

CHAPTER THREE  
HISTORIC CONTEXTS  
AND SIGNIFICANCE



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### INTRODUCTION

Historic Contexts are those patterns or trends in history by which a specific occurrence, property, or site is understood and its meaning (and ultimately its significance) within history or prehistory is made clear. To determine significance within a historic context the following considerations need to be determined for each property: The facet of prehistory or history of the local area or the nation that the property represents; whether that facet of prehistory or history is significant; whether it is a type of property that has relevance and importance in illustrating the historic context; how the property illustrates that history; and whether the property possesses the physical features necessary to convey the aspect of prehistory or history within which it is associated.

### CLASSICISM AND COLLEGE PLANNING: 1820-1860

Washington and Lee University exhibits typical design ideals and principles of many other college campuses being developed during the same era. The most prevalent style of this period revolved around a revival of the philosophical and academic values of antiquity that were spurred on by the newly-founded American republic. In the early 19th-century, Americans wanted to separate themselves as much as possible from the Old World practices of monarchy and tyrannical rule. They found that classical concepts of the republic, democracy, and education were excellent models for the new country they had created. This desire for new political and social order found an outlet not only in politics, but also in the physical design of the landscape and the buildings placed upon it.

America was enthralled with the concept of peripatetic learning, with the ideals of order and knowledge gained through study, and with the theme of “the nobility and necessity of the traditional college and its classical curriculum.”<sup>1</sup> While these ideals were exhibited through choice of curricula and methods of moral discipline, they could also be seen in the way campus landscapes were developed. Classicism, as a design style, was based on the principle of order and symmetry. To this end, buildings were organized in the landscape in symmetrical, orderly patterns with linear axes and bilateral termini. Examples of this campus planning style can be

<sup>1</sup> Turner, Paul Venable, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), 89-90.

found at the University of Virginia, with its symmetrical ranges of buildings; and at Girard College in Philadelphia, and the University of Wisconsin, both of which consist of a central Greek temple-form building flanked by the same number of smaller, classically-styled buildings on each side.

In addition to siting of buildings, topography also played a part in campus planning during the era of Classicism. Colleges and universities were often located upon hills or ridges to reinforce the concept of the educational institution as a temple on a hill; to separate the school from local villages or towns that were initially thought to be poor influences on impressionable students; and to maintain a picturesque setting, complete with views to natural surroundings, that were thought to favorably impact the mental and physical health of the student body.

Washington and Lee exhibits many of these same principles, and is an excellent example of campus planning during this era, although the characteristic symmetry did not occur all at once. Historical documents stated that, in 1803, the campus moved to its current location on “one of three low ridges on which the town of Lexington rests.” The same text documents that the choice of this particular crest gives a frontage in all four directions and, being elevated, provides pure air and a wide outlook.<sup>2</sup> In 1804 Graham and Union Hall and a steward’s house were constructed for student accommodation. In 1824, Washington Hall was erected and later, in 1831, when Graham and Union Hall dormitories were torn down, Payne Hall was constructed adjacent to Washington Hall. In 1835, one dormitory was constructed on either side of these central buildings. In 1840, Robinson Hall was built on the northern edge of Washington Hall, thus balancing Payne Hall and creating the Colonnade that exists today. In 1842, two faculty houses were constructed on each side of the academic core, further reinforcing the campus’s uniformity. To complete the homage to classical education and design, a carved, wooden statue of George Washington wearing a toga was placed atop Washington Hall’s cupola in 1844.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Washington and Lee Historical Papers*, 4: 5-8.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela H. Simpson, “Reflections on White Columns,” in *Come Cheer for Washington and Lee*, ed. Mame Warren (Lexington, VA: Washington and Lee University, 1998), 7-8.

Over time, buildings have been razed and constructed dependent on the needs of the University, or due to fire or age. The influence of Classicism, however, is still strong some 180 years after construction began on the ridge above Lexington. The symmetrical alignment of the campus has been reinforced over the years by the construction of Tucker Hall (1900, and 1936), which balanced the presence of Newcomb Hall (1883), and by the retention of the Colonnade and other antebellum buildings that typified campus planning between 1820 and 1860.

## **MYTHMAKING AND COMMEMORATION: 1820-1861**

In the period from about 1820 to 1861 American higher education experienced tremendous growth but also found itself in crisis. The expanding American frontier, the rivalry of religious sects, and the ideal of democratic education all contributed to a proliferation of colleges in the country. Most schools perpetuated the traditional system of education, with its strict religious emphasis and narrowly classical curriculum, which many critics considered irrelevant to a society preoccupied with business, industry expansion and progress. Many new types of schools did appear but the majority persisted in the old methods.

Intellectual interests falling outside the prescribed curriculum often were discouraged. Students protested often with vandalism and violence, which became serious problems – riots and disorder were not uncommon. Concern for student order often affected campus planning – installation of fireproof elements. Students began reshaping the American college with unofficial curricula – first literary and debating societies, then the Greek-letter fraternities, and later organized athletics.

