

# JOHN NEWTON THOMAS

December 3, 1996

—  
Mame Warren,  
interviewer

**Warren:** This is Mame Warren. Today is the 3rd of December, 1996. I am in Richmond, Virginia with Dr. John Newton Thomas.

My first question to you is, how did you decide to go to Washington and Lee in the first place?

**Thomas:** I didn't decide. It was decided, I think, by my mother, and it never occurred to me to think about what institution I'd go to. In those days, I don't think we young people had quite the freedom that's granted today, and I'm very pleased that we didn't have it. My uncle, Charles Graves, taught law at Washington and Lee, and then for some reason went and taught law at the University of Virginia. But he and my mother were very close, and I suspect it was his influence that led mother to suggest that I go to Washington and Lee.

But I remember now vividly I was driving from Bedford, where I lived and my mother was, over to Lexington one day, Mother and I, and I can see us now coming into the campus from the street down below, I forget what street that is, and when we got there looking up the hill, and then walked around in front of the chapel and then walked up to the main building, to the Washington College, and just looked around. I didn't exactly know why we were doing it, but that was my first contact with Washington and Lee. I didn't know then that I'd be going to Washington and Lee. I think Mother had this idea that if I went over there and saw it, then I would want to go there, and she was certainly right about that. So that was

my first contact. Many a time, during my student period, I think back on the day that Mother and I first walked up that campus.

Well, I'll say this, that it never occurred to me to go anywhere else, I hadn't really given it a thought. When I look back on what I will now call the "good old days," we kids were not making major decisions about where we'd go to college and that type of thing. I trusted my parents to treat me right. [Laughter] So the time came, and I came to Washington and Lee.

But I will say this, that when I graduated from Bedford High School, they invited Dr. Henry Louis Smith—is that a familiar name?

**Warren:** Yes, sir, it is.

**Thomas:** Dr. Henry Louis Smith to deliver the graduation address. My parents entertained him in our home while he was there. If I may say this, without seeming to brag, I had the honor of giving the valedictory for our class. What do you call it?

**Warren:** You mean the valedictorian?

**Thomas:** Yeah, the valedictorian for our class. We didn't have but eleven persons in it. So unless I could prove that they're all very distinguished, I would say that my being valedictorian was a modest honor. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Well, tell me about Henry Louis Smith. What kind of person was he?

**Thomas:** I thought he was the greatest person in the world. He had been president of Davidson College and he came to Washington and Lee. Insofar as I was able at that time to make a judgment, or that is to value, I just thought he was about the greatest person who ever came down the road. During my college days, I was in the Smiths' home from time to time for dinner and so on. His son, Leyman Smith, was a member of the Beta Theta Phi fraternity, and I had never heard of fraternities until Washington and Lee, but I was given a bid to Beta, Beta Theta Phi, by "Dupre" Smith, as we called him, belonged to and, of course, I thought that was the best fraternity in the country.

Have you ever heard of Miss Annie Jo White?

**Warren:** Tell me about Miss Annie Jo White.

**Thomas:** Well, Miss Annie Jo White, I can't tell you all her background. She had a house, owned a house on the campus—well, now, what's the street right south of our campus?

**Warren:** Main Street.

**Thomas:** Main Street. That house is still there, I think. There was another professor's house next to it where the Shannons lived, but the Beta fraternity lived in Miss Annie's house.

**Warren:** The Beta fraternity was in Miss Annie Jo's house?

**Thomas:** We didn't all live there, but that was our place of gathering.

**Warren:** Really?

**Thomas:** Miss Annie had an interest in some of us. I remember that she was interested in—I can't remember names anymore.

**Warren:** That's okay.

**Thomas:** She was interested in Eddie Crockett from Wytheville, Virginia, who was a Beta. Miss Annie was the one who chose the leaders for the Fancy Dress Ball. As a matter of fact, she may have inaugurated, as far as I know.

**Warren:** She did, indeed.

**Thomas:** So the first year I was there, Eddie Campbell from Witheville led the Fancy Dress Ball.

**Warren:** Ed Campbell?

**Thomas:** Ed Crockett. Well, you may have heard about Miss Annie. She had rather decided characteristics. Using her house the way we did, we were happy there. As far as I know, we never had any trouble with her.

**Warren:** What was she like? Tell me about her.

**Thomas:** Oh, my goodness. I don't dare to try to tell you about her. She always had pretty positive ideas, I think, and in a sense she had leadership because she undertook a good many things. People on the campus knew her as Miss Annie Jo.

