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WASHINGTON COLLEGE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

By Ollinger Crenshaw

The Fortnightly Club

DURING THE LONG REGIME of Dr. Baxter's Coll an event occurred [in Charlottesville] which according to some observers tended to check the growth of the already static Washington College. This was the realization of Thomas Jefferson's dream of the establishing of a "central university," the capstone of a planned statewide system of education.

The people of Lexington, and the trustees of the college, eagerly desired that the proposed university be located in Lexington. They offered substantial financial

inducement, which included an offer by John Robinson to transfer his entire holdings to the state, provided the university be located within four miles of Lexington. It was obvious that the Board of Trustees stood ready to convert Washington College into the University of Virginia. Late in 1817 the trustees resolved that if the legislature of Virginia "at the present or any future session, should fix an University at Lexington or its vicinity, this Board will enter into any friendly arrangement with any persons properly authorized which, in its opinion, it can, consistently with its duty, & the obligations of its

¹ George Addison Baxter was rector and then president of Washington College, 1799–1829. The bookends of his administration were the fire in 1803 that destroyed Liberty Hall Academy and the benefactions in the 1820s of "Jockey" John Robinson.

Above: Pediment, The Rotunda, University of Virginia. Jefferson's architecture influenced Washington College's. See page 3.

charter, to apply the funds & property of the College in aid of the University, so as to promote, in the most eligible & effectual manner, the general objects of literature.”

The trustees renewed the offer in mid-summer 1818, unanimously declaring it desirable that the university be located at Lexington. All of Washington College’s property was to be turned over to the University, provided that the latter be placed at or near Lexington, that the present faculty members be taken care of, and that the college remain in operation until the university should begin to function. Trustee James McDowell Sr. was appointed agent to confer with the representatives of the new institution, and to inform them of the “claim & pretensions” of Lexington as the proper site of the university.

So great were the advantages to flow from the presence of the new institution in Lexington that the trustees apparently were even ready to surrender their tenaciously held control. But the Sage of Monticello, carefully guiding the emergence of the university, had no intention of permitting its location so far from his eye — and in the midst of a Presbyterian area, no less.

Jefferson’s intimate advisers in the “central college” project were aware of the emerging conflict with the Presbyterians of Virginia. Joseph C. Cabell (1778-1856), whom Jefferson named in 1815 to lead the legislative fight to charter and fund the state university, told his patron early in 1816 that if the legislature should favor his idea of a university, “you will see the Presbyterians about Lexington, and the Scotch-Irish about Staunton, striving to draw it away from Albemarle, and the whole western delegation . . . will threaten to divide the State unless this institution shall be placed beyond the Blue Ridge.”

Staunton coveted the state capital, while Washington College at Lexington would become, in Cabell’s unique phrase, “the bantling of the Federalists.”

The Federalists dominated the Society of the Cincinnati, and thwarted potential financial support under their influence for a “central college.” The Presbyterians, Cabell wrote in December, 1817, looked upon it with a “scowling eye.” Cabell declared early in 1818: “The friends of the Washington College hang upon our flanks, & encumber every step of our progress. If that pitiful place were not in existence, we could get along, but as it is, I fear they will mar our success.”

Cabell remained apprehensive. A few weeks later he reported to his chief that had the location question been brought up during the past session of the legislature, there would have been an intensive drive on behalf of “Rockbridge College.” He feared the rivalry of Washington College in part because he thought that Rockbridge, with John Robinson’s money (which he much over-estimated), could outbid anybody.

In response to petitions in 1821 from the trustees of Washington College and from Hampden-Sydney College, the House of Delegates voted down a proposal to investigate the possibility of appropriating state funds to these institutions. Cabell pronounced that action [rejecting the requests for state funds] to be bad strategy, from the viewpoint of those promoting the university, as he believed both colleges more popular than the university.

The university idea did indeed have its enemies. A sympathizer with the colleges disfavored by state appropriators, writing in 1823 under the pseudonym “Virginius,” penned a vigorous attack on the architecture, the expense and the “novelty” of the University of Virginia. This writer complained that two colleges of Virginia, founded by private enterprise, had been struggling to complete needed buildings. These institutions



Rotunda: University of Virginia



Far left: Façade of the Rotunda, designed by Jefferson, begun in 1822.

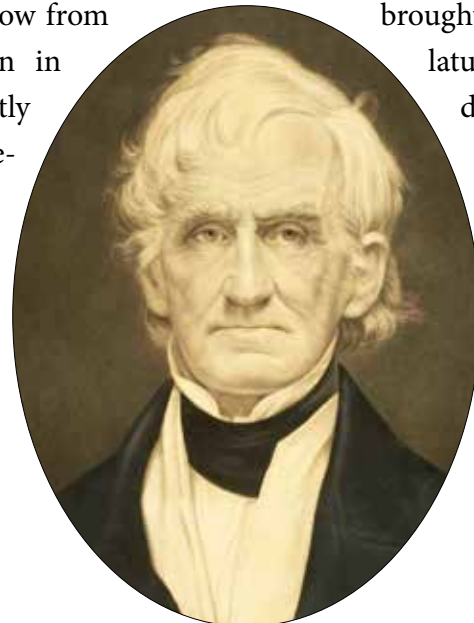
Near left: Center Building (now Washington Hall), begun in 1824; designer uncertain but built by John Jordan, who had worked under Jefferson

deserved aid, he contended, because they had trained “a large portion of the best members of the learned professions in our state.” Washington College had begun an important addition to its buildings, assisted by the liberality of one man, John Robinson, and by savings and loans. “Virginius” waxed bitter when he reflected that these worthy schools were to be allowed to die for want of funds, “while enough to give them efficient aid has been sunk in adorning a theatrical novelty, — a fabric as destitute of any practical adaptation to its purposes, as it is bedizened with the ephemeral trappings of silly ostentation.”

Of these reactions the Jeffersonian camp was informed. The Presbyterians were reported in 1821 to be much disturbed over the “Socinians,” who were to be introduced into the university, “for the purpose of overthrowing the prevailing religious opinions of the country.” According to Cabell, they wanted institutions of their own, and “calculated” on the Robinson estate at Washington College. Cabell strongly opposed alterations

in the charters of these colleges, changes which would enable the Presbyterians to tighten their control.

While undoubtedly the University of Virginia drew away from the colleges students who might otherwise have attended them, Washington College’s lack of prosperity during the twenties and thirties seems to have stemmed from internal issues, notably clashes of pedagogical opinion and personality. After the University of Virginia had established its enviable reputation as the most eminent Southern institution of higher learning, alumni of Washington College pursued advanced degrees at that institution; and by 1860 Washington College officially advertised that among other things it prepared students for the University of Virginia. Graduates of the University of Virginia began to appear in the faculty of Washington College during the fifties. It was not until after the Civil War, when the University of Virginia opened its doors tuition-free to Virginia students, that genuine alarm was felt for the future of the Lexington institution, by then also known as a university. ■



Joseph C. Cabell, Charlottesville proponent and Lexington nemesis

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