

**Cover Letter for Rector’s Letter and Kamron Spivey’s  
Response  
Plus  
The W&L Spectator Article on University Officials Have Not Publicly  
Acknowledged  
“Life Safety” Concerns in Chapel**

Returning students have been welcomed back to campus by both President Dudley and Rector McAlevey, so we thought you would appreciate a reflection on what has transpired since the start of campus life a year ago. To say the least, the past 12 + months have been active and consequential. We will start this journey through the lens of Rector McAlevey’s note of August 26, 2021, sent then to the Washington and Lee community. It is found in the first attachment, and it is accompanied by a contemporaneous reflection from student Kamron Spivey ’24. We trust you will find this exercise in viewpoint diversity illuminating.

The second attachment is a fact filled update on what has transpired over the past year, with a particular focus on Lee Chapel. Kamron Spivey has served as President of Students for Historical Preservation. He is extremely knowledgeable about Lee Chapel. He spent this past summer in Lexington performing a significant internship with Habitat for Humanity. In his spare time, he was able to keep an eye on what was expected to be an eventful period for the Chapel. This included the distinct possibility of a permanent interior wall being constructed to seal off from the auditorium both the public view of and physical access to the statue chamber and Valentine’s renown *Recumbent Lee*. Mr. Spivey reports and reflects upon these developments. This vessel is his insightful article about the Chapel that was

published a few days ago in *The Spectator*, which he serves as Co-Editor. This initial issue contains a number of other articles which you should find interesting. We hope you will look them over at <http://www.wluspectator.com/>

Please donate to the Generals Redoubt to pay for professional research related to defending Lee Chapel as a National Historic Landmark, for future funding to educate students about the rich history and legacy of Robert E. Lee, and to help bring back diversity of thought. We need your help if we are to save Lee Chapel as a campus and national treasure. Thank you in advance for your support. Information on how to contribute is found at <https://www.thegeneralsredoubt.us/support>

Respectfully submitted

*Tom*

Thomas P. Rideout '63, President

On Behalf of The Generals Redoubt

## **Rector's Letter to the Washington and Lee Community**

To: The W&L Community  
From: Rector Mike McAlevey '86  
Date: August 26, 2021

As we look forward to the start of the new academic year, I write to update you on the progress made this summer by the university and the Board of Trustees in furtherance of the board's decisions announced in June.

In the June announcement, we confirmed what W&L has always stood for, including free and critical inquiry, civil discourse, developing students with honor and integrity and preparing graduates for responsible leadership, engaged citizenship and service to others. In keeping with these values, we committed to continue building a more diverse community, enhancing inclusion for everyone at W&L, supporting the professional success of our students and employees, and strengthening the board's composition and work. We have taken important actions already to advance these commitments.

On July 14, we announced the addition of Betsy Pakenas '94 and Jonathan Wortham '04 to the Board of Trustees.

On July 27, the university announced the creation of the DeLaney Center, a new interdisciplinary academic hub for teaching and research on Southern race relations, culture and politics.

Today I am pleased to share that trustee William Toles '92, '95L has agreed to chair our new board committee on diversity, equity and inclusion. We expect to constitute the committee at our October meeting.

Additionally, we are considering options for the new design of the university diploma, which we expect to finalize in October.

At the time of the June announcement, we amended the University Bylaws to change the name of Lee Chapel to University Chapel. The board is in the process of selecting an architectural firm that specializes in historic restoration projects to propose a plan for separating the 1868 auditorium and 1883 annex containing the Lee memorial sculpture into two distinct spaces. Burt Pinnock, a Richmond, Virginia-based architect who specializes in design solutions for spaces with historical and cultural significance, will consult with the firm on the project. We anticipate that this renovation will be completed by the beginning of the 2022-23 academic year. Although the renovation work will take some time to complete, we nonetheless

expect the chapel auditorium to reopen to the campus community in early September 2021 for orientation events, and to the public in mid-September 2021.

In keeping with our commitment to restore the chapel auditorium's original, unadorned design, we have begun relocating portraits, plaques and artifacts. Portraits and some plaques will be moved to the Chapel Galleries located beneath the chapel auditorium, where we already present the history of the building, the university and the relationship to our namesakes. We plan to improve the galleries with a new exhibit to display prominently the 1796 Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington and the 1866 J. Reid portrait of Robert E. Lee. We expect that new exhibit to open later this fall. Once the new University Museum is completed, it will be home to all of our most important portraits, plaques and artifacts and tell the many stories of the university's history more completely.

