

BULLETIN

The COLLEGE *of*
WILLIAM *and* MARY
in VIRGINIA



WILLIAM AND MARY AND THE
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Convocation Address at the College of William
and Mary in Virginia, September 21, 1935,
on the Occasion of the Award of the
Degree of Doctor of Laws to
President J. L. Newcomb
of the University of
Virginia

BY

DOUGLAS SOUTHALL FREEMAN,
Ph. D., Litt. D., LL. D.



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MR. RECTOR, MR. PRESIDENT, GENTLEMEN OF
THE FACULTY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

We have met in the shadow of this ancient building to celebrate a triumph over circumstance and to symbolize the complete repair of an accident of revolution. Both the adverse circumstance and the revolutionary accident, as it happens, are associated with the name of perhaps the most illustrious of all the sons of this college, the third president of the United States.

It is too familiar a story for me to tell how Thomas Jefferson, younger than most freshmen of today, came, while a student at William and Mary, under the influence of George Wythe, of Professor William Small and of Governor Francis Fauquier. You may read in any of the many biographies of Jefferson how the sandy-

haired, keen-eyed student was no unworthy fourth at many small dinners in the palace. In his eyes, George Wythe was the veritable embodiment of the law, Dr. Small, the exemplar of nascent science, and Governor Fauquier, the emblem of that aristocracy of intellect which was merely set in a fitting frame when it happened to be the quality of a gracious nobleman.

These three men and a group of restless, puzzled burgesses at the other end of Duke of Gloucester street gloriously typified Williamsburg and its college to Thomas Jefferson. When he left the town to the monitory growl of the oncoming storm, he was for all time a loyal son of William and Mary. Twenty years thereafter, while he was a member of the inner circle of a French society that still talked of Voltaire, he was asked by an American father to advise whether Rome or Geneva offered the best educational facilities for his son. Jefferson's choice was for Rome. "But," he asked, "why send an American youth to Europe for education? What are the objects of an useful American education?" He specified them, with reasoned emphasis on chemistry, agriculture, and botany. "It is true," he said, "that the habit of speaking the modern languages cannot be so well acquired in America; but every other article can be as well acquired at William and Mary College, as

any place in Europe”¹—an assertion that was repeated, I doubt not, almost *ipsissima verba* this summer by many a member of the class of 1935 as he talked parentally and sagely to those representatives of another generation, about to enter college and not destined to graduate until the remote year 1940.

After Jefferson was named in 1776 with George Wythe, Edmund Pendleton, George Mason and Thomas L. Lee—mighty names and mighty shades!—to codify the laws of the new republic of Virginia, the rearrangement of the acts affecting the college of William and Mary fell to the lot of Mr. Pendleton. However, “we thought that on this subject,” Jefferson wrote in his *Autobiography*, “a systematical plan of general education should be proposed, and I was requested to undertake it.”² As you know, the result was the preparation of three bills, among the most epochal in the whole history of American education. One provided a great public library, the second a system of elementary schools, “for all children generally,” as the Democratic Jefferson wrote, “rich and poor.” The graduates from these schools would be admitted to regional colleges where those of merit and capacity could continue to graduation.

¹*Jefferson's Writings*, Memorial edition, v, 186; letter of Oct. 15, 1785, to J. Bannister.

²Op. cit., i, 70.

The third bill made William and Mary a state university, broad in foundation, liberal in spirit, lofty in curriculum.³

When these bills were presented in 1779 to the general assembly as a part of the proposed code, there were grumblings and protests against the provision that the support of the elementary schools should be placed entirely upon the counties and towns—grumblings and protests, you will say, that echoed for 250 years in the halls of the same legislative body. The proposal for a library received short shrift at the time, though from it ultimately developed our present state library, the begrudging support of which by the commonwealth mocks every high Virginia name in literature.

But the bill for the university—on that was centred much the same fire that has been directed with more modern weapons against every plan to give Virginia a few well-fed institutions of higher learning instead of half-a-score undernourished schools that sometimes have had to beg for bread. In short, jealousies were aroused in 1779, deep and wrathful jealousies. Mr. Jefferson argued that William and Mary was the proper institution to be transformed into a state university, with advanced instruction in science, language, law and medicine, leaving to the

³ *Jefferson's Writings*, Memorial edition, i, 70-71.

regional colleges all training in the classics.⁴ He favored William and Mary for the state university, because, as he explained, the college was old and well-established and was at the seat of government—a laboratory, so to speak, for a wide variety of researches.

