

EDUCATION FIRST

by Suzanne Barksdale Rice

Ignorance Club, October 23, 2017

AS A FRESHMAN at the College of William & Mary I was taught a litany of college firsts. First among the firsts was: “*First* college in the United States in its antecedents, which go back to the College proposed at Henrico (1619). Second to Harvard in actual operation.” Even before I married a Harvard man, this seemed a somewhat tenuous claim as firsts go, somehow an “almost first.” Nice try, but no cigar. I suppose we can all put ourselves first if we throw “antecedents” into the mix.

Well, my antecedents are in Lexington, where I attended kindergarten and first grade and all the grades thereafter until I went to college. Long before I walked across the campus of William & Mary, or Harvard for that matter, I crossed the campus of Washington and Lee University each day on my way to school at Ann Smith.

Suzanne Rice was born and grew up in Lexington, attending its public schools in the 1950s and '60s. After graduating from the College of William & Mary, she pursued an arts administration career in Cambridge, Houston, Pasadena, and Tucson. In 2012 she returned to Lexington, where she is currently president of Historic Lexington Foundation and coordinates a regional English-Speaking Union Shakespeare Competition for high school students.

The author delivered this paper as an informal oral presentation on the year's Ignorance Club theme, “Fabulous Firsts.” It is a synthesis of information based on original research and secondary sources.

Ann Smith School stands proudly on the northwest corner of Nelson Street and Lee Avenue. Its architecture mirrors that of nearby Washington and Lee — monumental scale, high ceilings, well-proportioned, red bricks, white columns, spacious front lawn. Appropriately imposing and serious for any six-year-old embarking upon an education. Its architect was Charles M. Robinson, a prolific designer of educational buildings in Virginia, including many at William & Mary.

Ann Smith was built in 1909–10 as the town's high school and later served as an elementary school from 1927 to 1969. I attended second, third, and fourth grades there. My third-grade teacher, Miss Lucy Ackerly, had taught my mother some twenty-eight years before. The building was purchased by W&L in 1978, remodeled, and continues its “educational mission” today as the W&L Chi Psi fraternity house. It's listed as a Virginia Historical Site and a plaque dedicated in 1981 by the Ruth Anderson McCullough Branch of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities attests to its heritage.

Its antecedents — and its name — go back to an earlier educational institution: Ann Smith Academy. Ann Smith, a private, classical school for young women in Lexington, began operation in temporary quarters in November 1807 and was incorporated by the Virginia General Assembly in January 1808. It is the second-oldest incorporated school for girls in Virginia, preceded only a few months by the Richmond Academy for Female Education. But let's dismiss the short-lived Richmond Academy, for Ann Smith is unquestionably Virginia's most durable female academy in years of actual operation — nearly 100. In publicity, the academy claimed to be the first of its kind in the South.

Ann Smith Academy was founded by Lexington's prominent, and predominantly Presbyterian, families who had “daughters ready to be educated,” so said one of its first organizers, James McDowell. Consider this. Lexington had been established a scant thirty years before. It was, in the early 1800s, rural and remote, a town of about 600 to 700. Not until the railroad arrived in 1881 did Lexington become less isolated.

There was no public school system in early-nineteenth-century America. Most



Former Ann Smith School, built in 1909–10; now a fraternity house owned by Washington and Lee. Photograph by Sally Mann, c. 1976; from *The Architecture of Historic Lexington*.



The original Ann Smith Academy, built in 1809.
Photo: W&L — Rockbridge Historical Society in Library's Special Collections.

schooling was private, rudimentary, and male-only. The very idea of a female academy was visionary — and not without controversy. But then — there *were* those “daughters ready to be educated.” And there were those Presbyterians for whom education, rather than cleanliness, was next to godliness.

So Lexington's leading citizens organized with the intention of acquiring funding, choosing a site and building a school, and securing a principal. A committee of parents seems to have designed the elegant structure that John Jordan built in the Federal style, similar to two academic buildings at nearby Washington Academy that had been erected only a few years before.

The female academy they built stood from 1809 until it was demolished in 1909 to make way for the new high school (the building that was destined to become my elementary school).

Much of my information on Ann Smith Academy comes from William W. Pusey III's long 1983 essay, *Elusive Aspirations: The History of the Female Academy in Lexington, Virginia*. Dr. Pusey was a W&L professor who researched the Academy's trustees' meetings as well as the annual reports of the principals, including those of Ann Smith herself.

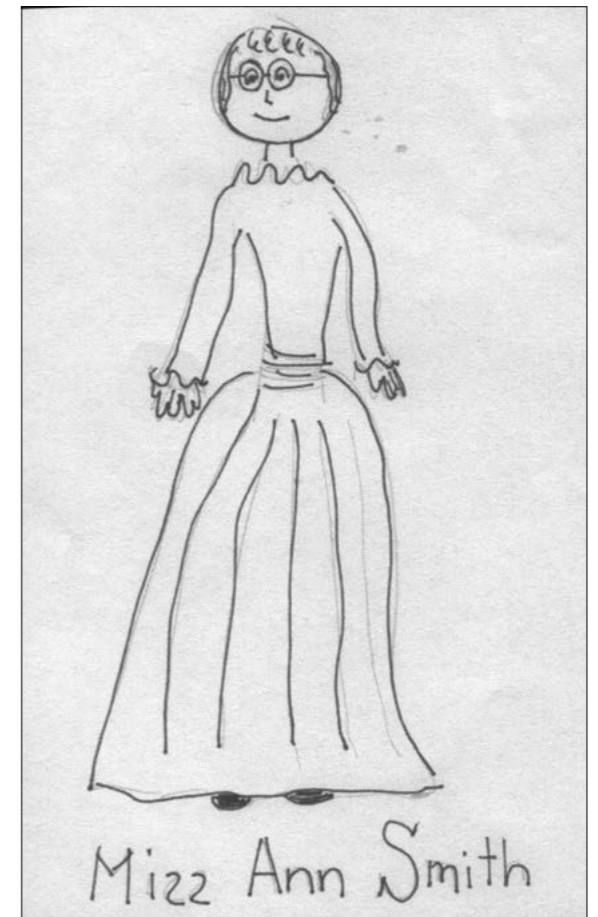
Who, then, was Ann Smith, the woman who gave her name to the fledgling female academy? Why did her name endure for 200 years — from the founding of the Academy in 1807, through the closing of the elementary school in 1969, and to this day in the memories of those who were taught there? With no portrait to hinder my imagination, I see her as the consummate schoolmarm, slight of stature, erect of bearing, slightly prim, serious, strict but fair, brisk, capable, dedicated, with high standards and high expectations of “her young ladies.” In my mind's eye she was the perennial guiding spirit of female education in Lexington.

