

# Histories of the Washington Literary Society and Debating Union

Transcribed and Re-Published by Patrick Morgan (Spring 2015)

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*Introduction to the Washington Literary Society Catalogue, 1860*

Washington Literary Society

In the session of 1881-'82 (the eighth session of the University,) some fifteen or twenty students met together in the room of one of their number, and formed themselves into a Club, "or Association for Mutual Improvement in the Art of Oratory." To this association they gave the name of "Academics' Society," the place of meeting being, after the first few weeks, on the west side of the Lawn, the fourth pavilion from the Rotunda, and at present the residence of Professor Davis. A little later, an association of the same character was organized at the present Proctor's office, and went into operation under about as favorable auspices as the Academics. These bodies continued a separate existence, though neither of them a very flourishing one, until 1835-'36, when they resolved to unite, and form out of the two one vital organization; this new body they "called the Washington Society, that its name, recalling the deeds of the 'Illustrious Father of American Liberty', might animate them with the desire of using the power the attained for the good of their country and the weal of their countrymen."

Then and thus the Washington Society originated, and thus did she spread her banner to the breeze. The records show that her history has been an eventful one -- her ups and downs many. Several times has her very existence been imperiled by discord, but she has been able, on every such occasion, to slough off the discordant spirits, and has only wrapped closer around her the mantle of brotherly love. She has also had to contend with all the disadvantages usually attendant upon the situation of a younger sister; but such trials have only resulted in the attainment of a vigorous and hardy maturity and she can now bid defiance to all adversaries.

The minutes, and almost everything in the shape of records, for the first eight years, have unfortunately been lost. Enough, however, has been preserved to show that, until 1846, the Society was but poorly supported. This was, no doubt, in great part, the result of the want of a hall that it could strictly call its own; for, until this date, its place of meeting had been the Proctor's office, which, of course, lacked most of the conveniences afforded by a permanent hall. The Society was organized by the election of a corps of officers, consisting of a President, Vice President, Recording Secretary, Corresponding Secretary, Treasurer, Librarian and Door-Keeper, and the names of these offices remain very much the same, though the duties of some of them have been considerably changed, and the facilities for effective operation greatly increased by the institution of a Tribunal and several other Standing Committees. The only honour, in addition to that of holding these offices, was awarded, in the form of a Diploma, at the end of the session, to such as were judged worthy of distinction. To arrive at this judgment, a committee was appointed to examine the records of the standing of each member, and his absences from the meetings, and failures to speak when appointed on the debate, as well as general deportment during the session of the Society, were taken into the account. A fee of one dollar from each member, in the form of an "Annual Tax" was quite sufficient to defray their then moderate expenses.

But the establishment of the Washington Society upon its present footing, took place in

1845-'46, and was due principally to the efforts of two gentlemen, N. H. Massie and John L. Cochran, Esqs.; both of them now successfully engaged in the practice of law in Charlottesville. Though they are not the real founders of the Society, to them, it may be said, it owes its present existence and flourishing condition. Up to this time the meetings seem to have been suspended about the middle of each session; but in the latter part of 1844-'45, a room, which formed a part of the present hall, was permanently secured, and 1845-'46 constituted a new era in the Society's annals. The Constitution was then carefully and thoroughly revised, and many cumbrous features remedied, and each succeeding year, consequently, exhibits marked progress. From the earliest formation of the Society, it had been the custom to elect an Orator, and a Reader of Washington's Farewell Address, for the twenty-second of February; but the first notice of a public Anniversary Celebration occurs in 1846-'47. In the same session was instituted the Vaedictory Celebration. Both of these were held in the Chapel of the University, and printed invitations were then sent to the ladies, only, of the neighbourhood. As an additional evidence of her now growing prosperity, it may be noted, that in the next session the Society ordered to be worn a badge, in the form of a plain gold pin, bearing the name of the Society, and a representation of waves, with the motto: "Quam fluctus diversi, quam mare conjuncti." During the last session, (1859-'60,) however, the size and shape of the in was altered, and Washington's coat of arms added. The badge for all public occasions is a bow of plain white ribbon, won on the left lapel of the coat.