Added to the curricular problems were conflicts between religious orthodoxy and academic freedom, the financial straits of many schools, and the widespread doubts in America about the value of higher education. American colleges reacted by creating a kind of mythology to sustain themselves. The main theme was the nobility and necessity of the traditional college with its classical curriculum – emphasis on American college as part of an ancient tradition of learning and as such should display the supposed hallmarks and trappings of that tradition – all these ideas found expression in the architecture and physical planning of the American college.

## **ROMANTICISM IN LANDSCAPE DESIGN: 1850-1890**

At the time of the construction of Lee Chapel in 1867, American stylistic tastes had moved away from the formal, geometrical, and rigid aesthetics of classical revival styles, such as Greek and Roman Classicism, and began to embrace the more organic, flowing, and natural tendencies of the Romantic Period of architectural and landscape architectural design. The Romantic Period of landscape design was based on principles of arranging the landscape to appear natural, yet resulted in sites that were actually heavily manipulated through plantings, creation of water features, installation of curvilinear walkways that followed natural topography, and framing views to attractive focal points. In addition, this was also the era that saw a burgeoning interest in the establishment and design of public parks as remedies for crowded cities, tedious grids of urban streets, and an overwhelming trend toward an industrial paradigm. The necessity for picturesque parks as a relief for urban conditions, combined with the trend toward naturalistic settings, were likely factors during the siting of Lee Chapel and the design of the surrounding landscape.

The landscape of Lee Chapel is a good example of Romantic design, although one that is small in scope. The Romanesque building—a typical architectural style during this era—is sited by itself, facing the Colonnade, and in a park-like setting. The sweeping, rolling lawn was left uncluttered by buildings and structures. Although the numerous trees appear to have been planted more than fifteen years after the construction of the chapel, their inclusion in the landscape was befitting of the style of the existing Romantic landscape. In addition, the curving sidewalks are in direct contrast to the gridded Colonnade circulation and follow the existing topography.

## **FRATERNITY HOUSING: 1865-1900**

During the mid-nineteenth century, fraternities were largely secret societies that provided students with a more autonomous space outside the tightly controlled realm of college officials, who saw their role as paternal stewards exercising a necessary strict code of behavior. Fraternities were a way for students to celebrate scholarship and academic achievement as well as a place to form social alliances. American fraternities began in 1776 in the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg where a handful of William and Mary students founded Phi Beta Kappa. Washington and Lee's first fraternities began in 1855 with the Virginia Beta chapter of Phi Kappa Psi followed by Beta Theta Pi's Alpha Rho Chapter; the Kappa Alpha Order was founded in 1865.

When Robert E. Lee accepted the presidency of Washington Academy the college was in dire need of physical improvements and increased student enrolment to fund further development. In order to secure immediately accessible accommodations for new incoming students Lee turned to the town of Lexington as a source of well-constructed and plentiful housing that could serve as boarding houses. These boarding houses, run by a ‘house mother,’ were often used as fraternity houses. Originally fraternities had only met in rented meeting rooms, but by the 1920s, fraternities looked increasingly to the town for housing. Several fraternities took out loans from the University and built impressive new housing in keeping within the stylistic neoclassical idiom established for university property; others purchased existing large residences.<sup>4</sup>

### **BEAUX-ARTS DESIGN AND COLLEGE PLANNING: 1901-1930**

The Classical style persisted at Washington and Lee until the turn of the 19th-century; due in great part to the fact that the University undertook a sizable construction program between 1820 and 1840—at the height of the Classical trend—and fulfilled much of its need for additional buildings until the late 1800s and early 1900s. In 1904, however, Theodore C. Link was hired to design not only Reid Hall, but to develop a long-range master plan for the campus.<sup>5</sup> Link’s master plan, the first ever developed for Washington and Lee, was undoubtedly influenced by the Beaux-Arts school of design, whose principles were exhibited at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The popularity of this style led to the subsequent City and University Beautiful urban and campus planning movements.

The Beaux-Arts system of planning followed principles of monumental organization which facilitated orderly planning on a grand scale and was capable of incorporating many disparate buildings or parts within a unified, overall pattern.<sup>6</sup> This system was particularly useful for campuses that already existed—such as Washington and Lee—yet whose trustees or planners wanted to “collect” and organize their buildings into a uniform, comprehensive plan. Beaux-Arts planning utilized bilateral symmetry; axial alignments; monumental buildings as focal points and termini to a long axis; and symmetrical, hierarchical circulation patterns that featured central walkways with secondary routes leading from them.

<sup>4</sup> *Come Cheer, Washington and Lee University*, Lexington, VA, 1998, 205.

<sup>5</sup> *Come Cheer*, 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Turner, *Campus*, 167.