Ann Smith was indeed the school's first principal. The 1807 Commonwealth of Virginia incorporation papers for Lexington's female school already bear her name — the Ann Smith Academy. She was present from the start, in fact before the start, as Oren Frederic Morton relates in his 1920 *A History of Rockbridge County*.

Miss Smith was known to the trustees before they organized the school, and it was their aim to secure her if possible. She was a cultured lady, a born teacher and was highly successful in her new position. Her terms were liberal in the extreme. She declined to accept any salary, but her board and her incidental expenses were to be paid by the trustees.

While the trustees attested to her fine reputation, her story before and after her time at the academy that bears her name is largely lost to history. She was born in Maryland in 1766 and died there in 1840, at the age of seventy-four or seventy-five. She herself was educated at a female academy in Maryland. Before arriving in Lexington she seems to have taught in Maryland; Georgetown; and briefly in Staunton, or perhaps Fincastle.

But here's the thing. Her time in Lexington was quite brief. She led Ann Smith Academy for *four and a half years* before severing connections. She departed for Fredericksburg, where she apparently taught for several years before returning to Maryland to live with a nephew and teach his two children. She never married. That's it. Four and a half brief years. Nine sessions — 1807 to 1812.



A schoolchild's portrait of Ann Smith.

Yet under Ann Smith's leadership and with her organizational skills, the female academy got off to a fine start. The first trustees had accomplished exactly what they had set out to do — obtain funding, acquire land and build a school, and engage a principal.

As noted, Miss Ann Smith offered her services without pay, although she was provided room and board and was reimbursed for incidentals, including black stockings and the mending of an umbrella. The trustees held her in high esteem and she was welcomed into the town's literary circles. But in March 1812 she abruptly tendered her resignation. The trustees begged her to stay, but she would not be dissuaded. She left in April to become the principal of a Fredericksburg female academy. A Fredericksburg newspaper noted that her move was due to "the sudden changes of temperature in a mountainous country injurious to her health" as well as the "inconveniency in being so remotely situated from her native state" (that is, Maryland).

Others believed she had fallen in love with one of her teachers, a handsome young Frenchman, Hyacinth Crusolles. While in Lexington, they had traveled to the Springs together. And Crusolles spent the June and July following Miss Smith's departure teaching French in Fredericksburg, listing as his address the academy where she was the new superintendent. But after the summer he returned to Lexington to teach briefly at Washington Academy. Some years later he was for a short while a tutor for wards in Amherst County.

Thus exit Hyacinth Crusolles and Ann Smith from the stage, leaving to our fertile imaginations what did — or didn't — happen between them.

Yet her name and her namesake academy endured. During the academy's long history, there were numerous fluctuations in curriculum, enrollment, and ages of students. Financial woes, however, were a constant. While most of the academy's students were from Lexington and Rockbridge County, some came from farther away. Boarding was required for all young ladies whose parents or guardians did not live in the town or nearby. Students took their meals at the steward's table. Their ages varied from eight to twenty, although most were between thirteen and sixteen years old.

Miss Smith had established a strong curriculum, with subjects that included not only reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also grammar, geography, natural philosophy, chemistry, astronomy, *belles-lettres*, French, painting, music (largely piano), embroidery, and sometimes even dancing. Over the years the number and type of courses varied considerably. Not all courses advertised were always taught. Beyond basic tuition, different fees applied to different courses.



Ann Smith Academy; undated.
Photo: W&L — Rockbridge Historical Society in Library's Special Collections.

Enrollment proved unpredictable, from a high of ninety-nine pupils in 1886 (which in that year, however, included a number of boys) to a low of five girls in 1858, to everything in between. During Miss Smith's last year, 1812, enrollment stood at more than seventy, with forty-five boarders. In 1839, enrollment was ninety, more than at Washington College. Seven years later, in 1846, Ann Smith had 40 students, while Washington College had 80 and Virginia Military Institute 110. The academy also experienced several brief periods of closure, regrouping, and reopening. It was forced to close for a time during the Civil War. (During Hunter's raid, two shells struck across the street from the school, although neither the school nor its pupils were injured.) Beginning in about 1877 some boys under the age of twelve were admitted.

With Miss Smith at the helm, the school had, for the most part, flourished, but after she left, the academy witnessed a revolving door of principals, including several Presbyterian ministers, none of whom measured up to the example she had set. Not until the last principal, Miss Madge Paxton, from 1879 to 1892, did the academy again experience the strong leadership of its first principal.

