

# Leadership in Crisis: A Historical Analysis of Two College Presidencies in Reconstruction Virginia

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*Presidential leadership beyond the burgeoning universities of the mid-19th century is an often overlooked area ripe for historical analysis. This paper focuses on two presidents in the Reconstruction South: Robert E. Lee at Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) and Benjamin Stoddert Ewell at the College of William and Mary. As Virginia emerged from the Civil War, both institutions sought students and financial support. Lee used his fame to find both, transforming Washington College into a thriving institution. Ewell struggled to find either, forcing William and Mary to reorganize under state control in order to survive.*

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## Leadership in Crisis: A Historical Analysis of Two College Presidencies in Reconstruction Virginia

Historians of mid-19th century American higher education often focus on presidential leadership at the developing preeminent universities, such as Daniel Coit Gilman at Johns Hopkins University or Charles William Eliot at Harvard University (Lucas, 1994; Rudolph, 1962; Thelin, 2004). The significant advances and struggles of other institutional leaders can add a more nuanced understanding of the era. This study focuses on the post-Civil War leadership of two college presidents in Reconstruction Virginia: Robert E. Lee at Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) and Benjamin Stoddert Ewell at the College of William and Mary. As presidents of the only Virginia colleges in the post-Civil War period without financial support from either the Commonwealth or a denominational affiliation, the contrast in outcomes for these two colleges is stark (Walker, 1993). One found the students and endowment to thrive. The other was forced to redefine itself in order to survive.

### **Virginian Aristocracies as Personal Foundations for Leadership**

Both Ewell and Lee were born into established Virginia families. Ewell was the grandson of Benjamin Stoddert, the first Secretary of the Navy. According to his biographer, Anne Chapman, the Ewells were “a prominent, proud, but impoverished Virginia family” (1984, p. 2). Most of Benjamin’s youth was spent on the family farm in Prince William County of northern Virginia, where he would first encounter the College of William and Mary through alumnus Thomas Jefferson, who regularly visited the Ewell home. Lee was the son of Henry Lee, a general in the American Revolutionary Army. Lee was five years old when his father died in 1812 from complications of injuries sustained during a riot in Baltimore, leaving the family on questionable financial footing (Freeman, 1934). Both men attended the United States Military Academy at West Point. Lee graduated second in his class in 1829, with Ewell ranked third in his class three years later (Johnson, 1993; Rhodes, 1932). From these similar beginnings, Ewell and Lee took divergent paths to a college presidency.

### **Benjamin Stoddert Ewell's Path to William and Mary**

Following his graduation, Ewell chose a career as an educator, receiving an appointment as assistant professor of mathematics at West Point. In the fall of 1839, Ewell accepted a position as professor of mathematics at Hampden-Sydney College, where he would teach until 1846 (Johnson, 1993). At the time of his appointment, Hampden-Sydney faced declining, or at least sporadic, enrollments, difficulty in fundraising, and weakened denominational ties due to a split in the Presbyterian Church. This experience served as a precursor for the rest of Ewell's career in academe. Despite irregular pay, Ewell worked tirelessly at Hampden-Sydney based on personal loyalty and commitment to the institution, traits that became synonymous with Ewell (Chapman, 1984).

Following his time at Hampden-Sydney, Ewell taught from 1846 to 1848 at Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. A popular campus figure throughout his teaching career, Chapman (1984) states:

A major factor in his success as a professor—and later his greatest asset as a college president—was the paternal relationships he achieved with the young men entrusted to his care. He achieved a rare balance of kindness, fairness and firmness that seemed to encourage scholastic effort and proper behavior in students inclined to be unruly. (p. 63)

Ewell changed institutional affiliation for the last time in the summer of 1848. Having applied for a teaching position at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, the Board of Visitors voted with only one dissenter to appoint Ewell to the chair of mathematics as well as the vacant presidency despite his stated lack of interest in the latter position (Johnson, 1993). As planned by the board and per Ewell's expressed wishes, this initial presidency was temporary. Ewell served largely as a placeholder until the board convinced Bishop John Johns, the Assistant Bishop of Virginia, to assume the role, which Johns held from 1849 to 1854 (College of William and Mary, 1987; Johnson, 1993).

In 1854, Bishop Johns resigned what he viewed as a temporary position, believing William and Mary had sufficiently recovered from the enrollment difficulties and internal political turmoil that plagued the college and forced its closure in 1848 (Johnson, 1993). The board again asked Ewell to serve as president, a position he was reluctant to accept. Ewell held that an officer of, or someone with close ties to, the Episcopal Church would best serve William and Mary since much of the enrollment and financial health of the college depended upon Virginia's Episcopal population.

Ewell's description of the ideal candidate matched the established mold

for college presidents at the time. Of 288 pre-Civil War college presidents, 262, more than 90%, were ordained ministers (Schmidt, 1930). As a Presbyterian and layperson at that, Ewell possessed neither the ministerial background common among other college presidents nor the Episcopalian link of previous William and Mary presidents. As such, the Board of Visitors' decision to reappoint him was abnormal for both the period and the college.

Since Ewell did not possess strong ties to the Episcopal Church, both he and the board saw this second appointment in 1854 as tentative. Two events, a fire on campus and the Civil War, cemented Ewell as the college's leader in the coming years. On February 8, 1859, fire destroyed the college's main building (Tyler, 1907). Ewell fought to rebuild immediately, displaying his dedication to and passion for William and Mary. The college reopened to students for the fall term in 1860, only to be disrupted by John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, a seminal event leading the nation into the Civil War (Johnson, 1993).

College classes were suspended in 1861. Anticipating a short conflict, Ewell and the Visitors planned to hold classes in January 1862 (College of William and Mary, 1874). Despite strongly objecting to secession and the ensuing conflict, Ewell served as a colonel in the Confederate Army and was charged with building the critical defenses for Virginia's middle peninsula. Ewell failed to earn a reputation as a soldier and was relieved of his command after his fortifications were deemed less than adequate to stop the Union Army's advances (Chapman, 1984). Ewell returned to his position as William and Mary president at the end of the war to find a campus destroyed physically and financially.