In 1848-'49, the Washington Society made the initiatory move in getting up a periodical, called the "*Jefferson Monument Magazine*," the proceeds of which were to be appropriated to the erection of a monument to the memory of Thomas Jefferson. It was conducted by a corps of seven editors, two from each of the three Literary Societies, and one from the students at large. The enterprise was at first warmly seconded by the other Societies; but the "proceeds" not coming up to their expectations, they soon became disheartened and in 1851-'52 abandoned it altogether. Other attempts to establish a Magazine have, at various times, been made by the Societies of the University, but with no better success, until 1856-'57, when the "*University Literary Magazine*" (name since changed to "*Virginia University Magazine*,") was founded so securely that it cannot but succeed. Indeed, it has already succeeded, and has now become a fixture -- a part of the Societies, and a part of the University itself. A gold medal is awarded to the contributor of the best article appearing in each volume, subject to the decision of a Committee of the Professors. The Magazine has also, during the past session, been made the medium of rewarding merit in another way. In April, 1859, the Hon. Edward Everett delivered, in the Public Hall, his oration on the "Character of Benjamin Franklin," and donated the proceeds to the three Societies. After much discussion as to the best method of investing the income arising from this donation, the Jefferson and Washington Societies (the Columbian having ceased to exist) held a joint meeting, November 12th, 1859, and then decided to appropriate it to the purchase of a medal, to be called the "Everett Medal," and to be awarded to the contributor of the best "Biographical Essay on an American Citizen."

In 1849 a number of members withdrew, and, together with deserters from the Jefferson, formed the "Philomathean Society." This Association was short lived. In 1852 a much more serious revolt occurred, and one which well nigh proved fatal to our body. In that year the "Parthenon Society" was

formed, exclusively by members deserting from our own; and this desertion was caused by the failure to elect as “Final Orator” the candidate of a party in the minority, who, however, had refused to join his too ardent supporters, and was afterward a prominent member of our own Association. On this occasion about one-third of the members joined the new body. But “whom the gods love die young,” and the Parthenon Society ceased November, 1853.

In 1854-'55 it was found necessary, owing to the large number of new members, to enlarge the hall to its present size. “I was in the Society at the time,” says a former President, to whom we are indebted for many of the facts here given, “and well remember the feelings of pleasure and anxiety depicted upon the countenances of the old members as, on each Saturday night, we initiated, in the business language of the treasurer, ‘fifteen, twenty, forty, and fifty dollars’ worth’ -- *pleasure* at the growing prosperity of the body they loved so well, and *anxiety*, lest the expectant novitiates might not find seats.” While this improvement was being made, the Jefferson Society very kindly gave them the use of their room.

The only other point that we shall notice in this brief sketch, is the establishment of the Debater’s Medal in 1856-'57. It was then resolved to award a Gold Medal to “that member who shall, during any session, prove himself to be the best debater.” We need scarcely add that this has been a most efficient aid in promoting the objects at which the Society aims.

The committee feels it to be a duty, which it owes not less to itself than to the Society, to say that, in the preparation of the present catalogue, it has laboured under very great difficulties – difficulties which it thinks sufficient to recount for all of the more marked defects. Between 1836 and 1843 there is nothing available in the shape of records: the only means of information as to the earlier days of the Society are some Treasurer’s Reports, and a few disconnected pages and from these the names of the members for 1835-'36 and 1836-'37 have been compiled. Even where the books have been preserved, the Minutes have been frequently very poorly kept – sometimes amounting to nothing at all. We can supply punctuation points, and even words, and possibly, now and then, a sentence, but we cannot supply whole *Minutes*. The errors, if any, (and we fear they are numerous,) may be remedied for the future, by giving the proper information to the Corresponding Secretary.

Charles D. McCoy,  
Henry Lee,  
W. O. Bullock,  
J. W. H. Porter  
Committee  
University of Virginia, 1860.

*Introduction to the Washington Literary Society Catalogue, 1866*

Washington Literary Society of the University of Virginia

In republishing the Catalogue of the Washington Society, the committee deem [sic] it proper to add a brief sketch of the Society from the date of the publication of the former Catalogue (1860) to the present time.