The opposing forces would not concede this argument of a loyal alumnus and a practical statesman. Three objections, aside from that of expense, were advanced in answer to his appeal. For one thing—and Jefferson himself is our authority on this—the burgesses alleged a “local eccentricity” against Williamsburg. By referring to “local eccentricity” the delegates from the western and northern counties did not mean to reflect on the speech of Williamsburgers or to suggest any oddity of behavior. Nor, I take it, did they intend to allege any singularity in the conduct of the collegians. For did not William and Mary already have a stern temperance rule that denied the student to drink any liquor at table—*at table*, mark you—“except beer, cider, toddy, or spirits and water”?⁵ No, “local eccentricity” was reported by Jefferson in its mathematical sense. The objection was

⁴Cf. P. A. Bruce, *History of the University of Virginia*, i, 52. The details of these courses, here credited to Jefferson's legislative defence of his proposal for a state university were given in his resolutions of 1779, as an *ex officio* member of the board of visitors, for the reform of the curriculum.

⁵*History of William and Mary College*, Baltimore, 1870, 44, cited in Beveridge, *The Life of John Marshall*, i, 156n.

one of the early expressions of the sectionalism that cursed Virginia for generations: William and Mary was no seat for a university, the up-country legislators insisted, because it was not in the centre of the state.

Secondly, William and Mary failed of selection as the state university in 1779 and seventeen years thereafter, when the basic educational law was enacted, because, as Mr. Jefferson put it, the town had an "unhealthy autumnal climate." That doubtless was a euphemism for saying that flies came over like planes from Langley Field, and mosquitoes struck hard in early September. This defamation of the salubrity of the Williamsburg climate is the adverse circumstance the conquest of which is one of the occasions for the gathering of this throng to-day. Doubtless all that was charged against *musca domestica* and against *musca culex* in 1779 was true; certainly the sun did not withhold its approving smile from Williamsburg. Doubtless we shall have to admit frankly that William and Mary was not calumniated then. Nevertheless, I maintain that her sons were of a fibre to endure the "heat of the sun and the furious winter's rage." This is proved by the longevity of the six most distinguished professors and alumni of William and Mary who were leaders of public thought about the time gentle-

men who favored other sites were charging the town with addiction to chills and fever. The average life of these men was seventy-two years which would be a not-unfavorable record now.⁶

Moreover, for the vindication of the reputation of the stalwarts of William and Mary, I have compared the illnesses of Alumni Jefferson and Marshall with those of George Washington, and, on the whole, the sons of William and Mary avowed sickness as a reason for lack of preparation or of execution less frequently than Washington did.⁷ If this is not convincing, I still can justify myself by the tables of mortality. James City County, in 1933, exclusive of the fatalities at the Eastern State Hospital, had a death-rate for its entire white population of 8.2 per thousand, a rate surpassed by only twenty-two counties of Virginia. There are few healthier regions in America. However, the members of the general assembly of 1779 could not foresee the effects of mosquito control, William and

⁶I have taken Jefferson, Marshall, Edmund Randolph, Peyton Randolph, John Tyler, Sr., and George Wythe—the first names that occurred to me.

⁷Jefferson stated in 1803 that he sometimes had headaches and rheumatic pains but that he considered himself above the average in health. In 1819 he wrote Dr. Utley that he was blessed with marvelous digestion, had not lost a tooth from old age, had chest colds not more frequently than once in eight years, had never had more than three fevers exceeding twenty-four hours in duration, and that he still rode six or eight miles a day and sometimes forty miles. When he was 77, though suffering from what would seem to be varicose veins, he went on a ride lasting four days (*Writings of Thomas Jefferson, ed. cit.*, vol. x,

Mary diet or modern sanitation, and they heeded the argument that Williamsburg was an unhealthy place.

