Arthur W. Phelps

Having come to William and Mary in 1945 Mr. Phelps has been on the law faculty (at first the department of jurisprudence) longer than anyone in Williamsburg. At one time dean of the law school, he has observed its modern growth and tells of this in his interview. The transcript was approved (with a few additions) by Mr. Phelps.
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Interviewer: Emily Williams

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1 min.
5 mins.
2 mins.
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Williams: You were talking about Dean Cox and the law school and that President Bryan gave him a great deal of responsibility.

V. Phelps: Yes, he was very good at organizing special events, like when President Roosevelt came he did that. He would do the wonderful Christmas parties that Mr. Bryan had. And also, I think he did the dances in the Sunken lawn and Leslie Cheek did the decorating, but Dean Cox had headed that. And well he headed up all the special functions for Mr. Bryan. The law students were Mr. Bryan's aides -- Blake Newton and Cecil Harper and Pat Lyons, who is now dead, Billy Roberts of Philadelphia.

Williams: This was sort of part of how the law students were part of the college itself.

V. Phelps: That's right. It was small and there were just a few students in the law school, but the law school was very close to the main college.

A. Phelps: A great many of the teachers in the law school were in the arts college proper, particularly business administration, fields of this kind, and government-related (like labor law) fields of this type. We had a number of these people working with us at different times -- economists were working so that some of the courses were designated in such a way that the arts college student, could take them or that they would be a part of the law school program. And frankly, the arts
college students were excellent students, well capable of taking the course. Matter of fact, one of them took trusts and estates, which is a highly complicated legal course, but he was leading into insurance, and he did very well.

Williams: You thought this interdisciplinary approach was really beneficial to the law school?

A. Phelps: I think it was, and I think and hopefully it will get back to this to some degree, but as we moved into becoming a full-scale law school, it's been necessary to adhere more closely to the traditional concepts of a law school. And many of us feel, to some extent, that this is a mistake, and we hope some day we may get back to an interdisciplinary approach.

Williams: Because the school did start out as the School of Government and Citizenship, and as I understand, Mr. Pollard and Dr. [J. A. C.] Chandler were really the ones who got it started.

A. Phelps: That's my understanding, too, although I'm sure that -- I think Judge Shewmake was a little later, wasn't he? He was very active in promoting the School of law and I think he had this broad concept of teaching law, and he gave a very good talk here many years ago to a small group about his conception of a law school along these lines, and I think he got it from the earlier experience here with the law school.

Williams: When you came, it was called the Department of Jurisprudence?

A. Phelps: Right.

Williams: But it was part of the Marshall-Wythe School of Government and Citizenship?
A. Phelps: Right and the higher salaries were exactly the same as the professors' salaries on the academic side. And that remained for many years, true for many years. In other words, we were that much a part of the college that we were really a department in the fullest sense.

Williams: Someone told me -- and this may be hearsay -- that the way the school came to be called a law school, no one really knew when it was that it sort of had to be done in a roundabout way. Do you know of this? (This could have been totally erroneous information.)

A. Phelps: It was along about '47 or '48, I think, that we shifted from this over to the Marshall-Wythe School of Law. I think -- I'm trying to think now -- it probably was a little later than that, not that -- probably during Woodbridge's era or Curtis's -- I don't know which, but I believe it was Woodbridge's.

Williams: I think that was when this question came up. They were trying to date a portrait of Dean Woodbridge, and they were trying to figure out when he was dean, and they said, "Well, all of a sudden, after one summer, it was called the law school." So I wondered if there was.

A. Phelps: You'll find that I'm sure along in there in the minutes of the board.

V. Phelps:

A. Phelps: But that shift was a part, and the law review was changed from a review of Virginia law, which I instituted, and was very modestly successful, but that was the start of the William and
about the same time that the name of the law school changed, the name of the law review changed so it became the William and Mary Law Review. Part of the purpose of that was to gain more national recognition, frankly, by having a law review. I thought that was a good idea and that was our intention to lead into this, but I thought it was a little untimely. I thought we hadn't quite arrived at the point, but it seems to me that it's worked pretty well but I was a little hesitant about moving that fast into this area because at that time we were just beginning -- you were asking what period we began -- we were beginning to attract students and of course, the ending of the war brought students in; this was what really gave us our first real boost. But somewhere around -- approximately -- really it was a little after Mr. Woodbridge's tenure -- we began to attract a more broadly national group. We always had some students from other states but we began to attract them in larger numbers and they were not dependent on this military bulge; they were dependent on the fact that the school was becoming recognized as a good school and I think when we had established the chair of law this gave added interest to the development of the school and gained us a great deal of national recognition and reputation.