Financial difficulties were unending. The academy was heavily in debt from the start, largely due to the initial costs of erecting its handsome building. Creditors, including its builder, John Jordan, perennially knocked at the door. Lexington was a small town, with a stable population, uneven community support, and a small base of donors (called subscribers). The academy's benefactors read like a Who's Who of Lexington — Preston, McDowell, Reid, Leyburn, Barclay. A few subscribers came from elsewhere, including Thomas Jefferson, who made a gift to help establish the academy. In the academy's early years, the trustees several times sought and failed to receive state funding. In 1824, Washington College's benefactor "Jockey" John Robinson rescued Ann Smith Academy, at least for the moment.

The connection between Ann Smith and Washington Academy lay not only in their architecture and their mutual donors, but in their trustees and teachers as well. In fact, the female academy was considered a sister institution to the male college. During the first sixty years of Ann Smith Academy many of the trustees served for long periods of time — and served concurrently on the boards of both institutions. Furthermore, sometimes Washington College professors served both as Ann Smith trustees and its teachers. In the 1830s, the young ladies of Ann Smith, if properly chaperoned, could attend advanced classes at the college. And once VMI was founded in 1839, its professors, too, taught advanced courses to the young ladies.

Students from the Ann Smith Academy and Washington College got together for socials as well as theatrical productions and pageants. The young ladies sometimes attended Washington College commencement exercises. For instance, from 1840 to 1842, the young ladies joined the young men in a procession to the Presbyterian Church, where they viewed Washington College graduation ceremonies from assigned seats. I like to imagine my antecedent, great-grandfather John James Dupuy, who graduated from Washington College in 1841, processing with the young ladies of Ann Smith Academy, they in white dresses with bonnets on their heads. Was he smitten by one of them? I do not know. He did not marry an Ann Smith girl.

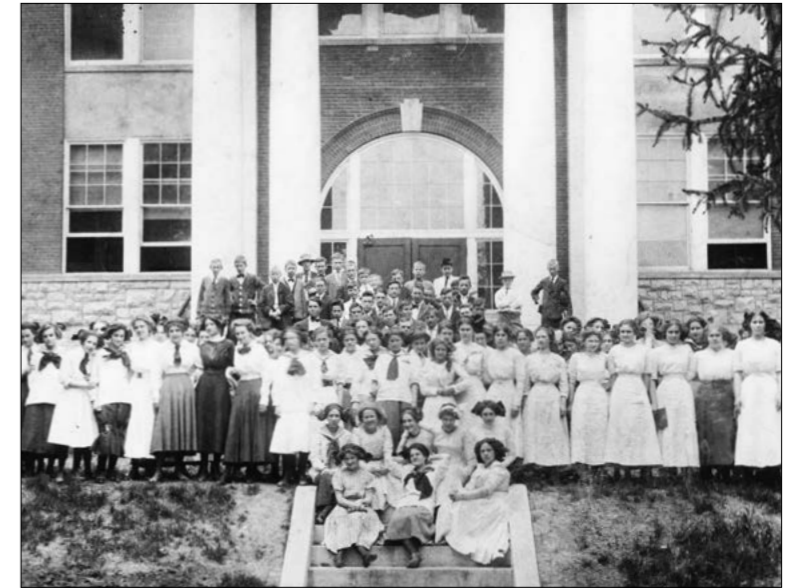
Ann Smith Academy persisted for more than a century, barely surviving, struggling with persistent poverty, inept leadership, fluctuating enrollment, temporary closures, not to mention a Civil War. Its travails notwithstanding, the female academy managed to educate hundreds of young ladies (and some young men), primarily from Rockbridge County. Its demise was signaled by the new kid on the block — public education.

The academy building was leased in 1903 for high-school use. In 1908 the town accepted the school property, but in 1909–10 the building's foundations were determined to be unsafe and beyond repair. Despite a public outcry based on a

sentimental attachment to the handsome old building, it was demolished to make way for a new public high school — the building that was my grade school and stands today, occupied by young W&L fraternity men.

With fifth grade I left Ann Smith behind. My legs were a bit longer and I could walk a bit farther, skirting the W&L campus, traveling east on Washington Street to Ruffner School. Like Ann Smith, Ruffner is a handsome brick and stone building with large windows for natural light. Built in 1892, Ruffner is the oldest surviving public school building in Lexington. It was erected as the first public school to serve grades from one through the third year of high school. It became an elementary school in 1910 when the high school moved to the new Ann Smith building on Lee Avenue. Thus Ruffner was the first in a long line of Lexington high schools repurposed as grade schools — first Ruffner, then Ann Smith, then the two Lexington High Schools that are now Waddell Elementary and Maury River Middle School. What once was Ruffner now houses Lexington City Hall. It may be a stretch to find an educational connection between Ruffner School and City Hall, but for what it's worth, when I was sixteen I took my first driver's license exam in the building.

Ruffner was my school for fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. In those days the



Lexington High School students in 1910 at what would become Ann Smith School, now Chi Psi Lodge. Photo: W&L Library Special Collections.



Lexington High School students in 1897 on steps of what would become Ruffner School, now Lexington City Hall. Principal Harrington Waddell stands at the top by the doorway. Photo: W&L Library Special Collections.



The author's seventh-grade class at Ruffner School, 1957–58.

schools weren't called "elementary" or "middle." They were just "grade" (with a lower case "g") schools. Who went to school where was pretty much determined by how many students were in each grade. In fact, for my fourth grade year, half of us remained at Ann Smith (as I did) and the other half (as Lisa didⁱ) moved on to Ruffner. I knew the school was named for William Henry Ruffner, but my knowledge of him was as scanty as was my knowledge of Miss Ann Smith. I understood that Ruffner was an educator, but I'm not sure I was aware that he was the first superintendent of public instruction in Virginia. (Now, there's a legitimate *first* for you.) Nor did I know that Ruffner had once served as a trustee of Ann Smith Academy or that, as a strong proponent of public education, he had, perhaps unintentionally, contributed to the Academy's demise.