The third reason why William and Mary did not become the seat of the state university was a more serious one. The college, under the crown, had adhered strictly to the established religion. The appointed members of the board of visitors were expected to be communicants of the Church of England. A majority of the faculty were Episcopal priests; and if, by any chance, a layman was appointed, the first official act required of him was that he walk up to the faculty table and subscribe to the thirty-nine articles without exception and without any crossing of his fingers under the board. So positive was the atmosphere of sacerdotal celibacy at the college—contrary to the usage in the parishes—that two professors were dismissed in 1758 for marrying. It availed them nothing then—as it might not avail even now in some other schools—to point out that the president had done what he forbade his professors to do, and that in yonder house he sat

p. 364; vol. xii, p. 218, vol. xiv, pp. 284, 386; vol. xviii, p. 342; vol. xix, pp. 194, 255). Marshall had no serious illness till he was 76 (Beveridge, *op. cit.*, vol. iv., pp. 80, 81, 587). Washington, on the other hand, had smallpox and then pleurisy in 1751-52, was ill for three weeks with fever during Braddock's campaign, subsequently had dysentery and fever for four months—probably a colitis—and, during his first presidency, nearly lost his life from anthrax (W. C. Ford, *Life of Washington*, vol. i, pp. 30, 92; vol. ii, pp. 157, 299).

himself down comfortably with a wife to share the immoderately-long winter evenings. As late as September, 1769—only ten years before Jefferson's bill came up in the general assembly—the board of visitors solemnly reaffirmed that the marriage of members of the faculty was “contrary to the principles on which the college was founded and to their duty as professors,” and that if any of the teachers took unto himself a spouse, his “professorship would be immediately vacated.”⁸ For these oppressed individuals, revolution was another English reformation in its effect on the celibacy of William and Mary priests, and by John Marshall's day, though the rule had not been cancelled, four of the five professors were married.

However, that change, so far as it had been effected by 1779, did not save the college from odium in the eyes of dissenters. All the shortcomings of the most negligent members of the Episcopal priesthood were visited upon the college. Because it was esteemed the child of the Church of England, more than for any other reason, William and Mary was denied selection as the new university. The removal of the capital to Richmond that same year, and the absence of Jefferson in France thereafter, destroyed the last chance the college had of being

⁸Resolution of the board of visitors, Sept. 1, 1769; cited in A. J. Beveridge: *Life of John Marshall*, i, 156n.

the first American state university as well as the second American college.

It is perhaps proper to add that the college did not stoop to any convenient conversion. It held for decades to the established church and, when foxes became scarce in York and in James City, the leading spirits of the college gratified their sporting instinct by hunting heretics. A jealous voice, as late as 1838, remarked that William and Mary felt compelled to justify its existence by starting a controversy over some heresy at least once in three years.⁹ Seriously speaking, in a sense too little appreciated, William and Mary endured religious persecution. The general assembly, dominated by dissenters, denied it essential appropriations and thereby headed it for its long, dark era. Writing in 1803, in the *British Spy*, William Wirt denounced the legislators for "converting their national academy into a mere lazaretto and feeding . . . its highly respectable professors, like a band of beggars, on the scraps and crumbs that fall from the financial table."¹⁰

But in the soul of a college that suffered for its religious faith there was something that gave it faith in its future; just as it possessed a vitality that drew to it the sons and grandsons of those

⁹Bruce, *op. cit.*, i, 51.

¹⁰*Letters of a British Spy*, 131, 132, quoted in Beveridge, *op. cit.*, i, 157n.

who had known its glory and its greatness in Jefferson's day. Perhaps, if paradoxically, the prejudice that cost William and Mary the added priority Jefferson sought for her many years before circumstance turned his eyes and his interest to another part of the commonwealth, has worked out on the longer, providential view, to the advantage of higher education. Had William and Mary been the University of Virginia in 1862, when she passed within the federal lines, disaster might have been deepened into destruction, and recovery might never have come. Instead of having both William and Mary and the University of Virginia we might have neither.

In that reflection and in a spirit of joyful cooperation, each school in the achievements of the other, President Bryan and President Newcomb today symbolize, I repeat, the complete repair of that ancient accident of revolution. The lesson is for all men to read when a son of the University of Virginia, as president of the College of William and Mary, now confers on an alumnus of William and Mary the honor of the purple he fairly won from the hands of his Alma Mater when he became president of the University of Virginia.

