

*Editor's Note:*

The following essay was written by 1980 alumnus Steve McCabe early in 2018, soon after the release of the *Report of the Commission on Institutional History and Community*. McCabe had submitted it to the secretary of the W&L Board of Trustees in the summer of 2018 with a request that it be distributed to each of the trustees while they were reading the report and before they acted upon its findings.

--Neely Young

## Contextualizing the Swastika on My Hat

*By Steve McCabe*

I never thought of the “Trident” athletic logo of my *alma mater*, Washington and Lee University, as looking at all like a swastika—that is, until I read the recently released *Report of the Commission on Institutional History and Community* at W&L. That’s where I found the comment that the Trident, which has graced W&L athletic uniforms and banners since 1904 and currently adorns one of my hats, “is mistaken for a swastika,” according to a faculty member.



In the 44 years since I entered the university and at various times have worn clothing bearing the Trident, I have never had anyone ask why I was wearing a swastika. I wondered now why such an incomprehensible notion has emerged. Reading the commission’s report, I think I now understand.

According to the commission, “The university reveres its 19th-century past almost without qualification and is content to offer mostly minor contextualization and little critical analysis.” Well, the 136 pages of the report tries mightily to right this perceived wrong by offering plenty of “contextualization,” which, as far as I can tell, seems to be simply a euphemism for qualification and criticism. Much of the commission’s work has been focused on how Robert E. Lee’s legacy as president of then-Washington College from 1865 until his death in 1870 is conveyed on campus—particularly in Lee Chapel, where he and his family are interred. The commission seeks to contextualize every aspect of W&L’s history, from its namesakes and benefactors to the race and gender of those depicted in the portraits hanging throughout campus.



How Lee’s legacy ought to be recognized today begins with how that legacy began, when Lee died almost 150 years ago. In 1870, the Lee Memorial Association and Lee’s widow commissioned sculptor Edward Valentine to create a memorial statue. Valentine responded with a white marble recumbent statue of Lee, asleep at a battlefield. Today, the commission has contextualized this statue of the sleeping Lee as a manifestation of the “Lost Cause Narrative” of the South and therefore embarrassing to the university at best and somehow hostile and discomfiting at worst. “Students have stated feeling uncomfortable or undervalued when mandated to admire [Lee’s] tenure at W&L,” the report states.

It made me wonder, first, how students are “mandated to admire Lee’s tenure at W&L” but, more importantly, whether the commission is comfortable with a W&L faculty member comparing the Trident

to a swastika—and its implicit “undervaluation” of the Holocaust, which saw more than six million Jews and an almost equal number of Poles, Slavs, Roma, and others systematically murdered by those wearing real swastikas.

At the risk of oversimplifying the statue, I wonder whether the Lee Memorial Association and Valentine wanted to convey a sense of Lee the general at rest and therefore at peace—with himself, with the outcome of the war, with his role in how he waged it and, most importantly, how he ended it. Valentine’s statue humanizes Lee and, consequently, the mythos surrounding him, and this, I suspect, is what the commission finds so troubling: how might it “contextualize” the achievement of a leader, question his motives and those of his admirers, and convince future generations they have been misled—and do it all within the context of a sleeping man?

It’s a tall order for the commission. After all, Valentine’s statue shows us that even our strongest leaders must take rest. Escaping temporarily the horrors of war, Lee sleeping conveys not only the humanity of the man but, like all art, instructs quietly, suggests a direction, offers a different context: *exhale, fall to sleep, let the world go, escape from it—even if only fitfully and briefly.*

Toward that end, here’s my take on the commission’s admonition about the statue’s misappropriation of the “Haptic experience of space” (go ahead and Google it; I did) in Lee Chapel. Hardly threatened or made to feel uncomfortable or undervalued by visiting Lee Chapel, I always found the space and Lee’s sleeping marble presence there calming, centering, reassuring. The chapel was almost always empty, quiet, and cool when I’d visit, occasionally with just a tourist or two ambling through, but more often than not, it was just me and the sleeping Lee.

Every time I visited, Lee pointed me toward this conclusion: *while we sleep, life continues—and we will wake to face its challenges.* Comparing my problems at the time to Lee’s was always both humbling and heartening. It was healthy and liberating to put my worries about, say, the outcome of an overdue paper or an upcoming exam or whether that young woman I’d been thinking about was also thinking about me into the context of Lee’s worries about the outcome of, say, an Antietam or a Gettysburg or the civilians in the path of General William Tecumseh Sherman’s March to the Sea.

The odd compounded negations of W&L’s motto, “*Non in cautus futuri,*” or “Not unmindful of the future,” might provide context. Neither illegal nor inexcusable in the past, slavery is both illegal and inexcusable in the present. But ingratitude has always been inexcusable. We all owe Lee a debt of gratitude for ending the war unequivocally and with the most benign of conditions—especially given the immense pressure he was under from the likes of Confederacy President Jefferson Davis to adopt a guerilla strategy to continue the war (a prospect many military historians feel certain would have altered its political outcome).

The notion that there is only one context for Lee’s association with W&L—and that it can or should be imposed as the only one for making decisions regarding how his legacy is conveyed—isn’t just authoritarian and didactic: it is indicative of a level of ingratitude that is inexcusable.

And ingratitude is the fundamental issue here. The generosity of W&L’s benefactors, especially its namesakes, has not only made the university a leading liberal arts institution but saved it from bankruptcy and dissolution at critical junctures. In 1826, enrollment had dwindled to some 65 students before

benefactor John Robinson's estate, including 73 slaves, was bequeathed to then-Washington College, saving it from insolvency. While Robinson Hall, a central building in W&L's National Register of Historic Places-listed colonnade, is named after this benefactor, the very existence of the university today is probably attributable to the critical timing of Robinson's bequest—and fellow slave-owner George Washington's 1796 gift of \$20,000 in James River Canal Company stock before that, and General Lee's gift of name recognition and leadership afterward.

These and other benefactors since have built W&L's comfortable (more than \$1.6B) endowment today. Could they have then imagined the kind of success their philanthropy would afford the university? Could they ever have envisioned the university today would be appointing a commission to attempt to hide their contributions? Is it possible to contextualize that all of this would be moot were it not for the generosity and leadership of the benefactors and namesakes of the university?

It is a privilege to receive a gift and a trait of privilege to bestow one. Every gift is inextricably tied to privilege. In the nineteenth century, some people of privilege owned slaves. Many of them, like John Robinson, made a gift of their estate, which included slaves. As uncomfortable as that nineteenth century notion makes us today, in the twenty-first, the underlying sentiment—philanthropic generosity—endures. A thoughtful response, one mindful of the future, would do well to respect and honor the same enduring altruism that saved W&L and sustains and nurtures it today.

Meanwhile, I will continue to wear my Trident-bearing W&L hat. I'm hopeful I'll be able to share with anyone who might ask about the Trident how it's emblematic of a university that recognizes and respects the critical role of its namesakes and benefactors in making its success possible today.

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