

# Letting Go of Robert E. Lee at Washington and Lee University

*It is going to get increasingly hard to persuade high school students who care about diversity to attend a university named after a Confederate general.*

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Recumbent statue of Gen. Robert Edward Lee (1807–1870), in the mausoleum at Lexington, Va. (*The Graphic* / Getty Images)

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**T**he first time I walked inside Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University, I noticed an overpowering, musty odor before I spotted the larger-than-life mass of marble in the sanctuary that depicts Confederate General Robert E. Lee in uniform, as if asleep on the battlefield. Symbolism can leave an enduring stench. For over a century, the bones of the slave-owning Lee family have been kept in a crypt in the chapel's cellar. Because of them and other relics of the Confederacy housed there, the building reeks of the cruelty of slavery, of elitism and racism, and of the lies of the Lost Cause myth that persists in honoring Lee, a man who acted dishonorably throughout his life.

Lee's image as a kind slave master, noble but doomed warrior, and proponent of reconciliation between North and South after the Civil War

is a prime example of the power of revisionist history—and an efficient PR machine.

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Perhaps as pernicious is the other story of Lee, the great educator. It's a myth that has been perpetuated since 1870 by my employer, Washington and Lee University, which bears responsibility for the miseducation of thousands of students through its deification of a man who betrayed his country and fought to keep millions of black people enslaved.

Now, as people around the world rise up to protest against institutional racism, it is time for Washington and Lee University to begin to make amends for its role in peddling a false narrative. It is time for the board of trustees to drop Lee from the university's name.

A small private school in Lexington in southwestern Virginia, W&L claims it can trace its roots to 1749 and credits its survival to George Washington's timely donation in 1796 of shares of stock in the James River Canal Co. that would be worth millions today. To show their gratitude, trustees renamed the school after Washington.

It defies logic, 150 years after Lee's death, for W&L to give him credit for making the university the first-class liberal arts institution it is today. He doesn't deserve it. The thousands of students, faculty, and staff who came after him do. They include brave young men and women of color who often found themselves alone, underestimated, and ridiculed as they sought their educations on an overwhelmingly white campus.

Until it frees itself of Lee, the university will never achieve its stated goals of diversity and inclusion, no matter how much money it says it's going to throw at the effort. Only by removing Lee's name can the university overcome its inability to recruit and retain African American

students and faculty. Absent a change in the name, the student body will remain largely “white and loaded,” as W&L is known.

Lee is undeserving of recognition in the university’s name because he was a racist and a traitor. He broke up families of slaves, selling them off, in violation of the wishes of their original owners. And he is unworthy of respect as a college president because he looked the other way when his students were accused of harassing female teachers in a Freedmen’s Bureau school and preying on young black women in town.

In an interview with the *New York Herald* after the Civil War, Lee said he thought black people should be “disposed of.” He told Congress the black man was inferior and could not be educated. “I do not think that he is as capable of acquiring knowledge as the white man is,” Lee testified. For years, W&L had credited Lee with creating the school’s fabled student-run honor system. He did not. A commission on the university’s history debunked that lie in 2018. If Lee had created an honor system, he would’ve violated it during his testimony before the Joint Committee on Reconstruction in Congress on February 17, 1866, less than a year into his term as college president. Lawmakers wanted to know whether he and other Southerners supported reconciliation with the North. Lee’s answers were disingenuous, as he “pleaded near total ignorance of political conditions and local debate,” historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor wrote in *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters*.

“Lee’s performance was a masterpiece of reticence,” she wrote. But “in private he penned political treatises that throb with controlled rage” as he discussed with his friends his resentment of the powers the national government exerted over Southern states.

The lawmakers also pressed Lee about whether he took an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy at the start of the war. “I do not recollect having done so; but it is possible that, when I was commissioned, I did,” he testified. “I do not recollect whether it was required. If it was required, I took it; or, if it had been required, I would have taken it; but I do not recollect whether it was or not.” Here was a man who barely

missed finishing first in his class at the US Military Academy at West Point. His “I don’t recall” defense rings as hollow then as it does today when major public figures use it to wiggle out of legal jams.

In the months after his surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865, Lee did not know whether he would be charged with treason. According to Pryor, Lee panicked when a judge in Norfolk urged an indictment that June. Lee appealed to Grant, a fellow West Point graduate, to reiterate the terms of his surrender and the accompanying amnesty that spared his life. The military academy’s “long gray line” of graduates and cadets had shielded Lee from a firing squad in Appomattox—and did so again.