Unlike the elusive Miss Ann Smith, William Henry Ruffner had deep roots in Rockbridge County. He was born in Lexington in 1824, died in 1908, and is buried in Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery. He grew up on a family farm and at what is now 110 Preston Street at the head of Lee Avenue. The house was built by his father in 1821–24, just before William Henry was born. It faces Washington College and is just two blocks from Ann Smith. William Henry's mother was Sarah (Sally) Lyle. She was one of Miss Ann Smith's first pupils. In fact, when the academy building was erected in 1808, Miss Smith laid the first brick and Sally Lyle the second, followed by the other young ladies enrolled in the Academy. When Miss Smith

i Lisa Tracy, an Ignorance Club member.

abruptly left town, Sally and another pupil seem to have assumed interim teaching responsibilities.

William Henry Ruffner's father was Henry Ruffner, who graduated from Washington College in 1813. Henry was a professor at the college from 1819 to 1836 when William Henry was growing up and was its president from 1836 to 1848 when William Henry (and my great grandfather, the aforementioned John James Dupuy) were students there in the early 1840s.

William Henry Ruffner received his A.B. in 1842 and his A.M. in 1845, both from Washington College. He entered Union Theological Seminary, then located at Hampden-Sydney, and completed his ministerial studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1850 he married Harriet Ann Gray, the daughter of a wealthy Rockingham County planter. They had two sons, who died young, and two daughters. Ruffner was, at various times, a supply minister for Presbyterian churches near Lexington (including Ben Salem Presbyterian), a chaplain at the University of Virginia, and the minister-in-residence at Seventh Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

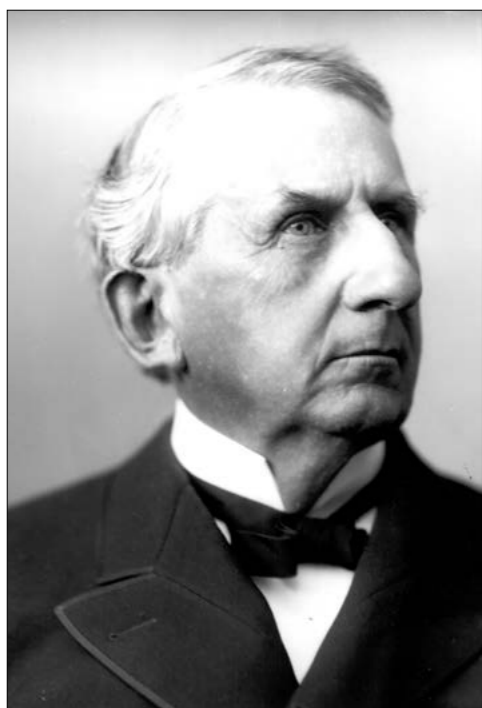
In 1853, he resigned his Philadelphia ministry due to ill health and returned to Virginia to settle into farming. His farm relied on slave labor, as did his family's salt mine, which he had administered as a young man.

While in graduate school in Lexington in the mid-1840s, he had formed a Colored Sunday School at the Presbyterian Church. The school disbanded when he left town. Nearly ten years later, in nearby Rockingham County, he again established a Colored Sunday School. He was careful to note that he relied on oral instruction, as Virginia law forbade teaching groups of slaves to read.

Throughout those pre-Civil War years, Ruffner advocated the gradual emancipation and colonization of slaves. He was a strong proponent of the American Colonization Society, joining local chapters wherever he lived, fundraising, and issuing sermons and publications proposing immigration to Liberia as the solution to American slavery. Leading up to the Civil War he opposed secession from



Ruffner School, built in 1892; Lexington City Hall today. From *The Architecture of Historic Rockbridge*.



William Henry Ruffner: Lexington native, Virginia's first superintendent of public instruction, and grade-school eponym. Undated Michael Miley photo from W&L Library Special Collections.

the Union. But once the war began, he supported the Confederacy. After war's end, he favored reconciliation, along the lines espoused by Robert E. Lee. He served on the Washington College board of trustees (as well as on the Ann Smith Academy board) and was among those who had asked Lee to become president of the college.

After the war, he built a home, Tribrook, just outside Lexington, where he raised crops and served as a supply minister. And then he received a new calling. The United States Congress required that the former Confederate states write new constitutions in order to be readmitted to the Union. In 1869 Virginia approved the Underwood Constitution that mandated the creation of a free public school system. William Henry Ruffner submitted his name, was endorsed by Robert E. Lee, and was elected on the first ballot as Virginia's first superintendent of public instruction, a position to which he was

twice re-elected and which he held for twelve years.

Like Robert E. Lee, Ruffner believed that education was important in rebuilding a devastated South. With determination and urgency, Ruffner embarked upon a bold experiment: developing a plan for the creation of a free, public school system. He presented his comprehensive plan to the General Assembly twenty-six days after being elected superintendent of public instruction. He formed local school districts, hired county superintendents and appointed school trustees, established regulations, and advocated widely for public education. He selected John Lyle Campbell, a Washington College chemistry and geology professor and former classmate, as Rockbridge County's first superintendent.

Almost 3,000 public schools opened in Virginia the first year, attended by 130,000 students, including 39,000 African Americans. When Ruffner resigned twelve years later, there were 5,500 public schools, most of them small and rural, with 250,000 students.