Williams: Was this taxation degree also part of this of building up the program and therefore trying to get better students?

A. Phelps: Oh, yes. We felt that tax law was an important area and one
that we could concentrate in. That we could develop a good tax program -- which we did, we developed an excellent tax program and Mr. Atkinson came in to establish the program and (he had a national reputation) and many of his students are well placed over the country at the present time.

I had a little to do with expressing the desirability of this and pushing it. Also Judge Shewmake was very much interested in it and Judge Hooker was very much interested in having taxation established as one of the areas of study.

And a good deal of interest developed immediately for this, and it was intentionally done to give us a little area of specialty above and beyond the normal tax courses that you have in law school.

Williams: You mentioned Judge Shewmake -- now neither Judge Shewmake nor Judge Hooker graduated with a law degree from here, but they were both interested for a long time in the law school.

A. Phelps: Yes, strangely -- I think Judge Shewmake was a Surry County boy and he did have an intense interest in the law school.

Williams: I think he had been one of the first teachers when it was first formed.

A. Phelps: Yes, he was. And I'm fairly certain he was a graduate of the University of Virginia but in spite of that he was always representing the best interests, I think, of the law school at William and Mary. Strangely, we've had several Virginia people who have been interested in the law school.
Williams: Over the years it seems the law school has gotten a great deal of alumni support, even though up until recently there weren't all that many alumni who were influential. Is this not true?

A. Phelps: Yes. After we began to enlarge a little bit we got excellent students like Chappell—who is now a member of the board—We had Foster—who is now a judge. When these young men graduated the total class took an interest in the development of the law school and had maintained basically that interest although they aren't quite as represented in the association. As formally they played a very important part in the development of the law school and that solid interest and in the case of the law review it was a student development. In other words, the faculty—I was advisor for many years and I insisted the faculty and the student effort and they did all the business work and planning. They did all the work with the state agencies and this was what helped to make them the students that they were actually handling the full responsibility. Of course, I advised them with respect to certain policy matters and things of this kind but I've always felt—and many law reviews do feel it's true—that you get much better results this way. Those people really wrote the articles (except of course with some quick lookover here and there) also many of us gave them subjects to write on and so forth. Some of it was the product of classroom work, so it was in part supervised but in general it was almost totally inde-
ependent and those people contributed immeasureably to the development of the law school.

Williams: This is a "which came first, the chicken or the egg"-type question: have the standards been raised from getting better students or were the programs the courses introduced -- were they the cause for better students coming?

A. Phelps: Well, we've always had a core of excellent students. We might have had less students, but we always had a core of very solid students. Frankly, in the earlier days there were many students, but we gradually moved to the point where we had no problem with respect to quality of students. In other words, we turn away hundreds of students who are well qualified to have in the law school. If we get this new law school building, of course we'll be able to take larger numbers. To some degree, we don't want too much enlargement. It would be too large a law school in comparison with the rest of the college.

Williams: I would think having the quarters, having your own building, rather than being in Bryan Hall, would have been a factor, too.

A. Phelps: You know, I'm a great believer in the fact that you can have education anywhere. The buildings help, but there are plenty of buildings around the country where law is not very well taught. They have fine facilities and fine buildings. We conducted a vigorous program of solid student interest in what they were doing; the classes were small enough to really
bring out the students, and it was a very happy time to be teaching, really—a very fine group of young men, and the quality was, yes, good at the top. I'd say more than half of the students were highly qualified. Many of them have proved it since in their accomplishments. So, yes, we get good students.

Williams: Let me ask you a little bit about administrative attitudes. When you came here did you feel that from the president on down there was a real interest in making this a quality program?