After the passage of the Act of Secession by the Convention of Virginia, (April 17th, 1861) the Society, at its next meeting on the 20th day of April, in view of the condition of the times, which foreboded other contentions than those of the literary arena, resolved to adjourn, to meet on at the call of the President. In subsequent meetings, called by the President, it was determined to dispense with the Final Oration, and not to award the Debater's Medal for that session. It was also voted unanimously, that the funds of the Society should be "placed in the hands of the Governour of Virginia for the defense of the State in the present war with the United States;" which was accordingly done.

From this time forward the Society only met in joint session with the Jefferson Society. At these meetings it was resolved to discontinue the "Virginia University Magazine," and to abolish the "Everett Medal." The last meeting of the two Societies was held on the 19th day of May, to take into consideration what disposition should be made of the "Everett Fund." They determined to return it to the donor, Mr. Everett, as soon as the state of the country would admit of it.

During the war the Society did not continue its organization. In the session of 1861-'62, however, a few old members of the Washington and Jefferson Societies united and formed the "University Literary Society," and held their meetings in the Hall of the Washington Society. this new body ceased to exist after the close of that session; but in the succeeding session, the Jefferson Society was reorganized, and continued to hold its meetings thereafter, with but few interruptions, during the war. For a period of four years and a half, there existed no Association bearing the name of the "Washington Society." At the beginning of the last session, (1865-'66,) through the untiring exertions of four of its former members, -- Messrs. Wm. M. Perkins, A. Frederick Fleet, John H. Lewis and John S. Harnsberger -- it was reorganized. Though it had to content at first with many disadvantages, it soon succeed in assuming its former rank as a Society, and now bids fair to regain the prosperity it enjoyed before the war. The only change made, upon its reestablishment, was the adoption of the original badge of 1847-'48, in place of that which had been substituted for it in 1859-'60.

In the preparation of the Catalogue, the committee has attempted to correct the errors in the previous one, to supply omissions, and to publish the names in full, as far as they could be ascertained. By a careful examination of the old reports and letters in the possession of the Society, a mistake as to the date of its organization has been rectified. It was organized in the session of 1834-'35, and not in 1835-'36, as stated in the preface to the first Catalogue.

William T. Early, Esq., of Charlottesville, has furnished the committee with the names of many of his co-members of 1834-'35; and by the aid of Prof. Davis of the University, the names of many

members between the years 1837 and 1843 have been ascertained, and are now for the first time published. It is a grateful duty to acknowledge these kind services. To Prof. Davis we are under special obligations, not only for the interest he has taken in the subject of our enquiries, but for the devotion of much of his valuable time to our assistance.

Chapman Maupin,

J. W. Foster

S. Travers Phillips,

T. Jeff. Stubbs,

A. Frederick Fleet.

University of Virginia, Oct. 1866

## *1981 History of the Washington Society*

The publishers of the second edition of the Washington Society history were too modest to state that this Society was the first to be reorganized after the War Between the States (the First Interregnum). The war was over in 1865, but the terrible sacrifices were not forgotten. In May of 1867 the Society raised funds for a suitable monument to the Confederate dead, placed in the cemetery of the University. At the same time, the Society publicly applauded the release of President Jefferson Davis from prison.

The Society was a transient one in the period immediately following the War Between the States. Space limitations in the Washington Society Hall forced brief relocations to the Chapel and to The Temperance Building. Finally in 1869, with \$1300 of surplus funds, and a generous appropriation of \$500 from the Board, Washington Hall was enlarged to its present dimensions..

The 1870's are notable for the frenzied competition between and within the Washington and Jefferson Societies. At stake were the debater's medal, the final oratorship, and the final presidency. Apparently, those elected represented their respective Society at final commencement. Generally the winners were firebrands of the Deep South whose public condemnation of the abuses during Reconstruction distressed the Faculty. The Faculty decided to require two diplomas before a speaker would be awarded the lectern to speak at graduation. And ultimately, of course, the Societies lost their preeminent positions at Commencement. Nor were the Societies spared the seemingly routine condemnation of the student press for such things as the "meagreness" of thought demonstrated at the weekly debates.

