

John Newton Thomas
[REDACTED]
Richmond, Virginia 23221

May 7, 1984

Mr. James M. Ballengee
Rector of the Board, W & L University
[REDACTED]
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010

Dear Jim:

As one who pushed hard for mandatory retirement of board members at age 70, I feel reluctant about showing up at too many board meetings, despite your gracious invitations and my love for being in Lexington with you friends and colleagues. I shall therefore not attend the meeting this month and I shall be out of the country in July.

Thus far I have taken no part in the discussion of coeducation at W and L, but I am writing now to say that I join with Waller Dudley in expressing the hope that the board will seriously consider postponing, possibly for an indefinite period, taking any action on the issue. I was on the verge of writing you to this effect when Waller's letter arrived with its excellent articulation of the case for delay.

As I see it, we have three choices at the present time: (1) to reject coeducation, realizing of course that it could be brought up again in the future, (2) to adopt coeducation, an action which, I am convinced, would be irrevocable, and (3) to delay action, as suggested by Waller. I favor the third alternative, partly because, even with all the evidence at hand, I am not sure we yet know enough to resolve the complex problem. However, my primary reason for advocating delay is the difficulty of reaching a responsible decision in a highly-charged emotional atmosphere and under the pressure of a deadline.

On two previous occasions this board demonstrated that it could handle the matter of coeducation in a calm and rational manner and without sending emotional waves from Lexington throughout the alumni community. What makes the present discussion different is not the increased difficulty of the problem itself but rather its timing, coupled with its being sensationalized in the media. While it would be unrealistic to presume that we could ever fully regain the relaxed mood in which coeducation was previously studied, it is not unreasonable to believe that time would lower the emotional level of debate in Lexington and beyond, thus enabling the board to concentrate with fewer distractions on the issue at stake.

My best wishes and my prayers for you and your colleagues.

Sincerely,

Jack

John N. Thomas

cc: Active and Emeriti Trustees

Dear John, I don't know how you may feel about this position, but I want to be helpful. Best of luck to you!

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

June 21, 1984

Mr. John Newton Thomas
[REDACTED]
Richmond, Virginia 23221

Dear Jack:

I am now well along in learning, yet again, how quickly the summer weeks go by. Time is almost out and I'm still trying to work my way through the "legacy" of the spring. This place has a very busy air to it in the summer, too. The Executive Institute is in its second week and the first Alumni College convenes this Sunday. In the following week one hundred young men and women of high school age will arrive for their "rising seniors" program, the fourth year of a growing and useful effort to reach the best of our younger people. And, of course, the sports camps provide a physical accompaniment to all of the other programs. Indeed, Norm Lord is appointed to lead all our program participants (including the elderhostel participants) in early morning exercises!

The Board will meet in mid-July, as you know, and will decide the question of coeducation for the undergraduate schools. The option of delaying a decision for three years or so will obviously warrant discussion and consideration. I really think it would lose us more than we might gain. To be sure, alumni could be asked to rally in support of our admissions effort and in the drive for more student aid endowment. I could use the time to make myself known to a larger circle of the Washington and Lee family (though I have visited 41 chapters to date). Still, three years of extended anxiety and uncertainty could be very enervating. The school people would be confused (i.e., prospective students) and certain alumni would use the time to carry on the debate and to muster more pressure. I'm not sure Jack Warner, for example, would withdraw his effort to withhold support, either his own or others. And, finally, we would be pushed hard to justify every act of omission or commission during the period. I fear Bill Hartog and his people would be under great pressure to prove that they were doing everything humanly possible (that is, if our Board scores or total applicant pool should continue to decline).

I fear, too, that should we decide in 1987 to admit women we would be made to appear as grudging losers trying to get well by reluctantly opening our doors to both sexes.

I think, Jack, it would be better to reject the idea now rather than delay it in some explicit way. We could do that with an affirmative statement about the ineffable quality of the Washington and Lee experience and our unwillingness at this point to put the quality of that experience to a

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test of the kind coeducation would impose. This would not mean that the matter would remain tabled forever. It could arise again, even fairly soon, and I suppose it might be hard to appear to reverse ourselves if the rejection statement in July is strong and unequivocal. But I would rather go that way and then make the strongest effort to make it work. To drift silently downward over an extended waiting period could be very enervating indeed.

To accept coeducation next month, of course, also involves risks. The chief one is alumni alienation, I suppose. I'm told that people are surprised that only 40% of our alumni responded (but this number even exceeds our annual fund percentage) and that "only" 58.5% of those favored remaining all-male. Lafayette had about the same percentage against the change some dozen years ago. I think most schools experienced that order of alumni negative feeling. Still, ours may be deeper or more consequential. Surely it is true that many more of ours are questioning me, personally, or my "motivation." Even at that, I am pleased to note that the vast majority would have us adopt coeducation before we permitted our academic quality to decline. That, finally, is the bedrock question.

It has been an eventful year. We began with a shocking rape (by an outsider) which took place in a fraternity house and ended the year with the death of a student by arson. Along the way we suffered through four serious drug convictions and the continuing coverage by the press of the county's drug probe. We found and appointed a new dean to succeed Bill Watt and created a new department of Computer Science. Coeducation has been an important part of my life throughout the past 18 months, but, as you can see, it has had no exclusive hold upon me.

I do marvel at the audacity and distortions of the press. I've had this to contend with since last September. People have wondered why I do not cease talking with reporters. They seldom consider our obligations, especially to the local Ring-tum Phi. I cannot refuse to talk with our own student reporters. And most news from Lexington tends to start there (indeed, Phi reporters can also be paid stringers for the metropolitan papers). It is a strange and wonderful world.

We have our health and our children and a great nation, warts and all. And we have a wonderful community in which to live, with men and women on the faculty of great character and competence. Our alumni are amongst the most courteous and civilized of our citizens. (Even those who think I am mad rarely believe it necessary to tell me so directly!) And I am deeply fond of many of our students. So, given all this, it is no wonder that I approach the July meeting with equanimity.

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I hope you and Mrs. Thomas are keeping well. It has been very warm and dry in our lovely Valley and I suspect Richmond has been hotter still. It hasn't helped to have the dining hall air-conditioner broken down. But, then, thirty years ago, we didn't have air-conditioning and people seemed to survive. We will survive.

My best wishes accompany this note. It hardly substitutes for the visit I have meant to pay you for, lo, these many months. But I hope it won't be too long before we can sit together again.

Most sincerely,

John D. Wilson
President

JDW/bcb

bcc: Mr. Farris Hotchkiss

Mr. James M. Ballengee