A. Phelps: There's always been an interest, except possibly during one period, and I don't like to pinpoint any one individual, but behind the law school, although I'm not too sure that Dr. Pomfret was solidly... or he did back the law school, I've always wondered. And some people like Bob Lande, who was librarian, made no bones about the fact that he didn't think there should be a law school here. So there was a certain amount of opposition, but I would say overall, we've always had the highest cooperation from the administration, from all the people have been working... Of course, the pace would be slower or faster with some than others, but even Dr. Pomfret, I think, recognized that the law school was going to be here, and he was a part of the effort. I really don't know much there was there.

Am I accurate there, Virginia?

V. Phelps: Yes, I think you're very accurate.

A. Phelps: Right, I think if I picked one administrator, he was much less interested in the law school, and I think his natural interests were different, but we did have solid support, and I think he
recognized the fact that we had for the law school but there's always been a great deal of interest, but then this period came when there was this discussion of duplicating facilities in the state and I suggested to you that I had heard -- but I could not state it positively -- that Dr. Southall Freeman had a great deal of interest in this concept and was applying it objectively, broadly across the state, and therefore would affect our school (it was very small at that time). You see, they were feeling with the matter of efficiency and income and we were spending a little more money than we were making. Now, of course, we help the college proper much more than they help us at the present time. So it was completely turned around that flow of income so that we were really having a big fight to get what we considered a fair proportion of the income that we generate. But the picture was exactly opposite in those days. So Dr. Freeman or whoever it was (or a group of people undoubtedly) established a state policy of doing away with duplicating facilities. As a matter of fact, we lost our library science program here; other programs were lost as a result of this and we were slated for this. There was a good deal; there was quite a tug-of-war and there were substantial interests (I think very substantial interests) who wanted the law school and I think very substantial interests -- and there were other people who wanted to apply this theory of objects and we got a lot of solid newspaper support and so forth and all of a sudden it was
But there were two periods -- one before I came here in which the law school was almost abolished and then the period when I was dean during which there was -- well, as a matter of fact, I was told that the law school was being abolished and that we were going to be transferred to the University of Virginia faculty. We wouldn't lose our jobs but we would be given opportunities at the University of Virginia but this never eventuated because all of the school, apparently, got up in arms -- all the alumni and so forth -- and it became settled then and then we moved into this rather inadequate situation in the basement of Bryan Hall and then we gradually developed to the point where we justified our new building -- that's right; development of the library building as the law building which many of us thought. We recognized that the time was a factor there was also the need for other academic buildings and frankly, I think, if we'd fought tooth and nail for a building then, we would have gotten it, but it would have been at the sacrifice of the college proper. We have acted in a restrained manner in pushing for a law school building and I think, at the time the approval was made, it was thought that the building is so built that it could be fairly easily established into another type of operation for other purposes; eventually we will get another law school building, so I don't think -- and hopefully we are
in the process of getting that (which I think we’re entitled to) because frankly, I know we acted in a very restrained manner; and I know that we got up a good deal of support from the college proper as a result of it. And Dr. Guy was very helpful to us in getting the building we have at the present time because he recognized the restraint which we exercised, and I think the chemistry building was attributed to some extent to us because he felt the same way that but he helped us and so we should help somewhere.

Williams: What capacity was he acting in?

A. Phelps: He was the head of the chemistry department.

V. Phelps: I thought he was dean of the faculty at that time.

A. Phelps: He was very responsible; he was in the inner councils, as you might say. Very quiet operator, though. Not ostentatious at all, but his judgment was well recognized. Well, he certainly was a very influential person. (Discussion on whether or not Mr. Guy was ever dean of the faculty.)

Williams: Did this move to abolish, you’re taking about now in the late...

I think it was ’39. Dr. Bryan introduced to the Board of Visitors and in fact the Board of Visitors, I think, voted to abolish it then and as I’ve been told, a week later, they had to meet again because of the uproar there was over this. Did this get any farther than just sort of rumor or talk stage? I know the board never acted on it, but I’m probably thinking more of in Richmond.

A. Phelps: You’re talking about which time?
Williams: Here in the late '40s when you were dean.

A. Phelps: It never got to the point of action as far as I know, except for actions of committees which were appointed by the legislature and were working on this duplicating thing. As I told you, I was informed that the law school would be abolished and that we would be transferred to the University of Virginia. Now certainly some rather political decision had been made with respect to this, but that got to the newspapers again, and the agitation of the alumni developed strongly, quickly. But by that time I was in Florida.