The board will continue to update you as we implement the commitments that we announced in June. In the meantime, I wish you all a healthy and successful start to the academic year.

## **Kamron Spivey's Response to the Rector's Letter**

### **Abandoned History**

My conversations with alumni about Lee Chapel always end with shock and disbelief. How is it that a university once guided by an emphasis on “tradition” and “honor” could denigrate the legacy of their namesakes without concern or legitimate consideration of how the community feels? The Board’s decision to “separate” Lee from the Chapel (physically and ideologically) reveals their abandonment of Washington and Lee University’s heritage—the defining trait of this 272-year-old school. This abandonment attacks more than Lee Chapel; it divides our community.

Over the past year, the W&L administration has successfully disassociated Lee and Lee Chapel from students. Rather than learning about President Lee's positive accomplishments at a war-ravaged college, students are told only that Lee owned slaves and did not create the Honor System (both true, though that lack of nuance elicits unfair criticism). The Chapel remained closed because of "COVID-19", even after other campus museums reopened. This closure prevented students from learning about the Lee-Custis family and their role in Southern education. And now, with a new name and new purpose, "University Chapel" no longer sells items branded with Lee Chapel or Robert E. Lee. These policies prevent students from associating with Lee in typical campus life. Students must independently research Robert E. Lee to see why he deserves praise, but even this is punishable (such as when the school charged me with Unbecoming Conduct for making educational pamphlets on President Lee). These policies have fomented a dislike of W&L's namesake among most social circles.

This dislike will only intensify with the Board's announcement to "separate" the Recumbent Statue and Lee Family Crypt from the rest of the Chapel. Hiding him behind a wall (wrongfully) signals that the W&L community should be ashamed of Lee. The Board of Trustees justifies this decision under a pseudohistorical claim to "restore... [the Chapel's] unadorned design" to before Lee's death. Before Lee died, the College Chapel (as it was called) hosted religious services six days a week. Lee himself declared that the Chapel "should be...devoted exclusively to religious worship & instruction."<sup>1</sup> Unless the Board of Trustees intends to hold religious services six days a week and host classes in "University Chapel", they fail to "restore" the Chapel to its original nineteenth-century purpose.<sup>2</sup>

But those few years in which the Chapel operated under Lee's direction constitute very little in the building's grand scheme. From October 1870 until today, Lee has been integral to the Chapel's identity. The numerous descendants entombed there intensify the Lee-family association with the Chapel. Lee's personal connection to the structure is the definitive reason as to why President Henry L. Smith's 1921

proposal to expand the Chapel lost support.<sup>3</sup> In 1961, President Fred Cole promised that the building's appearance would not change from the Motor Company Fund's renovation, as the goal was "to restore and protect...a building constructed under the supervision....Lee".<sup>4</sup>

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1 David Cox, "Lee Chapel at 150" (Buena Vista: Mariner Publishing, 2018), 19.

2 Notable secular functions of the Chapel during Lee's Presidency included literary society meetings, meetings with the President, and graduation ceremonies. The YMCA also meets in the basement of the Chapel.

3 Cox, 120-121.

Lee Chapel's greatest honor, its status as a National Historic Landmark, exclaims why the building is nationally significant:

Lee Chapel is the resting place of Robert E. Lee, Confederate general and southern educator. Lee commanded the Army of Northern Virginia for nearly the entire course of the American Civil War. Following the final Confederate collapse Lee became president of what was then called Washington College in 1866; Lee Chapel is a monument to that later period. Lee's ceaseless efforts to erase the bitter feelings engendered by the Civil War, and to provide the best education possible for the South's young men, are memorialized here.<sup>5</sup>

Lee Chapel should be a place to learn about the Civil War and how Lexington and the South recovered through Lee's guidance. Instead, W&L's current administration wants to abandon that history and any effort to educate students about Lee. If they get their way, the structure that symbolizes over 150 years of growth and reconciliation will be little more than an empty auditorium; Lee's attempt to unify the community will ironically be ignored as people separate themselves over Lee.

I hope that those who read this paper understand that denigrating Lee Chapel's historical significance affects more than the W&L Community. Lee Chapel, although a privately owned site, brings in approximately 40,000 tourists each year.<sup>6</sup>

But what is there to see now that everything is walled off? What is there to learn now that teaching on him is discouraged? How will students of history ever understand the nuance of Robert E. Lee when the scholarship on him is cast aside and pictures of him “relocated”? In abandoning Robert E. Lee, we divide our campus and our nation.