Ruffner's school system reflected the democratic principles he held. He believed the state had a moral obligation to educate all its citizens. Fearing votes cast by an uneducated citizenry, he believed in an equal education for white and black students. At the same time, he strongly supported segregated schooling. Like his

fellow Presbyterians, religion and education remained strong threads throughout his life. Yet he believed in a secular education, with religious instruction best left to parents and churches.

He understood the importance of teacher training, and established six-week summer teaching institutes, separate ones for white and African American teachers. And he championed the creation of normal schools to train teachers. As most teachers were women, this meant *female* normal schools. In 1884, after he had retired as superintendent of public instruction, he was chosen to be the first principal of the new State Female Normal School, now Longwood University, at Farmville, a position he held for three years. My female antecedents were educated there, my paternal grandmother in the early 1900s, and my mother and my father's sister in the late 1930s.

In later life, Ruffner remained active, working on geology projects in the Washington Territory as well as in Virginia and West Virginia, and writing a history of Washington College. In twelve years he had designed, created, advocated for, and implemented a statewide, centralized system of free, public education. Through his visionary, tireless efforts, he had succeeded in establishing, and ensuring the continuation of, public education in Virginia.

His tombstone in Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery reads:

William Henry Ruffner, 1824–1908, First Superintendent of Public Instruction and Author of Her School Law. Presbyterian Minister, Farmer, Educator, Geologist, Author, Philanthropist, A.B. A.M. LL.D.

Beginning with eighth grade we were in the high school building, although we weren't "in" high school. Perhaps once again where we went to school was determined by the size of the class and the space available. Or, perhaps, the orphan eighth grade was a holdover from my mother's era. She had graduated from Lexington High School in 1935. She used to say with some measure of pride that she had skipped eighth grade. My assumption, and perhaps the impression she intended, was that she was really smart. I've since learned that eighth grade was required only for those who through learning difficulties or disci-



Ruffner's tombstone in Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery.

plinary problems were not ready to move on to high school. The eighth grade was taught by Miss Nettie Dunlap, the principal of Ruffner School and a member of the Ignorance Club. Her [1937–38 Ignorance Club paper](#) has recently been published online.

Anyway, for the eighth grade, I resumed walking across the W&L campus and on to Lexington High School at Sarah’s Run, a.k.a. Woods Creek. That fine brick building with its colonnade of monumental white columns was erected in 1927, on what was known locally as an eight acre goat ranch. It served as a high school until 1960, then became Waddell Elementary School, and, succumbing to age, was torn down in 2015 to make way for a new Waddell Elementary. Much like the razing of the Ann Smith Academy almost ninety years before, the demolition of the old Lexington High School was a sad day for those who held its architecture and its memories dear.

Lexington High School was only four years old when my mother entered ninth grade there in the fall of 1931. It was originally, officially, named Harrington Waddell High School, but even as early as my mother’s yearbooks, while Waddell was serving as its principal, it was already known as Lexington High School.

I attended school in that building only for two years — eighth and ninth grades – before we moved on to the new Lexington High School, now Maury River Middle School. But I knew the old Lexington High in childhood because it was the town’s auditorium. When the school was built, Harrington Waddell expressed the hope that the building would be used as a community center. And so it was. The

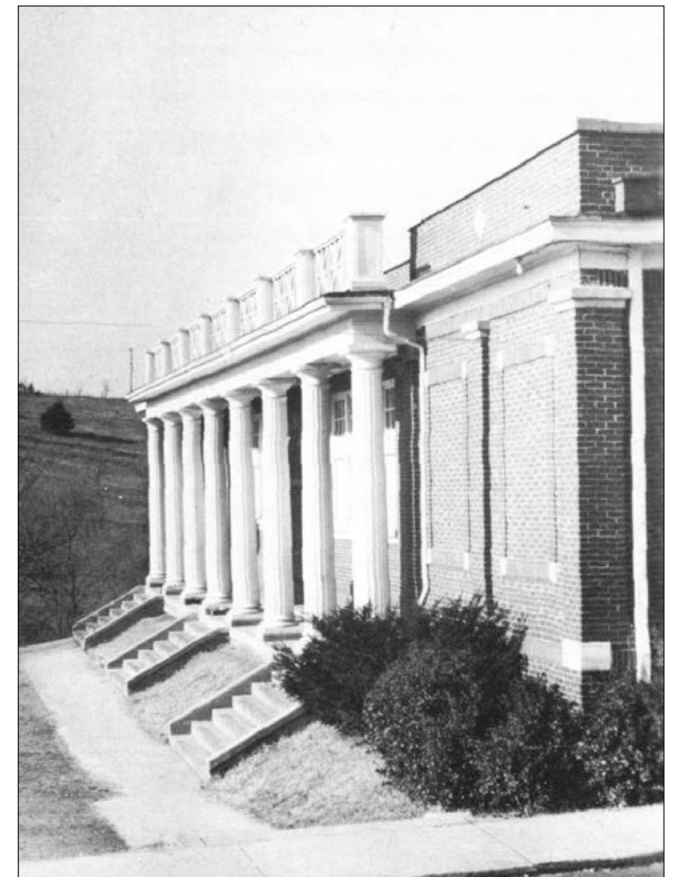


Harrington Waddell.
Photo: W&L Library’s Special Collections.

school’s beating heart was the four-sided central, light-infused auditorium/gymnasium with basketball hoops on opposite sides, a stage and raked, wooden seats on the other two sides, and classrooms all around. Throughout my childhood I attended both local and national concerts and plays there. In 1953 the entire Ann Smith School, with a cast of 150, performed on its stage in an elaborate Christmas pageant, “[The Little Comet](#).” Third graders assumed the lead roles. Lisa Tracy played the title character, the Little Comet, and I was the planet (and goddess) Venus.

