were standing in scattered groups or strolling along the main street of the town. It was not known when Gen. Lee would arrive, and he was not expected on that

particular day, and he was not observed  
as he rode up the street until he was opposite  
the Court House. As soon as he was recognized  
every head was bared, and in return Gen. Lee  
gratefully lifted his hat, but there was no  
cheering. No sound expressed the deep  
feeling of respect which filled the hearts  
of the citizens. That feeling was more akin  
to veneration and reverence, and the people  
stood in silent admiration.

Gen. Lee drew rein in front of the Lexington  
Hotel as if about to dismount. Prof. J. J. White  
happened to be on the street, nearly opposite  
the Hotel, and he promptly went to Gen. Lee  
as he sat upon his horse. After a brief  
conference they moved on to Col. Reid's  
hospitality home, Gen. Lee still on Traveller  
and Prof. White walking beside him.  
Col. Reid lived where Mr. Reid White now  
resides, and his son-in-law, Prof. White, lived  
with him. Gen. Lee remained a guest  
in that house, for some days, until his  
college home was made ready for the

reception of his family. The President's house at that time was the house recently occupied by Prof. Graves, and now partly filled by Prof. Crow. The morning of the day succeeding Gen. Lee's arrival was spent in receiving calls of respect from members of the Board of Trustees and Faculty and other citizens of the town. Later in the day he made his first visit to College.

For the benefit chiefly of the new students present, let us go with Gen. Lee and view with him the buildings and premises. The buildings were old and unimpressing in appearance. They consisted of the present structures which have columns in front with the two intervening buildings, and a one story row of six rooms on either side, where Deacons Hall and <sup>the</sup> Tucker Memorial building now stand. Six professors houses stood on either side of the Campus, with small yards enclosed by cedar hedges.

The chemical and Philosophical apparatus had been destroyed by Sumter's army of invasion in 1864, and the tools of the

libraries scattered and torn and the buildings damaged. The campus was a rectangle limited on the lower side by an avenue running from the S. M. I. gate to Washington street and passing immediately in front of this chapel. The ground below the avenue was divided into lots for the use of the Professors. Gen Lee gave no sign of disappointment, but no doubt his quick eye took in at once the needs and the possibilities of the location. The session was to open on Oct 2<sup>nd</sup>. Owing to the straightened condition of the Southern people at the close of the war, it could not be expected that all the young men who desired to come to college could come. One hundred and forty six found means in various ways to defray expenses. Some brought horses for sale or exchange for board and tuition. One young man, who afterwards became a distinguished Master of Arts brought a lot of home made Hankets where with to pay expenses.



At length the day for the session to open arrived and Gen. Lee was to be formally inducted into office. He declined a public inauguration, and the oath of office was taken before Justice Wm. White in the present Law Lecture Room, in the presence of the members of the Board of Trustees and Faculty. Gen. Lee stood on the front side of the room, midway between the two windows.

The Faculty then consisted of the President and the four Professors of Latin, Greek, Mathematics and Chemistry, aided by a few assistants. There were only five class rooms, and about forty five lodging rooms in the college. Gen. Lee's office was the room adjoining the present Law Lecture Room. He spent the morning hours until 2 P.M. chiefly in his office or in visiting the class rooms.

His correspondence was extensive, and he had no private secretary, and the writing of manuscript letters occupied

much time and labor.

He called for weekly reports from the faculty and the assistants and he was particularly strict that these reports should be neatly and carefully prepared. These weekly reports were not forwarded to parents but were required in order that the President might be accurately informed in regard to the attendance and progress of the students.

They were carefully examined and delinquent students were invited to his office for conference. I have heard students say that while Gen. Lee was extremely polite in these interviews, they were anxious to avoid another conference. Gen. Lee made it a point to become acquainted with each of the students. He would find out where they were from, how they had been employed, what opportunities they had for making preparation for college - including of their homes and family, and what was the condition of their pecuniary state.

the war, and he made them feel that he was interested in them. Many of the young men in attendance were fully prepared for college, owing to the fact that the schools had been broken up during the war, and it became necessary to establish preparatory classes.