The task we face is to save this heritage and history. Founder’s Day is abolished. The diplomas no longer depict our namesakes. Since the administration no longer appreciates this school’s past, incoming students won’t either. If we do not take pride in our school and those men and women who developed it over 272 years, we will lose the distinctive qualities that made W&L flourish. We cannot abandon our history and heritage.

Sincerely,

Kamron M. Spivey

Washington and Lee University ‘24

President – Students for Historical Preservation

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4 Cox, 191.

5 U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory- Nomination Form, Lee Chapel,” August 1862, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/41679071>.

6 Cox, 238. This approximation does not account for the decline in national tourism in 2020 and 2021.



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## *THE W&L SPECTATOR*

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A MAGAZINE OF STUDENT THOUGHT & CIVIL DISCOURSE

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SEP16

## University officials have not publicly acknowledged “life-safety” concerns in chapel

The W&L Spectator

*Despite City of Lexington officials’ denial of plans to alter chapel, university announces construction will continue as planned this fall.*

*By Kamron M. Spivey, ‘24*

On June 4, 2021, the Washington and Lee University Board of Trustees announced in a publicly broadcasted email titled “The Future of Washington and Lee University” that, “Lee Chapel will be renamed ‘University Chapel,’ in keeping with its original 19th-century name of ‘College Chapel.’ The board will oversee and approve interior changes to restore its unadorned design and physically separate the auditorium from the Lee family crypt and Lee memorial sculpture.”

The Board of Trustees did not publicly address this plan again until over a year later. In a September 9, 2022, emailed titled “Fall 2022 Update,” the Board wrote several paragraphs reaffirming their commitment to that June 4th decision a year before.

“One of our decisions about which we continue to receive questions is University Chapel and the changes we are making there,” the Board acknowledged.

After summarizing the first-third of the chapel’s over 150-year history in four sentences, the Board stated their intended goal in changing the chapel, “The Board’s plan restores the building to its original name and recreates two separate, publicly accessible spaces: one for university events and the other for the study of history.”

Critics of this plan have noted the long-term existence of partition gates and doors which already, literally, separate the two spaces: sanctuary and statue chamber. These iron gates and fire-resistant doors are routinely closed during every event held in the chapel and have been for several years.

The Board continued, “A more visible, physical separation between the chapel and the annex [which includes a stage leading to both the statue chamber and basement stairs] helps signify this distinction.”

Before touching more upon this “visible, physical separation” — a wall — one must understand the other changes that have occurred in the chapel since the June 4, 2021, decision.

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In keeping with the promise to “restore the chapel to its unadorned design,” over twenty plaques and paintings were removed from the auditorium within less than a year. More controversial artifacts—like those related to the Confederacy—were removed first.

Unfortunately, there exists no such list of everything taken down, despite vocal student and community pushback.

Not until mid-summer did Washington and Lee University update their website with the first reference to where some of the stated plaques will be moved (since taken down, the plaques have been “in temporary storage” on campus).

A July 21, 2022, Columns post titled “Update on University Chapel Renovations” offered plans for four plaques related to American veterans—including the Liberty Hall Volunteers Memorial.

“The Liberty Hall Volunteers plaque will be contextualized as part of the new exhibit currently being planned for the gallery on the upper level of the annex, adjacent to the Lee statue,” The Columns said.

No further timeline has since been provided for this plan.

The Columns continued, “Three plaques, two honoring World War I veterans and one honoring a Vietnam War veteran, will be moved to the Memorial Gate at the Jefferson Street entrance to campus to be displayed with other plaques honoring U.S. veterans.”

When I further inquired this summer into the timeline for these three veteran plaques, Director of Institutional History and Museums, Lynn Rainville, said, “The University is planning an event to mark the move of the veteran plaques to the Memorial Gate during the next academic year.”

No further timeline has since been provided for this plan.

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As per the other sixteen plaques, the Columns post states “Most of the other plaques will be moved to the galleries in the building or to the new institutional history museum, where they can be displayed with more historical context.”

No further timeline has since been provided for this plan, but the Board’s “Fall 2022 Update” reiterates, “We also approved a plan to construct a new museum on campus where the university's history may be told in its fullness.”

Washington and Lee University officials frequently reference this “new museum of institutional history” when addressing the removal of artifacts from the chapel.

The alleged museum has become the proposed home of innumerable campus artifacts and “all of W&L’s important stories,” according to a FAQ responding to a 2018 report delivered by the Commission on Institutional History and Community.

This new museum of institutional history has made no notable progress since 2018.

