

# **Cover Letter for Consistency and Transparency**

*25 May 2022*

Neely Young, class of 1966, has just written an article on "The Importance of Consistency and Transparency in Decision Making by the Washington and Lee Board." The article is attached to this email and points out that over the last four and a half years, the Board has made a number of decisions which have not fulfilled either of these requirements. Dr. Young calls on the Board to be more consistent and transparent in future decision making.

As always, TGR welcomes your response. You may respond to Rex Wooldridge or directly to Dr. Young, whose email address is [yneely38jung@gmail.com](mailto:yneely38jung@gmail.com).

Please donate to The Generals Redoubt to support our demand for consistency and transparency with new leadership and 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.

## **The Importance of Consistency and Transparency in Board Decision**

# Making at Washington and Lee University

20 May 2022

Author: Neely Young, Class of 1966

## I.

### OVERVIEW

Over the last four years, the Washington and Lee Board of Trustees has made numerous decisions regarding the naming of buildings and the treatment of historical treasures. I, along with other alumni, have disagreed with many of these decisions. Perhaps more importantly, I have identified inconsistencies and contradictions in the Board's decision-making process as well as a lack of transparency as to how these decisions were made.

I call upon the Board to stand by declared positions and conduct its policies in a transparent manner. Stakeholders such as parents, students, and alumni donors are asked to engage and support the University. All stakeholders rightfully, expect the University to engage and inform them fairly.

## II.

### EVENT TIMELINE AUGUST 2017 TO PRESENT

Rex Wooldridge and I began to observe and engage with the Board of Trustees in the early fall of 2017. Our concern then, as now, was to be “mindful of the future while still preserving the history, values and traditions of the University.

What follows is a timeline of events from August 2017 to the present:

- **August 2017** - Horrific events take place in Charlottesville, VA.
- **September 2017** - President Dudley announces the appointment of a History Commission to examine the history of Washington and Lee University and to make recommendations. It is not clear from the letter what sort of recommendations will be made and on what subjects.
- **September 2017** - Letter to Don Childress, Board Rector, from Rex Wooldridge and Neely Young asking that the Board issue a statement confirming that various aspects of Washington and Lee's will be preserved and maintained, specifically:
  - 1) That the recumbent statue of Robert E. Lee will not be removed or obscured from view except on specific occasions.
  - 2) That the name of the university will not be changed under any circumstances.
  - 3) That the legacy of Robert E. Lee will continue to be honored.
- **November 2017** - After failing to respond to previous outreach from Rex Wooldridge and Neely Young for almost two months, Don Childress responds to us and says "Simply put, we see no reason to publish a statement along the lines that you suggest because at this time, the Board *has no intention to make any of the changes that your letter fears* [*author's emphasis*]. As we shall see, in the next three and a half years, the Board instituted or considered instituting all of the "changes" which we feared.
- **May 2018** - History Commission issues its report, which contains numerous recommendations with which we and many other alumni disagree.
- **June 2018** - A significant group of Emeritus Trustees write a letter to the Rector, the Board, and the President expressing disagreement with several the conclusions and recommendations of the History Commission. Specifically, they state:
  - 1) The History Commission Report does not meet "the President's charge to the commission to study the entire history of the university."

2) The report focuses in a limited and unbalanced way on Lee and his relationship to enslaved people.

3) The emeritus trustees are critical of many of the recommendations of the commission including the renaming of many buildings such as Lee Chapel.

4) "The thought of transforming Lee Chapel (including the apse) into a university museum. . . doesn't make sense culturally or financially."

5) They question "the reason or need to remove the name of "Jockey" John Robinson from the building named after him." They say such a decision would "demean the man's character and reputation."

