



THE SECRET LADIES' BASEMENT

Washington & Lee's Contribution to Civil Defense, 1953–76

By William Buchanan

Presented to That Club, November 21, 1994

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PROLOGUE

THE FOLLOWING is what is now known about a nameless project in a building that has vanished from the Washington and Lee University campus. It involved Lexington housewives in activities so secret, they are still forbidden to disclose them.

When entering upon and terminating their contracts, these workers were required to sign non-disclosure agreements pledging never to reveal their activities there. They have never been excused from it.

My efforts to secure information from the existing bureaucracy met with a series of runarounds and a final insistence that, despite the end of the Cold War and the disclosure of similar operations elsewhere, revealing what the Lexington ladies did in that space would endanger national security. This account, therefore, is based on information secured from persons not encumbered by that pledge.

William Buchanan, a 1941 Washington and Lee University graduate, earned his Ph.D. from Princeton. After U.S. Navy service in World War II, he taught political science at the University of Southern California and the University of Tennessee before returning to teach at W&L in 1966. He retired in 1990 and died in 2003.

This article is based on his 1994 paper to That Club, a more informal discussion group, but merges updated information he uncovered and included in his Fortnightly paper seven months later.



CHAPTER ONE

What Everyone Knew

BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR, most W&L freshmen and others of us who did not belong to fraternities ate at the University Dining Hall, familiarly called the Beanery, in the building that is now [in 1994] the Bookstore and snack bar [and since 2007, Holekamp Hall]. The tables were served effectively, even aggressively, by football players on scholarship.

In 1943 a new dining facility was erected to serve the military personnel then occupying the campus. It and the print shop beside it faced the back of Washington Hall. After the war it became the University Dining Hall, accommodating about 250 persons, served cafeteria style, and the old Beanery became the supply store. The new dining hall was an unimpressive cinderblock structure, painted red, and recognized from the start as temporary. Its entrance was located approximately where the wide bridge to Leyburn Library leaves the

back quadrangle now. It had an open basement facing the back campus access road and parking lot, at that point in space which is now Northen Auditorium. The Buildings and Grounds Department stored equipment and parked trucks there.

The evolution of the building's uses are difficult to trace. Once the flood of returning veterans abated and fraternities resumed serving most students, the need for extensive sitdown dining facilities on campus was alleviated. In December 1953, the trustees authorized the closing of the dining hall, leaving the cinderblock building available for other purposes. For a time, on the main floor, the Reserve Officers Training Corps band stored its instruments, pushed back the tables and practiced in the eating area.

In 1976 the building, then listed on campus maps as "Registrar's Office and Computer Center," had to be demolished to make way for the University (now Leyburn) Library.



The old Beanery (right), which became Washington Annex II, housing administrative offices on its main level. Below that was the "secret ladies' basement," apparently a backup center for unspecified federal government operations in case of emergency. At the far left is Reid Hall, W&L's journalism building; center left is Annex I, which had a classroom, a copy center and faculty and administrative offices. Photo taken shortly before the building was demolished to make way for the new library; courtesy of Washington and Lee University Library Special Collections.

CHAPTER TWO

What a Few Knew

PRESIDENT FRANCIS P. GAINES, who had proved resourceful in securing military schools to keep his near-empty college viable during the war, saw an opportunity to secure a federal tenant for the structure. This was the era of Civil Defense, of signs pointing to basement shelters, of "duck and cover" exercises in elementary schools, and emergency food storage bunkers in back yards. In 1950, in the era of the Soviet A-bomb, President Truman had created the Federal Civil Defense Administration for both disaster relief and refuge from attack.

In October 1954, Gaines presented to the trustees a proposal from "the Office of General Services of the United States Government regarding a contract for the use of the University facilities in case of an all-out emergency caused by an enemy attack or the imminence thereof." The W&L trustees moved to "cooperate in every way possible if an emergency arises." Air raid shelter signs appeared on entrances to the basements of the library and Tucker Hall [then the law school].

In the following July, representatives of the General Services Administration requested the use of part of the empty cinderblock dining hall. "Their mission was a secret one and they asked that it be treated in confidence," according to trustee minutes. The lease was approved by a board committee consisting of James R. Caskie and Homer A. Holt and went into effect.

When President Fred C. Cole arrived in 1959, the computer age was dawning, and he established the Computer Center in the portion that was not used by the GSA project. Initially this took up a relatively small part of the building just inside the central doorway. The Registrar's office was moved to the southern (left) side of the building. President Cole kept one room as a hideaway office for quiet policy planning.

