

To Trustees and Supporters of W&L and The General's Redoubt (TGR)

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Dr. Neely Young has just written a scholarly essay on "The Evolution of the Honor System at Washington and Lee," which is attached to this email. Dr. Young recognizes that the roots of the honor system go back to Washington College before the Civil War. But he has demonstrated that the most important features of the honor system- a student run system with a single sanction- were established during the presidency of Robert E. Lee. Custis Lee, who succeeded his father as president of Washington and Lee (Washington College), furthered the development of the system. By the beginning of the 20th Century, all of the essential features of the modern-day system, including the Executive Committee, were in place.

The importance of Lee in developing the honor system has long been recognized. However, in recent years some individuals, including members of the W&L faculty and administration, have questioned Lee's contributions to the honor system and to the university in general. Dr. Young's essay answers all such questions with regard to the honor system and also highlights some of Lee's many other contributions to the modern university.

It was because of Lee's initial contributions to the honor system that the Executive Committee long met in Lee Chapel and held open honor trials there. Recent actions taken by the Board of Trustees to re-name the chapel and to strip it of any association with Lee and other historical figures constitute a grave injustice to the history, values and traditions of the University and should be reversed immediately.

We need your help to save Lee Chapel as a campus and national treasure. Please donate to The Generals Redoubt to pay for professional research related to defending Lee Chapel as a National Historic Landmark, and for future funding to educate students about the rich history and legacy of Robert E. Lee, president of Washington College 1865 – 1870.

As always, we welcome comments and will respond to them as we are able. You may send your thoughts and inquiries to Rex Wooldridge at rwooldridge@thegeneralsredoubt.us.

The attached essay is a shortened account of a longer piece. If foot notes are requested, the latter version is available from Neely Young at yneely38jung@gmail.com.

Rex Wooldridge

The Evolution of the Honor System at Washington and Lee University

M. Neely Young, Ph.D.

Honor systems in higher education are difficult to trace as they are usually unwritten and based upon tradition. The concept of honor, itself, is difficult to define as it is organic and implicit and changes over time. A working definition of honor is the idea or ideal of a bond between an individual and society as a quality of a person as a quality of a person that is both of social teaching and personal ethos and that manifests itself as a code of conduct. Originally, honor was

practiced only by certain groups or classes of individuals within society, but over the last few hundred years, honor has become more democratic and egalitarian in the West and in the United States and today anyone can behave in an honorable manner.

Almost all societies have some concept of honor. In Japan, the Bushido Code or code of the Samurai developed, and in China the Confucian system promoted the idea of the chun-tzu or gentleman who practiced moral rectitude and proper behavior. In the west, the concept can be traced to the ancient Middle East. It then flowed through Greece and Rome to Medieval Europe. In the Middle Ages, honor was associated with the chivalric code and was associated only with the warrior class and the nobility. Christianity came to have a moderating influence on the warlike concept of chivalry by calling for protection of the weak, the promotion of peace, and the "just war." Beginning in the Renaissance, particularly in England, honor came to be associated with the rising gentry class who aspired to the rank and marks of nobility. They practiced gentility which gave rise to the term "gentleman." Gentility became synonymous with dignity or integrity, and this ideal was transferred to the new colonies in America.

In the period immediately before the Revolutionary War, the concept of honor became broadly institutionalized in American society and was tied to one's individual actions more than to one's lineage. The practice of linking personal and collective honor began in American colleges and universities. Princeton University, under the leadership of John Witherspoon, stands out in this regard. Princeton provided academic, moral, and spiritual education. Witherspoon, who taught moral philosophy, gave a Christian, specifically Presbyterian, imprimatur to honor and duty, which he viewed as both secular and religious values. He viewed the Revolution as a just and holy cause and was a strong patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Incidentally, one of Witherspoon's students was William Graham, the first rector of Liberty Hall Academy (later Washington and Lee University).

By the beginning of the revolution, a concept of "national honor" had developed not only at numerous colleges and universities in North and South, but throughout the colonies. The Founding Fathers embraced the ideal as a way to unite the colonists to defeat the British and form a new government. As the concept of honor changed so did the ideal of the gentleman which also became more democratic and egalitarian. The Lees constituted probably the most consequential family in Virginia before, during, and after the Revolution. Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee, great uncles of Robert E. Lee, were both signers of the Declaration of Independence. Richard Henry Lee "supported a democratized version of honor and virtue which superseded class and birth." Henry,

"Light Horse Harry", Lee was a member of the Virginia Constitutional Convention, which approved the Constitution and later served as the governor of Virginia. During the war of 1812, he called for "peace with honor." Certainly, Robert E. Lee would have received an education in honor and duty from his family.

