ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

NUMBER 49 WINTER 2024

Portrait of an Orator

By William Buchanan

Presented to the Fortnightly Club, December 20, 1991

Francis Pendleton Gaines was born in 1892 near Due West, S.C., or, as he preferred, "five miles due west of Due West," the eleventh and last child of a Baptist minister. It was a family of preachers and teachers. His mother, a school teacher with a penchant for dramatics, taught him to read at an early age. A sickly boy, he was taught at home until he was 10, when entered at the fourth grade. By then he had read Thackery, Hawthorne and much else in his and neighbors' family libraries.

The family moved to Wytheville, Virginia, and when he was 12 his parents decided that Frank needed physical development more than schooling. They got him a job as timekeeper at the Ivanhoe lead mine, to which he commuted daily on a spur-line railroad. After three years of this work he attained a scholarship to Fork Union Military Academy, where he played baseball and finished with honors in two years.

Enrolling then at the University of Richmond, where his older brother, Robert E. Gaines, a mathematician, taught, he became an English major, joined the literary society and graduated in three years. After a year as principal of a school in rural Prince Edward County, Virginia, he went off to the University of Chicago for his master's degree, writing his thesis on Carlisle and Ruskin.

At the age of 23 he joined the faculty of Mississippi State College, rising in nine years to the rank of full professor. He roomed at the home of the dean of the School of Agriculture, Joseph Clarke Robert, who was the son

Above: Excerpt, "And Once When Dr. Gaines Spoke," by John Chapman, class of 1950. Original in W&L Special Collections. See page 4 for the complete drawing.

of a plantation owner in the "black belt" nearby.[1] Gaines quickly became a family favorite, tutoring the 14-year-old daughter, Sadie DuVergne Robert, in Latin. He was a popular teacher whose pupils included, among others, Turner Catledge, later editor of the *New York Times,* and John Stennis, U.S. Senator. When his Latin student reached 17 he married her, and her college education thus ended after just a few months. Not long thereafter he became a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University. But they spent summers at Sadie's grandfather's plantation in Mississippi.

His dissertation, published by Columbia in 1924, was *The Southern Plantation: A Study of the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition.* It cited obscure ante-bellum novels that condemned or defended slavery, and post-bellum novels that romanticized the plantation culture. It was written after Ellen Glasgow's more realistic Southern novels, but before *Gone With the Wind.*

At age 31 he joined the English department at Furman University, where he taught Shakespeare, acting out the roles. He also taught a Sunday school class in Greenville that became so popular it drew members away from the 11 o'clock church service. It was then that he turned to speaking on the civic club and chamber of commerce circuit.

Gaines became president of Wake Forest College at the age of 35.


and Black

Deeons, Repeat the Victory

AY, SEPTEMBER 23, 1927 No. 1

INCOMING PRESIDENT OF WAKE FOREST

NEW PRESIDENT OF WAKE FOREST ASSUMES DUTIES

Dr. Francis Pendleton Gaines Much Liked as New President of This Institution.

DR. FRANCIS PENDLETON GAINES

Gold and Black (Wake Forest student newspaper), September 23, 1927

Just three years later, in 1930, he moved to the presidency of Washington and Lee University, where he remained until his death. He is said to have turned down the presidencies of Columbia, Minnesota, Georgia and other institutions, and to have been tempted only by offers from Vanderbilt and Tulane. He did not consider offers of support for governor, although he accepted appointment by President Franklin Roosevelt to a number of boards and commissions. He wrote some poetry and a novel, but he published only one other book, a series of addresses given at Alabama College on Southern oratory. He identified with the South with a strength that may be hard to understand today, except, perhaps, for those of us who grew up there in the '20s and '30s.

There were other qualities related to his success, as described in an autobiography by his son Franklin Pendleton Gaines Jr.: ability as a raconteur in small groups, immense charm, unflagging energy, friendships with important people who visited his campuses. But this discussion is limited to his oratory.