6) The emeritus trustees say that the History Commission recommendation dealing with the name of the university and sports teams should be adopted without the phrase, "at this time." **Had this recommendation from the emeritus trustees been adopted in 2018 there would have been no need to reconsider the name of the university in 2020.**

7) *In future, any proposal for naming or re-naming a building or other structure should be considered by a joint committee of the Board, administration, and faculty before being presented to the Board for consideration. [author's emphasis]* **To my knowledge, such a re-naming committee has still not been established by the Board.**

- **August 2018** - President Dudley responds to the report of the History Commission and states the following:

1) Founders Day will be maintained. [*This was later eliminated in 2021*]

2) The upper part of Lee Chapel will not be converted into a museum as suggested by the History Commission.

3) The name of the school will not be changed; nor will the name of the school's teams, i.e. The Generals. [*Both of these decisions would be reconsidered two years later*]

4) The Lee House and the Lee Chapel will not be renamed. [*The Lee Chapel was renamed less than three years later*]

At this time, Don Childress states that the Board fully endorses President Dudley's response to the History Commission.

- **October 2018** - Board votes to take the following steps:

1) Close the doors to the recumbent statue at **all** university events in contradiction to Rector Childress's statement of a year earlier.

2) Rename Robinson Hall to Chavis Hall. This is in direct contradiction to the recommendation of the Emeritus Trustees 4 months earlier.

3) Remove the Pine portrait of Lee and the Peale portrait of Washington from the interior of the Lee Chapel and place the latter on permanent (?) loan to Mt. Vernon. Replace the two portraits with portraits of Washington and Lee in civilian clothing.

Many alumni, though unhappy with these changes, presumed that these were the last changes to be made regarding historical buildings, monuments, etc. The President and Board would shortly reinforce this impression.

- **December 3, 2018** - President Dudley states in a *Ring-tum Phi* article that the Board does not intend to make other name changes. Rector Childress is quoted as saying, "We're not going to change the name of the university. There is no discussion going on at all about making any other name changes of any sort."
- **February 7, 2019** - A group of emeritus trustees meet with selected Board members to discuss discontent among alumni and divisiveness among various university stakeholders. They state:

1) The level of discontent and division among alumni is the highest in their collective memory which stretches from the 1950's to the present and that "the university has a serious alumni relations problem."

2) Many alumni feel that the recent Board and administration actions regarding the History Commission recommendations are "flawed and stacked against the consideration of alumni viewpoints." The emeritus trustees criticize the failure of the university to create a formal mechanism for alumni to weigh in on commission recommendations other than a short Q and A session, where

discussion was truncated.

3) "The Board made no attempt to explain the policy underlying its recent decisions. Nor did the Board tell alumni how these decisions would advance the university's mission or are consistent with its values." **Here we see the issue of a lack of Board transparency addressed.**

4.) John Robinson "appears to have been a convenient sacrifice on the altar of political correctness."

5.) Board needs to amend the by-laws to require 75% vote of trustees to change the name of a physical structure or other important elements of the university, "including the name of the university."

6) Board should issue a statement that the name of the university will not be changed. **Here again was an opportunity for the Board to act decisively and make clear to all constituencies that the name of the university would not be changed.**

- **February 2019** - At its scheduled meeting, the Board resisted calls to distance itself from Lee and to rename the university. However, it did not make a broad, public statement to that effect. The President and various trustees admitted that they dropped the ball in explaining to alumni and others their rationale for making the decisions in fall, 2018.
- **February 22, 2019** - In a letter, President Dudley reiterates his and the Board's decision that the name of the university and the Lee Chapel will not be renamed.
- **2019 FAQ sheet on W&L website** - "**Are any other building names under consideration for change?**" "No. . . Washington Hall, *Lee Chapel* [*author's emphasis*] and Lee House **will** retain their names and remain among the prominent spaces on campus."
- **November 2019** - Several law students ask for the option of removing portraits of George Washington and Robert E. Lee from their diplomas.