**Warren:** Was she still the librarian when you were there?

**Thomas:** I don't recall that she was. I'm pretty certain that she wasn't, although I wouldn't like to state that for history.

**Warren:** Do you remember her at Fancy Dress? Did she still go to the balls?

**Thomas:** Oh, yeah, she ran it.

**Warren:** Did you get involved in that?

**Thomas:** No, I didn't, but I could have if I'd wanted to. The Fancy Dress was a real institution when she was there, and I think it was primarily due to Miss Annie.

**Warren:** Did you used to go to Fancy Dress?

**Thomas:** No, I didn't.

**Warren:** You never went?

**Thomas:** Never went.

**Warren:** Oh, no! I was hoping you could describe it to me.

**Thomas:** Well, I have to tell you that my strict Presbyterian family didn't encourage dancing. My sister danced and my brother danced, but at that time, I never learned to dance, so I didn't bother about Fancy Dress. Not being able to go to Fancy Dress didn't interfere with my enjoyment of the university and so on. I was quite an enthusiastic Beta in my Beta fraternity.

**Warren:** Tell me what you mean by that. What does it mean to be an enthusiastic Beta?

**Thomas:** Well, let me see. I'm trying to think of a Beta song.

"And we all filled our cups so high, the old [unclear]. All pass the loving cup around, pass it to brother thy, we know a [unclear] Beta Theta Pi, our blood flows



strong, bold comes our song when this fair cup we raise, so pass the loving cup around and drink in Beta's praise."

**Warren:** Very good, I'm impressed. That's wonderful. Well, now, you just brought something up I'm curious about, "Pass the loving cup around and drink in Beta's praise." Now, you were there during Prohibition time, weren't you?

**Thomas:** Oh, yes.

**Warren:** How did that have an effect?

**Thomas:** Well, that was just a song, "The Loving Cup." We had a lot of songs and that was one of them. But there were some Betas there who were of a strict background and were drinking. "The Loving Cup," of course, referred just to a particular meeting when we passed the cup around, and I suppose it was alcoholic. I think in those days it wasn't necessarily alcoholic.

**Warren:** Was there a sense of it being Prohibition time? Did you ever see anything like bathtub gin and that kind of thing going on?

**Thomas:** No. No. When did Prohibition—

**Warren:** Wasn't it in the '20s?

**Thomas:** Well, as far as I know, it was. Now, I'll tell you this about me, my mother told me when I was a boy that if I went until I was twenty-one years of age without taking a drink, she'd give me a hundred dollars. Well, now a hundred dollars, I've asked my financial friend, I said, what was a hundred dollars in '24, how much would that be today, and they say about a thousand dollars. So I got my hundred dollars for going until I was twenty-one without drinking. Well, of course, Mother's theory was if I got that far without it, I wouldn't do it. I never had any real temptation to drink, I don't know why. There was, of course, there was a fair amount of drinking at Washington and Lee, but I don't remember students being drunk. I don't think I ever saw one drunk.

**Warren:** So you didn't have any sense of, during Prohibition, that that was any kind of an issue? Yes?

**Mrs. Thomas:** I feel very inhospitable.

**Warren:** Oh, not at all.

**Mrs. Thomas:** Not bringing you all coffee and cookies and attending to you properly, but I just got to go out for a little bit.

**Warren:** Okay, I hope I see you.

**Mrs. Thomas:** Jack Thomas, you think you can take care of this pretty lady while I'm gone? I won't be gone long.

**Thomas:** I think I can.

**Mrs. Thomas:** You think you can?

**Warren:** He's doing a good job already.

**Mrs. Thomas:** You take care of him.

**Warren:** He's doing a good job already.

**Mrs. Thomas:** Is he doing all right?

**Warren:** He's doing great.

**Mrs. Thomas:** Well, bless his heart. He's got a lot of interesting things, stories in here if he can just bring them up.

**Thomas:** If I can remember them. [Laughter]

**Warren:** He's doing it.

**Thomas:** All right.

**Mrs. Thomas:** I certainly hope I get back before you leave.

**Warren:** I hope you will, too. Okay.

**Thomas:** Just plan to stay until she gets back.

**Mrs. Thomas:** I'm going to unlock the front door if it's locked so you can open it if she wants to leave. He couldn't find his key one day, and he had call a neighbor to come and open the door.

