



# ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

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## ‘JOCKEY’ JOHN ROBINSON: WASHINGTON COLLEGE BENEFACTOR

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The Fortnightly Club

IT WAS DURING THE TIME of Dr. Baxter<sup>1</sup> that John Robinson, a wealthy resident of Rockbridge County, became interested in the affairs of Washington Academy and College. As early as March 4, 1803, the trustees “Resolved that John Robinson Esqr. is entitled to the thanks of this Board for his generous conduct and benevolent Donation to Washington Academy.” Robinson had contributed to the institution following the burning of the academy, at a time when citizens of Lexington were anxious to have that institution removed to the immediate environs of the village. Elected to the Board of Trustees of Washington College in 1819, he also

served as trustee of the Ann Smith Academy. Although he did not attend many meetings of the college board, he retained a lively interest in the affairs of the school, and upon his death in 1826 bequeathed his entire estate to Washington College, an enormous bequest at the time.

Fortunately an unnamed writer (identified by William H. Ruffner as Dr. Archibald Alexander) who had been acquainted with his subject published “A Sketch of John Robinson, The Founder of a Professorship in Washington College” in *Princeton Magazine* (1850).

*Above:* Base of the obelisk on Washington and Lee University’s front campus where John Robinson is buried. See page 6.

Ollinger Crenshaw, a 1925 Washington and Lee graduate, earned his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. He taught history at W&L for more than four decades and was the university historian and author of *General Lee’s College* (Random House, 1969).

<sup>1</sup> George Addison Baxter, president of Washington College from 1799 to 1829 (and briefly in 1835 acting president of Hampden-Sydney College). It was during his presidency that Washington College, known as Washington Academy until 1813, moved to its present location in Lexington proper.

According to this account, John Robinson was born in County Armagh, northern Ireland, about 1754. The lad's father died, and at an early age an uncle bound him to learn weaving. A few years at this trade were enough for the youth, who decided to emigrate to America; how he managed to cross the Atlantic is not known. The writer in *Princeton Magazine* knew him in Rockbridge County first as an itinerant weaver who traveled from house to house, from loom to loom, a jovial, good-natured young man of 16 or 17. He found a permanent haven at the residence of General John Bowyer,<sup>2</sup> near Lexington, where soon his spicy wit, even temper and good humor commended him to the people of the neighborhood.

Following this trade for a year or so he accumulated enough money to enable him to purchase a "poor horse." The young Irishman liked "fine form," high spirit and good gait in a horse, and by careful attention raised a well-conditioned animal. He then decided to travel to Lexington one court day, there to try his hand at horse-trading. In this he made an instant success, exchanging his sleek, handsome horse for a larger, younger, though slenderer animal, in addition to a sum of money. Robinson followed the same plan again with equal success; soon afterward he abandoned the textile trade and became a horse-trader — hence the sobriquet. His shrewd ability to appraise equine flesh was unsurpassed in the region; at the same time he earned a reputation not ordinarily associated with the business of horse-trading — that of honesty. After a few years of this activity he became a man of some wealth.

The question then confronted this unmarried man as to what he should do with his money, increasing steadily with each month. The new Federal government, established in 1789 through the Constitution, was in the slow process of formation. In the late 1780s there were many needy veterans of the American Revolution in the Valley of Virginia, men who held government certificates entitling them to compensation for their war services. Public

opinion held that these certificates would never be paid at par, if indeed at all. But a number of sagacious persons judged that the time would come when they would be fully redeemed by the national government. John Robinson, himself reported to have served as a soldier and confident of the new government's intentions, began speculation in soldiers' certificates, "of which he found abundance offered for a trifle." Meanwhile such business did not in the least affect his normal pursuit of horse-trading — the two activities complemented each other.

It is said that he acquired several thousand dollars in government paper, placing in this investment all the profits he could earn from horse-trading. The *Princeton Review* writer was careful to note: "In these transactions he was chargeable with nothing fraudulent. Indeed, very few were willing to purchase them [certificates] at any price. The owners were very ready and very willing to take what he offered, and he ran the risk of losing all that he had paid for them." Many Americans, especially in the eastern part of the country, engaged in this activity, some with benefit of inside knowledge of the plans of the treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton, with regard to funding of the national debt at par and assumption of state debts. Thus were laid the bases of family fortunes, and thus were made many ardent Hamiltonians. It should be emphasized that there is no evidence that John Robinson acted on other than good judgment and shrewd reading of the future in his speculation.

