

Chapel Latest Battleground

W&L's Efforts To Address Its Past Puts University Chapel In Spotlight
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From the earliest of days, Washington and Lee University's chapel has played a constantly evolving role on the university's campus and in Lexington.

It has also been the center of numerous controversies, from a plan in the 1920s to demolish and rebuild the chapel to the removal of Confederate battle replicas in this century.

Now the chapel is the focal point of the latest chapter in the debate over how the school should reckon with its past, a chapter that was sparked by death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black resident of Minneapolis, Minn., at the hands of a police officer in 2020 and the calls for racial justice across the country that followed.

The university has faced calls for change from its student body, faculty and many alumni in the years since then. With the same passion, the university has also been urged by other alumni and students to resist those calls for change and stop "rewriting" history.

Although the school's board of trustees decided last year not to rename the school, it did change the name of Lee Chapel to University Chapel and directed that the portraits and plaques be removed from its walls and that a wall be built to separate the original 1868 chapel from the 1883 annex, the part that includes the recumbent statute of former school president and Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

The proposal to build the wall has many people rife with anger, anger that has been expressed in billboards and newspaper ads over the past year.

But it is not the "wrongness" or "rightness" of the wall that is in play this fall – it's whether or not the wall can be built according to safety standards.

At the moment, the university's plan to build the wall is stalled. On Nov. 14, the Lexington and the Buena Vista Joint Board of Building Code Appeals unanimously denied the university's attempt to overturn a decision by building inspector Steve Paulk.

After an 11-month review, on Oct. 4, Paulk had denied issuing a building permit that would have allowed the university to construct the wall separating the "University Chapel from the Chapel Museum."

He concluded that the university's plans for the wall would have restricted people from exiting the auditorium portion of the chapel safely in the event of an emergency like a fire or mass shooting.

"As a building official for the city, it is my responsibility to protect the health and the safety of citizens of the commonwealth," Paulk said. "I wouldn't be living up to my oath as a building official if I approved this."

Even though the university planned to construct a hidden door in the wall, the appeals board reasoned that in the event of an emergency, it would still put people in danger. The board was concerned that since the door would only become unlocked if a fire alarm was pulled, it would create "life-safety" hazards. Also, the board reasoned that the narrowness of the door would create a bottleneck that would threaten both attendees to the chapel and first responders alike.

Nevertheless, Steve Blaine, a Charlottesville-based lawyer representing the university, and Charles Piper, an architect from Quinn Evans who designed plans for the wall, argued that the chapel's designation as a historic landmark in 1960 means it does not have to conform to current building codes.

However, adaptations to historic landmarks that make them less code compliant are not allowed.

In order to be approved, the university would have had to have shown that the construction of the wall either maintained or improved the current level of “life-safety” in the chapel today. The appeals board affirmed Paulk’s conclusion that the proposed wall would have “created two separate buildings with two occupancies and two different levels,” and posed a substantial risk to “life-safety.”

“The place is woefully inadequate in the number of exits,” board chairman H.E. Ravenhorst said. “If that were addressed, then all this wouldn’t be a problem. The wall could go anywhere we want it.”

The university is now deciding what to do next.

In an email from Drewery Sackett, executive director of communications and public affairs, on Nov. 18, she stated that the “timing of the University Chapel renovations depends on completing the permitting process. We are currently considering our next steps following Monday’s hearing.”

Other Changes

The statue of Lee asleep in his Confederate military uniform on a battlefield has rested in an alcove visible from the original part of the chapel since 1883, after the addition to the 1868 chapel was completed.

The chapel was built during Lee’s time as president at the then Washington College, 1865-1870.

For many years, the walls surrounding the Edward Valentine sculpture of Lee held original Confederate battle flags, those being replaced with replica flags in 1995. But those replicas were removed by then-President Kenneth Ruscio in 2014 following a protest by a group of law students demanding that the school stop glorifying Lee and acknowledge his and the university’s ownership of slaves.

Throughout much of its history, Lee Chapel also contained a number of plaques, as well as portraits of Lee and George Washington.

Following the directive of the board of trustees last year to return the original part of the chapel to a “simple, unadorned” space for university gatherings, those 20 plaques and the two most recent portraits of Lee and Washington that hung beside the alcove have now all been removed.

Three of those plaques, two honoring World War I veterans and one honoring a Vietnam War veteran, were installed on the Memorial Gate at the Jefferson Street entrance to campus on Oct. 25. The remaining plaques are in temporary storage, Sackett said.

“Most of them will be moved to galleries within the chapel itself or to the new history museum, where they can be displayed with more historical context,” Sackett said. “The Liberty Hall Volunteers plaque [which hung in the vestibule of the chapel] will be contextualized as part of the new exhibit currently being planned for the gallery on the upper level of the annex, adjacent to the Lee statue.”

A location for the university museum mentioned by Sackett was proposed this year as part of W&L’s latest master plan. The site on Lee Avenue, above a proposed new garage, was not approved by the city when it approved the master plan, in part because of concerns about the traffic flow from the garage and loss of parking along Lee Avenue.

The university, said Sackett, is continuing to develop plans, consider possible locations, and fundraise for the museum.

As far as the most recent portraits of Lee and Washington to hang in the chapel goes – the 1796 Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington and the 1866 J. Reid portrait of Lee – they are on display in the new “Setting the Stage” exhibit in the galleries on the lower level of the building.

The Charles Willson Peale portrait of Washington as a colonel in the Virginia Regiment that long hung in Lee Chapel is on loan to Mount Vernon until April 2023 and will return to W&L to be displayed in a prominent space on campus prior to moving to its permanent home in the new museum of institutional history.