Beginning in early 2022, the Washington and Lee University master plan (which included, of ten new proposals, the museum of institutional history on Lee Avenue) received backlash from Lexington residents attending a Planning Commission that would determine the master plan’s approval or rejection.

The community members that vocally disapproved of the proposed museum and parking deck on Lee Avenue did so for several reasons: some worried that the site plan, which was no more than a rectangular plot on a map, was too vague.

Others felt that the museum’s location on Lee Avenue would congest an already-crowded downtown or that Washington and Lee University has encroached too much on downtown businesses.

Whatever the reason for opposition, the rezoning proposal for a Lee Avenue museum was repeatedly rejected in the Lexington Planning Commission meetings.

As the minutes from those meetings show, Washington and Lee University eventually amended their master plan to exclude the Lee Avenue museum from their zoning request in June.

That means there is no foreseeable construction of a new institutional history museum at Washington and Lee University.

*The Spectator* emailed Rainville twelve questions for this article on August 23, 2022. She refused to answer any questions herself and instead directed us to Drewry Sackett, Executive Director of Communications and Public Affairs.

In response to the question, “Has the Washington and Lee University Administration or Museums Department made any public statement acknowledging the rejection of this [institutional museum] plan, or its removal from the W&L Master Plan?” Sackett responded, “The city approved the Campus Master Plan on June 16. Plans for the museum of institutional history will be developed separately.”

Dodging the question, Sackett continued, “While Lee Avenue remains our preferred location for the museum, we are also considering alternative locations and will continue to work with city officials to explore options that are agreeable to both parties.”

The Board, in their “Fall 2022 Update,” offered a simpler response, “The administration continues to work with its architects and the City of Lexington to implement the Board's plans.”

When *The Spectator* asked what will happen to the plaques that were to be housed in the institutional history museum, Sackett replied, “We remain committed to building a museum of institutional history, which will house a number of our historic plaques and artifacts.”

She provided no timeline for this plan.

No discussions of the museum have occurred in Planning Commission meetings since the Lee Avenue proposal was removed from the university master plan.

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Meanwhile, the university has just one more change to accomplish in the chapel

Aside from an inconsistency with the chapel’s original look—a chapel which was originally (and for nearly one-hundred years) stone gray, not white—the Board’s plan to “restore the chapel to its unadorned design” faces another major obstacle: the feasibility of a proposed wall that both appears as it did in 1868 while also meeting modern building code requirements.

On July 11, 2022, I submitted a Freedom of Information Act request on all documents pertaining to the chapel between Washington and Lee University and the City of Lexington from June 2021 onward.

The resulting documents, hundreds of pages worth, included various email communications between university and city officials, notably the Building Inspector, Fire Marshall, and Chief of Police between November 2, 2021, and June 24, 2022.

The final outcome after months of deliberation with these city officials (primarily the Building Inspector, Steve Paulk) was this: university’s attempts to build a wall separating the auditorium from the antechamber were rejected for safety concerns.

In a May 23, 2022, email, the Lexington Fire Marshall Trent Roberts indicated that the Building Inspector could not approve the proposed wall because it would allow the “installation of a barrier, which reduces the life-safety configuration of the building. The wall will eliminate access to the rear stair, which although is not a posted exit leading from the sanctuary, upon the occurrence of an emergency, that stair is currently accessible as a building discharge.”

The inspector additionally “disapproves of the occupancy number for the Chapel Sanctuary” if a wall were built, noting that there would only be “one exit and discharge.”

Since Lee Chapel underwent substantial renovation in the 1960s, construction had to abide by the now-outdated Virginia Public Building Safety Regulations (VPBSR). According to Article 4-Section 402-2(b), “Every room, gallery, balcony, tier or other space having a capacity of more than 200 persons shall have access to at least two Exit ways[.]”

The present (2018) Virginia Construction Code “designates a limit of 49 occupants with one exit,” according to the Inspector Paulk.

The Fire Marshall and Building Inspector note that, in the event of a fire or other “life-safety” risk, the current maximum capacity of the chapel (525 people) would greatly exceed the number of people who could safely exit the single egress at the front of the chapel.

Chief of Police Angela Greene expressed concern about potential mass shooter events.

In a summer City Council meeting, Chief Greene “spoke of doing a training on mass shooting with all Public Schools and Universities.”

City officials thought it would be fitting to include her in chapel discussions, though, as the inspector noted, “She is not familiar with the building’s egress or occupancy gatherings.”

Following their unrecorded meeting on June 16, 2022, Chief Greene wrote, “I hope they understand the seriousness of the safety issue.”