What went on in the government portion of the facility remained something of a mystery. But occasional lapses in security permitted visitors to the civilian area

to glimpse a row of telephones in the Civil Defense portion in the rear.

The secrecy of the GSA operation left it with no official name. Those who knew of its existence referred to it as "the secret room," "the mysterious basement" or "that place where the women work." Buildings and Grounds people called it "the GSA." Some of those employed there referred to it as "the Underground."

The facility consisted of more than a room; it was a suite. It changed its configuration as expansion of the Computer Center pushed it toward the rear portion and the basement of the building. A major renovation was undertaken in 1964, which moved the entire operation into the basement and the connecting stairs were removed. The government paid for the reconstruction and signed a three-year contract to rent the space at \$4,000 per year. The contract was renewed until 1976 at rates which the university considered quite favorable. The university retained two rooms, each with an outside entrance.

The remodeled space in the center of the basement consisted of more than 3,000 square feet. It contained a battery of a dozen or more telephones and a large conference room with an 8-by-12-foot wall map of the region with coded lights showing the location of facilities, rather resembling the world map at the Marshall Library that shows the battle areas of World War II. There were high-speed teletypes and a duplicating machine, state-of-the-art technology for that period. Visible outside was a powerful complex of radio reception and transmission gear, including a radio link to a transmitter at a guarded site on top of the Blue Ridge mountains and probably to other locations. There were offices with large filing cabinets and equipment rooms, but there was hardly room enough to sleep and feed any Washington official and his staff, even the poet laureate, for an extended time. The vault, which earlier might have been



the food storage locker for the dining hall, had masonry walls and a steel door that had come as surplus from another site and which bore the seal of the U.S. Army, revealing the project's auspices. An auxiliary power plant, housed some distance down the hill from the building, contained a diesel generator to keep the operation going in case of a power failure, a not improbable consequence of nuclear attack.

From time to time officials from Washington and elsewhere came to the suite for disaster exercises and rehearsals, with some of their classes overflowing to duPont Hall.

The complex was administered by two full-time civil servants, and employed fifteen or twenty Lexington housewives, including spouses of W&L and VMI faculty, one day a week or the equivalent. They maintained files, updated records, tested equipment and may have played the role of officials in simulated emergencies. Both the managers and the women on part-time work were very well paid by Lexington standards, and there would have been no difficulty in finding replacements had they been needed.

SECURITY was abridged on several occasions. The contract provided that the president of Washington and Lee could inspect the premises annually if he chose. Buildings and Grounds personnel needed to enter for maintenance purposes from time to time, and on one occasion a reporter for the *Ring-tum Phi*, the student newspaper, was given a tour. It was explained



Ring-tum Phi, March 18, 1969.



October 21, 1962.

to him that the GSA managed property, construction, procurement of supplies, government records, strategic materials and communication systems. These functions took place in a suite that he described as “a bright, bustling office complex with over 8 secretaries at work with teletypes and typewriters bustling.” The account mentioned the map room, equipment for damage assessment and a vault for record storage. (March 18, 1969)

On at least one instance, in October of 1962, the installation was activated. The episode was described in a memo by Professor John Gunn:¹

... The night of the Cuban missile crisis, in October 1962, there must have been about two hundred people, more or less, going in and out of that facility at a furious rate, *many* high-ranking officers — I saw several bird colonels, a couple of dozen lieutenant colonels and majors, and all moving almost frantically. There were three dozen or more Army vehicles in the parking lot — many olive-drab sedans, but also some of those high-wheeled, 4-x-4 personnel carriers that veterans of World War II and the Korean War will remember, plus a few jeeps; and again, there was *much* activity — two or three vehicles coming or going almost continuously. I didn't spend the night on campus, but I watched for half an hour or forty-five minutes. I took this activity to confirm the evacuation command-center theory, or something rather like that. (I did not see a general officer nor any evidence that one was present, and I was on the lookout for one; with that many

¹ Omniscient, endlessly inquisitive economics professor from 1957 to 1995. See Professor Gunn's entire memo on page 9.

field-grade officers running around I thought there must be a general somewhere.)

In 1976, when the cinderblock building was demolished to make way for the library, the university would have kept the GSA facility elsewhere on campus, since the rent was a useful contribution to its budget, and the GSA explored that possibility, but apparently for technical reasons it decided that this was not feasible.

The government moved in its trucks, stripped the center of furniture and equipment, collected the records, and ended the Lexington operation.

