

W&M students push for campus to change faster

Many want Confederate tributes gone, but college not so sure about others



Students walk past Morton Hall at William & Mary in Williamsburg on March 12. During February's Board of Visitors meeting, W&M president Katherine Rowe asked the board members to consider renaming three buildings before April's meeting, including Morton Hall, named for Richard Lee Morton, longtime chairman of W&M's history department. Some of his writings express racist views. Kristen Zeis/Staff photos



This statue of Thomas Jefferson stands between McGlothlin and Washington Hall at William & Mary in Williamsburg on March 12.

BY MAGGIE MORE STAFF WRITER

Institutions nationwide began divesting themselves of slaveholding and Confederate symbols, names and statues in response to nationwide protests sparked by George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers last summer, and the Historic Triangle has been no exception.

With a spring semester enrollment of 8,914 students at the College of William & Mary, there's a diversity of opinions on campus and among alumni when it comes to renaming buildings, adding context or removing monuments, and reckoning with past racism — as there is across the rest of the country.

Some universities, such as Clemson and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, decided to remove statues and rename buildings on campus last summer, according to Inside Higher Ed.

In Harrisonburg, James Madison University started to rename three buildings last month that had been named for Confederate military leaders.

In Charlottesville, the University of

Virginia has taken steps since the deadly Unite the Right rally in 2017 to address its past as a university built by enslaved people and that it had been supportive of the Confederacy. The university created a committee in February to rename two buildings. It will also remove two Confederate monuments and add historical context to a statue of Thomas Jefferson, who owned slaves.

By and large, students at W&M are in favor of renaming buildings with ties to racists, slaveholders and Confederate figures, and judging from repeated campus protests, they would like the school to act quickly.

Anthony Joseph, a senior at the university and president of the Student Assembly, said that the names of buildings on campus and their relationship to slavery and the Confederacy can deeply affect Black students like himself.

“For someone of color, that trauma is very much present,” Joseph said. “That history is very much present.”

Prominent examples are the buildings and features named for the Tyler family. John Tyler was the 10th U.S. president and a W&M alumnus, and he and his descendants are well represented on campus, between Tyler Hall and the Tyler Family Garden, both on the oldest part of campus near the Wren Building.

The history department is also named for John Tyler’s son, Lyon Gardiner Tyler, who was W&M president from 1888 to 1919. He authored several writings used to defend Jim Crow laws and argued the Civil War was not fought over slavery, but because Northern states rejected the South’s legal rights. As president of the university, Lyon Tyler did manage to get the school’s finances in order, and it was under his tenure that W&M first admitted women. But some students say it’s difficult to overlook his racist views.

W&M has stated that further research is needed to determine which member of the Tyler family Tyler Hall is named for and what the next steps should be. It now acknowledges Tyler’s complicated legacy on its website. But for the students of color who take their government classes in the building, the notion that its namesake may have painted slavery as acceptable is unsettling.

“There are hate groups that use his materials against us,” Joseph said. “We have to wrestle with that every single day.”

It’s just one example of the naming quandaries the university faces. Thomas Jefferson, who graduated from W&M in 1762 and wrote the Declaration of Independence, has a residence hall named for him and a statue on campus. He owned more than 600 enslaved people in the course of his life and fathered several children with his slave, Sally Hemmings.

For Black students, Jefferson cannot be seen as just the author of the Declaration of Independence, Joseph said — “he was the writer and a slaveholder.”

In February's Board of Visitors meeting, W&M president Katherine Rowe asked board members to consider renaming three buildings before April's meeting: Cary Field, named for plantation owner and Virginia colonial leader Archibald Cary; Morton Hall, named for Richard Lee Morton, longtime chairman of W&M's history department; and Taliaferro Hall, named for rector of the college, Board of Visitors president, and Confederate army Brig. Gen. William Booth Taliaferro.

Students and university work groups have called attention to several other ways the Confederacy, the Jim Crow South and slavery are manifested on the campus.

Ewell Hall is one such building, named for Benjamin Stoddard Ewell, a Confederate army officer and the 16th president of W&M who reopened the school with his own funds after the Civil War. Another is Blair Hall, named for the Rev. James Blair, one of the co-founders of W&M, first president of the college and owner of at least two slaves who were leased to help build the President's House and the Brafferton, then a school to re-educate Native Americans in the ways of Christianity.

It's a familiar tension nationwide, and one that W&M is working to move through.

Bringing 'the community along'

Students, many of whom are taking part in social justice protests on and off campus, say they want the university to shed the names of all slaveholders, including the Founding Fathers, and they often want change at a faster pace than W&M is moving.

Salimata Sanfo, a junior, has been organizing various social justice efforts on campus since her freshman year, and works with the student organization Political Latinxs United for Movement and Action in Society. In a phone interview, she said she "completely understand(s) having a discussion" about renaming when it comes to the Founding Fathers, but she feels that those buildings and "anything tied to the Confederacy" should be renamed.