1880 found the Societies in a bitter struggle with the Council of Friends of Temperance for supremacy in the rhetorical arts. If survival is any test (and perhaps Temperance's inherent disadvantage casts doubt upon that), we emerged victorious.

Perhaps the high-water mark of both the Washington and Jefferson Societies – if sheer size is any test at all – was reached at the end of the 1880's. There is no question that the rise of interest in athletic sports at the University dampened student enthusiasm for the traditional pursuits of the Societies. This period is also noteworthy for the elevation of the orator's medal to the stature of the debater's medal. In inter-society competition before Faculty judges, the Wash bested the Jeff in the competition for the Harrison Trophy, with recorded victories in 1896, 1898, and 1899. The Jeff managed a single victory in 1897.

Many Washington Society Members represented the University in intercollegiate oratorical associations, engaging in competition with the likes of Chicago, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, Vanderbilt, Texas, Washington and Lee, and Cornell.

Perhaps the most permanent and beneficial contribution of the Wash and the Jeff was their 1913 proposal to the State Teachers' Association for a speaking league of all public and private secondary schools in the Commonwealth. The proposal adopted, an executive committee was established

comprised of a professor of secondary education and a member of each of the two societies. This organization is believed to be the antecedent of the debate and forensics section of the Virginia High School League, now, of course, a huge organization with thousands of high school participants every year.

1915 saw an innovation which would become a commonplace in succeeding years. A member of the Faculty, Professor Graves, was invited to address a meeting of the Society. Previously, the programs of the Washington Society consisted of a debate by members upon a topic selected the week before.

The Wash approached the Roaring 20's on ominous notes. The roll book for 1917 and 1918 records attendance between 10 and 20 members. For unknown reasons the Society met in the "smoking room" of Madison Hall many times in 1919-1920. On the other hand, the Society had sufficient funds to donate \$160 to the "Serbian Scholarship Fund" on May 17, 1919.

The tradition of inviting Faculty members to address the Society became firmly entrenched by the early 1920's. Perhaps as a consequence, the topics for debate became markedly more frivolous.

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In the economic depression that followed the great stock market crash of 1929, the Washington Society resolved to adjourn, to meet only at the call of the President until such time as the membership felt that conditions warranted a return to more regular proceedings. In the period that followed, known as the second or major interregnum, the Society ceased to be included in the Corks and Curls for financial reasons and met but rarely. Discounting the membership of the society during this period and the informal nature of its activity, the second interregnum might historically be viewed as lasting approximately fifty years, ending by all accounts in the Fall of 1979, as hereinafter recounted.

In the fall term of the 1979-80 school year (the 156th session of the University and the 148th year of the Society) Mr. J. D. Henson of Willow, Alaska, a former Vice-President of the Jefferson Society, spoke with Mr. J. R. Davis, then Vice-President and later President of the Jefferson Society concerning the state of that body. Mr. Davis and Mr. Henson noted that at that time, the Jefferson Society alone continued any major role in furthering oratory at the University, the Patrick Henry Society having been de-activated and the Washington Society having suspended regular meetings.

Some time later, Mr. Henson, together with J. Mitchell Aberman of Rock Hill, South Carolina, also a former Vice-President of the Jefferson Society, and Stephen L. Huntoon of Arlington, Virginia, a former Jefferson Society President, became involved in a controversy involving Jefferson Society membership. The controversy, in its essence, stemmed from the failure of that Society to admit into membership Mr. Richard Nichols Randolph of Oakton, Virginia, brother of Jefferson Society member Christopher Craven Randolph and a descendant of Mr. Jefferson himself. Notwithstanding that Mr. Randolph had successfully completed all membership requirements, he was not admitted into the ranks of that society, an action for which no justification was given prior to or following the membership vote. Messrs. Aberman, Henson and Huntoon thereupon resolved to create a new literary and debating society at the University, one whose membership would, in the true spirit of Mr. Jefferson, be based on

