



PHOTOS BY RICHARD L. McCLEARY

Front Campus': A historic setting helps to inspire deep reverence for the school's past and bristling resistance to change

The Women Are Coming!

Washington and Lee's gentlemen give up a 235-year tradition, but who knows, the parties may get better.

Washington and Lee University takes its traditions seriously, as befits a school founded in 1749, saved from financial ruin in 1796 by a substantial gift from George Washington, and transformed into a progressive university between 1865 and 1870 by Robert E. Lee. Tradition means that W&L, set in the sleepy town of Lexington, Va., approaches change with an abundance of caution and a reverence for the way things have been done: an honors system inaugurated by Lee more than a century ago remains largely intact. So when W&L's board of trustees met in July to vote on the admission of women to its undergraduate college, after 235 years of admitting only men, the decision was reached only after deep and sometimes fretful reflection. On the night before the final vote, admits board chairman James Ballengee, "I was tossing in my bed, and I heard another trustee at 4 a.m. pacing in the hotel room next door." Eight hours later W&L's board voted 17 to 7 to admit women in the fall of 1985.

The W&L decision leaves only a handful of nondenominational men's colleges in the United States, among them Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind., the Citadel Military College of South Carolina in Charleston, Hampden-Sydney College in

Hampden, Va., and the Virginia Military Institute, located next to W&L in Lexington. They outlasted the great move to coeducation that began in the late '60s and swept along such institutions as Harvard, Dartmouth and Vassar. By comparison, dozens of women's colleges exist, in part because they are seen as a way to overcome a perceived sexual bias in society at large and in coeducational colleges and universities. Such a rationale doesn't exist for men's colleges, and sexually segregated education for males has become increasingly unpopular with high-school graduates. "An all-male school doesn't seem to be a product that sells," says trustee Ballengee.

Nonetheless, the break with tradition wasn't overwhelmingly popular at W&L. In a survey last spring, the faculty voted 6 to 1 in favor of coeducation, but alumni opposed the change by 2 to 1, and 52.9 percent of current students declared against coeducation, 33.9 percent of them "strongly so." "Students here have lived under the system and enjoy it," says student-body president Cole Dawson. "Our student body is very conservative."

"Washington and Lee is not a national university, but a Southern university with a

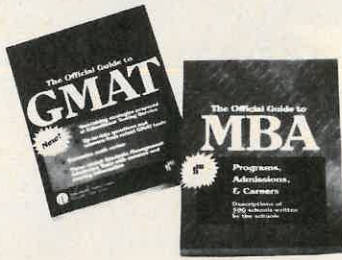
national constituency," says W&L president John Wilson, sitting across from a portrait of Lee in the president's residence, a house designed and built by the general. "There are values here that can be traced back to the best in Southern regional culture. There's a high sense of decency, civil-



Protest: Mixing frivolous and serious?

ity, courtesy, trust, honor. Lee came here out of the Southern military tradition with an almost Homeric vision of the gentleman." Legend has it that Lee took the book of regulations that dictated student conduct and threw it away, replacing it with the unwritten rule that every student should simply act as a gentleman. (Any violation, no matter how small, results in dismissal.) Today's students can literally see the legacy of Robert E. Lee. The Confederate leader and 15 members of his family are entombed on campus in the Lee Chapel, designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962. (Lee's horse, Traveller, is buried just outside.) Facing the chapel across a gently sloping expanse of lawn is the front campus, a group of five buildings that create the

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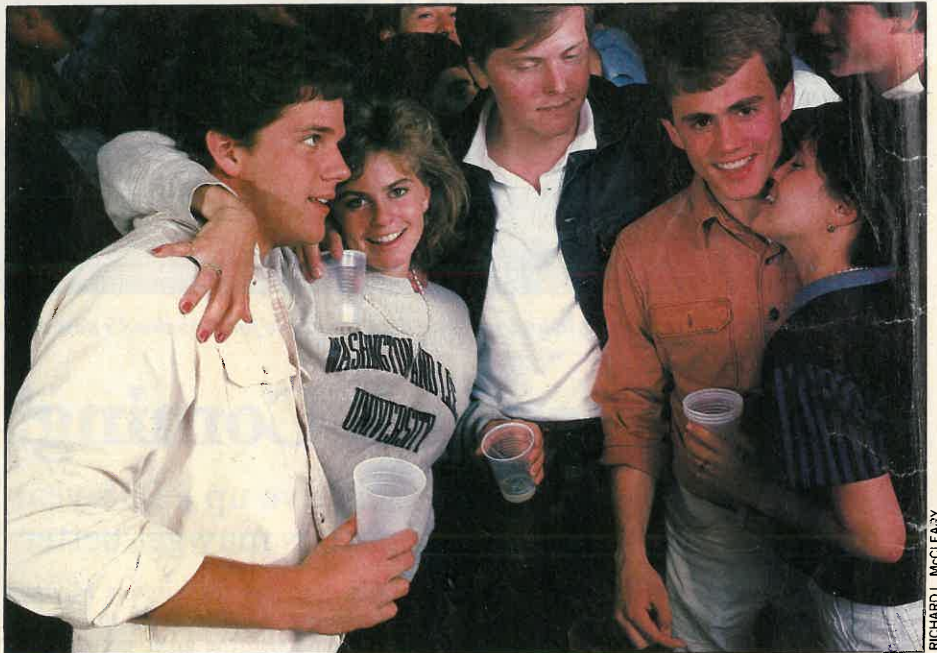
EDUCATION

visual trademark of W&L—a towering white colonnade standing in stark contrast to the deep-red brick structures.

