

Cover Letter for To Be Grateful or Not

13 May 2022

In almost every battle of life there arrives a crucial juncture at which the contest is decided, either for victory or for defeat. The fight to save Lee Chapel likely puts us at this crucial juncture in our long struggle to save Washington and Lee University, with its honored values and traditions, and may well decide whether that struggle is finally won or lost. In this sense of the gravity of the moment, I wrote the following paper in the hope that with renewed resolve and in full confidence of the rightness of our cause, we will all join in sparing neither effort nor resources till we carry the day!

To this end, please donate to The Generals Redoubt to pay for professional research related to defending Lee Chapel as a National Historical Landmark, and for future funding to educate students about the rich history and legacy of Robert E. Lee. We need your help if we are to save Lee Chapel as a campus and national treasure. Thank you for any contribution you can give us.

Kenneth Everett, '64

To Be Grateful or Not

In the case of a benefit, this is the abiding rule for the two who are concerned -- the one should straightaway forget what he has given, the other should never forget that it was received.

Seneca, On Benefits, II, X, 4

From remotest antiquity it has been generally believed by the civilized portion of mankind that no quality of character more clearly marks out the good man than that he is unfailingly grateful for the benefits he receives from others, be they large or small, deserved or undeserved. And this man, in the fullness of his gratitude will strive, when

opportunity offers, to reciprocate with a benefit to his benefactor, that the bond of goodwill and common humanity be sealed. At the opposite pole, ingratitude has been condemned as one of the blackest marks upon character, signifying a man defined by selfish aims, willing to receive benefits but reluctant to bestow them unless to further his own ambition, welfare, or aggrandizement.

When the light of this abiding truth is turned upon the recent actions taken by the Washington and Lee administration and trustees in renaming buildings and otherwise scrubbing from notice the names of some of the university's most generous benefactors, institutional ingratitude shows itself in unmistakable colors. A notable example is that of the newly named Chavis Hall. This building, a part of the historic Colonnade of the front campus, was constructed in 1824 and was named for Mr. John Robinson, one of Washington and Lee's most important early benefactors, thus giving us the building formerly known to generations of Washington and Lee students as Robinson Hall. In October 2018, however, it was renamed Chavis Hall, in honor of Mr. John Chavis, an accomplished free black man and the first African American to have obtained a college education at Washington and Lee (at Washington Academy in the 1790's). A collateral motivation for the renaming, however, seems to be the fact that Mr. Robinson owned some slaves, as there appears no other obvious reason for the action that was taken. Hence the banishment of his name and memory to oblivion.

Prior to the renaming of Robinson Hall, the Washington and Lee Historical Commission of May 2018, addressed the issue of renaming buildings on campus by listing explicitly several principles that would govern all renaming decisions. Among these was that "removing the name should not have the effect of erasing history." Nevertheless, in the renaming of Robinson Hall history was, in actual effect, erased, inasmuch as the renaming removed from public view or recognition the historical fact of Mr. Robinson's generous benefaction. Future generations of the Washington and Lee community, with no memory of the renaming event, will never suspect Mr. Robinson had any connection with Washington and Lee unless, purely by accident, they should run across records of his beneficence in the university archives. Credit for Robinson's generosity, and the gratitude owed it, could have easily been preserved, while simultaneously honoring Chavis, by renaming the building "Robinson-Chavis Hall" or "Chavis-Robinson Hall" -- but, again, the fact that Robinson owned slaves, as did much of the donor class of Southerners of his era, pretty clearly led to the extirpation of any vestige of gratitude for his gift to the school.

Interestingly, it is firmly established that several members of Mr. Chavis's own family-owned slaves, although it is unclear whether Mr. Chavis himself owned any. Despite

Chavis's feeling that slavery was a moral evil, he is on record as opposing the abolition of slavery in the near future, not wanting to upset the settled order of society, and thinking as well that the enslaved blacks of his day were better off in their enslaved condition here than they would have been in Africa, where they would not have enjoyed the influence and benefits of Christianity. Nevertheless, an examination of Mr. Chavis's record of lifetime achievement (an educated, devoted Presbyterian minister, a teacher and educator, etc.), remarkable even for a free black of his day, shows that he does deserve to be honored by Washington and Lee. But it does not follow that Mr. Robinson deserves to be dishonored.