**Thomas:** I've got my key right now.

**Mrs. Thomas:** You got your key? All right.

**Warren:** Bye-bye.

Well, let's go back to Henry Louis Smith. I'd like to hear more about him.

**Thomas:** Well, he was from North Carolina, and I thought he was the greatest speaker I ever heard, the greatest speaker anywhere. I remember his graduation address for the high school, and I can't remember other men's addresses that I heard last week. Well, I'd have to say this, I've never had much contact with anyone of his stature. We had some mighty good people in Bedford, but of his stature, and I often said, and for many years, he was the greatest person I knew. I don't know how I happened to get a Beta bid, but I have flattered myself of late to think that it may be that Dr. Henry Louis put it up to his son Dupre, who was a Beta, and I got a Beta bid. In fact, I didn't know anything about fraternities when I went there. I was really unsophisticated.

**Warren:** So tell me what fraternities were like back then.

**Thomas:** Well, they had regular meetings. Many of them had fraternity houses. Sigma Chi house is still on the corner of Washington Street, and if they didn't own a house, they rented it. They encouraged their people to take part in activities, and if you got to be anything on the campus of any importance, that's what they wanted. I think, frankly, and it's simply prejudice, I think Beta perhaps put more emphasis on the worthwhile things than some of the other fraternities did. Now, you could write that down to my prejudice as a Beta.

I have an idea, I've never said this to anybody and I never had thought about it until recent years, I have an idea that Dr. Henry Louis Smith was kind enough to suggest to his son Dupre that Beta's give me a bid, in spite of the fact that he'd heard my graduation address. [Laughter] But the first position I had in the world when I graduated was given me by Dr. Henry Louis Smith, and I traveled throughout the

South in the interest of raising funds for the reestablishment of the Robert E. Lee School of Journalism.

**Warren:** Really.

**Thomas:** For the Washington and Lee campus, yes.

**Warren:** Tell me about that.

**Thomas:** Well, that was Dr. Smith's dream. I am embarrassed that I can't tell you more about that, I don't know that ever took place, and I'm sorry to say that. Seems that it hadn't taken place for a long time, and Dr. Smith didn't have universal agreement with his policies, and that's all I can say about it.

**Warren:** Did you stay in touch with Washington and Lee all through the years?

**Thomas:** Yes.

**Warren:** Because I'm intrigued that you're talking about Henry Louis Smith as being such a wonderful orator.

**Thomas:** Yes.

**Warren:** You're the only person I've talked to who was in school during the Smith administration. So many other people talk about talk about Francis Pendleton Gaines. You are the only person who can compare them.

**Thomas:** Well, Francis Gaines was an orator with magnificent command of the English language. Henry Louis Smith, before I met Gaines, I would have put at the top, but that was a limited experience, maybe, of a Bedford High School graduate. Henry Louis Smith was very, very interesting. He talked about leadership in his graduation address, and he made a great point of the difference between being a boxcar and an engine, and that we ought to be engines instead of boxcars being pulled around by something else. Well, that was simple enough for a college student to understand, and I still remember it today.

Now, am I talking too much?

**Warren:** You're doing just wonderfully. You know, that is such an interesting point, because I have spent the last year trying to understand what makes Washington and Lee, Washington and Lee, why it is such an extraordinary place, and I think that's one of the things that I've learned is that it produces engines.

**Thomas:** [Laughter] Yes. Very good.

**Warren:** So how do they do that? How does Washington and Lee inspire leaders?

**Thomas:** Well, I will say this, and this may sound arrogant, I think Washington and Lee was fortunate in that a high proportion of its students come from families where you could expect some degree of leadership, particularly the traditions of Robert E. Lee. Lee was a great person. Where do you originate?

**Warren:** In Maryland.

**Thomas:** Maryland. Well, that's pretty close to Virginia. [Laughter] That was the Washington and Lee tradition. George Washington and Robert E. Lee, maybe you'd say you wouldn't want to have two military persons in leadership, but I think these were exceptional military persons. Lee was a strongly religious man. I won't say that Washington wasn't, I don't know just how strong Washington's religion was. I was going to talk about religion later on, I've got something to say about that, and don't let me forget.

**Warren:** I'm writing it down. One of the things that I think we all associate with Robert E. Lee is the concept of the Honor System.