Link's 1904 master plan incorporated many of these concepts and is a clear successor to the Beaux-Arts era of design. His idea was to make the campus bilaterally symmetrical by constructing a row of buildings to the west of the Colonnade, therefore creating an interior mall or quad. Link's plan shows monumental buildings anchoring the long mall axis at either end. The plan also shows two long central walks along the mall axis with shorter secondary routes leading eastward between the Colonnade buildings. Link's plan did not, however, come to fruition immediately, but took over fifty years to be fully realized. Today, the influence of the Beaux-Arts and Link's master plan are still clearly visible in Washington and Lee's campus. The interior mall was slowly formed over time as buildings were erected along the western edge of the main campus. The construction of DuPont Hall in 1955 completed the effect of the dual-ended axis, which still exists between the 1907 Carnegie Library and DuPont Hall. The pattern of walkways is linear and geometric. Although the current campus is not completely symmetrical, the general concept of a unified plan is still visible.

### **COLONIAL REVIVAL DESIGN: 1899-1950**

Mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century fears of rapid changes occurring in America prompted the established elite to look to the Colonial period for reassurance that the Republic and all it stood for would survive. In doing so, they emphasized ideas about patriotism and used references in architecture and design to evoke trusted symbols rooted in the ideas of the Republic. At Washington and Lee, Charles Gillette, trusted designer of many of the First Families of Virginia worked with another tradition-oriented group, the Garden Club of Virginia, to establish landscape design ideas at the chapel of Washington and Lee.

### **PROGRESSIVISM AND EDUCATIONAL THEORY: 1890-1920**

A national trend that affected planning and development at the University was the Progressive era educational theory. This mode of thought was based on the belief that educating the public in a democratic fashion was the best way to improve society. In the South, this philosophy was embraced with particular enthusiasm because it provided a way for educators, politicians, and others to enhance the status of southern universities in the eyes of the nation. Progressive era educators also perceived their institutions as bringing tangible improvement to the South by means of educating a generation of young people to make a practical difference in their communities. Consequently their emphasis was on applied rather than theoretical knowledge. Progressives pushed for increased entrance requirements to universities and the creation of professional schools such as medicine, law, engineering and

3-6

education. The University of Virginia led the way in the south but other universities soon followed suit in expanding programs and academic specialization. This expanded program naturally resulted in increased student accommodation needs as well as buildings for new schools.

### **STATEMENT OF CAMPUS SIGNIFICANCE**

Washington and Lee University originated as a single building set in a rural environment with its roots steeped in a classical curriculum and reverence for traditional values. Incorporated into these traditional values was the notion that the scenic beauty of the surrounding landscape provided an inspiring setting for serious study. By 1804, the college had moved closer to the town of Lexington. The first buildings of the current configuration were constructed on the crest of a hill that overlooked the urban fabric, the topographic situation was such, however, that a right angle allowed a wide outlook and frontage in four directions. Thus, the college's main facade overlooked the town, but also had views and vistas toward the mountains and surrounding physical landscape, which had inspired its inception.

The historic architectural core of Washington and Lee University comprises a body of harmonious and spatially related classically-inspired buildings that within their idyllic setting form one of the most dignified and beautiful college campuses in the nation. Development of the current historic core took place between 1824 and 1842, however, the decisions regarding their location and the construction of the first buildings occurred in 1804. From the first buildings on the crest of the hill overlooking the town of Lexington, a precedent was established for future site planning. The Center Building of 1824, later named Washington Hall, set a precedent for architectural style with its red brick, three-story Classical temple form with a large Tuscan portico. This building formed the foundation for what became Washington and Lee University's signature image, the Colonnade. The Colonnade today, together with its flanking residences, suggests a single architectural concept, whereas, in reality, this succession of columned and pilastered buildings is the evolutionary product of a building program spanning a period of more than one hundred and fifty years.

After 1842, as student enrolment increased and the growing needs of the college changed, other academic buildings were accrued. Mostly following in the Neo-Classical architectural tradition, these buildings were intended to evoke an impression of classical ideals, tradition, democracy, and patriotism. These ideals also embraced the natural landscape, which include rolling hills and grassy knolls, ridges, a creek, and a number of mature trees, many of which were

planted by Robert E. Lee. An axial quadrangle constructed behind the Colonnade at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided a focus both inward to the University's activities as well as towards the rear lying mountains, and reinforced the established sense of place as the campus developed beyond its original core.

While the modern university plant reaches well beyond its original site plan, the antebellum buildings have remained the key visual symbol and psychological heart of this esteemed institution. Extensive changes have occurred to the individual buildings at Washington and Lee in the course of their organic growth, nevertheless, the integrity of the University complex as a whole has survived. Other structures in the Georgian Revival and modern styles, built in the vicinity during the latter half of the twentieth century, have provided the campus with a sense of the inevitability of change and progress.

The significance of the buildings and landscape at Washington and Lee University has been recognized both through the designation of individual buildings as well as various integral and related sites. Lee Chapel was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1961 under the theme of the Civil War. Washington Hall was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970 as part of the Washington and Lee Historic District. It is also part of the 1973 National Historic Landmark designation. The Colonnade, Lee Chapel, Lee House, Lee-Jackson House, Morris House, Gilliam Admissions House, Reeves Center, and Alumni House are the historic core of Washington and Lee University. Downtown Lexington was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972 and is roughly bounded by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, Graham and Jackson Avenues and Estill and Jordan Streets. There are thirty-one (31) university-owned buildings within the Lexington Historic District and approximately twenty (20) are historic resources.