

## **George Washington and Robert E. Lee, the Importance of Our Namesakes**

Let us first state the obvious. Neither George Washington nor Robert E. Lee were without faults, and both were men of their times. They both made mistakes of judgment, sometimes big ones. However, they are more than the sum of their faults and mistakes. History has judged them as great men who contributed significantly to our country and our university.

The legacies and families of George Washington and Robert E. Lee are intertwined. The father of Mary Custis Lee, Robert E. Lee's wife, was George Washington Custis. He was the grandson of Martha Custis Washington and the adopted son of George Washington. Thus, the Washington, Custis, and Lee families were related by marriage. The birthplace of George Washington in Westmoreland County, Virginia is very close to the ancestral home of the Lee family, Stratford Hall. The two families knew each other well over several generations. Henry "Lighthorse Harry" Lee served under George Washington in the Revolutionary War, and later served as Governor of Virginia. He composed the epitaph for George Washington, "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Several members of the Lee family were prominent in Virginia and American politics and government. Two ancestors of Robert E. Lee were signers of the Declaration of Independence, Francis Lightfoot Lee and Richard Henry Lee, and Richard Lee was also one of the inaugural Senators from Virginia to the new government. We have already mentioned that Henry Lee was a Governor of Virginia, and after the Civil War, Fitzhugh Lee, a nephew of Robert E. Lee, was also Governor of the state. George Washington was, of course, a member of the First Continental Congress, Commander of the Continental Army, President of the Constitutional Convention, and first President of the United States. In other words, the Washington and Lee families worked to establish our country and its government and were prominent in that government thereafter.

George Washington and Robert E. Lee were interested and involved

in education throughout their lives. Washington had little formal education, but he did have a practical education and was a skilled surveyor. He promoted the liberal arts, practical education, and moral education, much like Robert E. Lee. In his farewell address, Washington called for a public education system throughout the country and for a national university. He stated that American leaders needed to "promote . . . institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge" and that "It is essential that public opinion should be enlightened" both for the economy to prosper and to support democratic government. Washington also supported new and existing schools.

The first of these was Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. When the college was founded in 1782, Washington consented to have the school named after him, provided financial support, and served on the college's Board of Visitors and Governors. The second school with which Washington was personally involved was our alma mater. In 1796, Liberty Hall Academy was struggling financially. Washington made a gift of stock to the school, which was one of the largest donations to any educational institution in the country at that time. In effect, Washington "saved" the school from ruin. To express their gratitude, the trustees changed the name to Washington Academy and later, in 1813 to Washington College. There are many other colleges and universities in the United States named after George Washington, but these are the two most closely associated with him and his legacy.

Washington, like Lee, thought that moral and social education was as important as intellectual instruction. One of the books that most influenced him was a 16th century manual entitled *The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. He memorized the 110 maxims in this book. From an early age, Washington used the manual to master the arts of interpersonal skills and self-control, which were important to his future leadership. Later, he developed his own set of maxims. As was the case later with Lee, these maxims had mostly to do with morality, character, and civility:

*Human Happiness and moral duty are inseparably connected.*

*I hope I shall possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain what I consider the most enviable of any titles, the character of an honest man.*

*Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation.*

*Be courteous to all, but intimate with few.*

Robert E. Lee was better educated in a formal sense than George Washington, but both valued and promoted education broadly. Lee was provided with excellent tutors as a young man and graduated at the top of his class from the United States Military Academy. Like Washington, Lee was a believer in practical education. Whereas Washington was a surveyor, Lee was an engineer, a closely related profession. He also served as Superintendent of West Point in the 1840's. Lee's most important contributions as an educator came at Washington College in the period from 1865-1870. His actions there had implications for southern and national education more generally.

Like Washington before him, Robert E. Lee essentially "saved" the university that now bears his name. The school had fallen into ruin during the Civil War, but Lee, through his reputation and actions, raised it to the first rank of Southern and National Universities. He dramatically increased enrollment, modernized the curriculum, raised money in both North and South, and carried out a building program. He helped to bring the Lexington Law School into the college, thus creating a university. Many of his innovations, such as the establishment of journalism and business programs, were among the first in the nation and were copied by other schools. Lee also supported the establishment of a public school system in Virginia and was the key supporter of the first Superintendent of Public Instruction, William Henry Ruffner, also, incidentally a graduate of Washington College. To honor Lee for his contributions to the new university, after his death in 1870 the trustees voted to rename the school Washington and Lee University, a name that it has borne for over 150 years.