### **Robert E. Lee's Path to Washington College**

Lee pursued a well-documented military career after graduating from West Point. Early on, he worked as an engineer building and modernizing strategic fortifications along the east coast. From 1846 to 1848, he served on Gen. Winfield Scott's staff during the war with Mexico, where he was wounded and received several promotions (Freeman, 1934). In 1852, Lee returned as superintendent of West Point, where he had graduated 23 years earlier. This was not a joyous homecoming for Lee, who longed to be a line officer serving in the field. He viewed the academy post as an administrative desk position (Rhodes, 1932). Though he only spent two years as superintendent, what he learned prepared Lee well for his presidency at Washington College. At West Point, Lee inherited command of one of the most technically advanced institutions in the country.

The campus and curriculum had changed dramatically since Lee's time

as a cadet. Many of the buildings that he had occupied were now gone, replaced with new barracks, a hospital, a chapel, a library, and an academic building. Only two of Lee's professors remained and the curriculum had changed significantly, bolstered by increased volumes in the new library and new scientific equipment in the academic buildings (Pappas, 1993).

As soon as he arrived on campus, Lee began assessing the needs of the cadets and faculty as well as the physical plant. He asked for "\$5000 for the betterments to the professors' houses, \$20,000 for officers' quarters, \$6500 for a second story to the overcrowded hospital, and \$18,000 for the much-needed riding hall" (Freeman, 1934, p. 331). Though firm with strict expectations concerning conduct, Lee was always available to assist cadets, especially those showing promise. In addition to the day-to-day administrative duties, Lee and his family also entertained guests and visiting dignitaries (Wayland, 1951). All of the aforementioned experiences would serve Lee well as president of Washington College.

In 1860, Lee was a full colonel and viewed by many to be Gen. Scott's successor as commanding general of the U.S. Army. He was also wealthy through his marriage to Mary Custis, a member of the prominent Virginia family who possessed vast estates, including one located in Arlington, Virginia, looking directly over Washington, D.C. (Blount, 2003). Renowned in military circles for his efforts during the Mexican War, Lee first garnered national attention in commanding the troops that put down John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry (Wayland, 1951). Following Virginia's secession in 1861, Lee resigned his commission from the U.S. Army in order to serve the commonwealth and eventually the Confederacy. Initially perceived as weak, Lee was given command of the Army of Northern Virginia and went on to win a series of military victories (Freeman, 1934). After the battle of Gettysburg in 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia was depleted of both soldiers and resources. Lee was forced on the defensive until he surrendered his army in April of 1865.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Lee found himself unemployed, broke, and in poor health. The fate of former Confederate leaders was uncertain, and he impatiently awaited a possible trial for treason against the United States (Blount, 2003). With his estate in Arlington commandeered and used as a war cemetery, Lee and his family were forced to live by the charity of others in a tenant house in Richmond (Freeman, 1934). Lee's daughter Mildred wrote to a friend, "I expect now to have to be always poor" (Pryor, 2004, p. 435). The stress of his command had taken its toll. Weakened by two heart attacks during the war, Lee preferred to sit on the porch or in the parlor over riding throughout the countryside.

There were opportunities for financial gain as Lee was inundated with

offers from companies from both North and South to endorse their products. He declined all but one: an offer to write his autobiography, which he hoped would allow him to purchase a farm where he could live out his days (Flood, 1981). An intriguing proposal, though not a novel one, came in the summer of 1865 as Judge John W. Brockenbrough informed Lee that the Washington College trustees had elected him as president (Riley, 1922). Both the University of the South in Tennessee and the University of Virginia had previously approached Lee (Fishwick, 1963). Unaware of those offers, the Washington College board of trustees voted unanimously on August 3, 1865, to elect Lee as the next president of the college, deciding at the same meeting to resume classes that September (Crenshaw, 1969).

Electing Lee was a risky venture on the part of Washington College. At the time, he had not yet been pardoned for his contributions to the Confederacy, and there was still the risk of treason charges (Blount, 2003). Judge Brockenbrough's pitch to Lee was that most Virginia institutions including the University of Virginia, Hampden-Sydney College, and William and Mary were "prostrate" and would be for some time, but Washington College had a functioning endowment and could be saved from "destruction" if Lee were to intervene (Crenshaw, 1969, p. 147). Lee considered the unsolicited offer for three weeks before accepting. He felt a special connection to the college due to his admiration for Gen. Washington and his ties to the American Revolution. Lee wrote to the trustees on August 24, 1865:

I think it is the duty of every citizen, in the present condition of the country, to do all in his power to aid in the restoration of peace and harmony, and in no way to oppose the policy of the State or general government directed to the object. It is particularly incumbent on those charged with the instruction of the young to set them an example of submission to authority.

Lee left for Lexington, Virginia, on September 15th unsure of what lay ahead for himself, his family, or the college (Fishwick, 1963).

### **Institutional Impact Following the Civil War**

Though from similar family origins, Ewell and Lee took very different pathways to a college presidency. Despite these differences, both men found themselves at the helm of institutions resuming instruction in the fall of 1865. The following analysis includes ways that both institutions dealt with enrollment, financial and physical infrastructure, fundraising, and curriculum.

## Enrollment

Both colleges reopened after the war and set about recruiting students. Resuming classes after years of closure, neither college had an existing student body. Washington College and William and Mary found very different results in rebuilding student enrollment.

### Enrollment Declines at William and Mary Under Ewell

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, William and Mary struggled to attract students following the war, a trend that began in the antebellum years. In the five years preceding the Civil War, the enrollment averaged more than 57 students, whereas other Virginia institutions measured in the hundreds.<sup>1</sup> In the five years after the Civil War, the enrollment fell to an average of only 39 students. Both Hampden-Sydney and the University of Virginia had remained open during the war for a small population of wounded veterans and boys too young to fight. Hampden-Sydney did not reopen its collegiate program until 1867, but, by way of comparison, maintained an enrollment in the fifties (Brinkley, 1994). Immediately after the war, the University of Virginia enrolled 258 students (Abernethy, 1948). Following the 1865-1866 academic year, in which William and Mary enrolled 65 students, enrollment plummeted to only 20 students for the 1867-1868 academic year. This diminished enrollment substantially contributed to the college's closure for the 1869-1870 academic year.