The Chief of Police’s input recognizes the danger of limiting the emergency exits in a large auditorium to one discharge.

The architectural firm working for the university to build the wall, Quinn Evans, wrote several lengthy emails trying to justify their proposals.

On May 25, 2022, Principal Charles Piper insisted that city officials “have never considered the anteroom stair as a second means of egress from the auditorium.” He continued, “The stair is not signed for egress,” and “the extremely narrow and steep configuration of the stairway make it impractical and inadvisable to consider it a compliant second means of egress for the auditorium.”

Piper claimed, “The auditorium has operated as an assembly space with one means of egress (the front door) for 150 years.”

This claim conflicts with archival files of the chapel.

“The 1929 file shows a means of egress stairway located in the area behind the pulpit stage area.” Inspector Paulk continues, “The Building Official’s review of the 1929 plan interprets the stairway as a dedicated means of egress from the main chapel and lower floor.”

Similarly, “The Building Official’s review of the 1962 plan [which had to ascribe to the aforementioned VPBSR codebook] interprets the new stairway and (sic) as a dedicated means of egress from the main chapel and lower floor.”

After relaying this information on June 2, 2022, Inspector Paulk reiterated, “Restricting the means of egress as proposed is not approved.”

Piper’s claim that the assembly space has just one means of egress also contradicts the information given at the start of every university event held in the chapel, such as [this one](#).

“Speakers have been instructed to call attention to the emergency exit in the antechamber behind the podium at the beginning of an event,” Sackett stated.

The architectural firm proposed to “provide a three-foot by seven-foot access door from the Chapel to the Anteroom, accessible to emergency personnel via a control button from an adjacent Knox Box that releases a magnetic lock.”

Fire Marshall Roberts advised against a Knox switch on May 19, 2022, which would limit door access to only those with an appropriate key.

Piper continued, “[T]he historic character of the space would argue against a visible exit sign” above a door on the south wall.

However, as Piper previously noted, “No original doors were provided at the south end of the building where the addition was constructed.”

The original south wall of the building, as pictured in the below photograph (c.1870), had glass windows in lieu of a white, magnetic, and discreet emergency door.

The mock presented by Quinn Evans, featured at the head of this story, intends to “restore” the chapel to how it looked from 1868 to 1883.



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The most recent meeting between City of Lexington officials and the university for the chapel project occurred on June 24th.

Despite the three-time rejection of plans for the wall, Washington and Lee University officials still endorse the project.

Paulk noted “we do not know when they will have a formal building permit submitted” again.

The July 21st Columns post opens, “The renovation of W&L’s University Chapel...is scheduled to begin in late fall 2022.”

“W&L continues to work with our contractor and City of Lexington officials on planning and permitting related to the construction,” the post continues.

*The Spectator* asked Rainville, “Has the Washington and Lee University Administration or Museums Department made any public statement acknowledging the rejection of their Chapel building proposal(s)?”

Sackett answered, “On July 21, 2022, we provided an update on the timing of Chapel renovations, communicating that we are continuing to work with city officials on the renovation plan.”

The attached link directs you to the same Columns post cited above, which does not acknowledge any rejection of the renovation plans.

*The Spectator* then referenced the “life-safety hazards” and the city officials, who “have cited the increased danger of fires and mass shootings in the Chapel auditorium if the proposed building plans were approved.”

“Has the W&L Administration or Museum Department considered these concerns and discussed alternative avenues to house students in a safer, more spacious structure on campus?” *The Spectator* asked.

Sackett responded, “The chapel has been used as an active university space in compliance with applicable regulations for over 150 years. The renovations are intended to allow us to continue to use the building for university gatherings.”

“The safety and well-being of our students is of utmost importance and factors into all of our decisions,” she concluded.

The Board of Trustees noted their “desire for clarity about all we stand for” in the “Fall 2022 Update.”

A 2018 FAQ still on the university website states, “The Board and President Dudley have repeatedly affirmed that the university will not change its name. Washington Hall, Lee Chapel, and Lee House will retain their names and remain among the most prominent spaces on campus.”

“Robert E. Lee remains prominently memorialized in the names of the University, Lee Chapel, and Lee House,” the FAQ declares.

Alumnus Tom Rideout, ’63, president of The Generals Redoubt, feels that “the university has rapidly abandoned their values and commitments.”

“University officials,” he continued, “care more about ‘Cancel Culture’ and making Lee Chapel a ‘safe-space’ than they do about actually making Lee Chapel safe for the students in it.”