

Transcription:

“An address of Professor A.L. Nelson before the students of W&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 where General Robert E. Lee rode into Lexington to assume the duties of the President of Washington College. He had ridden all the way from Powhatan County on his war horse Traveller.

It was on the 18th day of September 1865 that General 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 where General Lee would arrive, and he was not expected on that particular day and 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 General Lee gracefully lifted his hat, but there was no cheering. No sound expressed the deep feeling of respect which filled the heads of the citizens. That feeling was more akin to veneration and reverence, and the people stood in silent admiration.

General Lee drew rein in front of the Lexington Hotel as if about to dismount. Professor J.J. White happened to be on the street, nearly opposite the Hotel, and he promptly went to General Lee as he sat upon his horse. After a brief conference they moved on to Col. Reid's hospitable home, General Lee still on Traveller and Professor White walking beside him. Col. Reid lived where Mr. Reid White now resides, and his son-in-law, Professor White, lived with him. General 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 Professor Graves and partly filled by Crow. The morning of the day succeeding General 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 the College.

For the benefit chiefly of the new students present, let us go with General Lee and view with him the buildings and premises. The buildings were old and unprepossessing in appearance. They consisted of the present structures which have columns in the front with the two intervening buildings and a one story row of six rooms on either side, where Newcomb Hall and the Tucker Memorial Building now stand. Two professor's houses stood on either side of the Campus, with small yards enclosed by cedar hedges.

The chemical and philosophical apparatus had been destroyed by Hunter's army of invasion in 1864, and the looks 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 VMI 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. General 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 October 2. Owing to the straightened conditions of the Southern people at the close of the war, it could not be expected that all the young men who decided to come to College could come. One hundred and forty six found means in various ways to defray expenses. Some brought horses for sale in exchange for board and tuition. One young man, who afterwards became a distinguished Master of Arts brought a lot of home made blankets where with to pay expenses.

At length the day of the session to open arrived and General Lee was to be formally inducted into office. Lee delivered a public inauguration, and he oath of office was taken before Justice William White in the present law Lecture Room, in the present of the members of the Board of Trustees and family. General Lee stood out 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 four classrooms in the College. General Lee's office was the room adjoining the present Law Lecture Room. Lee spent the morning hours until 2pm 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 particular 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 General Lee was extremely polite in these interviews, they were anxious to avoid another conference. General Lee made it a point to become acquainted with each of the students. Lee would find out where they were from, how they had been enrolled, what opportunity they had for making preparations for College, something of their homes and family, and what was the conditions of their people since the war, and he made them feel that he was interested in them. Many of the young men in attendance were ill prepared for college, owing to the fact that the schools had been broken during the war, and it become necessary to establish preparatory classes.

As the session of 1865-6 advanced money began to come from friends in the north and General Lee was encouraged to feel that a future was beginning for the college. A meeting of the Board of Trustees was called for April 26th, 186 and 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. Math; 4. Chemistry; 5. Moral Philosophy; 6. National Philosophy; 7. Applied Mathematics; 8. Practical Chemistry; 9. Modern Languages.

At that meeting four new professors were elected. Col Richard S. McCulloch became professor of experimental philosophy and practice mechanics.

Col. William Allan was appointed to the chair of applied mathematics and professor Edward S. Joynes to the chair of Modern Languages. Reverend J.A. Lefevre

DD of Baltimore was elected professor of Moral Philosophy and having accepted his name appeared in the forthcoming catalogue but he afterwards declined before entering upon the duties of his professorship and Reverend John L. Kirkpatrick DD President of Davidson College hC was made Professor of Moral Philosophy.

These were all immediately wise appointments and added much to the attractions of the College. During the summer of 1866 steps were taken 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 busier man than ever. General Lee watched the progress of these buildings with keen and critical interest. It was said that he saw every stone in the basemen of the Chapel placed in position. Lee was anxious in regard to the acoustic properties of the room and it was at his suggestion that these wooden beams were placed across the ceiling, so as to present a resonance of sound. As the building of the Chapel neared completion a lady of Texas __ (left blank in original document) __ happened to visit Lexington and she asked that the ladies of Texas be allowed the privilege of placing an organ in the chapel. Of course, the privilege was granted with thanks and in due time the organ we now have was placed in position.