CHAPTER THREE

What No One Knew . . . Or Can Find Out

AFTER I RETURNED to the campus in 1966 [as professor and head of the political science department] I inquired idly one day what was in the basement of the structure, and was told that it served some secret government function, presumably related to the Cold War. It was operated by a group of Lexington ladies, including a number of VMI and W&L faculty wives. If I were curious as to what went on there, I was told, it would be useless to ask. They had been sworn to secrecy, and in that chauvinistic era people were particularly sensitive to the stereotype that women could not keep a secret. So I didn't ask. And didn't think about it for a quarter century.

What did those women do? Were they a command center? Were the custodians armed? Were there explosive charges underneath it all as a last resort?

I went to some of the guardians of the secret: Jane Jenks, wife of history professor Bill Jenks of W&L, and Trudy Reeves, wife of biology professor Jack Reeves of VMI, who were in the corps of occasional workers, and Mrs. Mary Miles, who was the civil servant employed as full-time supervisor. All of them said they had taken an oath of secrecy at the time they were enlisted and again when they were terminated, and that no official had since relieved them of their commitment.

In my innocence I thought this would be easy to remedy if I could discover what government agency had operated the facility. Was it the Treasury, the Army, the CIA? Pat Brady, who was then W&L's superintendent of buildings and grounds, sent me to his secretary, Linda Agnor, who maintained the buildings and grounds files in its office in the heating plant. She gave me the number of two contracts with the General Services Administration, the federal government's housekeeper, and the name of the official with whom she had corresponded. One contract addressed the enclosing and “modernization” of the old cafeteria basement around 1960; the other operated the facility until 1976 under the Transportation and Communication Service of the GSA's Special Programs Division (giving a hint as to what went on there).

In December 1992, I wrote to the GSA's Information Security Oversight Office, stating that this was a part of Washington and Lee's history which we would like to document “before the people concerned are unavailable.” I asked for:

1. A statement of declassification that can be shown to the local participants to relieve them of their obligation of confidentiality;
2. The source of further information about the project so that it may be adequately described. This would include its title, objectives and the names of supervisory personnel whom I might contact.

I waited for an answer.

AFTER THREE MONTHS I consulted Mark Grunwald, the W&L law school's authority on the Freedom of Information Act. At his suggestion I made a copy of the letter, adding a March 22 covering note to the GSA's Freedom of Information Act officer labeled “FOIA Request” and demanded a reply “within the 10 working day period provided by the Act.”

I received a response dated April 12 from the GSA's Information Security Oversight Office, signed by Ethel R. Theis for Steven Garfinkel, director. It said they never got the December letter, and besides, the office was not in existence at the time of the operation. They referred

my request to George F. Flynn Jr., director of the National Security Emergency Preparedness Division of the GSA's Information Resources Management Service, the successor to the outfit that ran the program.

In about a week I got a letter from Mr. Flynn apologizing for "the inordinate amount of time it has taken for your inquiry to be re-directed to the appropriate organization." It quoted my two requests verbatim and observed: "The information requested above unfortunately is still restricted and, therefore, cannot be released."

This was hardly news; if it hadn't been restricted we wouldn't have asked them to release it. So, again consulting with Mark, the FOIA expert, on July 12 I requested that it be "reviewed for declassification pursuant to 41 CFR s105-62.202(c)." That section of GSA regulations provided that classified information in GSA records be reviewed for declassification when it is twenty years of age, or by 1988.

Along about this time (I failed to record the date) the W&L switchboard received a call for me which was

referred to the commerce school secretaries, since I was in the library at the time. I had signed my letters over the title "Professor Emeritus, Department of Politics." The young lady on the phone, a Ms. Park, first asked the secretary if there really was a William Buchanan affiliated with W&L, and then wanted to know what a "professor emeritus" was. Satisfied of my credentials, she left a number for me to call.

I did so and brought my case to Ms. Park, asking her if she was familiar with Washington and Lee. She wasn't, so I explained our interest in our history, mentioning George Washington. She said she was a historian herself, although it struck me that she was more impressed by the gender angle to the story than the historical. It was a very pleasant conversation. She said she had no information about our project but found it interesting and would track it down and get back to me.

I never heard any more from her.

On July 12, 1993, I acknowledged Mr. Flynn's letter of April 21 and requested that the information

be "reviewed for declassification pursuant to 41CFR s105-62.207(c)."

In September I got a reply from the director, admiring my concern for W&L's history, and observing that "indeed Washington and Lee University is a very important part of the United States' heritage." He presented "a brief background as to the reasons personnel at that facility were required to sign a non-disclosure agreement upon termination of their duties," which was:

During the 1960s GSA rented a location to be used by the Special Programs Division. This location served as an Alternate Relocation Site for Continuity of Government (COG) purposes. The personnel located at that site handled documentation and equipment from various Government installations, vital to the COG mission. Many documents handled at that time still remain classified to this date, and can only be reviewed when the originating agency determines it is prudent to do so. It is because of this, the personnel you inquired about are still bound to their original Classified Information Nondisclosure Agreements as determined by Executive Order 12356, and provisions set forth in Sections 641, 793, 794, 798 and 952, of Title 18, United States Code.