merit alone. In the days that followed, it was resolved instead that the trio would join forces with the remaining members of the Washington Society to restore it to full activity. Mr. Randolph was invited to join with the three, who later became known in the history of the Society as the Jefferson Triumvirate. Mr. R. E. Heischman, of Charlottesville, Virginia, an active member of the Washington Society from 1923 until 1925, administered the oath to Mr. Randolph, subsequent to Mr. Randolph's completion of the membership requirements. Messrs. Aberman, Henson, and Huntoon, reluctant to give up their memberships in the Jefferson Society, were inducted two meetings hence, after also completing the membership requirements and after the Washington Society Constitution was officially amended to permit Jefferson Society members to join the Washington Society.

Mr. Randolph was elected President for the Spring term of 1980, and Mr. Aberman Vice-President, Mr. Henson Secretary, and Mr. Huntoon, Treasurer. The Society moved its official meeting time to Thursday evenings at 8:00 and thereafter met regularly at Washington Hall on the East Range of the University. The format for the Final Celebration was changed to an annual banquet on the weekend nearest Washington's birthday, at which time award medals were to be presented. On Washington's birthday that year Mr. Huntoon read Thomas Jefferson's tribute to Washington before the Jefferson Society that term and again at the Washington Society banquet, which was unanimously attended.

Pursuit to the old traditions, Washington's Farewell Address was also read. After much discussion the society determined not to restore the Everett Medal, but instead to present medals following a literary contest for prose and poetry each spring and an oratorical contest for dramatic and humorous speeches every fall. Mr. Aberman was awarded the prose medal for the 1980 Spring term, with the poetry medal going to Mr. Henson. The Society also reinstated the traditional medals for best debater and best orator. Mr. Henson was awarded the Debater's medal and Mr. Randolph the Orator's medal for that term. The society resolved to remodel its activities along the lines of the Oxford Debating Union for that term and thereafter the program consisted of at least one literary presentation followed by one serious and one humorous debate. The official name of the Society was amended to read "The Washington Literary Society and Debating Union of the University of Virginia." Official stationery was printed, using a silhouette of Washington based on the image appearing on the quarter dollar coin of that day.

The Society voted to meet during the summer term of 1980 in order to more fully prepare for fall efforts to increase the membership and activities. Mr. Henson was elected President for the Summer term, Mr. Aberman Vice-President, Mr. Huntoon Secretary, and Mr. Randolph Treasurer. Mr. Aberman resigned his position in order to register at the law school of the University of South Carolina, although he later became President of the Southern Oratorical Association and thusly maintained close contact with the Washington Society. He was temporarily replaced by the presidential appointment of Miss Leslie Carol Eliason of Washington, D.C. who completed the necessary provisional requirements to be the first woman in history admitted as a regular member of the Washington Society. The appointment of Miss Eliason was not without controversy, but Mr. Henson, long a champion of equal rights for women and already well known around the University for his willingness to take a stand for what he believed, insisted on the appointment and prevailed in the subsequent vote to approve Miss Eliason. Mr. Stephen Frantz of Washington, D.C. also a former President of the Jefferson Society, was

admitted into provisional [sic] the Washington Society during the Summer term under provisions permitting former students of the University to be inducted. Mr. Frantz, an attorney in Washington, D.C., subsequently became legal counsel to the Society.

For the Fall term, 1980, Miss Eliason was elected President of the Society, the first woman ever to hold that position. Mr. Emmet Scott Blackwell of Roanoke, Virginia, also President of the University Guides, was elected Vice-President. Mr. Huntoon was prevailed upon to continue in his post as Secretary and Mr. Henson was elected Treasurer. The Society adopted for thereafter the Greek letters SIGMA BETA PHI and established red as its official color. Thus the Society began its one hundred and forty-ninth year.

Washington Literary Society, 1981

## *A Summary History of the Washington Society*

A large role in the noble history of the University of Virginia is claimed by The Washington Literary Society and Debating Union. It traces its roots to the University's eighth session, when a group called the "Academics' Society" was formed, and began to hold meetings in the basement of the Rotunda, with the object of general intellectual improvement. Shortly thereafter, a similar organization began meeting in the fourth hotel from the Rotunda as an "Association for Mutual Improvement in the Art of Oratory."