How the general would react to newer traditions is problematical. Scratch a W&L gentleman and you'll likely hear the school's unofficial motto: "We work hard and we party hard." In addition to relaxing and socializing on weekends, W&L students now routinely take off Wednesday evenings to carouse. (And recently, W&L's on-campus hangout, the Cockpit, has become a popular place to spend a Tuesday evening.) Because it's a long drive to W&L from surrounding women's colleges such as Hollins and Sweet Briar, women usually need a good excuse, like a party, to spend an hour or

meetings between men and women. "It's like a meat market up here," said Ann Majors, a graduating senior at Hollins, which is 54 miles away in Roanoke. "You go through alcohol-induced meetings and half the time you don't remember who they are."

The social limits of the men's college are readily apparent to high-school seniors. In a recent W&L admissions-office survey of applicants who were accepted but chose to go elsewhere, more than one-third said that the school's all-male character was the most important reason. "There's no question that we've soft-pedaled the all-maleness of the institution," says admissions counselor Bennett Ross. "We've sold it as a quality institution."



Just your average Wednesday night on campus: 'We work hard and we party hard'

more driving to Lexington. "On Wednesday nights," says Frank Parsons, executive assistant to the president and university editor, "great swarms of women drive up. Some go to the library. Later in the evening, they make the rounds of the fraternities."

On one mild Wednesday evening last spring, the Phi Kappa Sigma fraternity was almost deserted at 10:30. Three men and one woman stood sipping beer in the dingy entryway furnished only by audio speakers chained to the wall. An hour later more than 100 people were dancing in the crowded parlor and overflowing onto the front steps. Beer flowed from two kegs and a stereo blasted "Let's Hear It for the Boy." John Henschel, then a sophomore in business administration, explained the thirst for partying: "You need to release a lot of tension when you have the chance." But the frequent parties can be explained another way: in a single-sex college, there are few opportunities for relaxed, unpressured

From that perspective, the W&L admissions office has had a strong product to sell. The institution enrolls about 1,350 undergraduates in the college (humanities and natural sciences) and the School of Commerce, Economics and Politics. With just under 150 faculty members, that works out to a rather cozy student-to-faculty ratio of fewer than 11 to 1, and class size averages just under 15. In recent years, freshman scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test have hovered around 550 verbal and just under 600 in math. But authorities feared that they could not maintain these standards at a time when W&L, like all colleges, faces a shrinking pool of customers. "We've admitted some students recently who wouldn't have gotten in in the past," says counselor Ross.

Spurred by admissions data and the arrival of new president Wilson (he came from all-female Wells College, where he had supported single-sex education), W&L's trustees last year inaugurated a sweeping study of the potential impact of coeducation

on all elements of the university. Opponents greeted even the possibility of women students with something less than enthusiasm. One trustee resigned from the board so that he could openly work against coeducation. A veteran professor declared, seriously: "The education of women is a trivial matter. The education of men is a serious matter. I don't think the frivolous and serious should mix." Among students, bumper stickers declaring, "Better Dead Than Coed" and "In the Hay But Not All Day" became popular and, at one point, W&L gentlemen draped a banner across the statue of George Washington atop Washington Hall that read "No More Marthas."

Some contended that groundwork for the admission of women had already been laid. Women have taken undergraduate courses at W&L—through an exchange program with other area colleges—since 1970, and the law school at W&L first admitted women in 1972, partly under pressure from law-school accrediting agencies. But at a place where an air of masculinity pervades every facet of university life—from student government to classroom give-and-take to campus camaraderie—the introduction of women at the undergraduate level has been considered by many to be a genuine threat to the "intangible" qualities of W&L. "Many of the values that exist here are subjective values, things that you know and feel inside yourself," says B. S. Stephenson, a 1942 W&L graduate who is now a professor of German. "A break with what has built up in the course of 235 years amounts to an alteration of personality and a discarding of values, many of which I consider worthwhile."

The change will be gradual. Current plans call for 80 or so women to be admitted next year, then increasing numbers until, by 1992, there will be about 500 women and 1,000 men. New dorm arrangements are a priority. Some fear that the change will hurt W&L's strong fraternity system—to which more than 60 percent of all undergraduates belong—and weak houses may die. On the other hand, two national sororities have already asked about establishing chapters.

The ultimate impact on this most traditional of institutions is, of course, unclear, but anticipation is growing. Most of the faculty see nothing but positives. "Women do look at some things differently," says Louis Hodges, professor of religion. "In my medical-ethics class, it's been difficult to get a sense of the emotional impact of an abortion." Admissions officers love their new prospects. They believe that even hardened alumni will soon be excited by the opportunity to send their daughters as well as their sons to W&L. And the evidence is already building. With the first coed class a year away, more than 500 women have inquired about attending W&L. They are eager to add a whole new melody to the Washington and Leeswing.

RON GIVENS in Lexington

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