As I said, Lexington High School was officially named Harrington Waddell High School. And today the elementary school that sits on the

Waddell High School as it appeared in 1960, its final year in that capacity. Photo from the 1960 yearbook, *The Crystal*.



same spot is called Waddell Elementary, although those who attend may be as vague as to its name as I was about Ann Smith and Ruffner.

Harrington Waddell was Lexington’s high school principal for fifty-five years, from 1897 to 1952, serving at all three high school buildings — Ruffner, Ann Smith, and Waddell — that later became grade schools.

Waddell was born in Staunton in 1872. The family moved to Charlottesville, and then came to Lexington when he was twelve years old. He died in 1961 and is buried in Stone-



Lexington High’s senior class in 1935, which included the author’s mother, put on the British farce *Wait for Me* by Wilbur Braun. Photo from *The Crystal*.

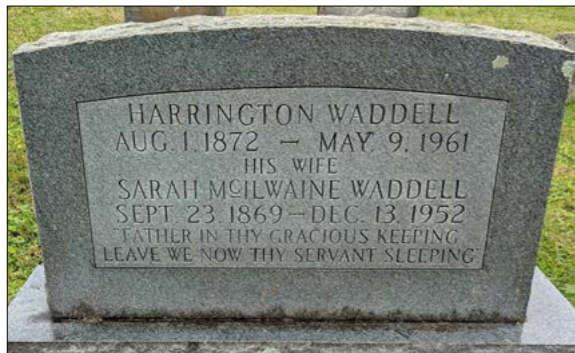
wall Jackson Memorial Cemetery. Like Ruffner, his roots go back to Ann Smith Academy. He was one of those young boys admitted to Ann Smith in the 1880s in order to boost enrollment. I wonder if he's among the boys in the photo on the porch of Ann Smith [p. 3]. It was he who, in 1917, uncovered old records of Ann Smith Academy in a vacant office in Court House Square and used them as a basis for a Fortnightly Club paper, "The Ann Smith Academy: A Brief Sketch," which became the source of later accounts of the school, including Dr. Pusey's and thereby mine.

Waddell graduated from Washington and Lee in 1893 and served on its board of trustees for twenty-five years. In 1897, at the age of twenty-five, he was elected principal of Lexington public schools. His fifty-five years as principal witnessed a tremendous growth in Lexington's public school system, from fifty-five high school students when he began to more than 1,000 when he retired. Importantly, he advocated for and oversaw the construction of the new high school buildings and the moves of students they entailed — from Ruffner, to Ann Smith, to the new high school named to honor him.

A tribute booklet, "Four Decades of Progress," written in 1937 (when he still had fifteen years as principal ahead of him), states: "The history of the school system is largely the history of one man. . . . The life work of this man has been the development and the furtherance of the public schools of our beloved town of Lexington."

During his tenure, he expanded and improved the curriculum and introduced more science and business courses. He was in charge of public education, albeit segregated, for both white and African American students. If Ruffner provided the impetus for public education throughout Virginia, Waddell was the first and primary effort to assure free, universal public education in Lexington. His long tenure provided consistency and steady growth. Throughout he was both a visionary and an effective leader. By all accounts he was both beloved and highly esteemed.

His gravestone gives his birth and death dates as well as those of his wife, Sarah McIlwaine Waddell, but rather than a list of accomplishments, says simply, "Father in thy gracious keeping, leave we now thy servant sleeping."



Marker, Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery.

The new Lexington High School, now Maury River Middle School, which I attended for the tenth through twelfth grades, opened in 1960. It was the first consolidated school, a joint city-county school project, and was built at the opposite end of town from where I lived. I walked home from LHS with my school friends, stopping for a Coke at McCrum's

The old section of Lylburn Downing School, built in 1926, as it appears today. Photo from *The Architecture of Historic Rockbridge*.