In the early Republic, there were various concepts of honor- personal, familial, regional, military, religious, and national. These concepts were not in conflict but blended together in a unifying manner. From the Jacksonian era (1828-1836) forward, regional and ideological conflicts weakened this broad agreement on honor. For many the question became how to reconcile these potentially conflicting ideas of honor and remain a gentleman. If a gentleman in honorable, where does his primary honor lie?

Prior to the Civil War, no American college or university had a fully developed honor system. There was a recognition of the importance of honor at all of them, and some had developed honor pledges, both of a general and specific nature. In 1802, Princeton, which influenced developments at Liberty Hall and Washington College, required each student to "solemnly pledge on your truth and honor" that he would obey the rules of the college. It is reasonable to assume that the tradition of honor at Princeton had something to do with the development of a similar

tradition at Liberty Hall/Washington College, but a direct link cannot be established between the budding honor system at Princeton and what developed later at Washington College.

William and Mary is supposed to have developed the first college honor system in the country during the colonial period. In 1784, a written pledge of honor was required of students by the administration. This pledge applied to not only what would later be described as honor offenses but to other misconduct. By 1834, it appears that not only a general pledge was required at matriculation, but that specific pledges on academic work were in force. Again, there is no direct evidence of a link between the honor procedures at William and Mary and those of Washington College. There may have been an indirect link between Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia.

Thomas Jefferson was a graduate of William and Mary, and the Governor of Virginia when a reorganization of the curriculum and code of conduct began at his alma mater. Jefferson took a direct hand in these developments. In 1825, the University of Virginia, with Jefferson's guidance and support, opened. In 1841-42, the faculty took a number of steps to delineate honor offenses and to require a written pledge of honor on examinations. In 1851, the professors at the university held their first honor trial. A student was charged with cheating by his fellow students and was found guilty and dismissed by the faculty. This may have been the first example in an American college of the enforcement of the "single sanction", whereby the only punishment for an honor offense is withdrawal or dismissal.

The United States Military Academy (U.S.M.A.) was founded in 1802, and certainly reflected the concepts of military and national honor. In 1817, Sylvanus Thayer became Superintendent. He is said to have introduced the motto of "Duty, Honor, and Country," and is also credited with the beginning of the honor code. Robert E. Lee was a student at West Point under Thayer. Thayer, like Lee later as both Superintendent at the military academy and at Washington College, led by

example and by the precepts which he taught. The 1821 regulations state that "any cadet who shall be guilty of conduct unbecoming a gentleman shall be dismissed [from] the service." The first recorded court martial for a cadet occurred in mid-1850. Although, again, there is no connection between the code at West Point and that at Washington College prior to Lee's arrival in 1865, there is a possible link through another military college, Virginia Military Institute (V.M.I.)

V.M.I. was established in Lexington, Virginia in 1839. The first Superintendent was Francis H. Smith, who like Lee, graduated from West Point under the tutelage of Sylvanus Thayer. The institute claims that the honor system dates to the first year and entering students did take a pledge of honor to obey the rules of the school. The first court martial records date from 1848; these have to do not only with matters of honor but with other forms of misconduct. In 1859, the first case involving an honor offense is recorded. Looking back after the Civil War, Francis Smith stated, "I deem it of great importance to the tone of the Corp of cadets to get re-established among them the code of honor. Several cadets have brought this to my attention." The V.M.I. honor code was influenced by that at West Point, and concepts of honor may have passed back and forth between the two schools of V.M.I. and Washington College before the Civil War.

No college or university had a fully developed honor system prior to the Civil War. Honor was valued, and expectations of honor were high. Students could be punished for honor violations, but punishments were not consistent. Faculty and administration-controlled enforcement, but students had some input. The single sanction was rare.

Elements of the honor system at Washington College can be traced to the pre-war period. Sidney Baxter, who was a student at Washington College in the early 19th century when his father, George, served as President, stated, "The discipline of the institution was based on the expectation that all students of the college were young gentlemen. . . They were taught that a sacred regard for trust was the cornerstone of the character of a gentleman." Still, the Presbyterian administration and faculty

of the college were very strict in their discipline, and there were a lengthy list of rules and regulations in place. Until late in the pre-war era, honor offenses were not treated as a separate category. Beginning in 1821, students took a matriculation pledge to obey the laws of the college. In the 1840's there is a shift in tone, and the Board made the following statement: "The punishments of this institution are of a moral nature and are addressed to the sense of duty and the feelings of honor and shame [of the students]. . . On the due observance of the promise made at matriculation shall depend on the student's right to the privileges of the college. Here is the first appeal to each student's sense of honor as well as a recognition that students, individually and collectively, play a role in upholding the honor of the college.