The students at William and Mary also became increasingly local. Leading up to the Civil War, a majority of the enrolled students came from throughout Virginia. In the five years before the war, students from the immediate area of Williamsburg and James City County accounted for 29.0% of the enrollment. After reopening in 1865, the enrollment became almost exclusively local students. From 1865 to 1868, an average of 78.9% of students came from the City of Williamsburg or surrounding James City County. Although this percentage subsequently declined to an average of 43.1% from 1869 to 1881, the trend of increased local enrollment persisted in comparison to lower pre-Civil War enrollments of local students. Further, William and Mary never attracted more than 20.0% of its student body from

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*Hampden-Sydney enrolled 135 students in 1860 (Brinkley, 1994). The University of Virginia enrolled 645 students during the 1855-56 session, a figure that had increased 500% in more than a decade (Abernethy, 1948).*

beyond Virginia’s borders during Ewell’s presidency. Out-of-state students were not a staple of enrollments before or after the Civil War, but these low rates imply that William and Mary’s reach did not extend under Ewell’s leadership.

Table 1

*Enrollments at Washington College and the College of William and Mary, 1850-1881*

	Washington College			College of William & Mary		
	Enrollmen t	Local Student s (%)	Out-of- State Students (%)	Enrollmen t	Local Student s (%)	Out-of- State Students (%)
1850-	52	36.5	5.8	35	5.7	17.1
1851-	51	51.0	5.9	56	12.5	10.7
1852-	64	68.8	4.7	80	12.5	12.5
1853-	58	53.4	5.2	82	15.9	11.0
1854-	67	50.7	4.5	82	19.5	7.3
1855-	73	49.3	5.5	66	18.2	10.6
1856-	96	36.5	5.2	58	34.5	8.6
1857-	88	46.6	4.5	60	25.0	11.7
1858-	75	49.3	2.7	47	31.9	14.9
1860-	83	41.0	3.6	63	25.4	4.8
1861-	20	55.0	0.0	Closed		
1862-	50	58.0	4.0	Closed		
1863-	64	45.3	6.3	Closed		
1864-	Closed			Closed		
1865-	146	20.5	40.4	65	78.5	3.1
1866-	399	7.5	65.2	42	83.3	0.0
1867-	410	7.8	68.3	20	75.0	5.0
1868-	348	9.8	68.1	Closed		
1869-	344	8.4	77.6	30	46.7	20.0

Table 1 (continued)

	Washington College			College of William & Mary		
	Enrollmen t	Local Student s (%)	Out-of- State Students (%)	Enrollmen t	Local Student s (%)	Out-of- State Students (%)
1870-	336	10.1	79.5	39	51.3	12.8
1871-	300	13.3	73.0	48	41.7	12.5
1872-	263	16.7	69.2	38	52.6	10.5
1873-	226	21.2	65.9	36	55.6	8.3
1873-	226	21.2	65.9	36	55.6	8.3
1874-	196	19.4	65.3	58	34.5	6.9
1875-	157	19.7	65.0	71	32.4	9.9
1876-	134	21.6	61.2	23	26.1	13.0
1877-	129	23.3	64.3	20	35.0	10.0
1878-	101	24.8	56.4	19	68.4	5.3
1879-	102	32.4	49.0	15	40.0	0.0
1880-	96	25.0	54.2	12	33.3	0.0

*Note.* Local students defined as Lexington or Rockbridge County residents for Washington College and Williamsburg or James City County residents for the College of William and Mary. Calculated from the authors' counts of Washington College catalogues (1851-1860, 1866-1881), *Special Collections, Washington and Lee University Library, Lexington, VA*; the "Matriculation Book, 1834-1866," *Special Collections, Washington and Lee University Library, Lexington, VA*; and the "Matriculation Book, 1827-1881," *Board of Visitors Records, College of William and Mary archives, Williamsburg, VA*

The William and Mary matriculation records provide an additional insight into the institution's enrollment struggles. For the years 1851 to 1881, denominational affiliation is included for enrolling students. As shown in Figure 2 and Table 2, an average of 91.1% of students reported an Episcopalian affiliation for the last three years of Bishop Johns' presidency. Under Ewell, the percentage of Episcopalian students declined to a low of 10.0% for the 1879-1880 academic session. The 1865-1866 academic year, the first in which William and Mary reopened following the war, presents a clear line of demarcation for the drop in Episcopalian enrollment. In the five years prior to the war, Episcopalian students accounted for 70.8% of the enrollment. From 1865 to 1870, Episcopalian students accounted for only

48.6% of enrollment.

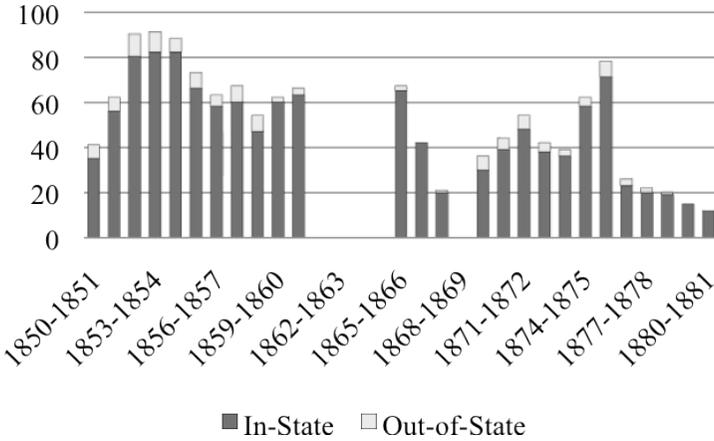


Figure 1. *College of William and Mary enrollment, 1850-1881.* Calculated from the authors’ counts of the “Matriculation Book, 1827-1881,” Board of Visitors Records, College of William and Mary archives, Williamsburg, VA.

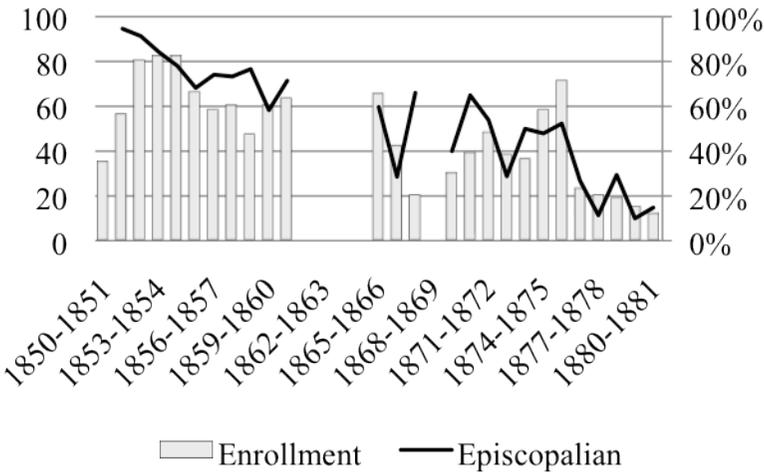


Figure 2. *College of William and Mary enrollment and percentage of Episcopalian students.* Calculated from the authors’ counts of the “Matriculation Book, 1827-1881,” Board of Visitors Records, College of William and Mary archives,

Williamsburg, VA.

