

Historical Documents of the Washington Literary Society and Debating Union

Transcribed and Republished by Patrick Morgan (Spring 2015)



Preamble to the 1860 Constitution

Oratory has, in every age, exerted an influence on the political, social, and moral conditions of Nations. As governments have changed from despotic to republican, and as man has advanced in culture and civilization, this influence has become more important, until, in our age and country, its sway is almost omnipotent.

Sensible, then, of the power which oratory possesses for good or evil, we have formed this association for the purpose of improving in this art, and we have called it the Washington Society, that its name, recalling the deeds of the "Illustrious Father of American Liberty," may animate us with the desire of using the power here attained, for the good of our country, and the weal of our countrymen.

As we are thus associated in the pursuit of a common, noble object, it is our desire to also be closely united by the strong and lasting ties of friendship, and thus prove ourselves worthy of the noble sentiment our badges bear:

"Quam Fluctus Diversi, Quam Mare Conjuncti"

Virginia's Literary Societies – An Historical Sketch

The Washington Society

“Quam fluctus diversi, quam mare conjuncti.” - Motto.

The history of the Washington Literary Society is, for the most part, a history of the University of Virginia. During the decades since it was founded in 1831 during the eighth session of the University, as “the Academic Society,” it has been close to the heart of the University life that many of Virginia’s choicest memories cluster around its venerable name.

By scanning the biographies of the University's famous sons, one finds many of them pointing with pride to the days when in this miniature forum of free debate, they contested for student honors and received their first lessons in the art of public speaking, in which many of them later attained such distinction. Henry W. Grady, Robert E. Toombs, Edward W. Carmack, Col. William E. Peters, Col. John S. Mosby, Joseph W. Bailey, and many other celebrated names were once written on its roll-book and are proudly claimed alike by the University and the Washington Society.

Its beginnings were small. It was first organized by a dozen or more students who were desirous of cultivating the art of debate and oratory. Its meetings were held in the Proctor’s office. The members that gathered at these weekly meetings were in earnest and worked hard. As the University grew, “Wash. Hall,” as the society has come to be popularly known, expanded and became more prominently connected with college activities.

In 1845, with the help of two well-known members of the Charlottesville bar, Mr. N. H. Massie and Mr. John F. Cochran, the society was established upon a firm basis, a suitable room, located where its present hall now stands, was secured and its constitution was revised to meet the more formidable conditions of the growing organization. The coat of arms of George Washington was adopted as its insignia and was worn by its members. All students were made eligible for membership, the only requirement being the payment of one dollar as a yearly fee.

In each meeting orations were delivered and political and literary questions were discussed. At the end of each year diplomas were awarded to the most talented members of the association, the manifestations of popular approval, for we are lead to believe that the recipients were chosen by vote of the society, being regarded as no small honors.

The Southerner has always been a lover of eloquence and literature and it is no wonder that the literary societies became the most popular activities of collegiate life. Up to the time of the War between the States, Wash. Hall steadily grew. During the fifties its membership averaged from eighty to one hundred men. Its hall was enlarged. In conjunction with the Jefferson Society, in 1856 it assumed the control of *The University Magazine*. This magazine, whose scope was even broader than that of the literary societies, did much to simulate literary endeavor on the part of the students and although it was comparatively short-lived, its publications contained poems and prose of considerable merit, and it paved the way for the greater *University of Virginia Magazine*.

But just at the time when the prospect for Wash. hall appeared at its brightest, the great political dissension, which for a time shook the states apart, was felt at the university, when the peace of Academic retreats and literary seclusion fled, and the issues of war became paramount in the minds of men.

When Virginia seceded from the Union, Wash. hall showed her loyalty to her mother state by turning over all her funds to the Governor of Virginia for the defense of the Commonwealth.

The societies discontinued the publication of the *Magazine* and suspended their meetings, as many of their members left to join the ranks of the Confederacy.

At the beginning of the session 1865, after many of its former members had returned to the University, the meetings were resumed. After many difficulties of reorganization the society assumed its former position among University activities. In 1866 the record shows eighty-six members enrolled and each succeeding year added its increase.

The old custom of inviting some eminent orator to deliver an address at the joint meetings of the literary societies at "Finals" was continued. The records of these occasions, both before and after the war, show the speakers to have been such men as Edward Everett, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John W. Daniel, Chauncey M. Depew and many others of equal celebrity.

Medals were given at the end of each year to the best orator and debater, but the greatest honor of all was to be chosen president of the society. The contestants and their friends engaged in the most strenuous campaigns, and before the elections free dinners, campaign literature, and all the other methods of winning popularity were in order, many of the candidates going so far as to offer their friends free initiation fees in order to persuade them to join the society and, indirectly or directly as you please, to vote "right."

On the whole, "Wash. Hall" during the years since the War has been highly successful, its membership increasing and its work in parliamentary law and student oratory attaining a higher standard as time went on. While popularity of college oratory has somewhat decreased in the last few years, yet today "Wash, Hall," shadowed by an illustrious past, in advancing in its worthy work – teaching the student member the faculty of "thinking on his feet" as it has been roughly called, familiarizing him with the important questions which confront America as a people, and instilling into his mind its motto so American in its concept, "Quam fluctus diversi, quam mare conjuncti."

Paul G. Ballard

Date and Publication Unknown

Letter to Gov. Dalton

2634 Clairmont Court

Columbus, OH 43220

December 22, 1980

The Honorable John N. Dalton

Governor's Office

State Capitol Building, Capitol Square

Richmond, VA 23219

Dear Governor Dalton,

Next year the Washington Literary Society and Debating Union of the University of Virginia celebrates its 150th anniversary, having been founded at the University in 1851. We are trying to put our financial records in order for a sesquicentennial presentation on the state of the Society, and would like to request your assistance with some clarification on the current status of a particular financial transaction that took place between the Society and the Commonwealth of Virginia before you took office.