A controversy developed in Congress over Hamilton's debt-funding policy. Many held that the veteran who had periled "life and limb" in service of his country, and those who had bought up paper for one-tenth of its value, should not be treated alike. In this debate, as on other aspects of Hamilton's policy, the development of political parties was adumbrated. A group under Congressman

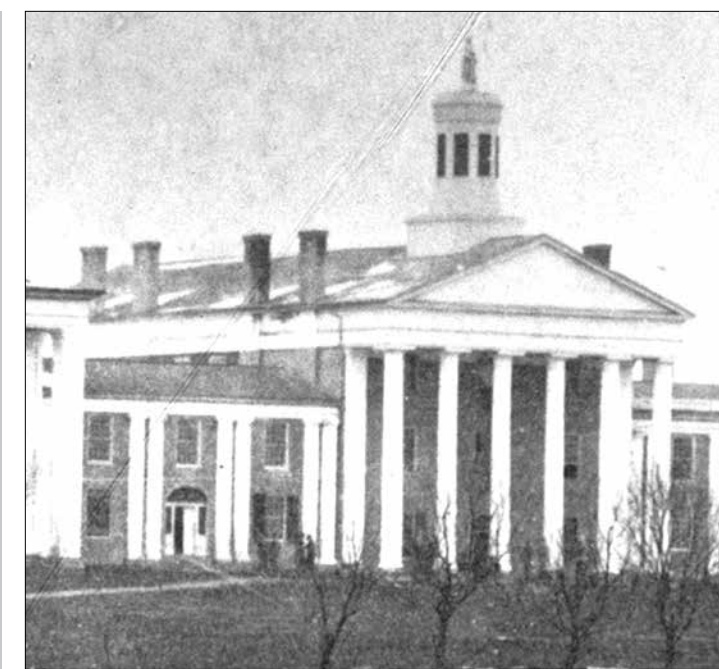


A typical Revolutionary War soldier's pay warrant, issued by Connecticut in 1782 and payable in 1789. Robinson speculated successfully in these warrants.

James Madison's leadership, opposing Hamilton's proposals, ultimately became known as Republicans, while those supporting Hamilton soon were called Federalists. After lengthy debate the decision came down against discrimination, and many fortunes were made. While the issue was in the balance, we are told that Robinson became "much agitated." One who knew him wrote that until that episode, "no one ever saw him in the least perturbed; for he was not only pleasant in temper, but sober, cautious, and prudent."

Thus Robinson became comparatively rich. Desiring to continue an active if different life, John Robinson purchased the beautiful Hart's Bottom farm, now the site of Buena Vista, from General John Bowyer. Inexperienced in the management of a large farm, the new owner encountered many difficulties. He bought a number of slaves for the Hart's Bottom estate, and had trouble managing them. Indeed, this phase of Robinson's life seemed unhappy: bad seasons and crop failures harassed him, and he became plagued by poor health. In this situation he began to consider what disposition he would make of his property, which in addition to the 400 acres of Hart's Bottom, included lands in Rockbridge County along the Cowpasture River, Buffalo Creek and elsewhere.

A MEMBER OF NO CHURCH (although Professor John Lyle Campbell years later wrote that John Robinson was, or had been, a member of the Roman Catholic Church), lonely in his old age, and a man without taste for literature or other resources of happiness, he decided to bequeath his entire fortune to Washington College. This decision may cause no surprise in view of his earlier interest in education at that institution, and his generosity to the hard-pressed Ann Smith Academy. In 1818–19, when the General Assembly of Virginia decided to set up a state university, various communities vied with one another to win the site of the new institution. Lexington and the trustees of Washington College offered a subscription to the Commonwealth amounting to \$70,000. Mr. Harrington Waddell located the conditional deed in the Rockbridge



Robinson paid for construction of the Centre Building, now Washington Hall, shown here in a detail from an 1867 Boude & Miley photo. The flanking buildings and the statue of Washington were all added in the 1840s.

County Courthouse, by which Robinson offered to transfer his entire holdings to the state, provided the university be located within four miles of Lexington. Mr. Waddell has called this deed "one of the most remarkable papers connected with the development of higher education in Virginia."

Nothing came of this, however, largely because of the influence of Thomas Jefferson in behalf of the site at Charlottesville. By 1821 the several buildings which had been serving the College since earlier in the century were deemed inadequate, whereupon the trustees appealed to John Robinson for assistance in constructing a larger building. This generous patron responded with a contribution of \$2,000. Although the bid of the locally famous contractor Colonel John Jordan was \$9,000, the trustees ventured to go ahead with Jordan's plan, doubtless relying on Robinson for further contributions.

IN THE NARRATIVE of John Robinson's relationship to Washington College, it becomes diverting to recount the incident either in 1824 or in 1825 when John Robinson sent a barrel of his choice "fruited," "ropy" whiskey to the campus. The several accounts of

<sup>2</sup> Revolutionary War leader and early Rockbridge settler, politician and builder of Thorn Hill, who became a trustee of Liberty Hall Academy in 1776 and died in 1806.

this episode, one of the most sensational ever to occur on the college grounds, agree that the whiskey was sent by Robinson; but concur on almost no other details.