Ewell was the longest-serving non-Episcopalian minister to hold the presidency to this point in William and Mary's history (Johnson, 1993). His background may have contributed to weakening ties with Virginia's Episcopal diocese, which previously supplied a high percentage of William and Mary's enrollment. As such, having Ewell as president may have actually contributed to the enrollment struggles. A number of other factors were clearly at work in the decline, including the condition of William and Mary's deteriorating campus, but the drop in Episcopalian students during Ewell's presidency is striking nonetheless. After years of closure during the Civil War, this mechanism for attracting students to William and Mary appears to have suffered without a president with direct ties to the Episcopal churches of Virginia.

#### Enrollment Booms at Washington College Under Lee.

The impact of Robert E. Lee's presence at Washington College can hardly be overstated. As shown in Figure 3 and Table 1, the enrollment, which averaged fewer than 88 students in the five years prior to the onset of the war, ballooned to a peak of 410 students during the 1867-1868 academic year, Lee's third as president. By comparison, Harvard College, which was much less disturbed by the Civil War, enrolled 479 students for the 1868-1869 academic year (Morison, 1928). As previously noted, the University of Virginia reopened with 258 students following the war. It appears that Lee's presence was a strong factor in attracting students as enrollments declined in the years following his death in the fall of 1870. In the last four academic years that opened with Lee as president, the Washington College enrollment averaged 367 students. During the next five years from 1871 to 1876, the average enrollment dropped to 228 students.

More impressively, following Lee's appointment as president, the student body became increasingly geographically diverse. Averaging 4.5% out-of-state students for the five years before Lee's presidency, the out-of-state enrollment immediately jumped to 40.4% in Lee's first year with 13 states/territories represented. This percentage increased throughout Lee's presidency to a peak of 79.5% in 1870-1871 with 24 states/territories represented ranging from New York to California and Idaho to Texas. In addition, two international students attended that year. While comparable enrollment data is difficult to find for this period, the geographic diversity of Washington College is remarkable nonetheless.

Table 2

*College of William and Mary Denominational Enrollment by Percent, 1851-1881*

	Episcopalian	Methodist	Baptist	Presbyterian
1851-1852	94.6	5.4	0.0	0.0
1852-1853	91.3	5.0	1.3	0.0
1853-1854	84.1	12.2	1.2	0.0
1854-1855	78.0	7.3	9.8	0.0
1855-1856	68.2	9.1	10.6	1.5
1856-1857	74.1	8.6	12.1	3.4
1857-1858	73.3	11.7	6.7	0.0
1858-1859	76.6	6.4	19.1	2.1
1859-1860	58.3	11.7	6.7	3.3
1860-1861	71.4	6.3	20.6	3.2
1861-1862		Closed		
1862-1863		Closed		
1863-1864		Closed		
1864-1865		Closed		
1865-1866	59.7	9.7	9.7	0.0
1866-1867	28.6	9.5	23.8	0.0
1867-1868	66.0	11.3	1.9	0.0
1868-1869		Closed		
1869-1870	40.0	0.0	1.5	1.5
1870-1871	64.9	9.5	12.2	1.4
1871-1872	53.9	6.6	9.2	1.3
1872-1873	28.8	3.0	6.1	0.0
1873-1874	50.0	8.0	6.0	2.0
1874-1875	47.9	5.5	13.7	8.2
1875-1876	52.3	4.7	10.5	9.3
1876-1877	36.8	10.5	5.3	2.6
1877-1878	11.4	17.1	0.0	0.0
1878-1879	29.4	8.8	8.8	0.0
1879-1880	10.0	3.3	3.3	6.7
1880-1881	14.8	0.0	3.7	0.0

*Calculated from the authors' counts of the "Matriculation Book, 1827-1881," Board of Visitors Records, College of William and Mary archives, Williamsburg, VA.*

As shown in Figure 3, Lee’s death in the fall of 1870 appears to have resulted in declining enrollments and percentages of out-of-state students. Out-of-state enrollments would, however, remain well above the pre-Civil War levels, one of Lee’s lasting legacies at the college.

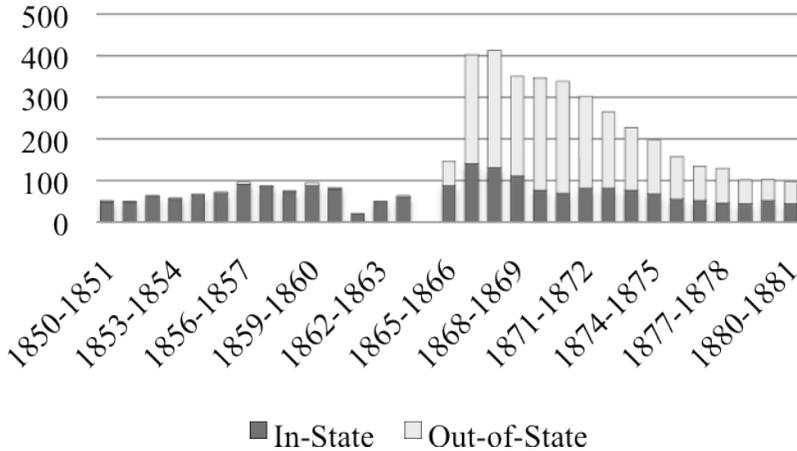


Figure 3. *Enrollment at Washington College, 1850-1881.* Calculated from the authors’ counts of Washington College catalogues (1851-1860, 1866-1881), Special Collections, Washington and Lee University Library, Lexington, VA, and the “Matriculation Book, 1834-1866,” Special Collections, Washington and Lee University Library, Lexington, VA.

Lee’s mere presence seemed to have served to boost enrollment substantially at Washington College. The trustees recognized this and immediately renamed the institution Washington and Lee University following Lee’s death in 1870. The timeliness of the name change implies a desire to permanently associate Lee’s reputation with the institution. To further cement the association, the college hired Lee’s son as president, though he was unable to sustain the institutional momentum created by his father.