As the session of 1865-6 advanced money began to come from friends in the South, and Gen. Lee was encouraged to feel that a brighter future was opening for the college. A meeting of the Board of Trustees was called for April 26<sup>th</sup> 1866, and on the recommendation of the Faculty, the old curriculum as well as the Saturday holiday was abolished, and the following independent schools were established:

1. Latin;
2. Greek;
3. Maths;
4. Chemistry;
5. Moral Philosophy;
6. Nat. Philosophy;
7. Applied Mathematics;
8. Practical Chemistry;
9. Modern Languages.

At that meeting four new professors were elected. Col. Richard S. Dr. Cuddeback became

Prof. of Experimental Philosophy + Practical  
Mechanics.

Col. Wm. Allan was appointed to the chair  
of Applied Mathematics, + Prof. Edward S.  
Joyce to the chair of Modern Languages.

Rev. J. A. Lefevre D. D. of Baltimore was elected  
Professor of Moral Philosophy and, having  
accepted, his name appeared in the forth-  
coming catalogue, but he afterwards declined  
before entering upon the duties of his professorship,  
and Rev. John L. Kirkpatrick D. D. President  
of Davidson College N. C. was made Prof. of Moral  
Philosophy.

These were all eminently wise appointments,  
and added much to the attractions of the  
College. During the summer of 1866 steps  
were taken to improve the premises.  
The avenue was removed and the Campus  
was enlarged to its present dimensions, and  
trees were planted. It was determined to  
build a chapel and a new house for  
the President, and all of these matters were  
placed in the hands of the President, who

became a hair man than ever. Gen Lee watched the progress of these buildings with keen and critical interest. It was said that he saw every stone in the basement of the Chapel placed in position. He was anxious in regard to the acoustic properties of this room, and it was at his suggestion that these wooden beams were placed across the ceiling, so as to prevent a resonance of sound. As the building of the Chapel neared completion a lady of Texas happened to visit Lexington and she asked that the ladies of Texas be allowed the privilege of placing an organ in the chapel. At first the privilege was granted with thanks, and in due time the organ we now have was placed in position.

When the chapel was completed Gen Lee's office was transferred to the South corner of the basement.

The session of 1866-7 opened with the influx of a large number of students - there were 899 enrolled. They came in numbers from

every southern state and they were as  
frank a body of young men as I ever knew,  
and many of them in after life became  
distinguished men. Most of them were  
quartered in the houses of families in town.  
Fewer dormitories could be furnished in  
the college buildings as the rooms were  
needed for other purposes. Each subsequent  
year of Gen Lee's administration large  
numbers of students were in attendance.  
The largest number was 410.

During these years there was no railroad  
to Lexington, and students came in old  
fashioned stage coaches from the upper and  
lower valley, and by packet boats on the  
river from Richmond and Lynchburg.  
It was interesting to see the arrivals in  
crowds at the opening of the sessions.

Gen Lee was an earnest Christian. He was  
an active member of the vestry of the  
Episcopal church but he was liberal  
in his Christian sentiments. He was

desirous of having the various churches represented in the Faculty. He exerted his influence in a quiet way to induce the students to attend divine worship in the churches of their choice. He invited the pastors of the various churches in town to conduct, in turn, the regular morning services in the chapel. While he was opposed to compulsory attendance on the part of the students, all were invited to attend these services. He was prompt and regular in attendance himself. He invariably took a seat near the front in the chapel, and he humbly knelt during the prayer.