**Thomas:** Of course.

**Warren:** Tell me how you learned about the Honor System and what it meant to you as a student.

**Thomas:** Well, everybody learned about the Honor System. We were told about it and it was understood that that was a principle of Washington and Lee. If you took an examination, you didn't cheat, and that's the way it came. It was one of the major emphases, and that, I think, is one thing that differentiates Washington and Lee

from a typical state university, for instance. Some of my prejudices may come out in this conversation. But the fact that you could associate the Honor System with Robert E. Lee meant a good bit.

Now, of course, we had students from all over the country. I don't know what the proportions were from the South when I was there, but I don't think anyone coming in there without knowing about it would think, "Well, now this is just another institution," because we were a national institution. There wasn't any emphasis at Washington and Lee on being Southern; there was emphasis on George Washington and on Robert E. Lee.

I'm going to deviate here and tell you something that I thought might interest you.

**Warren:** Please.

**Thomas:** Have you ever heard of Karl Barth?

**Warren:** No, what's the name?

**Thomas:** Karl, B-A-R-T-H, Switzerland. He has been recognized as maybe being the greatest theologian of this generation, and I spent a year in Switzerland listening to Barth and seeing him. He came to this country and spent about a week here in Richmond with Union Seminary. Well, it fell to me to squire Karl Barth around, and that was a great distinction. Some interesting things happened. But Barth was very much interested in military affairs, and we took Barth out to the banks of the Chickahominy River here to show him where one of the Civil War scrimmages had taken place. The local authority was telling Barth about it, and Barth corrected him at one point. [Laughter] He knew more about it than anybody.

I'm afraid I've gotten started on something and I don't want it to take too long, but, of course, it was a great experience for me to, in a sense, squire Barth around the state of Virginia. He was interested primarily in the military folks. There are a lot of things in our great state that didn't primarily appeal to him. As I said, I

was given charge of his program, so where would we go? Well, we went, of course, to Fort Appomattox and other places I don't especially recall now, and after we'd gone to Appomattox, I could see how interested he was in history, and it occurred to me, well, why not take him to Lexington where both George Washington [sic] and Robert E. Lee were buried. So I proposed that to Barth, and he said, "I'm not interested in where men are buried, I'm interested in where they fought." How about that from a theologian? [Laughter]

**Warren:** That's fascinating. That's fascinating. Well, now, you talk about going to Lexington. I'm interested in what the town of Lexington was like when you were a student. Can you describe the town for me?

**Thomas:** Well, I think so. The town of Bedford had about three thousand population. Lexington was a bit smaller, I think, than Bedford, and I recall being taken over there by my mother. Uncle Charlie was teaching law at the University of Virginia at that time, so I didn't see him in Lexington. Does the name John W. Davis mean anything to you?

**Warren:** Yes.

**Thomas:** Well, he's Washington and Lee, and he had been a student of Charles Graves, my uncle, and met me. That gave me some standing with him. He says, "Charles Graves knows more railroad law than anybody in the United States." Well, when he said that, the railroads were the thing. Airplanes were just maybe remotely coming in, and so, of course, that pleased me to hear him say that.

Now, you asked what Lexington was like. Well, Lexington was a Presbyterian town and was a religious town, but that doesn't mean that there wasn't a lot of things going on in Lexington that wouldn't be very compatible with the best Christian church. But there were a great many good people in Lexington, and I don't mean goody-good, I mean good people. There were certain families that for one reason or another I had contact with, I guess through my home. The Penick family,

he was the head of the finances of the university, Paul Penick, they were Washington and Lee people. Well, there were a good many others. I'm not doing satisfactory on this question.

**Warren:** One thing that, I think if I remember from my research, when you drove into Lexington, were the roads paved at that point?

**Thomas:** Oh, no. I suppose when I drove into Lexington, yes, they were paved in a good many places, but not everywhere. I remember the good old days when we drove on dirt roads. [Laughter]

My father was a hardware man, he had a hardware store in Bedford, but he also had a large farm right on the outskirts of Bedford, and he believed in making his boys work. So I did my stint on the farm, plowing, cutting corn, chopping wheat, everything that was to be done, and finally then drive the tractor on the farm. I liked it. That, to me, was a valued experience that I had. Now so many Yankees have moved into that area and bought some of our farm so that my sister-in-law, who grew up in Lynchburg, but still lives in Bedford, she speaks of it as South Manhattan, there are so many Yankees around. [Laughter]

Now, ask me again what you asked.