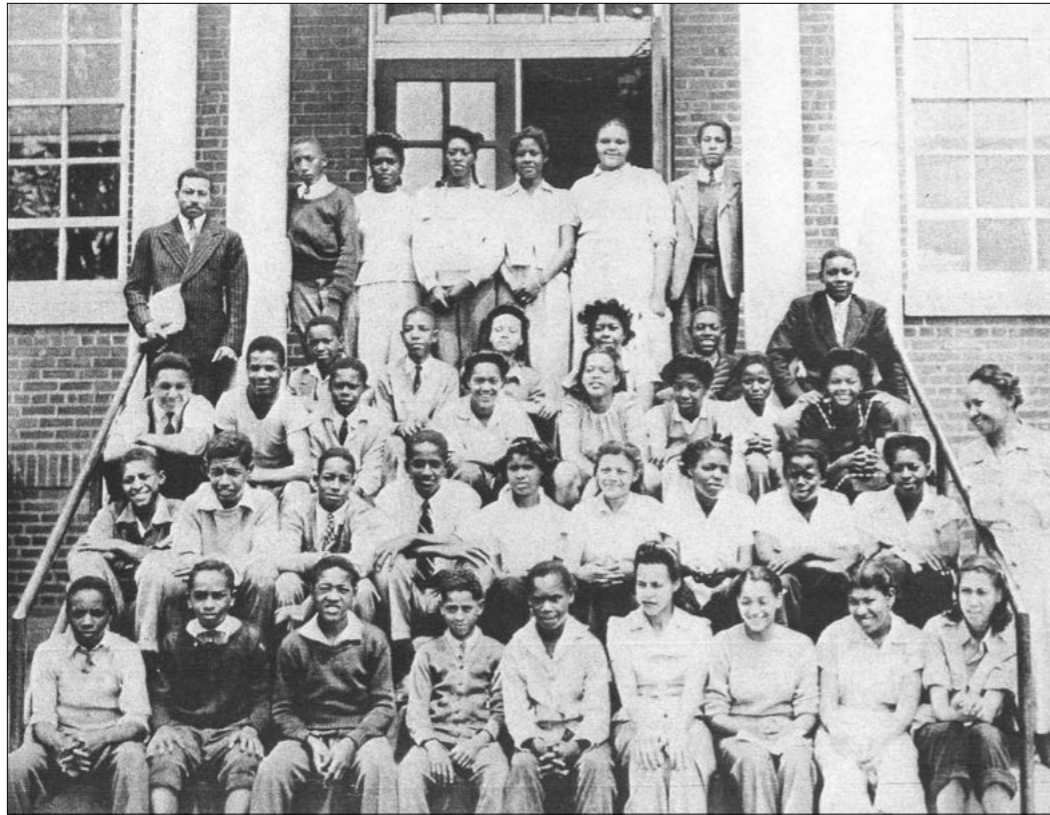


on Main Street. But getting to school in the morning on time was another matter. So our mothers in the neighborhood took turns carpooling. When they tired of that onerous chore, they discovered that, being more than a mile away, we qualified for a school bus.

In a mercifully short-lived venture, a school bus picked up VMI Post high-schoolers. Then, instead of heading straight for school, the bus lumbered up Diamond Street and drove around on Diamond Hill. I don't know why. The bus didn't pick up anyone once it left VMI. Lexington High School in those days was white and Diamond Hill was black. Anyway, although the trip was long and slow, it did afford my first view of Lylburn Downing School. I lived on Institute Hill, the ridge directly across from Diamond Hill, but I had literally never seen the African American school. A few years later, in 1965, the schools were integrated and my younger brother, in the course of his Lexington public school education, attended Ann Smith, Lylburn Downing, Waddell Elementary, and Lexington High.

Lylburn Downing had opened in September 1927, just two months prior to Waddell High School. It replaced the dilapidated Randolph Street Colored School. It had been a long time coming. For years the congregations of Randolph Street Methodist and First Baptist had petitioned the Lexington School Board and City Council to build a new school for African American students. They pointed out that African Americans paid taxes, yet their educational curriculum and facility were sadly lacking.

In 1925 the town used the revenue it had received from increased taxes on real and personal property to purchase a lot on the corner of Maury and Diamond Streets. Then the city merged the financing from bonds raised, thus enabling the construction of both Waddell and Downing simultaneously. The booklet, *A Brief*



Lylburn Downing students in 1946. Photo from W&L Library's Special Collections.

History of Public Education in Rockbridge County, Lexington, and Buena Vista, 1748–1980, paints this picture: “When the hammers and saws of carpenters were heard in the valley of Sarah’s Run in the southwest side of the town, their echoes were heard on Diamond Hill in the northeast section of Lexington as the new colored high school was constructed.”

The new Lylburn Downing School initially included nine grades; not until the 1940s did the school contain all twelve. In 1965, when local schools were integrated, the high school closed. In the 1980s the city turned the original, historic structure into a community center, a use that continues to this day. The adjacent building still serves as a middle school and bears Downing’s name.

Like Lexington High, Downing was built following a popular design, with classrooms arranged around a high-ceilinged auditorium/gymnasium, and circulation space with clerestory windows illuminating the interior. Transom windows were located high on the interior walls as well as above the doors to allow for cross ventilation and light to reach the auditorium.

The school was named to honor a native son. Lylburn L. Downing was born a slave in Lexington in 1863, during the Civil War, in fact on the day after Stonewall Jackson was wounded at Chancellorsville. His parents, Ellen and Lylburn, were slaves who had attended Jackson’s Colored Sabbath School at Lexington Presbyterian Church. After the war, Downing also attended what continued to be called

Gen. Jackson’s Sabbath School, although it was taught by Gen. John T. L. Preston after Jackson’s death.

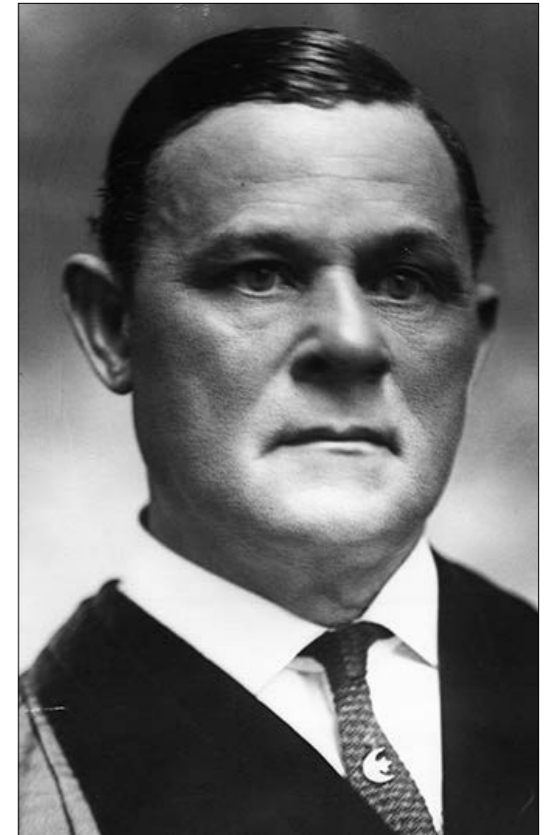
Downing studied for the ministry at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and in 1895 assumed the pastorate of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, where he served for forty years. He always credited Jackson’s example for his family’s education and its Christianity. He raised funds for a Jackson commemorative stained-glass window that was installed in the Roanoke church in 1906. He was a leader in Roanoke’s black community. And he continued his close ties with Lexington and delivered the dedication sermon in September 1927 for the new school that would be named for him.