Lee got the job as president of Washington College after a trustee overheard one of the general’s daughters complain at a party in Richmond that her father needed work. In September, Lee mounted his horse, Traveller, and headed to Lexington, where he found a college heavily in debt and struggling. It is true that Lee oversaw repairs, raised money, recruited students and injected the college with a practical streak of education by emphasizing chemistry, engineering and mining. He even is credited with spearheading an effort to educate printers to become better journalists.

Pryor’s extensive study of letters written by Lee and others revealed that many of the college’s students were Confederate veterans who revered the general. But she also found that Lee had a “fierce and violent temper, prone to extreme expression.” He was hard to please. He never apologized when wrong. One student remembered hiding behind a building’s column when he saw Lee pass, according to Pryor’s book. Lee even beat up his old horse in a fit of rage, Pryor wrote.

But the most damning account of Lee the college president is [John M. McClure’s essay](#), “The Freedmen’s Bureau School of Lexington versus ‘General Lee’s Boys.’” In 1865, members of the town’s black community had pooled their money to rent space for use as a school. “Within a week of the school’s opening, more than three hundred students—ranging in age from very small children to grandparents in their sixties—nearly

overwhelmed” the school’s teachers with their enthusiasm for education, wrote McClure, who is currently director of research and publications at the Virginia Historical Society.

The white townspeople responded by taunting black children as they walked to school, threatening black workers for seeking education, and charging black customers higher prices in local stores.

Washington College students joined forces with cadets from the nearby Virginia Military Institute to harass the black students and their teachers. “The college students frequently threw stones at the school’s windows and loudly sang ‘rebel songs’ during impromptu evening ‘parades,’” according to McClure’s essay.

“Teachers were called ‘Yankee bitches’ so often that the insult ‘hardly impress[ed]’ them after the first few months,” McClure wrote. “Men often stood in the women’s path as they walked home from school in the evening, forcing the teachers to push past them. On several occasions the students jostled the women and made ‘vulgar suggestions.’”

The white college students and cadets also sexually abused young black women and students at the school, McClure wrote. Some of the men were “sexual predators,” who tried to kidnap and rape young black women. Others pressured young black women into sexual relationships. “The threat of violence was omnipresent in such encounters: black women and girls undoubtedly knew they risked being assaulted if they denied their aggressors’ demands,” according to McClure’s essay.

Lee knew about his students’ harassment of the black school’s students and teachers. He also knew about two violent confrontations between his students and teachers and freedmen. “Lee had sent out advisories forbidding his students to take part in these activities,” Pryor wrote. But as one student told his parents, “It was reported that the Gen. had dismissed some of the boys, but I have not known of any leaving.” Pryor reached the only possible conclusion: “The number of accusations against Washington College boys indicates that he either punished the racial harassment more laxly than other misdemeanors or turned a blind eye to it.”

W&L has done little in the past 20 years to dispel the myth of Lee, the educator, other than remove a couple of battle flags from the chapel. Instead, it has ignored the facts. It's hard to believe the university didn't know about McClure's research or Pryor's work. McClure's findings were revealed at a large gathering of Civil War scholars at the University of Richmond in 2002 and included in a compilation of the conference's papers in a book, *Virginia's Civil War*, published in 2005. Pryor's book was published two years later to critical acclaim and won several awards, including the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize established to honor "the finest scholarly work" on Abraham Lincoln or the Civil War era. The university's reputation is in peril if it continues to pretend that Lee was more than he was. Its enrollment model is not sustainable—and it's embarrassing for a school of its caliber in the 21st century. In 2019, 79 percent of W&L's 1,860 undergraduates were white, and only 3.3 percent were African American. It is going to get increasingly hard to persuade a generation of high school students who care about diversity to attend a university named after a Confederate general.

"Time catches up with kingdoms and crushes them, gets its teeth into doctrines and rends them," as author James Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*. "Time reveals the foundations on which any kingdom rests, and eats at those foundations, and it destroys doctrines by proving them to be untrue."

It may be hard for people who idolize Lee to believe, but he did not like being president of Washington College. "The work of the college annoyed him at best," Pryor wrote, and he told his son that he wanted to leave.

It's time to let him go.