Few records remain from these days, but it is known that those two organizations merged to call themselves the "Washington Society," and by 1835 the group was meeting regularly "in the middle hotel of the West Range," in what is now known as Jefferson Hall. The university records do show that the Society applied in 1835 and in 1837 to use the library room in Pavilion VII as a meeting place, but without much success. The first Catalogue of the Society shows that it also met often at the proctor's office, and that it suffered greatly because of the lack of a permanent meeting place.

The early Society was hindered by opposition from the Board of Visitors, who positively refused to allow public speeches. The Visitors felt that, with the formation of another Society, there were too many young orators. They accused the Societies of having elections so turbulent that they degraded the University, caused personal feuds, and led students to think about oratorical pursuits rather than academic ones. A committee from the Society refuted these claims, arguing in 1838 that "we meet together...as a band of brothers, all having the good of the Society at heart, and anxious to chose him, who, they think, can best advance its interests... No time is lost. Our minds are not abstracted from our studies, nor our feelings excited."

Indeed, this might have been an accurate representation of the young Society. As early as February 1837, the Society had established its tradition of celebrating George Washington's Birthday in a spectacular fashion, but little else was accomplished until the term of 1845-46. At that point, Society members N. H. Massie and John L. Cochran secured a hall for meetings. Obtaining a permanent meeting place was no easy task, as space was limited in the early days of the University. The records show that the Board of Visitors granted the Society use of Hotel B, but there is no sign that a meeting ever convened there. As late as 1847, the Society was still meeting in the Proctor's home in Hotel F, but in 1849, a room was granted to the Society in Hotel A. In 1852-'54, the Society expanded that room, which became known as Washington Hall.

At that point, the Washington Society was viewed as a serious organization for perhaps the first time. The traditions of electing a Society Orator and a reader of George Washington's Farewell Address every February 22 were established, and the next year the first Anniversary Celebration and Valedictory Celebration were both held in the University Chapel.

By 1848, the Society had officially adopted a plain gold pin as a symbol of membership. The pin was about 2 cm square, with the society's motto – "Quam fluctus diversi, quam mare conjuncti" (though the waves are many, the sea is one) – surrounding a representation of nine 4-crested waves. In

1970, one of the original pins (ca. 1853) was donated to the University archives. It is believed to have belonged to Society member Cuthbert Buckner. The size and shape of the badge was changed to a more ornate style in 1859, but the new badge (which bore George Washington's Coat of Arms) was used for only two years.

The literary magazines of the University represent one of the Society's earliest successes. The idea of a magazine was first presented by the Washington Society to the University's other literary societies – the Jefferson and Columbian Societies – during the 1848-'49 term. The two societies were invited by the Washington Society to help publish the *Jefferson Monument Magazine*, with proceeds from sales going to pay for a memorial statue for Thomas Jefferson. The other societies backed out of the plan when the magazine failed to achieve popularity among the students, but the Washington Society kept trying. After several unsuccessful magazines, the *Virginia University Magazine* was established in cooperation with the Jefferson Society (the Columbian Society having dissolved several years earlier). This magazine was successful, partly because it offered two gold medals: one to the contributor of the best article in each volume, and one to the contributor of the best “Biographical Essay on an American citizen.”

The use of medals to encourage contributions to the magazine proved so successful that the society established the Debater's Medal during the 1856 term, for “that member who shall, during any session, prove himself to be the best debater.” This was the year of growing sectionalism, and in the late 1850s, a resolution was passed prohibiting the purchase of medals or badges from Northern or Western jewelers.

The intense patriotism of the Southern society members was indicated by much more than sectionalist medallion resolutions, however. A debate was held in January 1860 to resolve the question “Has a state the right to secede?” After heated debate, the question carried. It was ten months later that the Society addressed the truly important issue – not the right to secession, but the act of secession itself. The minutes of the meeting on November 3 read “Debate being next in order, the question ‘In case of the election of Lincoln, should the Southern States secede,’ was warmly discussed until 10-½ o'clock; whereupon Mr. Henson moved that the debate be postponed till next Saturday night.” The debate must have been too controversial for the minutes of the following meeting fail to mention it ever being continued.