The first mention of an honor trial occurs in the faculty minutes of January 29, 1850. This appears to have been the first honor trial conducted at any college or university, and indicates that at Washington College, honor offenses had been separated from other forms of misbehavior. In the early 1850's, punishments for honor offenses were mild or inconsistent. As the decade progressed, punishments became more severe. Students were signing written pledges on exams and other academic work. They were also identifying fellow students whom they suspected of honor offenses and reporting them to the faculty. (10) Although there appears to have been a shared view of the importance of honor

among the faculty and students, there was not a student run system, and the single sanction was not in effect. These critical aspects of the honor system would be introduced after the war by Robert E. Lee and furthered by Custis Lee, who succeeded his father as President of Washington and Lee.

Honor and duty were the two most important values in Robert E. Lee's life. Prior to the Civil War, Lee seemed to epitomize all aspects of honor. As the war approached, he experienced a sense of strain and conflict between his varying understandings of honor. He allowed his sense of personal, familial, and regional honor to take precedent over his sense of national honor. Lee's sense of honor was

based upon a Stoic, Christian model and was not the regressive sense of reputational honor embraced by many Southerners. His loyalty was more to Virginia than to the South. Still, he had to make a choice, and that choice changed history.

Following the war, Lee regained his sense of national honor and reintegrated it into his other understandings of honor. He worked tirelessly to bring about reconciliation between North and South. In accepting the presidency of Washington College in August 1865, he wrote, "I think it is the duty of every citizen. . . to unite in the restoration of the country and the reestablishment of peace and harmony." Writing later to the mother of two sons who had expressed her resentment toward the federal government, Lee said, "Madame, do not train up your children to detest the United States Government. Remember we are all one country now, dismiss from your mind all sectional feelings and bring them up to be Americans."

Lee recruited students from all over the county and dramatically increased the enrollment of the college. Lee expected all of the students to behave as gentleman and prayed that all of them would become Christians. Lee himself was viewed by many as the ideal Christian gentleman, someone who led more by example than by the use of authority. Having freed himself of military constraints, he took a more latitudinarian approach to matters of student behavior and discipline than did his Presbyterian predecessors at the college. He believed in and promoted self-governance among the students and did not burden them with petty rules and regulations. Lee famously stated that "We have but one rule, that every student must be a gentleman."

Lee did not provide us with a definition of a gentleman or a Christian gentleman, but others did. Timothy Arthur Shay, writing just after the war, said that "No man can be a Christian who is not also a gentleman." For Shay, both the Christian and the gentleman defer to the needs of others. To his cousin, Edwin Jennings Lee, Robert E. Lee was the epitome of the Christian gentleman: "So, Robert E. Lee, as

son or brother, father or husband, friend or comrade, subaltern or commander, exhibits the full measure of the Christian gentleman." Following Lee's death, The London Standard wrote of Lee, "A Christian without pretension, and a gentleman without flaw."

Lee did not try to coerce the Washington College students into becoming Christian gentlemen. Instead, he led by example and demonstrated faith and trust in the students. In a chapel address, he reminded the students "that the faculty has promulgated no rules for student government, that each and every one was presumed to be a gentleman and that by tacit agreement the control of the students was left to the student body and the individual sense of honor of each student." David J. Wilson, a student under Lee, later remarked that "he trusted to their [the students'] sense of honor to obey the laws of the college."

Lee supported individual responsibility and student self-governance in all things. He expanded the curriculum and allowed students to determine their majors and the course which they would take to fulfill that major. He made chapel services voluntary but set an example for the students by attending every day.

Lee did not initiate the honor system at Washington College but imbued it with its most important characteristics. According to John Gunn, emeritus professor of economics at Washington and Lee, Lee demonstrated his commitment to the system and its noble purposes, and he placed authority for its administration primarily in the student body. Statements from former faculty and students during Lee's presidency and the early years of Custis Lee's tenure indicate that a student run honor system was in place. E.C. Gordon, Lee's personal secretary, wrote that during Lee's presidency, "If a man was caught cheating, his life was made so intolerable by the students that he was glad to go home." Bishop James Winchester, writing in the early 20th century, said, "The students saw in him [Robert E. Lee] the personification of honor. If a student cheated on examination, his fellow students discovering it, the act expelled him." These and other comments indicate that the students initiated a practice of "shunning" dishonorable

men, which usually led to their withdrawal from the school. This came to be known as the single sanction.

Generally, the faculty and administration supported the students in their administration of the honor system. The Washington College Catalogue for 1867-68 states that "The Discipline has been placed . . . upon the honor and self-respect of the students themselves." In an 1872 article, Dr. James Kirkpatrick, Professor of Moral Philosophy, wrote that every student takes a pledge when he enters and "as this pledge puts every student on his honor, so the Faculty. . . leave him there- on his honor. . . It is only after a student has deceived them and has clearly shown that he is not entitled to their confidence, that they exercise the authority with which they are closed, and relieve the institution, faculty and students alike, of one whom they can no longer trust."