**Warren:** I was looking for a description of the town of Lexington. Was the Robert E. Lee Hotel open yet?

**Thomas:** The Robert E. Lee was not opened—

**Warren:** I think that was just after you were there.

**Thomas:** —when I was there, but it may have been opened before I left, I just don't know.

**Warren:** It was somewhere around in there, but I'm not sure about the exact date.

**Thomas:** The Robert E. Lee Hotel is not a historic Lexington building by any means. Of course, you've got Robert E. Lee's house on the Washington and Lee campus, where the president of Washington and Lee lives.



By the way, the president and his wife made a call on us recently and we let them in through the kitchen. We've got a driveway out there behind and that's where all the people come, they get off, then instead of walking around the grass and coming in the front, they come in through the kitchen. So I enjoyed seeing, and I welcomed the president of Washington and Lee and welcomed him through my kitchen.

**Warren:** Well, he told me he had a marvelous time visiting you.

**Thomas:** He did?

**Warren:** He did.

**Thomas:** Well, I think he'd have a marvelous time visiting with most anybody. I don't know him, I haven't seen him personally a great deal, but it's perfectly obvious that he is a gentleman through and through, and kindly, and I hope he's got enough force about him to stand for the right things. There's one thing that I will speak about later on—well, now I've been wandering.

**Warren:** Go right ahead wherever you want. It's fine.

**Thomas:** Well, you asked me about Lexington and I think that's about all I can—

**Warren:** All right.

**Thomas:** It's a lovely, lovely town, it's a good atmosphere for a university, but actually Lexington in my day didn't play a particular role in the Washington and Lee program.

**Warren:** Did you live at Annie Jo White's the whole time that you were there?

**Thomas:** I did for a while, yes, but I didn't live there—I lived next door, which was occupied by the Moffatts, he was an English professor. The Betas didn't necessarily live at Annie Jo's house. I think maybe occasionally she might have had one there. Down there on Main Street, the south side of the campus next to Annie Jo's was Dr. Desha's. He was chemistry.

**Warren:** Now, how about teachers? Were there any particular faculty members who were very important to you?

I'm going to flip the tape over before you answer that.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

**Warren:** Okay.

**Thomas:** I'm sorry to be hesitating. Dr. Shannon, English professor, father of the later president of the University of Virginia, was influential. I admired him. I didn't feel as close to him as I maybe do to some others. You know, I hesitate now because I haven't got any memory there.

**Warren:** What was your major?

**Thomas:** Well, we didn't have majors in those days.

**Warren:** Really.

**Thomas:** I don't know, maybe I did, but—

**Warren:** You know, I think you're right, I think that that developed a little later.

**Thomas:** Yes. I was interested in English. Mathematics was not among my major interests. Of course, I enjoyed some history.

**Warren:** Now, I looked you up in the yearbook and I see that you were involved with the newspaper, with the *Ring-tum Phi*.

**Thomas:** Oh, yeah, I was manager of the *Ring-tum Phi*. I forgot about that. The important person was the editor of the *Ring-tum Phi*, who was—I can't recall his name now, I can see him. That's the only elective office I ever ran for there. You know a lot about me.

**Warren:** Well, I like to do my homework.

**Thomas:** You should have given me time to do mine. [Laughter] Well, have you got anything else?

**Warren:** Well, I also saw that you were in the Washington Literary Society.

**Thomas:** Yes.

**Warren:** And I don't know exactly what that means.

**Thomas:** Well, it was a society which met maybe once a month, where the student would present paper and we would discuss it. I recall the law students being in it just to cultivate our interest in literature generally. The fact I was a member of the Literary Society I don't think was of any particular significance.

**Warren:** Well, I know at some point you had to be a member of— there were two literary societies.

**Thomas:** Yes.

**Warren:** I don't know whether that was still true in your day, but there was some time when you had to be in one or the other, the Graham, there was a Graham Literary Society and a Washington.

**Thomas:** Oh, what was the other one?

**Warren:** The Washington.

**Thomas:** Yes. I've forgotten which one I was in.

**Warren:** Well, the yearbook says you were in the Washington Literary Society.

**Thomas:** I was in Washington.

**Warren:** Then I also saw that you were on the business staff the *Mink*. Do you remember the *Mink*? I think it was some kind of a humor magazine.

**Thomas:** The *Mink* was an annual publication. The *Ring-tum Phi* was the newspaper. Was I on the staff of the *Mink*?

**Warren:** Well, no, that's the *Calyx*. The annual is the *Calyx*. I think the *Mink* was maybe a short-lived humor magazine.