**Financial and Physical Infrastructure**

Washington College and William and Mary faced very different circumstances in regard to campus conditions and financial resources following the war. These respective circumstances contributed heavily to the

trajectory of both colleges during the Reconstruction era.

Adversity and Challenges at College of William and Mary.

Most of William and Mary's records from this era were destroyed during the occupation and reoccupation of Williamsburg by Union forces during the Civil War. Like many other southern colleges, William and Mary's faculty and students rushed off to war believing it would be a short lived contest, so little thought was given to protecting the institutional records. The 1853 bursar's report is the last surviving financial document prior to the war, yet it offers a vital link to the state of the college's finances in the post-war bursar's report of 1870.

There are two significant factors in understanding William and Mary's fiscal infrastructure at the time. First, the same person served as bursar for this entire span. Tazewell Taylor, a local businessman, kept the books for almost 30 years. Taylor's decisions played a dominant role in the college's plight. In July of 1850, he and his family gave the college a \$20,000 bond tied to his Dismal Swamp Land Company (Taylor, 1850). The company proved a financial disaster that never benefited the college. Second, a majority of the bonds held by William and Mary were personal bonds from individuals pledging to pay annuities to the college.

Providing personal loans had been standard operating procedure at William and Mary for decades, including a loan for roughly one-fifth of the entire endowment to Thomas Jefferson in 1823 (Johnson, 1991). This Jefferson loan was never fully repaid, which would be the case with many of the personal notes held by William and Mary in the years following the Civil War. In 1852, personal bonds totaling \$88,403.24 supplemented \$22,800 in municipal and transportation stocks or bonds held by the college. These investments yielded \$5,304.19 in interest that year (Taylor, 1852). Although a seemingly impressive amount of interest, this total was down from William and Mary's peak revenue during the 1843-1844 academic year when it received \$9,144.91 from over \$153,454.01 in personal, municipal, and transportation bonds (Bursar, 1844). The college also acted as a local bank, loaning thousands of dollars to local businesses and individuals. Continually running tight budgets, William and Mary was only \$604.47 in the black by the end of the 1853 term (Taylor, 1853).

The Civil War combined with a dependency on personal annuities proved disastrous for William and Mary. During and after the war, the college continued to lose supporters via personal bonds. Many of the individually held bonds had matured and the college did not seek to replace them, or was unsuccessful in doing so. No evidence exists of a deliberate move away from personal bonds during the period as might be suggested by

a significant shift to investment in municipal and transportation bonds. In fact, there is little evidence of any coherent investment strategy at the time. In 1870, Taylor reported only \$42,406.45 of these private bonds on the books with only five of the 15 holders paying their annuities on time. The others owed “large amounts” of interest totaling \$10,686.42 (Taylor, 1870). William and Mary could not collect anticipated revenue from rents on college-owned lands in the area due to the agricultural market crash at the time. The college also lost another revenue source; the institution owned slaves before the war and rented these individuals to local farmers and plantation owners as day labor (Taylor, 1853). Though renting slaves was not a major source of revenue for the college, any income was desperately needed to continue operating in the post-war economy.

Physically, the campus was in ruins, with most of it destroyed by Union troops during the numerous campaigns up the peninsula to Richmond. William and Mary historian Helen Walker (1993) described the scene as follows, “The burnt out shell of the Main Building, the missing fences and outbuildings, and the badly damaged Brafferton [building] testified to the destructiveness of the just-concluded struggle” (p. 334). Ewell desperately sought to raise funds and defeat proposals to move the college to other cities in Virginia. Governor Francis Pierpont was in favor of moving the college away from Williamsburg to a more populated city. The city of Norfolk eagerly campaigned to have the college move there, volunteering a vacant building where it could be housed (Chapman, 1984). Ewell worked tirelessly to keep the college in Williamsburg and to raise funds for campus repairs.

#### A Stable Financial Foundation for Washington College.

Fortunately, Washington College’s administrative records remain intact. The city of Lexington, through fate and geography, avoided major military conflicts and troop movements. The campus emerged from the war with minimal damage, even though, like William and Mary, it had been occupied by Union cavalry troops (Crenshaw, 1969).

Washington College also benefited from the leadership of Dr. George Junkin, many of whose decisions before the war proved prescient. Junkin, a clergyman and the father-in-law of Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, was the college’s president from 1848 to 1861. He was a capable administrator, serving as president of two colleges before coming to Lexington. During the 1857 academic term, enrollment increased by 21 students, to a total of 93, which prompted Junkin to press for repairs to existing student housing and plan for expansion if the enrollment continued to rise (Junkin, 1857). In a report to the board, Junkin also drew attention to the deficient condition of other campus facilities, including the Refectory, his own home, and fences

surrounding the property. The treasurer reported revenues of \$3,892.50 from student tuition and fees that year (Treasurer, 1857a).

The treasurer's report of 1857 offers a clear picture of Washington College's financial situation. The college's financial foundation was a \$50,000 bequest from George Washington, which prompted the institution to change its name from Liberty Hall Academy to Washington College. The college's diverse investments included \$10,000 worth of stock and \$13,100 in bonds from James River and Kanawha (a canal/transportation company) and an additional \$21,500 in various state, county, and municipal bonds. There were shares in the James Bank and the Bank of Virginia totaling \$4,850, as well as a mixture of state bonds that would net \$24,696 at maturity. Four such bonds were set aside for the creation of a scholarship fund that totaled \$1,495 (Treasurer, 1857a). The treasurer's report of 1858 and subsequent reports echo these same investments and figures, demonstrating a consistency often lacking in financial reports from William and Mary.

Washington College reopened in September of 1865, just five months after the close of the war. The college's trustees were grappling with which assets still held value. Private companies, such as railroads, had been seized by the Confederacy. With locomotives, tracks, and stations destroyed, there was doubt that they could recover, so pre-war stocks and bonds were deemed useless. The same fears carried over to the state and private banks, whose Confederate currency and the bonds based on that currency were worthless. It would not be until after Lee was hired and the students returned for the fall term that the trustees truly understood their financial standing.

The college estimated a total loss of \$21,608.20, half of which was the James River and Kanawha stock, with the balance representing Confederate bonds and other stocks made useless by the war (Treasurer, 1865). Washington College retained most of its other investments, which totaled \$96,758.69 in 1865. The George Washington gift remained intact accompanied by a mix of state, county, and municipal bonds (Treasurer, 1865). Charles Flood (1981) notes Washington College was in "an odd sense of bankruptcy" when Lee was elected its president (p. 79). At the same trustees meeting in which Lee was elected president, the treasurer reported the college accounts totaled about \$94,000, most of which were securities of questionable value and viability (Flood, 1981). By September, these issues had been largely put to rest as the treasurer presented a supplemental report including revenue from the questionable bonds as well as \$11,178 in tuition from the 150 students (Treasurer, 1857b).