Following the ill-fated school bus episode, our parents resumed carpooling their teenagers to the architecturally undistinguished new high school. Little did I know that the school would eventually come into its own with features reflective of our own Maury River whose name the middle school now bears.

I continued to miss the stately elegance and sense of high purpose of the old high school, and of Ann Smith and Ruffner before it. Exploring them now has brought the educational history of this place and my own memories to the fore. I hear the echoes of the Scots-Irish Presbyterians who settled this valley and the value they placed on education in this village. I see the threads of the early Ann Smith Female Academy continuing to weave their way through Ruffner, through Waddell, down to my own education. The troubled, separate, yet interwoven history of race in this community is reflected, too.

We have been richly blessed in our educators, from Miss Ann Smith, who believed in “young daughters ready to be educated,” to William Henry Ruffner, champion of public instruction throughout Virginia for all, to Harrington Waddell, whose effective leadership saw the growth of education in Lexington and Rockbridge County, to Lylburn Downing, a respected minister who honored his early education with a stained glass window.

They placed education first — and we in this community are the beneficiaries. ■



Rev. Lylburn Downing, Lexington native and Presbyterian minister, for whom the school was named.

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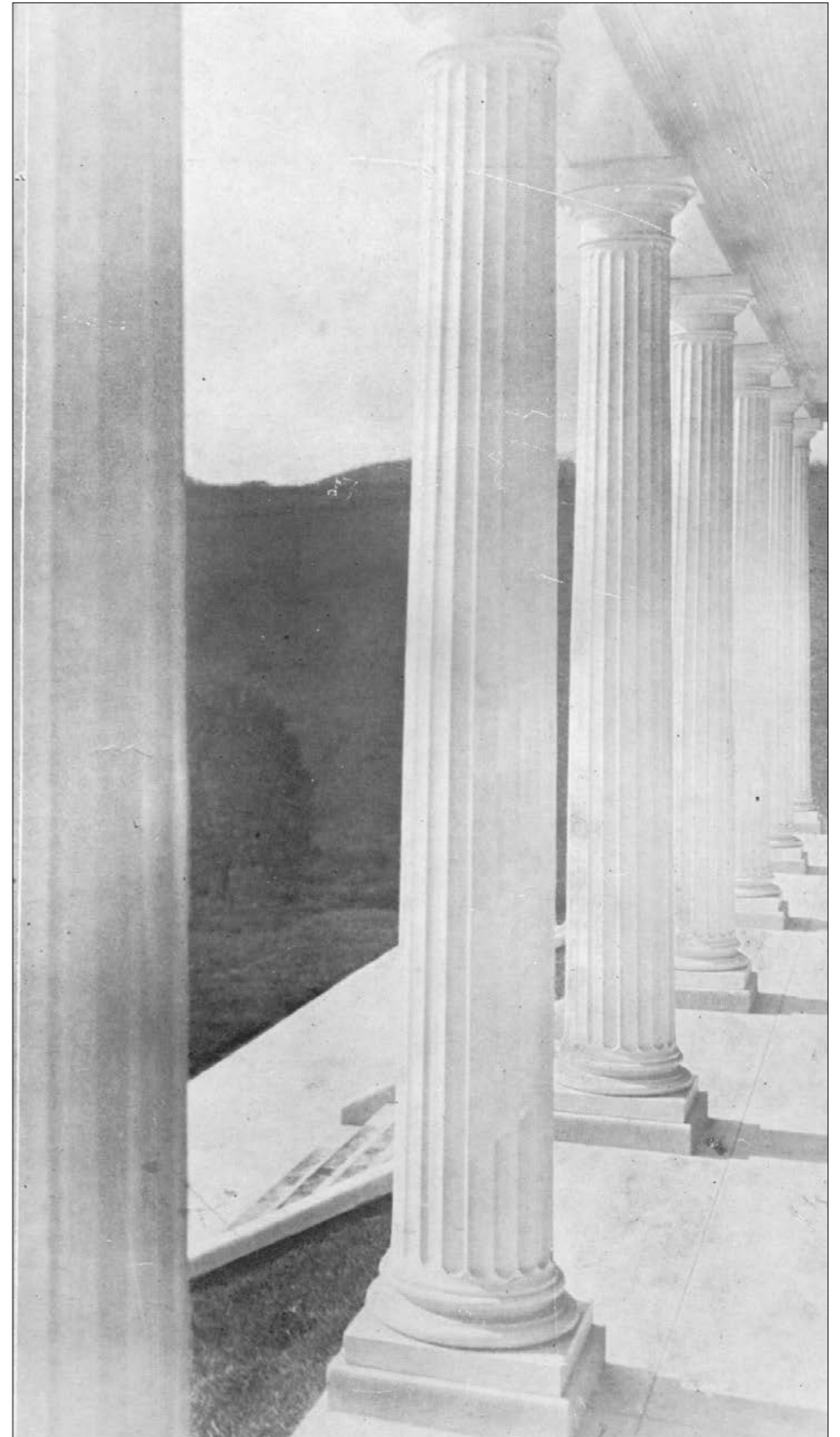
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