The Theodore Pine portrait of Lee is part of an exhibit in the lower level of the building.

The 2021 Decision

The plan to build a wall permanently separating Lee's statue from public view for visitors to the chapel auditorium was part of the board of trustees' statement in June of 2021 following an 11-month review of the university's history with race.

Much of the attention during the review process and after its conclusion was focused on whether to change the name of the university, which the board voted 22-6 not to do.

The board reasoned that there was little agreement on what to do.

"We found no consensus about whether changing the name of our university is consistent with our shared values. Nor is there a consensus on whether changing the name will position the university to be the most successful it can be in the future," the board wrote in its June 2021 decision.

"The name we have had for 151 years, and upon which our reputation is built, provides strength and resources critical to advancing our mission and ensuring that we can do good work long into the future. Therefore, we will continue as Washington and Lee University."

Despite not renaming the university, the trustees announced other commitments to improving modern-day racial inequities. They adopted a new design for university diplomas that no longer feature Lee or Washington. They also discontinued Founders Day, traditionally held on the birthday of Robert E. Lee.

The trustees also pledged to raise \$160 million to achieve need-blind admissions as well as committing to dedicate the earnings on \$40 million worth of endowments until 2026 to, among other things, "support a new academic center for the study of Southern race relations, culture, and politics."

Additionally, the trustees stated that the university planned to rename Lee Chapel as University Chapel and would "approve interior changes to ... physically separate the auditorium from the Lee family crypt and Lee memorial sculpture."

In the year since the trustees' announcement, conservative alumni have gone to great lengths to "protect Lee." No group has been more vocal in opposing university changes in recent years than The Generals Redoubt which was founded in 2018 to advocate for restoring Lee's legacy. The group has made its positions known by sponsoring billboards, purchasing ads in this newspaper, holding events, and even mobilizing members to attend meetings dealing with university history.

"We should celebrate Lee and his legacy in terms of the contributions that he made to a school ... and we think it's worth preserving and not worth having his legacy denigrated and desecrate the way the current administration is," 1963 W&L graduate and TGR president Thomas P. Rideout said during an interview in September.

Members of The Generals Redoubt packed the appeals hearing on the proposed wall despite the fact that the hearing pertained only to the safety of the building, not whether or not it should be built in the first place.

Members turned out after a notice, from Kenneth G. Everett, a 1964 W&L graduate, saying that Lee's statue "has become the primary target" of Washington and Lee's board of trustees campaign of "desecrating the Chapel."

Also, outside of Lexington, along U.S. 11, a billboard sponsored by The Generals Redoubt reads "Build No Wall!" and shows the Lee statue being overtaken by a sea of bricks.

What Do Students, Professors Think?

Only a few current students seem aware of the proposed wall. Those who do know of the plans have expressed mixed opinions about the university's handling of the situation.

Kameron Spivey, a junior at Washington and Lee, is coeditor-in-chief of the conservative student magazine, *The Spectator*, and has been the most vocal student critic of the university.

"I am glad to see the building code experts uphold Mr. Paulk's decision. While I have long been opposed to the ahistorical denigration of Lee Chapel, National Historic Landmark, life-safety is an entirely greater factor that W&L must consider — whether they want to or not. I hope to see the matter resolved without further appeal, so that the university can focus on the actual concerns of their students," Spivey said last week.

Other students aware of the controversy feel just as strongly but on the opposite side of the issue.

Shae Reinberg, a Black student and current sophomore, strongly supports the university's plans for the chapel.

"I would support W&L putting up a wall," Reinberg said. "I do not want to see the statue because it is a remnant of a racist legacy, one that supports the enslavement of Africans and racial discrimination."

Overall, many see the chapel as a proxy war for the larger controversy that continues to face the campus — whether or not to change the name of the nearly 300-year-old institution and how to teach about the university's past. Across the board, students and faculty on both sides of the name change issue lamented how the university has dealt with its history.

"Students (and faculty) don't learn about Robert E. Lee and his unparalleled presidency," said Spivey. "Students do not even learn about the enslaved families who built this campus, or John Chavis, who attended this school, because the W&L administration has been so focused on removing Lee that they have completely neglected the other 268 years."

"I am not aware of any actions the university has taken in response to the killing of George Floyd aside from renaming a couple of buildings," Reinberg said. "I think there are more actions for the university to take [to improve inclusivity]."

Likewise, some professors also expressed dissatisfaction with how the university is addressing its history and the decision to not change the school's name.

"Lee is a stain on the university's past, present and future. He was a traitor and he fought for the right of rich people to own other people. For those reasons, he is unworthy of the honor of being included in the university's name," Journalism professor Toni Locy said in an email last week.

"The only way the university can truly overcome its past is to stop worshipping Lee inside and outside of physical structures," she wrote. "The board of trustees made a purely business decision to stick with Lee because alums and parents withheld millions of dollars in donations. Refusing to change the name came down to money, lots of it."

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At the forefront of many conversations involving diversity and inclusion on campus today is how the university can rectify the past as it deals with the present and future.

Many students, faculty, and alumni have commended gains in diversity on campus with the current 1,860 undergraduate students at Washington and Lee more racially diverse than ever before and more women attending today than at almost any other time since the university began admitting women in 1985.

Nevertheless, many still want more to be done to increase the number of people of color on campus and reckon with the university's past.

When the dust settles on the current controversy over the university's chapel, the question of whether or not to build a wall may not be decided along the lines of whether or not it is right or wrong to prominently feature a statue of Lee. It may in fact be decided by a building official finding that a wall would make the building less safe.