## **Fundraising**

Both Ewell and Lee recognized that additional funds were necessary to secure the financial futures of their respective institutions. At the time, William and Mary and Washington College were the only institutions not officially associated with a denomination or supported by the Commonwealth (Walker, 1993). This meant neither could depend on immediate financial intervention from an outside source. Both colleges had to seek funds actively from all available sources, including businesses, organizations, private citizens, religious groups, and even the Commonwealth of Virginia.

#### Ewell Struggles to Find Funding for William and Mary.

Given the South's economic state, Ewell looked to the North and England for philanthropic support. In 1866, Ewell created a pamphlet, *An Historical Sketch of the College of William and Mary in Virginia*, which he distributed to prominent citizens in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and Boston. In the pamphlet, he describes the damage to the College during the Civil War in the hopes of generating support for its reconstruction (Chapman, 1984). Ewell also gathered letters of introduction to recommend him to potential Northern donors, including one written by Gen. Ulysses S. Grant (Walker, 1993). Ewell followed up with several fundraising trips to the North in 1867, which were unsuccessful. Encouraged by John R. Thompson, a noted literary figure, Ewell's focus turned to England, where he was also unsuccessful in securing funds. Thompson blamed "the waning interest felt by the English people in the affairs of any of the late Confederate states...and the fearfully depressed monetary condition of England" (Chapman, 1984, p. 178).

These fundraising efforts may have been ill-fated from the start for several reasons. First, the geographic base of alumni was in Virginia. More than 90% of students from 1801 to 1861 came from Virginia with only 0.5% from Union states (College of William and Mary, 1874). As shown in Table 1, no less than 82.9% of students came from within Virginia's borders in any year leading up to the war. With so many students from Virginia, the likelihood was slim of previous connections to the college among potential donors in the North.

Second, negative feelings toward the South among Northerners in the wake of the Civil War likely contributed to the college's philanthropic failures (Johnson, 1991). Ewell's quest to save a historic college in the South was unlikely met with a receptive audience. Even with William and Mary's ties to the American Revolution, attributing the destruction of the campus to occupying Union troops in the pamphlet may have alienated potential donors in the North.

Third, many of the major educational philanthropists during this era donated to establish modern research universities such as Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago (Oliver, 1999). Ewell's attempts to revive a historic college were unlikely to resonate with this type of benefactor. Despite holding progressive political views himself, Ewell's vision for William and Mary remained firmly grounded in the college's past, which may not have excited potential donors of this era.

William and Mary did succeed in securing funds from the estate of Mary Whaley, known as "The Matthey Fund." At its founding, the college began with a grammar school. Through legal action in England, William and Mary received \$8,100 from Whaley's estate, but with the stipulation the funds support the education of poor children in the Bruton Parish (Walker, 1993). These funds were immediately used for campus repairs despite the bequest's requirement that a grammar school be built. The school building was later completed and immediately leased to the Williamsburg school board in 1870 (Godson, 1993).

Despite the forces working against Ewell in fundraising, there were several close calls with donations years after his initial quest for funds from the North (Chapman, 1984). Ewell eventually found a Northern advocate for William and Mary in George Hoar, a congressman and Harvard graduate who felt a kinship to the Virginia colonial college he considered a sister institution to his alma mater. Hoar supported federal legislation to aid William and Mary as well as personally engaged in helping to raise funds, receiving pledges of \$100,000 in Massachusetts. After the Boston fire of 1872 and financial panic of 1873, these pledged funds could not be collected. In another cruel twist of fate, William and Mary learned in 1885 that a \$400,000 bequest intended for the college by a wealthy Bostonian had been redirected. With the college closed in 1882 due to lack of students and continuing fiscal struggles, the funds went instead to the University of Virginia.

Ewell also sought funds through legislative action to no avail. Each of these motions seemingly gained momentum, but eventually stalled and failed. He repeatedly pursued funds from Congress to pay for the destruction of the campus during occupation by federal troops, which failed each time. Years later, after Ewell was no longer president, federal reparation funding did reach William and Mary. Ewell also unsuccessfully pursued funding through the application of the Morrill Act in Virginia, which instead went to establish a state institution in Blacksburg.

Some of the failure to secure funds may have been due to Ewell's publicly stated political stances during Reconstruction. Chapman (1984) states, "Never having made a practice of voicing his views publicly, he did

so on this occasion in the belief that educators had a moral responsibility to rise above sectional, political, or personal concerns in the cause of national interests” (p. 176). Ewell spoke openly in support of the Fourteenth Amendment and wrote articles that appeared in *The New York Times* encouraging understanding and reconciliation of North and South (Walker, 1993). Ewell also spoke openly in support of Negro suffrage, an unpopular stance both locally and in the surrounding region, going so far as pledging support for teachers from the Friends’ Association of Philadelphia and insisting that his Negro servant Pauline conduct a school for freed slaves (Chapman, 1984).

Ewell’s political stances, which were decidedly unpopular in Virginia, likely alienated potential supporters in the area. This may have contributed to William and Mary’s failure to secure support from the General Assembly, either through direct appropriations or application of Morrill Act funding. Though potential Northern donors may have appreciated Ewell’s views, no funding from this source actually reached the college. He may also have failed to capitalize on any goodwill in the North created by his views. As previously discussed, Ewell appealed to Northern donors based on William and Mary’s historical roots, not as a progressive institution located in the South.

Given the failure to secure funds elsewhere, William and Mary sought to return to its Episcopalian roots. Initially, William and Mary presented honorary degrees to a large number of ministers to reestablish and strengthen the historic relationship. Between 1866 and 1874, the college awarded 64 honorary degrees compared to only 60 in its previous 181 years of existence. More than 60% of these degrees were awarded to members of the clergy (College of William and Mary, 1874). In 1879, the Board of Visitors appointed a committee to “confer with the Bishop and Council of the Diocese of Virginia on the subject of a closer connection of the Diocese with our venerable and honored institution” (Board of Visitors, 1879). The Episcopalian Church chose to avoid a formal relationship with the college, possibly due to other educational priorities. An Episcopalian seminary founded in Alexandria in 1823 may have supplanted William and Mary in the eyes of the diocese by the time the college sought to formalize a relationship.