And all of this, despite another of the History Commission's stated criteria for renaming: namely, that "examination of the standards of the namesake's time and place is relevant" - and in Robinson's "time and place," of course, slavery was legal and generally practiced, not being looked upon by most as necessarily a baneful social evil. Does, then, Washington and Lee's violation of its own renaming criteria in order to rescind its original gesture of gratitude to Mr. Robinson, reflect an honorable institution, one committed to the return of gratitude to its benefactors; or does it reveal one that takes deliberate steps to forget selected benefactors and their gifts -- and for reasons neither frankly stated nor adequately defended.

The most egregious withdrawal of Washington and Lee gratitude, however, was committed upon Robert E. Lee, in peremptorily stripping his name from that of Lee Chapel -- after the university had previously issued several public declarations that it would not change the name of the building. As a result of this behavior, which reeks of duplicity, we are therefore presented at the current juncture with an astonishing inconsistency of actions; in that the trustees elected to retain Lee's name in that of the university while, at the same time, removing it from the Chapel. How is it that a man worthy enough to have his name incorporated into that of the school itself, is nevertheless deemed simultaneously unworthy of having at least one small, general-use building on campus also named for him; a building, no less, that he conceived, had constructed, and dearly loved while he was president of Washington College -- and in which he and his family are buried?

Furthermore, how is it that the trustees could withdraw such a mark of gratitude from a man justly considered to be the second founder of the school, in that he almost single-handedly saved the institution from ruin and probable extinction following the Civil War, and, remarkably, restored it both to financial and to academic prosperity as a vibrant, modern college of its day? The renaming of Lee Chapel has all the appearances of trustee decision-making run amuck, based more on some kind of conflicted expediency

than on anything remotely resembling integrity of principle, where primacy is given to consideration of simple right and wrong. Is honorable conduct still alive at Washington and Lee, or are we seeing its last faint glimmerings extinguished by political game playing and disregard of justice?

If gestures of gratitude are now held at Washington and Lee to be commodities to be handed out or rescinded as the political or social vagaries of the moment dictate, is Washington and Lee still capable of extending genuine, enduring gratitude to any benefactor? That actions recently taken by the school have callously betrayed some past Washington and Lee benefactors, ought surely to appear to any fair-minded person as beyond dispute. Can the school have fallen to such moral depths as thus cavalierly to desert its reputed ideals of honor and civility -- ideals the institution claims still to hold, but, in light of recent events, falsely? Unless the Washington and Lee administration and Board of Trustees can rectify their thinking and reverse their actions in renaming and physically disfiguring Lee Chapel, the Washington and Lee we have known as one of the last champions of moral integrity and honorable character on the American academic scene may well perish ignominiously, as the actions bringing the institution to that end sink into the realm of irretrievable moral opprobrium.

As this paper began, so it will end, with two more quotes from Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD), the famed Roman statesman, advisor to emperors, essayist, dramatist, moralist, and Stoic philosopher, whose bountiful treasures of wisdom have come down to us through the hands of men enlightened enough not to have destroyed them merely because Seneca, like most wealthy Romans of his time, owned slaves.

Not to return gratitude for benefits is a disgrace, and the whole world counts it as such.

Seneca, On Benefits, III, I, 1

This is the duty we owe to the virtuous -- to honor them, not only when they are present with us, but even when they have been taken from our sight; as they have made it their aim, not to confine their services to one age alone, but to leave behind their benefits even after they themselves have passed away, so let us not confine our gratitude to one age only.

Seneca, On Benefits, IV, XXX, 3

Respectfully,

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Washington and Lee University