Williams: Now, on the state level the objection would have been duplication of facilities, but you hinted that not everyone at William and Mary was convinced that the law school should have been here. What would have been their arguments why it should not be -- would it be that the college's character was liberal arts and not professional?

A. Phelps: Yes, I think that had something to do with it. There's always been thought that maybe the overtones of Colonial Williamsburg and their desire and need to have a small arts college here, rather than one which they realized might develop too broadly. But, frankly, we haven't felt any major opposition to the law school from that sector. But I think from time to time there has been thought that a small liberal arts college here --

And of course, in terms of state money, it might well be desired.
itself felt that it should be oriented to a liberal arts college, not having other departments at all.

Williams: In connection with this attitude of various people, what was the interest of Alvin Duke Chandler in the law school? Do you think that since his father had been the one who started the school of government and citizenship that he was conscious of, shall we say, building upon his father's work?

A. Phelps: Oh, I think he was, very much so. And we've never had any better support -- Dr. Graves, right now, is supporting us very well -- but certainly that was the high point in the support, and he went on a real drive to help the law school. And if I'm not very much mistaken, it was during his period that this separation between salary scales (which of course was recognized over the country) occurred, and we started getting better salaries than the other parts of the college.

V. Phelps: It was he who brought in Dr. Atkinson who started the taxation program.

A. Phelps: That's right. He started the taxation program, and he had quite an interest in the law school in pushing the law school and then getting the law school building. The money was appropriated for designing that, I think, during his period. Yes, he was very much interested in the law school.

Williams: This Marshall-Wythe-Blackstone celebration that came during his administration -- did it have any effect on the law school or was it just a celebration of the accomplishments?
A. Phelps: No, that definitely was a part of the development of interest.
Williams: Calling attention to it?
A. Phelps: Oh, yes. And the taxation, you remember, was established as a part of that program. That was where Mel Jones really got his start was in that event or whatever you call that year, and he did a very fine job and he developed an interest in the law school which was quite helpful to us during the period of our development under Dr. Chandler because he got it from the top to some extent, but he also maintained his own interest because we had sort of participated in his development as well.
Williams: Wasn't it at one time proposed that this law school be tied to a new program at the Norfolk division?
A. Phelps: There's been discussion from time to time about a law school in Norfolk. And no one could quite decide whether the thought was originally that it might be established as a night law school and as sort of an adjunct to our law school but plans of course, running a full-time law school, as we are -- a full-time day law school -- we really don't have the desire or really the situation is very difficult for the development of a night program in our situation not in others perhaps a city situation, although they have the same problem in many other cities. But there has been some discussion on it, but it never has materialized, and I'm sure there's substantial interest in development of a law school there, but I think it'll probably take the form of a night law school which'll be
on its own, associated with Old Dominion University. But
some of those people down there had a vision of this sud-
denly blossoming out as a complete university and they
moved a little too fast, but they've done a beautiful job with the school.
but it's grown so fast that they really haven't taken time
to -- the medical program is another aspect of it, you see,
in this area -- and I think that now they've gotten to the
point where they may well be able to develop a program, but
I don't think at the present time that it'll develop in
connection with William and Mary, although if we
were to go into a new building and so forth, there may be profes-
sors that want to work at a night program. Most of the time,
full-time professors don't like to take part in a night program.
So what happens is you gradually develop a night law school
and most of the time they are of the same quality as the
day law schools. It's a funny thing. From a service stand-
point, there are a lot of people who ought to have their oppor-
tunities to study law and the only opportunity
(3) Mr. Atkinson, a lot of his study courses he's not a lawyer
but has studied a lot of law, Kissinger's done a lot of his
work, including his Ph.D., in just this kind of situation.) A lot of these people, the opportunity -- highly
qualified people -- to study law, but it's a big problem.

what is our duty to the entire community? We recognize it;
we haven't been able to solve it.

Williams: Moving from Chandler... Was Dr. Paschall
as interested in the law school as Admiral Chandler?

A. Phelps: Oh, yes. I was very surprised in a way because I thought he was going to definitely -- he was very much interested in the law school.