There are several boxes in the W&L archives containing his addresses and his correspondence with those who invited him to speak. In a normal year he received around 400 such invitations and accepted some 40 of them, mostly in the East and South. Each speech he very carefully prepared. They were typed on a machine with a tiny typeface, crowded on the sheet with no margins. These manuscripts contained rounded, punctuated sentences. He made few corrections and left minor typographical errors. An example, taken from a paper he prepared for The Fortnightly, appears nearby. He could not easily have read from these tiny, compressed notes; and indeed he once said that "reading a speech is like driving an automobile with a spark plug missing fire." He arose around 5:30 most days, and prepared, rehearsed and presumably memorized the speeches at that time.

A page from a Gaines speech draft

William Buchanan (1918–2003), a 1941 Washington and Lee University graduate, earned his Ph.D. from Princeton. After Navy service in World War II, he taught political science at the Universities of Southern California and Tennessee before returning to teach at W&L in 1966. He was an authority on American electoral politics and wrote a widely used textbook on the practical application of statistical analysis in political science. He retired in 1990.

Courtesy of Wake Forest University

Francis Pendleton Gaines, 1930, on becoming president of Washington and Lee University

Each year, on the night before Washington and Lee left for Christmas holidays, he preached at a candlelight service at Robert E. Lee church. I found two of those manuscripts. Given the subject of Christmas, you might expect a similarity. On the contrary: One was in effect a series of scriptural passages linked by his transition sentences written in, essentially, 17th-century prose. The other, which I heard delivered, is entirely different in tone. But each would stand with little editing as a written composition.

His addresses were well structured, sometimes outlined in Roman numerals. His opening lines and even the jokes and references to popular songs were specified, verbatim if they were brand new. I remember his quoting "Brush up your Shakespeare,"[2] which was a favorite, and another ephemeral song, "All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth."[3] Occasionally his notes might be abbreviated: in one instance he simply labeled the opening paragraph: "Int. Piffle." But the main argument was spelled out.

One tactic of political oratory which he adapted was the theme of "threat and reassurance." In politics the dire straits into which the polity has fallen are lamented, followed by the orator's program for redemption. Dr. Gaines often devoted the early paragraphs to the present evils, which might be of ethics, economics or esthetics. But the reassurance was not, as with the politicians, anything he would do. In fact, he advised his son "Use the first person singular very infrequently, and never in speeches unless ridiculing yourself." The reassurance that dissolved the threat was instead learning, beauty, freedom, determination, compassion — some element of the human spirit. A favorite theme was character, which he defined as "the ability to carry out a good resolution long after the mood in which it was made has left you." Often members of the audience would write him the day after to compliment him on his address and ask him to quote them again this definition.

A few lines of poetry always appeared at strategic points, but once he read a large portion from Alfred Noyes' poem "The Barrel-Organ":

> *There's a barrel-organ carolling across a golden street*
>
> *In the City when the sun sinks low;*
>
> *And the music's not immortal; but the world has made it sweet*
>
> *And fulfilled it with the sunset glow.*

I think it was there for no better reason than he enjoyed repeating it.

He favored a few unusual words, such as "covet" and "fruitage," and his vocabulary lent impressiveness to otherwise commonplace observances. For example, in summing up Woodrow Wilson's contribution, he noted that Wilson had "the authoritarian conscience" of a Covenanter. Then: "If there is a single thread through the wide fabric of oratory with which Wilson clothed his thought, that thread is the golden passion for freedom. It runs steadfastly from a narrow certainty to a broadening flow that was to give color to the tapestry of men's dreams."

He was punctilious about citing the source of everything he quoted.

WHAT MIGHT WE INFER as to his purposes from the messages he brought to the enormous variety of audiences he addressed?