As you are probably aware, in 1861, the Washington Society voted unanimously that the funds of the Society, some \$200.00, be "placed in the hands of the Governor of Virginia for the defense of the state in the present war with the United States," which was accordingly done. Probably as a result of certain turmoil in Virginia between 1861 and 1865, we have no records as to whether the sum given to the governor (a predecessor of yours) was loaned or contributed. If the money was loaned, we would appreciate confirmation of repayment or some indication of the status of the loan. Please be assured we are not demanding repayment at this time, having full confidence that the Confederacy is good for its debts. If the funds in question were simply contributed, we would be interested in receiving an account of how the funds were spent.

The Washington Society invites you to address the Society in person these points and suggests that you might consider our annual banquet on George Washington's birthday an appropriate occasion. Accordingly, please allow me to officially extend to you the invitation to speak at our banquet and cordially to request the presence of you and your wife for dinner at the 1981 Washington Society Final Celebration Banquet on Saturday, February 21, in the Rotunda of the University in Charlottesville at 8:00 p.m., cocktails beginning at 6:30.

Let me add that the Society would be happy to assume the expenses of your transportation to and from the event and is willing to help with whatever arrangements might be necessary to make your stay in Charlottesville a pleasant and enjoyable one.

On behalf of the Society, I look forward to hearing from you in the near future on this matter and thank you for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,

Victoria A. Saker

Secretary, The Washington Literary
Society and Debating Union

Response from Gov. Dalton's Office

March 20, 1981

Miss Victoria A. Saker

Secretary

Washington Literary Society

and Debating Union

2634 Clairmont Court

Columbus, Ohio 43220

My dear Miss Saker,

I am responding on behalf of his Excellency, the Honorable John. N. Dalton, to a portion of letter of December 11, 1980, concerning the status of your gift or loan to the Commonwealth of Virginia in the amount of \$200. Please excuse the delay in response but since it was a matter already somewhat aged, I did not place it in the urgent category.

While your concern over the fate of this transaction may be somewhat belated, I am glad, nonetheless, to be able to set your mind at rest concerning it.

A thorough check of our files located the Society's letter to-hand of 10 May 1861 addressed to the late Governor Letcher, of which a copy is enclosed for your information.

The mail obviously moved a bit more quickly in those days, and we have a notation dated 13 May 1861 indicating that your check was received and deposited in the Treasury of the Commonwealth.

However, it is regrettable to inform you that it was not a loan; but an outright gift; "... and request you to employ the same in such a manner as in your judgment shall most advance the interest of our common cause – the defense of the South."

I regret that I cannot give you an accounting of exactly how the \$200 was spent, other than to say that it was deposited and commingled with other state funds in the Treasury, but I am confident it was handled prudently.

As Secretary of Administration and Finance, I could only wish that the example of your distinguished predecessors of 1861 in sending an unsolicited contribution to Richmond would be more often emulated in the modern world. We are waging a new war on Federalism and accepting any assistance you might provide.

Please let me know whenever I can be of service to the Society.

Very respectfully yours,

Charles B. Baker

“Washington Society Resurrected”

The Washington Literary Society and Debating Union, formed in 1831 and disbanded in 1929, has been revived at the University.

Fourth-year student Leslie Eliason, the society’s president and first female member, said reorganizational meetings were held during the past year on the steps of Washington Hall, next to an 1869 plaque commemorating the Washington Society. In 1869, the society gave money for the construction of Washington Hall as its meetingplace. Washington Hall now houses the University’s planning office.

Society meetings are being held in Jefferson Hall, the home of the Jefferson Society. Each Thursday night at 8 p.m., the Washington Literary Society gathers for literary readings and debate.

In the 19th century, the Washington Society had what Ms. Eliason calls a “friendly rivalry” with the Jefferson Society. Today, not only do the societies share the same meeting place, but members of the Washington Society also may be members of the Jefferson Society. Unlike the Jefferson Society, the Washington Society will focus more on debates than speeches, with the floor open for discussion.

Fall and spring literary contests have been planned, in addition to a Founder’s Day banquet on Washington’s birthday.

The Cavalier Daily

Thursday, September 11, 1980

“The New Kid”

Besides the ring and secret societies, the University has two societies devoted to ideas. Tonight it will gain a third.

A group of students will meet in Jefferson Hall at 7:30 to revive the Washington Literary Society and Debating Union, defunct since 1929.

The Washington Society joins the Jefferson Literary and Debating Society and the John B. Minor Pre-Legal Society.

Though the Washington Society shares much with the two existing groups, it offers some refreshing contrasts. It will focus more on debates than speeches; each of its Thursday night debates will center on a single topic. Four members will give researched speeches, then the floor will be opened to all who have opinions.

The other debating societies have allowed members to question speakers, but this is the first time debate has focused on issues rather than individuals.

That's a welcome change. It should encourage members to appreciate listening as much as speaking. The egalitarian organizers of the Washington Society have decided to welcome all applicants willing to participate actively. That may rob membership of some of its prestige, but it should make the Washington Society less cliquish.

Organizers plan to take their literary half seriously, including readings every meeting. This, too, is a welcome change. We urge students to join the Washington Society or one of its sisters – and to dive into the groups' debates. But what we'd really like to see is a debate between the three groups.

Ad in the Cavalier Daily (1980)

“Lit Society to meet”

The first regular meeting of the Washington Literary Society and Debating Union will be held today at 8 p.m. in Jefferson Hall. The meeting will include four literary presentations and a debate entitled “A Woman's Place is in the House and the Senate.”