**Thomas:** I guess it was.

**Warren:** But you don't really remember that?

**Thomas:** I remember the *Mink*, but I don't recall my relationship to it.

**Warren:** Now, there's another thing that I'll tell you if I were a member of this, I'd be very proud of it, that you got into ODK.

**Thomas:** Yes.

**Warren:** And that was fairly early on in the existence of ODK.

**Thomas:** Yes, and one of our favorite professors was one of the founders of ODK. The Betas had something to do with the founding of ODK, and yeah, I was—I guess I knew the right people, so I got into ODK.

**Warren:** Was that Rupert Latture?

**Thomas:** Latture was a good man, he was not an outstanding person, he was very religious and we needed that.

**Warren:** Can you remember when you were selected for ODK?

**Thomas:** I was selected, I think, in my junior year.

**Warren:** That's an accomplishment.

**Thomas:** I may be flattering myself when I say that.

**Warren:** That's an accomplishment.

**Thomas:** I believe I was in the junior year. Betas had a big part in forming ODK.

**Warren:** I didn't know that.

**Thomas:** You see, it was organized, it was created at Washington and Lee. It's national now.

**Warren:** You mentioned a little while ago that you wanted to talk about religion.

**Thomas:** Washington and Lee, as I imagine you know, was started by Irish Presbyterians, and, of course, Lexington was, at least it was at the time, was primarily a Presbyterian place, and so at the time that Washington College was started, it wouldn't have been thought by anybody then not to have recognized it as committed to the Christian religion. It was that way when I was there. I don't think there was a united and enthusiastic commitment that had been the case in earlier years. In my day, the Christian religion played a real role at Washington and Lee.

For instance, it had a college YMCA, and in that day the YMCA was rather influential, it was much more so than later. They had a full-time YMCA secretary,

and the first time I got to Europe was through the YMCA. (You can see how my mind has deteriorated when I talk.) The student YMCA was really quite influential and the YMCA was more liberal than the old Presbyterian and Baptist churches, more liberal in the sense that there was a concern with social issues.

As I've said, I got to Europe first in connection with the YMCA. Ted Shultz was the secretary of the YMCA the first year and also an All-American football player, so that was a pretty good organization.

**Warren:** When you arrived in 1920, were there a lot of World War I veterans?

**Thomas:** A lot of what?

**Warren:** Were there World War I veterans in your class?

**Thomas:** No, no. You might look up the records and find out that there was one or two World War I veterans there, but I'm not aware of it. I don't believe they were there. The war was over in '18, so it would have been two years since the termination of the war. I would just throw in at this point that I'm pro-VMI with respect to the Supreme Court.

**Warren:** Well, you're one step ahead of me, on my next question. My next question was, what did you think about Washington and Lee becoming coeducated?

**Thomas:** I was opposed to it. I just liked the school the way it was. We could go to Sweet Briar or Mary Baldwin or Hollins and had dates there and invite girls to the campus. So I'd rather have them there as guests than as members of the student body. Now, that reflects, frankly, a prejudice on my part. There isn't any question about the fact that women are as smart as men. As a matter of fact, you can get some figures showing that they're smarter than men, their grades in other places are superior. You know about this. But I think feminism is a wrong philosophy. I don't think it was necessary. I don't mean, now, that there weren't injustices to women, but then there are injustices to men, too. And feminism is pretty dominant now. As

a matter of fact, I would say that the Supreme Court judgment about VMI reflected straight-out feminism. What's the name of the lady who wrote the opinion?

**Warren:** Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

**Thomas:** Yeah, that's right. She stated that men and women were of the same "stature." I've looked through the unabridged Webster's dictionary to see the different meanings of that, and it's not quite clear to me what she meant by the same "stature," but that was the basis, as far as that opinion was concerned, that was the basis of the action of the Court. It was not the Constitution which was the basis of it, it was a judgment that men and women are of the same stature.

I think really the great problem today is the change in the status of women in this society that has come through the years. Now, I think I'm right about this. Bader indicated, I think, and I have to say that this is my memory from what I read in the paper, I think she indicated that in the colonial times, women were discriminated against by Jefferson and others who were leaders. I couldn't say I'm an authority on that, but I believe that I—and it's perfectly obvious to you that I'm not a feminist. Of course, some of the worst feminists, if I may put it that way, are male. I get to going on one thing, it must be tiring to you.