William and Mary continued to decline until June 1882, when with only three collegiate students, an endowment of \$33,000 compared to \$30,000 in debts, and a crumbling Wren Building never properly restored after the Civil War, college exercises were suspended indefinitely. At the age of 72 and suffering from arthritis, Ewell remained on the payroll as president and caretaker of the college grounds. In order to maintain William and Mary’s

charter, Ewell rang the bell on the second Wednesday of each October to signify the opening of the academic session (Chapman, 1984).

### Lee Creates a Fundraising Juggernaut at Washington College.

By the close of the 1865-1866 academic year, Lee's first as president, Washington College's endowment had grown by a third. This growth was due to an increase in Virginia bonds, additional investments in local county bonds, and more than \$50,000 in new private bonds and donations (Treasurer, 1866). Interest from these investments netted \$10,319.50, a substantial sum just one year after the war. The college's fiscal foundation continued to grow as Lee's fundraising efforts brought in capital from all over the United States.

Though Lee approached some patrons individually, Washington College created a model for continuing campaigns for funds. Reaching out to a larger constituency, the trustees placed Gen. R. D. Lilley in charge of a sustained capital campaign (Preston, 1934). Lilley hired agents that traveled throughout the country to raise funds. These agents distributed pamphlets describing Washington College and Lee's new role as its leader. Lee wrote often to these agents thanking them for their diligence, introducing them to contacts, and supplying them with autographed pictures. Lee also provided the agents with letters of introduction that were used to gain audience with potential donors, demonstrating Lee's willingness to stake his reputation on Washington College.

Though Lee was both praised and vilified in the North, he received help from a number of famous Northerners who advocated for both Washington College and education in the South (Preston, 1934). The families of the Union fallen viewed Lee as a key leader in the rebellion that resulted in the violent deaths of loved ones. Reporters of anti-Confederate newspapers, charged by their editors with writing stories portraying Lee in a bad light, often visited Washington College and the town of Lexington (Flood, 1981). Others saw Lee as a conciliator who chose to end hostilities well before the Confederate political leadership. His surrender at Appomattox sent a clear message to the Confederate ranks that the war would not continue, neither with an operating army nor as a series of guerilla actions throughout the South. Ending the war prematurely, possibly by months or even years, garnered Lee respect not only from Union officer corps, but also from a portion of the Northern population.

Northerners supporting Lee included a mix of the cultural and entrepreneurial elite who proved more than willing to aid Lee in his post-war role as an educator. At a rally held at the Cooper Institute in New York City in 1866, Henry Ward Beecher, Peter Cooper, Horace Greeley, and Gov.

Reuben E. Fenten “spoke on the college’s behalf” (Fishwick, 1963, p. 144). Other famous donors included Samuel J. Tilden, Thomas A. Scott, Rathmall Wilson, W. W. Corcoran, and Warren Newcomb of Newcomb College fame (Crenshaw, 1969). In Lee’s first two years as president, Washington College raised \$150,000, which more than doubled the endowment (Preston, 1934). In 1869, while on a trip with his ailing wife to the White Sulphur Springs resort in West Virginia, Lee met George Peabody, a Massachusetts financier whose holdings eventually became the base of the J.P. Morgan fortune (Gaines, 1936). Shortly after meeting Lee, Peabody agreed to sign over \$50,000 dollars in Virginia bonds to the college. The commonwealth was reluctant to pay on the bonds, but Peabody felt sure that no politician in Virginia would refuse Lee’s request given his revered standing (Flood, 1981). Washington College’s relationship with Peabody continued and resulting gifts constituted a large portion of the endowment portfolio by the close of the 19th century.

Lee’s presence led to numerous small monetary donations from everyday citizens as well. Most were admirers of Lee, who tried to thank personally everyone who gave to Washington College. The institution received other gifts in the form of furniture, materials, labor, travel expenses for its officers, and books for the library. By 1888, the trustees reported that the bulk of funds raised by Lee had already tripled in value, amounting to nearly \$500,000 with Peabody gifts representing \$150,000 of that sum (Treasurer, 1888).

#### An Interaction between Ewell and Lee in Fundraising.

In contrast to Ewell’s struggle to attract donors, Lee met with great success. One instance in which the two overlapped in the search for donations demonstrates Lee’s superior draw in fundraising. Henry Ward Beecher, who had been recommended to Ewell by a mutual friend was unwilling to support William and Mary when approached by Ewell (Chapman, 1984). Lee, on the other hand, successfully secured support for Washington College from Beecher (Crenshaw, 1969). The reason for Beecher’s choice to support Washington College and not William and Mary is unknown. Beecher, however, did make mention of Lee’s efforts in several public addresses. In a speech in October of 1865, Beecher referenced Lee’s “weakness” in joining the rebellion, but endorsed Lee’s acceptance of the Washington College presidency, commending that his students “will be true and faithful to the government they live under” (Howard, 1887, p. 720).

Aware of the influence and success of Lee at Washington College, Ewell came to believe that a high-profile person in the role of president would be useful to William and Mary. He suggested former Confederate Gen. Joseph

E. Johnston to the Board of Visitors. Despite the seemingly tenuous nature of his appointment in 1858 and declining state of affairs at the college, the board refused to consider replacing him as president in 1869, recording “The Rector gave notice that President Ewell desired to resign his position, whereupon this meeting appreciating his delicacy declines to accept his resignation” (Board of Visitors, 1869).

## **Curriculum**

Prior to the Civil War, both Washington College and William and Mary offered very similar classical curriculums. Following the war, the colleges differed sharply in educational offerings.

### The Entrenched Classical Curriculum at William and Mary Under Ewell.

Few course catalogues survive from this period for William and Mary due to fires and the destruction of war. The available catalogues from 1858 and 1870 show little change in the 12 years between publications (College of William and Mary, 1859, 1870). Both describe a lock-step classical curriculum with limited elective offerings in modern languages. William and Mary offered three degree options: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Philosophy, and Master of Arts. Ewell staunchly defended the classical curriculum and resisted change, claiming “a rational education [mathematics] is among the most useless” in comparison to the classics, which he described as “sure foundations of a sound education” (Chapman, 1984, p. 243).