Williams: ...Because during his administration was when the graduate programs really began to take off at the college, and by this time the law program had become graduate level.

A. Phelps: We were beginning to pay our own way. That had something to do with it, well, there was a substantial interest in the law school, at least I never felt any antipathy toward the law school.

Williams: We talked about various opponents and proponents of the law school. When this abolition attempt was made in '39, Dr. Bryan was quoted as saying that law instruction was not a credit to William and Mary and how would you say this has changed now over the thirty-five years since he made this statement?

A. Phelps: I think we have national standing as a law school. We still have salary problems, even though we've made very substantial increases recently, to some extent, marginal. In other words, the dean is not paid nearly the amount here that he'd be paid in a similar law school. But I would say as far as the standing of the school itself, we are well recognized. Part of our ability in this area of recognition comes from the arts college, too, which is well recognized. But we have a fine reputation over the country.
Williams: What particular role can Marshall-Wythe School of Law fill in Virginia that no other law school can? Let me rephrase it -- what would you say is its basic function, then?

A. Phelps: Part of its function, of course, is to train Virginia lawyers because the University of Virginia can't possibly handle the number of students who want to study law basically to become Virginia lawyers. So we have an important place in that area. We also, as a national law school, have noted areas in the development of the national courts matter is indeed what may develop, and I think this is going to bring us closer to functioning in connection with the legislation in the state so whether this will become an adjunct of this other, I don't know, but we've all ready been given an area of possibility along this which we're slowly implementing and really need the new law school building to move forward strongly in this area. I would say that we have a service possibility. We're using our students very well in the area of serving the Norfolk community in connection with legal aid. We have service committees with the legislature -- student aid and divorce law problems -- different areas of this kind. We have a distinct opportunity because we're close to Richmond associations) to do a great deal remains to be done because our legislation in Virginia is not what it should be. In other words, it's not carefully done. It used to be that it was never done and recently it's very poorly done, in my opinion --
just from a technical standpoint. So that we have a great opportunity here ... I also think that as the first law school that we have a place in the tradition of the country, and I think that if we can develop these areas we can maintain that tradition, not just in the sense of the dusty old book, but as something important in terms of the active life of the state and the nation. I think we also have -- and we're working on this, too -- a beautiful opportunity to develop a program for lawyers who are going into government, and this I have pushed. When I was at Columbia, out of a group of fifteen, I was the only person who would conceive of a law school in terms of training lawyers for government work; I mean I was the only one who put it down, now maybe some of the others might have thought of it. When we were asked to outline what we thought, I was the only one that put it down, so it shows it's a area of great deal importance, and we have a real opportunity here for this, and this would bring on back into play this government-citizenship thing you were talking about, because you're dealing here with the law plus, you see. Also bringing in economics, accounting -- all these other areas could play a very important role, and I do hope some day this very nebulous concept can be given some plan. I'm sure that -- again, I was not a very great admirer of Judge Showmaker's, but nevertheless that was one of his excellent concepts.

Williams: Does it await funding or support or both?

A. Phelps: Well, I think those will come hand-in-hand. I don't envision
any major difficulties with funding once the solid base is established for the operation (and that's been the experience, I understand, with some of the others). Funding I don't think will be a problem. You generate these things, you see; you generate them and you don't have any trouble. It's strange how much money you can get for things that are worthless now. Things that really have a core of solid usefulness you don't have very much difficulty in getting accomplished.

Williams: Can you think of anything else I should ask or he should add?

V. Phelps: No, I don't think so. I just think it's important to make the oldest law school the best law school.

A. Phelps: We've run a quality operation; and we have gradually developed this and we have some problems -- I would be the first to admit it, -- we have problems, but we've, again, a solidly based law school and unfortunately, we've gotten tied into side issues at times over race problems and things of this kind, which I'm sure has diverted interest from the law school, but in toto, I don't think it's harmed the law school a great deal or stopped its progress. It certainly would have stopped its progress during my deanship if that had been a central policy of the state to do away with the law school being caused, you see, by the politicians at the time and then Virginia politics in the final

perhaps
critiqued very much, I think they really do try to develop
quality people. They bring in a great many people from outside the state for posts in order to keep it from being too inbred and so forth. I think Virginia's a great state and William and Mary's a great law school.