- **February 2020** - Board again rejects calls to distance itself from Lee.
- **May 2020** - Board votes not to allow students the option of removing portraits of Washington and Lee from diplomas. The new Board chair, Mike McAlevey, reiterates the position that the university name will remain.
- **Spring-Summer 2020** - A number of unrelated events rock the country, beginning with the covid crisis and lockdown, the murder of George Floyd in late May, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the "Defund the Police" effort. At the time, there is little to indicate a groundswell of support for making major changes at Washington and Lee.
- **July 13, 2020** - Another letter from Emeritus Trustees to Board supporting diversity initiatives but asking them to resist calls for radical change at the university.

1) No name-change for the university.

2) "Naming decisions will not be taken lightly and will be guided by facts, not based on some sense of institutional guilt or desire for historical atonement."

3) "If the Board acquiesces to the current call to expunge Lee from the university's name, it should be prepared for calls to rename Lee Chapel, Lee House, and to excise every vestige of Lee from the campus, lest someone take offense. . . Erasing parts of the university's history that are uncomfortable is a no-win exercise. Just as renaming Robinson Hall did not quell calls from those favoring historical erasure, removal of Lee from the university's name will not appease this group either."

4) Emeritus trustees once again call for a specific policy (apparently to be written and publicized) governing naming decisions. They state that the Washington and Lee History Commission recommended specific evaluation criteria for renaming buildings and spaces in their 2018 report. The emeritus trustees recommend a policy adopted by Yale University in 2016.

- **Late July 2020** - Board announces it will consider the question of a name change for the university along with other issues. This announcement appears to contradict much of what the Board had said since the fall of 2018.

- **September 20, 2020** - *Ring-tum Phi* article quotes Rector McAlevey as saying that Board has formed a committee to consider a name change for the university, changes to the form of the diploma, and "other matters that are necessary and directly related to the fulfillment of its purpose." This is a vague statement which does not specify what these "other matters" might be. There is no mention of changing the name of the Lee Chapel or other significant changes within and outside the chapel.
- **June 4, 2021** - The Board votes not to change the name of the university but hollows out its significance with other changes:

1) Board votes to remove the portraits of George Washington and Robert E. Lee from all diplomas. This contradicts the decision of a little over a year earlier. When asked by concerned parents and alums on a subsequent conference call why this decision was made and why students should not be given the option of having the portraits on diplomas, Board representatives do not provide satisfactory answers to either question.

2) Vote to rename the Lee Chapel as "University" Chapel. This decision is a contradiction of official Board and University policy of just over two years earlier. Rector McAlevey states that there was unanimity or near unanimity within the Board on this 2021 change but does not provide a vote count. Nor is a rationale provided for the renaming of the chapel. In the year leading up to this decision, to this author's knowledge, the Board sought no broad input on changing the name of the chapel or making other changes to its interior.

3) Vote to discontinue Founders' Day despite President Dudley's statement of a little less than three years earlier. Again, no rationale seems to have been provided.

4) Vote for extensive changes to the interior of Lee Chapel including:

a. Permanent walling off recumbent statue of Lee. In addition to being a total contradiction of Rector Childress' statement in Fall 2017, this is totally unnecessary in light of the Board's decision in Fall 2018 to close the doors to the recumbent statue during university events.

b. Removal of the new portraits of Washington and Lee in the chapel.

These had been placed in the chapel in Fall 2018. Their removal makes the Board look like it is incapable of making a decision and standing behind it.

c. Removal of all other plaques and historical markers in the chapel. The stated purpose was to restore the chapel to its original form, but this is not the case as the current white walled chapel does not look like the chapel of 1868.

### III.

### CONCLUSIONS

The Washington and Lee University Board of Trustees has dramatically changed its position on numerous issues involving the history and traditions of the university over the last four plus years. Their inconsistency and reversal of previous decisions is bewildering. The same can be said of their explanations or non-explanations for many of these decisions. The result is that many alumni have lost confidence in the Board. Clearly greater consistency and transparency will be required in the future if the confidence of the Washington and Lee community is to be retained and strengthened.