**Warren:** Not at all, you're doing great. You're a wonderful interview.

Have you been back to the school since women are on the campus? Have you seen what the changes have been? What do you think about that?

**Thomas:** Since the VMI decision?

**Warren:** No, since Washington and Lee became coeducated.

**Thomas:** Oh, yes, I've been back.

**Warren:** What do you think about what you see now?

**Thomas:** Well, I think it's as good as could be expected. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Very diplomatic.

**Thomas:** I frankly don't know, having not been there in the student body, and I have to accept the judgment of others, and it varies. I will admit the force of the argument for women, but I'll have to admit to force the argument for men, particularly as far as VMI is concerned. I think that if the Court was consistent, it would say that women should be sent into military service along with men. That's not my belief, but I think that's what we are really committed to if we're going to be consistent.

**Warren:** You were on the board for a very long time, right?

**Thomas:** Yes.

**Warren:** Were you on the board at the time of the coeducation decision?

**Thomas:** Uh-huh.

**Warren:** Were you still on the board then in 1984?

**Thomas:** I've forgotten when I got off the board. I think I was.

**Warren:** Well, I'm sure the coeducation issue was discussed through the years for a long time.

**Thomas:** Yes. I don't remember it in my student years.

**Warren:** No, no, I mean when you were on the board.

**Thomas:** We didn't discuss it as much as you might think. I don't know. I'm not in a position to state this, but what I'm thinking about is this, it wouldn't be right to say that having women there reflects a position advocated by the board. I think it reflects a position which was inevitable given the developments in society. Now, you would have to check that with other Washington and Lee people, some of whom would simply, I think, would disagree with it.

**Warren:** Well, I'm just about at the end of my list, but I have one last question that has to do with somebody you've mentioned and the very particular time you were there. The Mock Convention of 1924 was when John W. Davis was nominated. It seems to me that must have been a pretty big event at Washington and Lee.

**Thomas:** It was and I was head of the Virginia delegation and we voted Carter Glass [phonetic].

**Warren:** Really?

**Thomas:** Yes.

**Warren:** Tell me about that.

**Thomas:** Well, Carter Glass was highly thought of, and I think justly thought of, as a fine and able person. I wouldn't have said that Carter Glass was in the category of the top political leaders. I thought he was a good man. He lived in Lynchburg, just twenty-five miles away from Bedford.

I don't know what else to say now, except that the movement for women gathered such strength and lulled such converts among men and so on, I think that was—I started to say inevitable, that's not the right word—it was maybe highly probable. I thought highly of John W. Davis, who became, as you may remember, became the nominee in 1920, was it?

**Warren:** 1924.

**Thomas:** '24, yes. Class of '24 year. Although I had tried to get Carter Glass, I was willing to support Glass, but I supported him because somehow, I don't know what position I had, but I was connected with the Virginia effort. That was what I—

**Warren:** Was the Mock Convention a big event when you were there?

**Thomas:** Yes, yes. It's been a big event, I think, through the years. I think that's an educational feature. Have you had any criticism of it from others?

**Warren:** Not at all. I went to the one last year and it was exciting. It felt like the real thing. I've never been to a real one, but it sure felt like what I see on TV, and I just wondered if it had been that exciting all through the years.

**Thomas:** I don't know enough to say categorically yes or no, but it's certainly been exciting. It's certainly been—well, maybe if not that exciting, [unclear] it has been an exciting thing through the years, yes.



**Warren:** Was there a special feeling, though, in 1924 because John W. Davis was a Washington and Lee man?

**Thomas:** Yes. I don't think there's any question about that. I would say that I would have voted for John W. Davis. He was a brilliant man. As far as I know, his general positions would be in conformity with mine, or to turn it around, mine conformity with him. I think I quoted him, did I not, earlier?

**Warren:** You mentioned him.

**Thomas:** What he said about my Uncle Charlie Graves?

**Warren:** Yes, yes, being a great teacher of railroad law.

**Thomas:** Yeah, that he knew more railroad law than anybody else in the nation. Well, that was a strong statement.

**Warren:** Well, we have come to the end of my list of questions. Is there anything you'd like to say about Washington and Lee? You spent a long time on the board. Is there anything you'd like to talk about from that time?

**Thomas:** Yes, I would talk about the question of religion. You would expect that from me. On the whole, I am proud of Washington and Lee and in agreement with its policies. Of course, when it started, as Bob Huntley likes to point out, it started in a preacher's study. Do you know Huntley?