The first public presentation of the incident was given by Colonel J. T. L. Preston, an 1828 alumnus of Washington College, in an address delivered in 1866. Colonel Preston, a founder of Virginia Military Institute and member of the VMI faculty, declared that when the cornerstone of the Washington College center building had been laid in 1824, a barrel of whiskey had been provided, adding that President Baxter and the college professors drank from the barrel and had disported themselves merrily.

Preston's account was privately remonstrated against by members of Dr. Baxter's family at the time of its first delivery, but it was reproduced about 1873 substantially unchanged. A correction was published in the *Lexington Gazette* on February 28, 1873, emanating from a "Member of the President's Family," probably [daughter] Louisa Baxter. According to her, Andrew Alexander had been in charge of drawing the plan and executing the work of constructing the main building of Washington College. Regarding the cornerstone in 1824, Miss Baxter stated flatly: "There was no public exhibition, or gathering on the occasion." Furthermore, Miss Baxter, in a memorandum she wrote probably in the late 1870s, refers to a "celebration" of Robinson's gift to the college, but asserts that the episode had not been in any way promoted or endorsed by the school authorities.

Her version has it that the event was occasioned by the writing of Robinson's will, which had been drawn up "shortly before." In her communication of 1873, she put the matter succinctly: "Mr. John Robinson, who gave his fortune to the College, was a man of great eccentricity and, soon after his intention of making this donation became known, he sent a barrel of whiskey to College hill." Miss Baxter strongly dissents from the idea later expressed by William Ruffner, that whiskey had but few powerful enemies in the 1820s. "At that time," she continues, "such a proceeding was considered as great an outrage on propriety as at present; nothing but the well known singularity



*In 1976, a century and a half after the Washington Hall cornerstone-laying, the ceremony was echoed at the dedication of W&L's law building, Lewis Hall, but this time with unblemished dignity. The modern-era scotch was provided by a W&L alumnus who was a Virginia state supreme court justice and trustee.*

of the donor could at all excuse the act in the opinion of the Faculty and friends of the College."

Baxter, Graham and Ruffner, according to Louisa Baxter's story, became much disturbed at rumors concerning the whiskey barrel. They sought an expression of opinion by the trustees before they took action "which might lead to the withdrawal of Mr. Robinson's endowment." Dr. Baxter was in the act of relating the disagreeable rumor to members of his family, when one of his daughters observed a crowd gathering on the campus. Shortly afterward, Colonel Samuel McDowell Reid, having heard of the affair, rode to visit Dr. Baxter, and they conferred hastily as to diplomatic measures that would put an end to the mischief. The two authorities concluded that it would be wise for them not to be seen in the melee. Accordingly they sent for a tutor, John P. Hudson, who was instructed to act as "the axe man." Hudson did as he was directed, and soon the "fruited," "ropy" rye whiskey was on the ground. but before Hudson could execute his orders, even Miss Baxter conceded that "during this delay, a crowd assembled around the barrel, some of the liquor was drank, and a few persons were intoxicated."

Miss Baxter marshaled evidence from witnesses to support her account, including statements from the Reverend William S. Plumer, Dr. James McClung and members of the Baxter family. Plumer and McClung were students at the time,<sup>3</sup> and although Plumer had absented himself purposely from the whiskey-barrel

3 Plumer was graduated in 1825 and McClung in 1827.

occasion, he recalled that when several weeks afterward, a student delivered a jesting speech about it, he had been rebuked by the faculty "for treating with levity an affair, which they considered so serious."

THE BEST-KNOWN ACCOUNT of the whiskey episode, however, which has been repeated many times, was penned years afterward by William Henry Ruffner, and published in Number 4 of the *Washington and Lee University Historical Papers* (1893). Dr. Ruffner was the son of Henry Ruffner, a member of the faculty at the time of the occurrence of the alleged cornerstone incident. According to Ruffner, the unusual ceremony had been devised by John Robinson. The historian learnedly remarked: "Mr. Robinson was the only man who would have been indulged in a Bacchanalian libation to Pallas; nor would he have been allowed, could it have been foreseen that the offering was to be converted into a Circean potation." Ruffner declared that a barrel of 15-year-old rye whiskey was unloaded from a cart near the cornerstone, "and after being set up on end the head was removed, and the sun shone upon the finest rye whiskey ever seen in Rockbridge."