There is a contradiction between the above faculty statement and the previous statements from students at the time. It appears that the faculty recognized the right of the students to identify someone who may have committed an honor offense, to carry out an investigation, and to render some sort of verdict. However, the faculty also allowed the accused student to appeal the student decision and to decide what his final punishment would be. In a case from 1867, the faculty determined, based on a technicality, not that a student should be expelled, but that the professor "should not receive" his examination.

The interplay between students and faculty on matters of honor continued well into the administration of Custis Lee. They agreed on what constituted an honor offense, that this was a grave matter, and that students had a significant role to play in such matters. Students preferred the single sanction and were often allowed to have the final say. However, from time to time, the faculty acted as a final court of appeals.

Under Robert E. Lee's leadership, Washington College established the first student-run honor system in an American college or university (my emphasis). It

also appears that the single sanction was initiated during Robert E. Lee's presidency. Robert E. Lee is the pivotal figure in the development of the honor system which the university practices today, and his son, who succeeded him as President, also played a significant role.

Custis Lee admired his father and saw his own presidency as an extension of his father's. He continued to expand the curriculum and support the honor system. George Bolling Lee, Robert E. Lee's grandson and a student under Custis Lee, said of the latter that he "founded his discipline on the principles of the honor system." James Winchester, writing to a Washington and Lee professor, said "I rejoice that the same honor system which existed in my day under my two presidents [Robert E. Lee and Custis Lee] prevails today."

Despite the faculty's attempts to adjudicate a few honor cases, they slowly removed themselves from the process. The last instance of a faculty decision on a matter of honor in the undergraduate school occurred in 1889, and the last case of an appeal from the law school happened in 1892. In a 1902 article, Dr. J.A. Quarles described how the system had worked since he arrived on campus in 1887.

If, however, for any reason suspicion is aroused that any man in the class is acting or disposed to act dishonorably, they [the students] pass the word around and the poor fellow is the target of a dozen eyes from every angle of vision. Should they see evidence of his guilt, someone takes the responsibility of calling the class together, and they sit in judgement on the case. If guilt is proven, he is required by the students to withdraw at once from the University. Should he refuse, the case is taken to the faculty, who dispose of it upon its merits; this step is rarely taken.

In the years following Custis Lee's retirement, a formal student government began to develop. In the years between 1897 and 1900, all of the undergraduate and law school classes formed themselves into groups and elected officers. Each of the classes claimed the authority to deal with honor violations. The University Catalogue of 1901-1902 stated "This system [of honor] is traditional at

Washington and Lee University. . . In the few cases in which a student has had the hardihood to cheat in class or examination, he has been required by his fellow students to leave the institution." Clearly a totally student-run, single sanction system was in place by the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1905, the students established an Executive Committee of the Student Body to administer the honor system and perform other functions. The first public trial of a student occurred in March 1906, and the accused student was found not guilty. Later that year, a student was found guilty by the Executive Committee in a private hearing and withdrew. The procedures which were put in place in 1905-06 are very similar to those practiced today.

The greatest threat to the honor system occurred in 1954 when several students, mostly athletes, stole advanced copies of quizzes and exams. The Executive Committee tried the cases and fifteen students were expelled. This case led to the end of subsidized athletics, but the honor system was never called into question.

The late 1960's and early 1970's was another period of controversy surrounding the honor system. Some called for an end to the single sanction and to the honor system itself. Despite all of the turmoil, the honor system was maintained with the addition of some procedural rules to protect the rights of the accused.

There have continued to be challenges to the honor system from time to time, but the basic elements have remained:

- A student does not lie, cheat or steal or tolerate those who do
- The system is totally run by the students. Decisions by the students are final and may not be appealed to the administration or faculty
- The Executive Committee is given the responsibility to execute and enforce the system
- If a student is found guilty, there is only one punishment- withdrawal or dismissal

- In a private hearing, if a student is found guilty, his or her name and offense is not revealed
- A student has the right to appeal a decision of the Executive Committee by calling for a public trial. The decision of this court is final.

W&L's honor system has a long and proud history. The first recorded honor trial in America took place there in 1850. The first student-run honor system began during Robert E. Lee's presidency. It appears that W&L has the second oldest single sanction system in the country, preceded only by U.VA. Today, there are only two totally student-run single sanction systems in America- Washington and Lee and V.M.I. Underlying the system is the principle enunciated and exemplified by Robert E. Lee that all students should conduct themselves as gentlemen. Of course, there are still criticisms:

- Some today believe that the concept of honor is outmoded or unrealistic
- Others believe that a single sanction is too punitive
- Still others see Robert E. Lee as a controversial figure and wish to minimize or eliminate his critical contributions to the honor system

Despite such criticisms, Washington and Lee students and alums continue to believe that the honor system works and is, in many ways, the hallmark of the university. An honor system cannot survive outside of a "community of honor." Washington and Lee is such a community.