In October 1993, President Clinton and Attorney General Reno rescinded a 1981 rule that had encouraged agencies to withhold information requested under FOIA whenever there was "a substantial legal basis for doing so." The new policy was to be "a presumption of disclosure." Agencies were asked to reduce backlogs of requests and enhance public information. A memo to agencies said: "Where an item of information might technically or arguably fall within an exemption [to the FOIA], it ought not to be withheld ... unless it need be."

Thus encouraged, Mark and I drafted a letter mentioning this policy and stating that we were "not interested in the *contents* of particular documents, but rather in the activity of the ladies who handled them," how they went about it and what they accomplished. However, if this involved declassification, we asked him to direct the request to the appropriate agencies.

I recalled from my World War II days that the national security classifications were "confidential" and "secret," and later a more stringent category of "top secret."²

There was a fourth classification category, "restricted," which did not involve national security at all, but merely administrative convenience — a sort of "none of your damn business" category. We stated:

I note that your use of the term "restricted" rather than "classified" raises the question whether the documents to which you refer are even controlled by Executive Order 12356 rather than some administrative (and thus waivable) control system.

This produced a letter of December 3, 1993, from Joyce E. Brown, director of the Personnel and Information Security Division of GSA. She had discovered, belatedly it seemed to me, that GSA was not the original classifier or charterer of such programs at all. Therefore it "has no declassification authority within the program, nor do we have any policy authority." So she contacted the general counsel of FEMA, which, when it was chartered in 1978, had inherited authority for these programs. She sent him copies of all the correspondence, concluding, perhaps with relief, that "FEMA will respond directly to you."

Sure enough, it did. This year I received a letter dated January 5 from Sandra Jackson, "FOIA/Privacy Specialist" at FEMA, to the effect that an agency reorganization in late November had produced "significant shifts in resources, functions, and the physical location of records." My request was therefore being forwarded to Operations Support Directorate, which had oversight for security operations. She also said that a copy of regulation 44 C.F.R. s8.4 was enclosed. There was no enclosure.

In February 1994, I got a letter from John D. Hwang, associate director of that directorate, stating:

² By the way, when working in Mayfair in late 1944, in an office planning the demobilization of the German navy, I received an intriguing document labeled "top secret." Though strictly enjoined from writing down such messages, I found this one brief enough to memorize, and I still remember it. It went: "The principal difficulty encountered by the Control Commission for Rumania in the performance of its functions is the fact that the Commission itself has not as such been formed."



Entrance to the "secret room," back, lower level. Photo taken shortly before the building was demolished in 1976. Courtesy of Washington and Lee University Library Special Collections.

This information continues to be classified in accordance with Section 1.3(a)(2) of Executive Order 12356, which pertains to vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, projects or plans relating to national security. This information is being withheld pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 552(b)(1) of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which permits an agency to withhold information that is properly classified in accordance with the Executive Order.

However, this director of the directorate said that if I interpreted his determination to constitute a denial of my request, I could appeal to the FOIA, stating my reasons. Which I did on March 3, as follows:

1. Since the existence of the Federal Reserve and Congressional bunkers are in practice no longer classified, the activities of civilian ladies in a small, since-demolished building on a liberal arts university campus can no longer be a matter of national security.
2. These women who are so conscientiously fulfilling their commitment not to reveal their activities are now in their seventies. They should be relieved of this responsibility so that the University may record this chapter in its history.
3. None of the correspondence with various agencies beginning in 1992 has designated the matter as anything other than "restricted" — i.e., not classified pursuant to Executive Order 12356.
4. It is not clear from the correspondence that a classification review was ever conducted, or if it was, that a determination was made that the information must continue to be classified in the interest of national security.
5. We do not seek to reveal the contents of any documents (in the event any of the participants are still aware of them), but rather the nature of the operation and the part played by our college and the citizens of the town.
6. The President and Attorney General have directed agencies to apply a "presumption of disclosure" to information withheld under the POIA.