In. Nov. 1866 Col. Wm. Preston Johnston was elected Prof. of History and Literature. He had been a member of President Davis' staff, and was then a prominent lawyer of Louisville Ky. He was an accomplished gentleman and scholar, and became an ornament to the faculty. His home was

at "Clifton" beyond the river where he dispensed a gracious kind and liberal hospitality. At that time every member of the Faculty except Col. Allan was a married man. Mr. John S. Rice, who at one time was a Cadet at the S. M. S. in a recent very article descriptive of Lexington in his day, said, among other things, that visiting a Presbyterian girl of Lexington, was like sitting on an ice berg, cracking hailstones with ones teeth. Col. Allan did not find it so, but with that capital good sense which he manifested on all subjects and on all occasions, sought and won the heart and hand of one of the most cultivated and charming of Lexington's Presbyterian girls, and there there was no bachelor in the faculty.

Judge Brockenbrough's private law school, which had been conducted successfully for many years by that eminent jurist, was incorporated in the college; and the last addition to the faculty during Gen.



Lee's administration was made by the election of the Hon. John Randolph Tucker, as one of the Professors of Law. No words of mine are needed to express the admiration in which he was held by all who knew him. The stately building now nearing completion attests the exalted estimation and the devoted love of his numerous admirers.

While Gen. Lee spent the morning hours of each day in routine college work, his afternoons were usually devoted to recreation. He enjoyed taking long rides on Travellers, and sometimes he rode as far as the Rockbridge Baths.

On one occasion - as he was returning from the Baths, he was met by an old soldier named Wilson, in the woods on the further side of Poor House Hill - Wilson expressed great delight in seeing the Genl. and proposed to cheer him. The Genl. protested, but Wilson insisted, and taking of his hat, he swung it over his head and gave three cheers for Gen. Lee.

The General, much amused, rode away leaving  
Wilson lustily cheering, alone, in the woods.  
When the weather was unfavorable for  
horseback exercise Gen. Lee paid visits  
to the families of the college community  
and of the town where he was always a  
welcome visitor, and he really enjoyed it.  
He had a store of anecdotes for which he  
related remarkably well, and he listened  
with interest and pleasure to others who  
had something worth saying. He was a  
good laugh, which made him show  
his splendid set of teeth. He made  
fun of the children where he visited,  
and especially of the little girls, and  
made them love him.

It would be a mistake to suppose that  
all of the fire had gone out of Gen. Lee's  
life. On a few rare occasions, under  
sudden and just provocation I have  
seen his eyes flash, and his face flush,  
and the well known muscle on the  
right side of his neck, start with a quick

emotion, a sure indication of hot feeling within,  
but he never lost his self-control.

It was my good fortune to be thrown in  
almost daily touch with him for five  
years, which gave me the opportunity of  
knowing him as well as almost any  
living man, and I feel that he filled  
the measure of an ideal, perfect character  
more fully than any one I ever knew.

His life was a quiet and happy one, and  
on the whole he seemed content, and yet  
there were times when he seemed depressed  
by the failure of the cause so dear to his  
heart, but no one ever heard him blame  
any one as the cause of that failure.

Every poor Confederate soldier secured  
his sympathy and no old Confederate  
ever appealed to him in vain for assistance.  
He freely accepted invitations to spend the  
evenings with company at private houses,  
and he was the life and soul as well  
as the lion of such companies.

He usually spent about a month of his

summer vacations either at the Warm Springs or at the White Sulphur. One summer he met Mr. George Peabody at the White Sulphur Springs on which he made a fine impression. In the early months of the following session he received an important letter from Mr. Peabody which excited his profound interest. He invited several members of the faculty to meet him in his office. When they came he carefully closed the door and read the letter from Mr. Peabody announcing the gift to Washington College of several hundred thousand dollars in Va. bonds. As he read the letter his hand trembled with excitement. It was not the excitement of action, as when mounted on his charger he led his devoted army to victory, but the excitement due to the reception of a great benefaction to the college he loved so well. The sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was realized from

this gift.

When Gen. Lee became president of the college his health seemed to be firm and he devoted himself unflinchingly to the duties of his office. In the Spring of 1868, however, he found it necessary to take a trip South to recuperate his health. He was absent from the middle of April to the middle of May and returned improved in health. In March, 1870, the faculty began again to feel anxious about his health and addressed to him a letter, expressing their concern, and advised him to take a furlough and rest from the cares and anxieties of his office, and he consented to take their advice and went South.