Lee was a great admirer of George Washington and, like him, placed a

great deal of emphasis on moral and social education. Lee also read *The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior* and he was familiar with Washington's own statements on these matters. Lee developed some maxims of his own:

*Duty then is the sublimest word in the English language. You should do your duty in all things.*

*You cannot be a true man until you learn to obey.*

*A true man of honor feels humbled himself when he cannot help humbling others.*

*I cannot trust a man to control others who cannot control himself.*

It will be noted how remarkably similar to the statements of Washington are the maxims of Lee. Moral education has been a mark of Washington and Lee for 225 years and is directly linked to the legacies of George Washington and Robert E. Lee. Both men epitomize the concepts of honor, duty, service, and civility. Lee especially has influenced generations of Washington and Lee graduates by his introduction of the honor system as now practiced, by his promotion of civility within the university community and beyond, and by his own example of humble service.

There is another way in which George Washington and Robert E. Lee are similar. Both promoted reconciliation and forgiveness after periods of war. After the Revolutionary War, Washington sought reconciliation between the new country and its former ruler, Great Britain. He also recognized that both patriots and loyalists would have to make peace in order for the new country to succeed, and he promoted that reconciliation. After the Civil War, Lee sought reconciliation between North and South, blacks and whites, and among the Southern people generally. He worked closely with President Ulysses S. Grant towards those ends.

Both Washington and Lee and the university's Board of Trustees have been successful in their "branding" of the university over the years. On the current university website, it states "Our University's name recognizes the pivotal roles of George Washington and Robert E. Lee in the institution's

history." This branding process began when Liberty Hall became Washington Academy. George Washington was the most widely recognized and admired person in the country at the time, and the fact that he became associated with the school attracted financial support, students, and faculty in the period from 1796-1860. As previously mentioned, Robert E. Lee's highly successful tenure as President, the trustees, recognizing the value of Lee's name in both North and South, renamed the school Washington and Lee University. This was another example of successful "branding" which has served the university for over 150 years. Washington and Lee University is one of the most widely recognized and admired brands in all of higher education. In 1992 and again in 2010, Washington and Lee carried out successful capital campaigns that relied on the reputation of its namesakes. We should continue to honor and respect our namesakes and should not dispose of a brand that has served us through thick and thin for over 225 years.

The values and ideals of George Washington and Robert E. Lee are the same as those which our university has embraced and encouraged since 1796 - quality academic instruction, practical education as well as liberal arts, moral and social instruction. Washington and Lee's values and ideals are inextricably linked to those of our namesakes. As the old song about "Love and Marriage" goes, "you can't have one without the other." As the current "cancel culture" fades from existence and we return to a reasonable perspective on history and historical figures, the university will once again turn to its namesakes, honoring and respecting their legacies.

Signed,

*Rodney Cook* Class 1978

*Jeffrey Duke Southmayd* Class 1973

*Tom Andrew* Class 1963

*Stephen Robinson* Class 1972 and 1975L

*John Klinedinst* Class 1971 and 1978L

*Scott Yancy* Class 1987

*Charles Parkhill Mays, Jr.* Class 1958  
*Bill Becker* Parent 1996  
*Matthew Calvert* Class 1975 and 1979L  
*Gerrald Giblin* Class 1981 and Parent 2013  
*Walt Borda* Class 1967, 1971 Law and Parent 1999 and 2002  
*Gib Kerr* Class 1981 and Parent 2010  
*Jack Schewel* Class 1980  
*Bart Thompson* Parent 2020  
*Doug Newell* Class 1974  
*Tim Vandiver* Class 1965 and Parent 1992 and 1996  
*Tom Rideout* Class 1963 and Parent 1991  
*Rex Wooldridge* Class 1964 and Parent 1997 and 1998  
*M. Neely Young* Class 1966 and Parent 1999 and 2003  
*Will Tanner* Class 2021  
*George Reed* Class 1959  
*Maggie Campbell* Class 1998