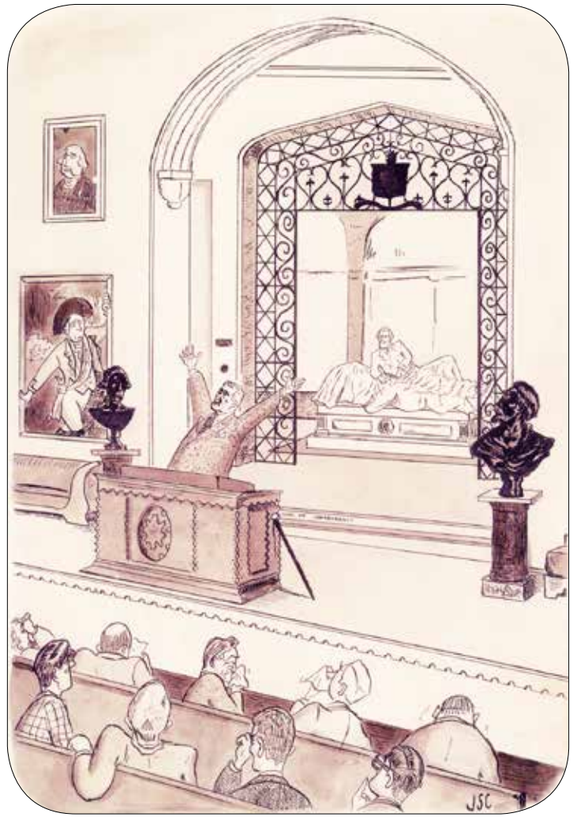
Often he simply preached sermons, in churches and college chapels and on the Baptist Bible Hour. In

1 So called because of the soil (*Encyclopedia Britannica,* 2024).

2 Song by Cole Porter from *Kiss Me Kate,* 1948

3 Novelty song made popular by Spike Jones and His City Slickers, 1947

"And Once When Dr. Gaines Spoke"



Washington and Lee University Library Special Collections

using Biblical texts in his remarks to students and parents, he usually tried to include something from a Jewish or Catholic source. You could guess the messages in his talks to students: take advantage of your opportunities, drive carefully, and so on. Once, in the Depression, he pled with the better-off students not to spend so lavishly as to embarrass their more straitened classmates. When W&L's abandonment of football was a tense issue, he is said to have made a speech justifying it and, sensing his audience was, for once, not entirely with him, ended in a word of prayer and adjournment.

His addresses on the subject of Southern oratory reveal that he appraised the orators in their intent as well as for their impact. He sought a common theme that ran through the purposes of John Randolph, Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry, John C. Calhoun, L. O. C. Lamar, Henry W. Grady, Woodrow Wilson and others — not an easy task. He concluded that they all sought freedom in their own way, which, I guess, is unarguable.

One of the earliest items in the Gaines collection in Washington and Lee's archives dates from the time before he came to Lexington: a four-page outline labelled "The Material of the Speech," apparently notes for a lecture. Much of it is the sort of advice you'd find in public speaking texts from the 1920s, but he adapted it to the time and place and to his needs. He lists topics appropriate for specific audiences. Here are some:

- For women, the value of poetry
- For civic clubs, Why go to church?
- For Boosters, a plea for some greatly needed civic improvement, or the value of professional baseball.
- For laboring men, the use of leisure time.

The outline stresses careful preparation, command of the subject which gives a SENSE OF POWER (in his capital letters). It covers sources: newspapers and magazine; the Bible and Shakespeare; "good novels and poetry." He advocates "The Note-Book Habit: jokes, statistics, striking facts, original ideas," and he underlines "Save 'em." He covers posture: "not shrinking, not stiff . . . look at audience . . . never turn back, never sidle, never seem to retreat." He treats breathing, articulation, inflection, timing and pitch. Further in capitals: "AVOID MONOTONY, AVOID EXAGGERATIONS OR OVER-DOING." He returns to "self-confidence the great problem, self-consciousness the stumbling block." Under style he wrote: "beauty of style in words, quotations, climax . . . BUT DONT OVERDO." Under "conclusion" he noted: "Don't be afraid to stop; don't peter."

1964 *Cadyx* yearbook

He sought always to entertain, inspire and elevate. He avoided controversy, and his political philosophy was obscure. Many of his friends and acquaintances were quite conservative, hardly surprising for people who contributed to General Lee's college.

HE WAS ALWAYS the advocate for Washington and Lee. Two of his frequent observations were "I never asked anyone for a dollar in my life" and "I am a mendicant scholar." How he might have reconciled those two statements, I can't say. But he injected into many of his speeches the contributions to education of George Washington's gift of substance and Lee's of service — letting his auditors draw their own conclusions.

Now, 32 years after his retirement and 28 years after his death, public speech as a persuasive technique has been supplanted by the 30-second spot, endlessly repeated.

1947 *Cadyx* yearbook

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