The historian felt called upon to explain that the making of whiskey in these parts was entirely respectable among the earlier inhabitants, and that many Presbyterian elders had been distillers. Having said that, Ruffner warms to his subject, writing with zest of the alleged occasion. Notice had been given throughout the community, he wrote, that this public treat was in store, and a large gathering had assembled at the college. Ruffner's words are eloquent of the scene:

Mr. Robinson inaugurated the ceremony by escorting two of the leading officials to the barrel, and these three took the first taste of the sparkling liquid. Then came a succession of dignitaries who in like manner honored the occasion. For a time some courtesy in the order of approach was observed, but the thirsty multitude soon broke through all restraint, and armed with

tin cups, pitchers, basins, buckets, and a variety of dippers, some of them more handy than nice, rushed for the barrel, and soon gave a glorious exhibition of what free whiskey can do for the noble creature made in the image of God.

Dr. Ruffner continues this classic account by assuring us that not every person on the grounds became intoxicated. He avers that there were some present who obliged only with a wry taste or two of the stuff, in order not to give offense to so liberal a benefactor of the college as Robinson. At last, Ruffner wrote, Isaac Caruthers and another gentleman intervened, "upsetting the barrel while yet a considerable quantity of its contents remained unconsumed." Possibly with tongue in cheek Ruffner declared, in conclusion of his narrative, that for "the remainder of the day College hill looked like a battlefield after a hard fight!"

As a footnote to this vivid version, trustee William A. Glasgow, one of the editors of the *Historical Papers*, added that John Robinson proudly dispensed his fine whiskey to gentlemen. He had anticipated their grateful comments as they partook of this "nectar"; and it had mortified him that "the unlimited hoi polloi" had spoiled the occasion by their rushing in and turning the affair into "a horrid riot of the rabble."

A member of Dr. Baxter's family, in 1873 publicly rejected the Preston version of the cornerstone laying. In any case the whiskey-barrel affair did occur, probably in 1825. Robinson's will was dated 1825, and he died June 25, 1826.

THE ECCENTRIC philanthropist, of whom it was later said that he had "never darkened the door of

a church", who had no relatives in the land of his adoption to shed a tear at his passing, was the recipient of an impressive funeral. The *Lexington Intelligencer* reported that his body was brought to town about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, accompanied by some of his neighbors. A procession marched along Main Street, the newspaper said, consisting of:

Departed this life on Monday Inst. at his residence in this county, Mr. JOHN ROBINSON, in the 73d year of his age -- Mr. Robinson was a native of Ireland, and came to this country when a young man. He united with the Revolutionary patriots in the defence of the country. He brought little or no property with him from Ireland; but by industry, care and good management, he amassed what, in this part of Virginia, is called a large fortune. Having neither wife nor children, he has made the Trustees of Washington College, his sole and entire heirs. Sometime before his death, the Ann Smith Ac-

The Faculty of College and Clergy  
 Coffin and bearers  
 The Trustees of Washington College  
 The Washington Literary Society  
 The Graham Philanthropic Society Ladies  
 Citizens  
 Servants of the Deceased

The cortege wended its way to College Hill, where the coffin was deposited in a grave on the campus.<sup>4</sup> The *Intelligencer* observed that, so far as it knew, John Robinson was the first person in Virginia ever to bequeath his entire estate to an institution of learning. The obituary concluded: "Many young men have been ruined by fortunes left them by relatives. May we hope that any of the wealthy in Virginia will hereafter imitate the example of Washington and Robinson." ■

4 In 1855, Robinson was re-interred in a grave in front of what is now Tucker Hall. The original grave was closer to today's alumni house, then at the undeveloped north edge of the campus.



### ROBINSON'S 'INCONVENIENT' LEGACY

Crenshaw wrote that Robinson's bequest to Washington College "provided for a number of stipulations, some of which afterward were found inconvenient to the board of trustees." Specifically, in addition to "various tracts of land," including Hart's Bottom, the estate included 74 enslaved persons, who (Robinson's will directed) were to operate Hart's Bottom. Nevertheless, in 1835 the board decided to sell the enslaved persons all to one buyer, "if that could be done to advantage." In particular, the board said, families were not to be broken up. ("The trustees doubtless also wished to avoid providing additional material for abolitionist propaganda, by 1835 well developed," Crenshaw added.)

In November the board accepted an offer from one Samuel Garland to purchase 58 of the slaves, whose numbers by then had dropped to 67. They were sent to Garland's plantation in Arkansas. The remaining slaves stayed at the college, presumably to work at

Hart's Bottom. The college sold the land in 1840, and later research showed that the college sold enslaved individuals in 1844 and 1852.

Crenshaw noted that in 1859, financial records showed that the college paid medical bills for two of them and one was still "cared for" by the then-university in 1878.

In 2014, W&L joined other universities in acknowledging and expressing

regret for their participation in the institution of slavery. In 2016, W&L President Kenneth P. Ruscio led the dedication of a historical marker to commemorate the enslaved men and women the college had owned, notably those from the Robinson estate. In 2018 the university removed Robinson's name from a building on the Colonnade, and the adjacent historical marker was enlarged to create a memorial garden.