When the session of 1870-71 opened, Gen. Lee was not absolutely sick, but he began to show signs of decreasing debility. The last meeting of the faculty which he attended was on Sunday, Sept. 27<sup>th</sup>, 1870. The next afternoon he attended a somewhat fro-

tracted meeting of the vestry of the Episcopal Church. When that meeting adjourned he went home and supper was immediately announced.

The family took their places standing at the table, and Gen. Lee stood at his chair at the foot of the table, and was about to ask the blessing, but he could not utter a word. Several students were present by invitation, and they with Gen. Custis Lee, laid the quilt upon a lounge. Mrs. Barton and Madison were quickly in attendance. A small bed was brought to the dining-room and the General was placed upon it, and he remained upon it until his death. He never spoke coherently after his attack. He several times tried to speak but he could not be understood, a pencil and paper was given him and he tried to write but the writing was illegible. No one will ever know what his last wishes were. He continued in this condition two weeks.

and died on the morning of Wednesday, Oct. 12<sup>th</sup>.  
That was a sad day for Washington College.  
I was holding a recitation when Col. Allan  
came into my class room and quietly  
whispered that Gen. Lee was dead. I announced  
the sad fact to the class and dismissed it.  
All of the church bells in town were tolled  
for an hour in the following order.

First a single stroke of the college bell  
and when the sound died out it was  
followed by a stroke of the Episcopal bell,  
then the Presbyterian, 4<sup>th</sup> the Methodist,  
5<sup>th</sup> Baptist, and they were repeated in this  
order for an hour.

Soon after Gen. Lee's death his body was  
moved from the dining room, to the front  
room, and prepared for burial. A barber  
trimmed his hair, which fell in locks  
upon the floor. I took up a small parcel  
from the floor, and some of it is now in  
an old fashioned breast pin in my family.  
During Gen. Lee's last illness ~~the~~ had  
one of the heaviest rain storms, ever known

in this section - It rained in torrents  
for three days - Route river became a  
surging stream which washed away the  
bridge at the point, and the ware-houses  
on the river bank, destroyed the canal  
and broke up freight traffic with the  
cities.

A suitable casket could not be found  
in Lexington for Gen. Lee's burial - It  
was learned, however, that several caskets  
had been received at Alexander's ware-house,  
just before the flood in the river, but  
they had been washed away - One was  
found lodged on an island a few miles  
below town, and was brought and put  
into condition and Gen. Lee's body was placed in it.  
It was found to be rather short, and Gen.  
Lee had to be buried without his shoes.

On Thursday (Oct. 13<sup>th</sup>) his body was brought  
to the Chapel followed by a long procession.  
His war horse, traveller, with empty saddle  
was led behind the bier. The route  
taken was along Washington + Jefferson



streets to the front entrance to the college grounds,  
and thence to the chapel. The body lay in  
state on this rostrum until Friday, and it  
was guarded through the day and night by a  
selected body of students. The funeral  
services were conducted by Rev. W. H. Pendleton,  
D. D. rector of the parish and previously chief  
of artillery in the army of Northern Va.  
After the usual services the body was removed  
from this platform to the south west side of  
the chapel and entering the basement was  
deposited in a grave made under the  
floor in the center of the room. When  
the body was lowered into the grave,  
at the request of Mrs. Lee, the grand old  
hymn "How firm a foundation, ye saints  
of the Lord" was sung by the immense  
crowd which stood outside the door, and  
Mrs. Lee, an invalid, confined at home with  
rheumatism bowed her head and listened.  
Mrs. Lee and their daughter Miss Agnes Lee were buried in the  
chapel basement, beside the grave of Gen. Lee, but they remained  
until the Mausoleum was built, and then all three were transferred  
to it.

May the soul as well as the body of this great  
soldier and college president find rest forever  
in peace. His fame is immortal.