When forced by William and Mary’s dire circumstances, Ewell proposed reform to the curriculum in order to survive. In 1886, with the college closed the previous four years, Ewell revived a plan to establish a normal school for teachers at William and Mary that he first voiced in 1882. That January, sufficiently convinced of the college’s plight, the board approved plans for establishing a normal school in conjunction with the collegiate course in exchange for \$10,000 of annual support from the commonwealth. Lyon Gardiner Tyler, who eventually succeeded Ewell as president, took up the cause in the Virginia House of Delegates, reviving the bill after it was twice voted down, and secured its passage in March 1888 (Walker, 1993).

After reporting to the new Board of Visitors, which now included governor appointees, Ewell resigned both the presidency and his professorship on May 10, 1888. The board appointed Ewell president emeritus and upon his death in 1894 allowed him to be interred in a small campus cemetery. In the following decades, prominent buildings and awards on campus were named in his honor, demonstrating appreciation for the tenacity with which he pursued William and Mary’s revival.

The college debt had been reduced to \$7,001.12 during the seven years classes were suspended, evidence that Ewell had put available resources to good use during the closure (Tyler, 1907). On October 4, 1888, with renovated buildings and curriculum, a new president and faculty officially opened the College of William and Mary for the academic term to 102 students, most of whom were enrolled in the new normal course of study (Chapman, 1984).

### Transforming the Curriculum at Washington College Under Lee.

Immediately upon assuming the presidency, Lee implemented substantial changes to the Washington College curriculum. Similar to William and Mary, the 1860 catalogue describes a lock-step classical curriculum with limited elective offerings in modern languages (Board of Trustees, 1860). In the 1866 catalogue, the first published with Lee as president, the curriculum showed marked innovations (Board of Trustees, 1866). Only three weeks into his tenure, the trustees voted to approve Lee's plan for the introduction of a scientific curriculum (Pusey, 1976). Washington College was reorganized into 12 different schools. The degrees for 1866 included the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Laws, and Bachelor of Philosophy as well as a Master of Arts (Board of Trustees, 1866). A Bachelor of Science degree was added a year later (Board of Trustees, 1867). Lee advocated for the local private law school to be incorporated into the college (Pryor, 2007). He also recommended that 50 scholarships be created for students who wanted to study journalism as a career. In doing so, Lee created the first school of journalism in the country (Ellard, 1926). He also ended compulsory chapel in 1868, decades before Harvard (Crenshaw, 1969).

Lee's ability to raise funds and his openness towards recruiting faculty from the North enhanced his efforts in rethinking the Washington College curriculum. The 1866 catalogue reports the new professor of experimental philosophy and practical mechanics became a reality due to a generous gift by Cyrus McCormick, who provided a \$15,000 endowment for the position. It was not long before all of the newly created professorships were endowed and filled. Lee's immediate faculty hires included Northern professors like Richard McCulloch, who previously taught at Columbia and Princeton (Pusey, 1976). Clearly, structural and curricular changes under Lee modernized Washington College, providing a direction for the future.

## Discussion

This study focused on two narratives of leadership by college presidents

in Reconstruction Virginia. Within the historical and geographic limitations of the study, Ewell and Lee offer interesting examples of college leadership immediately following the conclusion of the Civil War. Edward Ayers (1992) suggested that efforts to improve higher education in the South during Reconstruction were hindered by poor funding from legislatures, financially destitute or deceased alumni, and “timid leadership” (p. 422). Whereas this accurately describes Ewell’s experience at William and Mary, Lee helped Washington College defy the difficulties faced by most Southern institutions following the war. His personal prestige attracted students and donors while his vision laid the foundation for a modern institution, exceeding Judge Brokenbrough’s initial suggestion that Lee’s presence could save Washington College from destruction. Lee’s presence went far beyond merely saving the college as he left a thriving institution at the time of his death.

In order to compare Ewell and Lee’s presidencies, it must be noted that Ewell faced a much more difficult situation following the Civil War at William and Mary than did Lee at Washington College. With a destroyed campus, few returning students, and poor financial footing, Ewell had few resources with which to work. We hesitate to fully concede Ewell was a timid leader as Ayers describes. His devotion to the institution was without question, yet Ewell undeniably avoided substantive change at William and Mary until forced by the college’s prolonged closure. On the other hand, Washington College gambled on Lee’s celebrity and continued freedom and was greatly rewarded. Rather than resting upon secure financial footing, Lee mobilized institutional resources to modernize the curriculum and physical plant. These actions contributed to a legacy of attracting out-of-state students and dramatically increased enrollments. In many ways the post-war William and Mary under Ewell’s leadership was an institutional echo of the pre-war South, whereas Washington College under Lee’s leadership was progressive, embodying a vision of a new South.

The personal background of each individual greatly affected their presidential impact. For Ewell, we find evidence indicating that William and Mary’s enrollment struggles were exacerbated by an increasing separation of William and Mary from its historic, though unofficial, ties to the Episcopalian Church. As the first long-serving non-Episcopalian president, Ewell’s tenure witnessed the consistent decline in Episcopalian students, which coincided with the precipitous drop in overall enrollment. Despite his best efforts, William and Mary could not attract the necessary students and support without a dramatic change. Ultimately, Ewell’s greatest success was convincing the board to pursue a state-funded normal school, which saved the college.

Gaines (1936) concludes “categories of personality into which we slip historical figures for purpose of comparison or contrast do not exist for Lee” (p. 7). We agree with this assessment based on the dramatic boost Lee’s presence provided to Washington College. We describe Lee’s impact on Washington College as prestige transference, an instance in which an individual’s celebrity, expertise, and ability to effect change unilaterally greatly enhances an institution or organization. Lee’s personal prestige became tightly associated with Washington College, providing a major attractant for students and donors. The college attempted to cement this prestige transference by renaming the institution Washington and Lee University immediately following Lee’s death. The curricular advances and broad exposure during Lee’s administration secured the college’s future, as Washington and Lee continued to attract a large percentage of its enrollment from beyond Virginia’s borders.

In conclusion, this study highlights two significant leaders of American higher education in the mid-19th century: Ewell’s struggle to save the nation’s second oldest institution from permanent closure and Lee’s considerable contributions as an innovative college leader. Undoubtedly, a myriad of other institutional stories, both North and South, public and private, exist from the Reconstruction period that would add to a more complete picture of the development of the American system of higher education. We hope that this work serves to encourage a more nuanced analysis of American higher education in the post-Civil War era.

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