**Warren:** Yes, certainly.

**Thomas:** Of course, it was assumed in that day that it would be religious, that is to say, yes, it would have worship services. If there was any teaching of religion—well, I've answered it. So when I was there, we simply had the YMCA with a great emphasis on religion supported by the university. Most of the faculty were active and leaders in the Lexington scene and the atmosphere was favorable to, supportive of, religion.

In recent years—when I say in recent years, I don't know exactly where to date the beginning of that, but I suppose thirty, forty years ago—no, couldn't have been

quite that far back. Anyway, what I'm saying is that the board changed its view. Now, we had a—what is the term I want—it was a position taken by the board with regard to religion. What do you call that? Anyway, we had that. The board recognized Washington and Lee as a Christian institution. Now, that's all it said, that doesn't mean the board did anything else, but it does mean that the board recognized it, and that was the case when I was there and that was the case many years after I left. But I'm guessing now, six or seven years ago, the board changed its position. It was a—what's the term we use? I'm embarrassed.

**Warren:** A resolution?

**Thomas:** No, to describe a position that's held—it was not in the Constitution, but it was a position taken by the board that Washington and Lee was a religious institution, a Christian institution. But I don't know, maybe ten years ago, give or take some, the board rejected that position. It canceled that position which stated that Washington and Lee was a Christian institution. So Washington and Lee officially is not a religious institution doesn't recognize it. I was, as you would expect, I was greatly concerned about that, and I wrote a long letter dealing with the history of it and arguing with it, and sent it to Miles.

**Warren:** Steve Miles.

**Thomas:** Yeah. And he agreed with me that we ought to restore it, but the board turned him down. So the Washington and Lee board has not only not maintained what it had, but it has refused to bring it back. That leaves Washington and Lee in the unfortunate procession of universities that are secular. Maybe you could say they were led by Harvard. Now, after hearing me, you're able to imagine that didn't make me very happy. Our position that Washington and Lee was a Christian institution in the past meant, didn't mean that any sort of force was brought to bear on students, but it did mean that, well, if we had a professor of religion, he was probably the lead of Christian religion. He wouldn't use it just to bring up criticisms

of it. If you brought up criticisms, he would deal with it. I was hoping we might get that change, and, as I said, Miles Stevens [sic Steve Miles] agreed with me, but the board turned him down.

**Warren:** You're not the first person to bring this up. Another person brought this up, too, as an issue.

**Thomas:** Is that right? Well, I'm pleased to hear that. I think I'm familiar with all the arguments pro and con, and I appreciate that. Incidentally, when I decided that I might go to the seminary, I wasn't certain I could believe in God. I am an authentic doubting Thomas. So I went to Edinburgh University for two years to get my M.A. and then I got my Ph.D. over there, and the primary consideration was, could I believe in God, which, of course, led me into philosophy. My belief in God has a stronger basis than it has in the past.

I suppose I will have to sum this up by saying that I think that Washington and Lee's deliberate rejection of commitment to the Christian faith is a very, very sad and serious situation. We still have a professor of religion, but we don't have to have a Christian professor. We can have a Mohammedan or we can have a person who doesn't believe in God. You can have those people in religious ed. Of course, there are some people who feel that any commitment like that is unworthy. Now, if you asked them on what basis they make that statement, they can't say anything. The main thing, you can't hold it in this day so that this day was such that you can't believe in religion, presumably if you a responsible intellectual person.

**Warren:** Well, that's a real good summation, and I hope you shared these thoughts with President Elrod, too.

**Thomas:** To some extent I'm going to share them with him at length. That's one thing definitely I'm going to do.

**Warren:** Good. This is a good practice session. [Laughter]

**Thomas:** [Laughter] I must do it better than I've done here with you.

**Warren:** You've done a great job. Dr. Thomas, I am just thrilled to have been able to come and visit with you.

**Thomas:** Well, bless your heart.

**Warren:** This has been a real honor for me.

**Thomas:** Well, I am certainly thrilled to hear you say that.

**Warren:** You are very, very well thought of at Washington and Lee and people were very, very pleased to hear I was coming to see you.

**Thomas:** Well, I'm pleased to hear that, because there are fewer and fewer people at Washington and Lee that have had anything to do with Jack Thomas or ever heard of him.

**Warren:** You've got a reputation. Thank you. Thank you so much.

**Thomas:** Well, I thank you.

[End of interview]