When the chapel was completed General 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 399 enrolled. They came in numbers from every southern state as and they were as fine 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 General 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 valleys and by facket (?) boats on the river from Richmond and Lynchburg. It was interesting to see the arrivals in crowds at the opening of sessions.

General Lee was an earnest Christian. He was an active member 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 great 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, their 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. Lee was prompt and regular in attendance himself. He invariably took a seat near the front in the Chapel and he himself knelt during prayer.

In November 1866 Col William Preston Johnston was elected Professor of History and Literature. He had been a member of President Han's (?) 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. Mise, who at one time was a cadet at VMI in a recent racy article descriptive of Lexington in his day said, among other things, that visiting a Presbyterian girl in Lexington was like sitting on an iceberg, cracking hailstones with one's 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 cultured and charming of Lexington Presbyterian girls, and there was no bachelor in the faculty.

Judge Brokenbrough's private law school for many by that eminent jurist was incorporated in the college and the last addition to the family during General Lee's administration was made by the election of the Honorable John Randolph Tucker as one of the late professor's of law. No words of mind are needed to express the administration 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 General 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 Traveller, and sometimes he rode to the Rockbridge Baths.

On one occasion as he was returning from the Baths and he was met by an old soldier named Wilson in the woods on the father side of Poor House Hill. Wilson expressed great delight in seeing the General and proposed to cheer him. The general protested, but Wilson insisted, and taking of his hat, he swung it over his head and gave three cheers for General Lee. The general, much amused, rode away leaving Wilson lustily cheering alone in the woods. When the weather was unfavorable for horseback General Lee paid visits to the families of the college community and the town where he was a welcome visitor, and he really enjoyed it. He had a stock of anecdotes which he related remarkably well, and he listened with interest and pleasure to others who had something worth saying. Lee was a good laugh, which made him show his splendid set of teeth. Lee made pets 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 General 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 with a quick motion, 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 with him for five years. Which gave me the opportunity of knowing him as well as any living man. And I feel 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 he seemed depressed by the failure of the cause so clear to his heart, but no one ever heard him blame anyone 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 evening with company at private houses, and he was the life and soul as well as the lion of such companies.

Lee usually spent almost 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 whom 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. Lee 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 chargers 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 General Lee became president of the College, his health seemed to be firm and he devoted himself intriguingly 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 anxiety of his office, and he consented to take their advice and went south.

When the session of 1870-71 opened, General 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 Tuesday, Sept 27 1870. The next afternoon Lee attended a somewhat protracted meeting of the vestry of the Episcopal Church. When that meeting adjourned he went home and suffer was immediately announced.

The family took their places standing at the table, and General Lee stood at his chair at the foot of table, and was about to ask the blessing, he could not utter a word. Two students were present by invitation, and they with General Custs Lee, laid the General upon a lounge. Doctors 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. Lee never spoke coherently after his attack. He several times tried to speak but he could not be understood, a pencil and paper was given to him and he tried to write but the writing was illegible. No one will ever know what his last wishes were. Lee continued in this condition two weeks and died in the morning of Wednesday, October 12th. That was a sad day for Washington College. I was holding a recitation when Colonel Allan came into my classroom and quietly whispered that General Lee was dead. I announced the sad news to the class and dismissed it. All of the Church bells in town were lollled 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 up the Episcopal bell. Then the Presbyterian. 4th the Methodist. 5th the Baptist. And they were repeated in this order for an hour.

Soon after 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 breastpin in my family. During General Lee's last illness we had one of the heaviest rain storms ever known in this section. It rained in torrents for three days. North River became a surging stream which washed away the bridge at the point,

and the warehouses 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 General Lee's burial. It was learned, however, that several caskets had been received at Alexander's warehouse, 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 General Lee's body was placed in it. It was found to be rather stout, and General Lee had to be buried without his shoes. On Thursday (October 13th) 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 along Washington and Jefferson Streets to the front of the entrance to the College grounds, and there to the Chapel. The body lay in state on this rostrum until Sunday, and it was guarded through the day and night by a selected body of students. The funeral service was conducted by Reverend William Nelson Pendleton DD, rector of the parish and previously chief of artillery in the army of Northern Virginia. After the usual service the body was removed from the platform to the southwest 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 the house with rheumatism, lowered her head and listened. Mrs. Lee and their daughter Miss Agnes were buried in the Chapel basement, besides the grave of General Lee. There they remained until the mausoleum was built and then all were transferred to it.

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