

Cover Letter for What's in a Name

11 July 2022

As the systematic demolition of Robert E. Lee's good name at Washington and Lee has unfolded before our eyes -- as in the renaming of the Lee-Jackson House, the removal of Lee's birthday from the school calendar, the calling into question whether the name of the university should continue to include his name, and, more recently, the stripping of his name from that of the Chapel, from which building all symbols evocative of him have been removed or physically closed off from view -- it seems appropriate to examine how President Dudley and his administration view the present and future relationship of the school to its yet persisting name of "Washington and Lee University." This article examines what is perhaps Dudley's most widely quoted and most telling written pronouncement on the subject.

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 G. Everett, '64

What's in a Name

*He that filches from me my good name robs me of that
which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed.*

William Shakespeare

"Othello" (Iago), Act III, Scene 3

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A good name, as acquired by living a virtuous life, has from antiquity been denominated a man's most valuable possession, both as it contributes to his own happiness and as it inspires others to admiration and emulation. Popularity, wealth, fame, and the various other ornaments commonly thought the proper decorations of a successful life, are often as much the result of accidents of fortune as of merit; and even when rightly deserved, lose their luster to the tarnish of time and their security to the hazards of changing circumstance. But a good name, the product of upright conduct matured into habit and constancy in the crucibles of both vicissitude and triumph, endures to the grave, and is left to posterity as the finest memorial to a life well lived.

Washington and Lee University, in taking successively George Washington and Robert E. Lee as namesakes, was, until recently, considered by generations to have been inestimably blessed by this closest of associations with two men of eminently good names, men almost universally admired as models of honorable conduct and wise leadership, as those attributes were conceived in the gentlemanly code to which they subscribed in the regulation of their lives. The influence of their good names imparted to the university an educational ideal perhaps most eloquently expressed by the distinguished orator and long-time Washington and Lee president, Francis Pendleton Gaines, in his inaugural address to a Lee Chapel audience in 1930:

"To think of this university is to believe in an ideal. To think of this ideal is to believe that still it has power. Its power is to deposit in the life of a boy something a little finer than culture, a little rarer than competence, a little nobler than success, to quicken a dream in the young brain . . . to furnish young personalities with potency and poise."

A "*potency and poise*" no doubt modelled after that of the university's namesakes, George Washington and Robert E. Lee; the "*ideal*" to be believed in, no doubt being the code of gentlemanly conduct so perfectly exemplified in the lives of those men, and becoming manifest in the evolution of the school's honor system, dress code, speaking tradition, emphasis on civil deportment, and faithful execution of duty in all the endeavors of life; with the "*power*" to attain these virtues being inspired by

the sterling characters of these two great men. To this campus ethos and its salutary influence, generations of Washington and Lee students have attested and continue to attest.

When, therefore, President Dudley, in responding to the Board of Trustees' 2021 decision to retain Lee's name in that of the university, succinctly stated, as quoted in several news reports, that

"The name 'Washington and Lee' does not define us. We define it."

one must react in astonishment at the statement's strong implication that nothing about George Washington or Robert E. Lee has ever defined Washington and Lee University in any permanently positive way. But rather, that going forward, the name, "Washington and Lee," will serve only as a sort of empty picture frame, which will have no influence itself on the character of the school, but in which may be mounted beautifully painted scenes of the faddish, contemporary notions being propagated by the Woke/Cancel-Culture movement.

Thus do President Dudley and his administration seem intent on trashing the rich legacy that George Washington and Robert E. Lee left to the university -- a posture that must be attributed either to ignorance of the lives and real characters of the two men, or to a disavowal of them as fitting examples of elevated personal character because they had the misfortune to have lived in a society in which they had associations with slavery, although neither man was a dedicated proponent of the institution, which both saw as a social evil. In his four-volume Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Lee, Douglas Southall Freeman, writes of him, at the time of his decision to stand by his native state of Virginia as the Civil War approached, that

"The maintenance of slavery meant nothing to him. He felt that if he owned all the slaves in the South he would cheerfully give them up to preserve the Union."

Nevertheless, President Dudley seems bent on pressing ahead with reducing the "Washington and Lee" name to the same impotence as those of Yale and Brown, the Ivy League namesakes who also had links to slavery, but neither of whom shaped the character and traditions of their respective institutions as did Lee and Washington. Thus is the past, present, and future influence of George Washington

and Robert E. Lee at Washington and Lee in gradual process of being condemned and expunged from the campus.

So, what's in a name? According to President Dudley, not much -- it's just a yawning vacuity into which can be poured the "defining" content of his choice. To echo the thoughts and language used by Shakespeare in the quote that opens this article, President Dudley, his administration, and the Washington and Lee Board of Trustees, are systematically "filching" from Robert E. Lee his good name, "robbing" him of that which "enriches them not," and makes Lee himself "poor indeed," (actually, abhorred, indeed). George Washington escapes this fate for the moment, being a national monument yet too weighty to topple, so the final "filching" of his good name must wait. And in light of the course events are taking at Washington and Lee, there can be little doubt that also waiting in the wings is a reconsideration of retaining either man's name in that of the university.

Respectfully,

Kenneth G. Everett

Washington and Lee Class of 1964