SOME OF THE CIVIL DEFENSE LADIES

Ms. Mary Miles and Ms. Mary Allen Arehart were the full-time supervisors. Among those who worked at one time or another were Mrs. Rufus Holland, Mrs. Thomas Williams, Mrs. Ben Clark, Mrs. William Jenks, Mrs. Jack Reeves, Mrs. Frances McKemy, Mrs. Nancy Leach, Mrs. Sam Dobyns, Mrs. James Morgan, Ms. Hattie Deaver, Mrs. W. B. Bennington, Mrs. William Sauder, Mrs. Arthur Taylor and others.

A letter dated March 30 from Ms. Jackson, the privacy specialist, said the office had been relocated while my letter was en route, and I would hear from them by April 25.

On May 6 the General Counsel for FEMA wrote that action releasing individuals from their nondisclosure agreement "is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA); therefore, that aspect of your request and appeal need not be further addressed in a FOIA context." While the February denial letter was substantially correct, he said, "to add further clarity for your understanding," the documents "either do not exist or have been destroyed prior to your original request. Generic documentation, which does not address the Washington and Lee facility, has been reviewed and continues to be classified in accordance with Section 1.3(a)(2) of Executive Order 12356, which pertains to vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, projects or plans relating to national security." However, he added, I may seek a judicial review in either the local Federal District Court in Roanoke or the one in Washington.

So there it stands. According to the "clarity for my understanding," as the director would phrase it, the FOIA can't release the participants from their pledge not to reveal the contents of documents that no longer exist, which we don't want to know anyhow. There are documents like them at other places that are still secret and could be declassified by their agencies if we knew what the agencies were so we could ask them.

Just what the ladies did must be recorded *somewhere* in the 325,000,000 pages of documents more than thirty years old and safeguarded at a cost to taxpayers of some \$6 billion per year.

MEMORANDUM BY PROFESSOR JOHN GUNN

I remember the "modernization" in 1960. It was quite extensive. I was able to walk around in the area while construction was going on. It was a much larger area than one might suppose by looking at the outside, nearly twice the size of the Dean's conference room, containing a dozen or so different rooms. A couple were large conference rooms, with tables and chairs for, say, 2 dozen people or more. There were also indications it could be set up so that the people inside could remain for many days without supplies from outside—a large kitchen, with large food storage rooms adjacent. Most striking of all to me were the restroom facilities—I don't remember exact number, but there were a dozen or more stations, maybe more—I just remember being astonished at the sight of them, and wondering, "for whom"?

And there was a large, walk-in vault, like the safety deposit vault of a bank. Later, when the building was being demolished for the new library, I saw into the interior of that vault, which then was empty, but which had the seal of The Department of the Army on the door.

There were two other notable features: Just outside were very large electrical transformers—enough to supply more energy than one could possibly imagine in a facility that size. And telephones—lots of them, including a couple of "red phones."

I think the function of the center may have changed over time, but some rumors in the early '60s were: (1) Alternate switching station for East Coast communications of the Department of Defense or some component thereof; or (2) Alternate command center for the evacuation of Washington, in case that should be necessary.

The following is NOT rumor, but my vivid memory: The night of the Cuban missile crisis, in October 1962, there must have been about two hundred people, more or less, going in and out of that facility at a furious rate, MANY high-ranking officers—I saw several bird colonels, a couple of dozen lieutenant colonels and majors, and all moving almost frantically. There were three dozen or more Army vehicles in the parking lot—many olive-drab sedans, but also some of those high-wheeled, 4 x 4 personnel carriers that veterans of World War II and the Korean War will remember, plus a few jeeps; and again, there was MUCH activity — two or three vehicles coming or going almost continuously. I didn't spend the night on campus, but I watched for half an hour or forty-five minutes.

I took this activity to confirm the evacuation command-center theory, or something rather like that. I did not see a general officer nor any evidence that one was present, and I was on the lookout for one — with that many field

grade officers running around I thought there must be a general somewhere.

Several years later, the activity of the center was cut back sharply, I think, and the space occupied also was reduced much. Small offices at the rear of the main floor were set up for the center, and I think the basement part was then little used, if at all, or used by the ROTC Department for part of the time, though it remained locked tightly, with a sign on the door that this was United States Government Property and intruders would be prosecuted to the full extent of the law, and all that.

Once, when going to see Fred Cole, who had a hideaway office in a back corner of the building, I looked through an open door, and what I saw was a long bench on which there were a dozen or more telephones, a couple of which were apart from the others and red in color. I think at this time there were only two ladies still working regularly in the facility, and they seemed not to be very busy, but they were there every day without fail.

So, apparently the room was a control point maintained by the Army for emergency evacuation of some governmental unit or units, perhaps to other places in the Valley. My guess is that the Lexington ladies participated in occasional rehearsals or drills under the supervision of the full-time civil servants.