As part of her protest efforts, she has had various student groups share on their social media accounts racist quotes that came from many of the individuals for whom some campus buildings are named. So far, at least 40 different quotes have been posted by various groups, Sanfo said.

Activism is an important path for students to express what they believe in, W&M Rector John Littel said, even when it creates tension with the administration.

"Tension does not have to be unhealthy," he said. "We should have healthy tension on a lot of things. I fully understand the passion and the energy and the urgency of students, and that's good. We encourage people to be engaged."

Will Wasson, a white third-year law student who served as the representative from the Student Bar Association to the Student Assembly and is still involved with the Student Assembly's Reparations Committee, is another of those engaged students.

"I'm in favor of all renaming, I think," he said. But while Wasson has his own opinions about which buildings should be renamed and which should simply have signs adding context, "at the same time, I don't think my personal opinion really matters as much."

"It's not my ancestors that (slaveholders) owned, tortured and raped," he said. "It's not me." Instead, he tries to "listen to Black voices on campus" and support them in their efforts, pushing the Board of Visitors and university administration to move quickly.

As a future lawyer, he added, "statistics say I'm probably going to make a fair amount of money, and whether or not I'm going to be giving money to the college is based on how they act right now."

Fanchon Glover, W&M's chief diversity officer, said it's important to listen to students and student leadership, especially when it comes to fully understanding the perspective of the entire W&M community. The frustration comes when students, who want to see change happen while they attend the school, end up having to wait.

"Because change does not come as quickly, you're planting the seed for things to happen soon, but it may not be within their time that they're here as students," Glover said.

"We have a responsibility to the entire community," Littel said. In moving so carefully and deliberately, W&M aims "to bring the community along," Littel said.

Not everyone agrees that renaming buildings is needed.

Alumna Mary Lewis Chapman attended W&M in the early 1950s and attended classes taught by Richard Lee Morton, a history professor at the university for decades and the namesake for Morton Hall. The building is under consideration for renaming because some of his writings, including his book "The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1865-1902," express racist views.

In a letter to the editor published in The Virginia Gazette on March 6, Chapman said that she remembered Morton as a "fine, caring teacher," and found it "distressing" to hear that Morton Hall would be renamed.

"Trying to rewrite history is foolish," Chapman said in an email to the Gazette. "We need to build on our forebears, with all their faults."

But for W&M's administration, learning from the past doesn't mean the campus will never change.

"Our campus landscape is constantly evolving," Littel said. "It's not the campus that Thomas Jefferson walked across, it's not the campus that (chancellor) Robert Gates walked across," and years from now, it will look different to the students attending now.

The issues that affect students of color are issues that affect everyone at W&M, senior Shane Moran said in a phone call. "If you are a white person, this is your problem, too."

For example, it wasn't just enslaved Black people that the line "all men are created equal" didn't apply to when the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, Moran said — "poor people, women, ordinary white people who didn't own land, Thomas Jefferson wasn't a big fan of them either."

The hope in moving slowly and clearly laying out the process "is helping people realize that our campus, and our community, is a living organism," Littel said. "It includes our history, it includes our present, it includes our future," all manifested in the physical parts of the campus.

That careful pace for change is something that appeals to other alumni, such as Bill Cole, owner of the York River Inn in Yorktown and a 1970 W&M graduate.

As a local historian, he's hesitant to make hasty decisions about renaming when it comes to an issue that has really "exploded" in the past couple years. He added that it's important to "take what's good" from figures who kept W&M alive, or who fought, served and made legitimate sacrifices for their countries — even soldiers defending the Confederacy.

But it's important to remove monuments to those who worked to uphold oppressive structures, he said.

He's in "total agreement" with contextualizing building names or monuments to figures such as Jefferson or Ewell, to reflect their slaveholding or Confederate pasts.

"Our history is our history. I think we ought to honor things that we are proud of," Cole said, but also to remember the bad and add monuments to those who fought against oppression.

"I hate saying to take the names off, but I have to say, this is the 21st century," Cole said in a phone call. It's time to "reject the past when it's inappropriate, and move into the future."

The more the diverse history of the school is reflected in different names, Littel said, the less any one piece will detract from the whole.

The three parts of campus that will be under consideration at April's Board of Visitors meeting aren't the end of that work, said Littel. They're part of an extended sequence of efforts by the university, begun a couple of decades ago and continuing into the future.

"This is not once and done — this is something we need to do really forever," he said.

"Although it may not seem to be moving fast, I think there is the urgency of now, and that's because — what we experienced over the summer, last summer, was not just kind of a moment in time," Glover said. "This has become a movement, and it is not something that is going to stop. It's bringing to the center and the focus issues that we have not dealt with in the past."

That's something that, to a large extent, the university administration and students agree on.

"The reality is, the community is people, and it is constantly evolving," Littel said.

And in moving toward a campus that reflects all of those people and that evolution — with all the back-and-forth, push-and-pull it entails — the goal is finding a way to move together as one group toward a more inclusive campus.

"We should all be fighting for it, no matter what our background is," Moran said. "Because we're all one William & Mary."

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