The decision would have proved irrelevant, for the southern States did indeed secede in April 1861. The Society adjourned April 20, 1861, after resolving to donate its treasury to the war effort. On May 10, 1861, a \$200 check was sent to Governor Letcher with a letter requesting him “...to employ the same in such a manner as in your judgment shall most advance the interests of our common cause – the defense of the South.”

In fairness to the Society members of the period, it must be noted that there was no record of a member supporting the institution of slavery. Rather, the sentiments of the Society seem to be reflected by a poem published in the April issue of the literary magazine:

Through Peace, the fair angel's about to forsake us  
Though soon these rich valleys may desolated be  
Yet bondsman and serf, the foe never can make us,  
For the Sons of the South have all sworn to be free.

After the start of the War Between the States, both literary societies stopped meeting formally. During the 1861-62 session, a few members of both Societies met in Washington Hall, but were unsuccessful in maintaining interest during this period of unrest. A few months afterward, the Jefferson society did manage to reorganize, but the Washington Society would not meet for 4 ½ years.

After the end of the War, four Washington Society members met to reestablish the Society after what came to be known as the "Minor Interregnum." The Society convened with the fervor that had characterized it before its dissolution. That first meeting, John H. Lewis was forced to speak about the small number of members attending, but 28 new members were sworn in only one week later.

The first order of business was to establish a fund to repair the hall, but soon the Society was expressing its patriotism just as before the War. A petition to free President Jefferson Davis was tabled when members realized the practical uselessness of the document, but the two literary Societies did issue a joint resolution congratulating him when he was released from prison, and they went so far as to invite him to commencement exercises. Even stronger was the support for a monument in the University cemetery memorializing the Confederate casualties; a joint committee was established to seek contributions from the Charlottesville community, and one student was named from each Southern state to solicit contributions from hometown alumni. The Washington Society even suggested doing away with the decorations at the Finals celebration, so the money could be put toward the memorial, but this proposal was never effected.

More than anything else, the period after the War Between the States is notable for the cooperation between the Washington and Jefferson Societies. In October 1866, representatives addressed the Jefferson Society: "The Washington remembers, with deep pleasure, the happy relations of courtesy and friendship which have heretofore existed between the two societies as they have labored hand in hand in the great field of literature."

As the country went through a period of rebuilding after the War, so did the Washington Society. With the monument completed, leaders found the Society had become so large as to need more space than Washington Hall could provide. After temporary relocations to the Chapel and the Temperance Buildings, the Society resolved to enlarge Washington Hall. In addition to \$1300 that the Society raised, the University appropriated \$500 for the construction.

This was the period when the Society was at its peak. There was plenty of friendly rivalry with the Jefferson Society, as the two societies debated each other often at meetings of the Council of Friends of Temperance. Socially, the Societies were both successful. Says Phillip Bruce in *History of the University of Virginia 1819-1919* (Macmillan 1922): "The [Final] celebration, whether it was of the Jefferson or the Washington Society, drew to the illuminated hall and Lawn an even larger concourse of

people than the final ball.” All of the ladies of the area were invited, explained Bruce, and “...there was no other place in Virginia where so many matches had their beginning. It was an earthly paradise of youthful lovers.”

Many traditions were enlarged after the War. In November 1867, the simple-looking medal was replaced by a more ornate one. The design proposed “a shield with a field of black enamel in the center, with the initial letters of the society, and its date of birth; and in a rim of gold around the field was the motto.” The Treasurer’s Report for 1867-’68 shows that the Society spent \$68.75 – 14% of its budget – on the debater’s medal.

For a while, the Society prospered. After the 1880s, though, the rise of interest in University athletics reduced student participation in the Societies. By 1893, the quality of the Society had fallen so much that Law Professor Charles S. Venable suggested that the Societies should no longer be able to choose the final orator. He proposed that the commencement speaker should be chosen only from those students receiving degrees. Bruce commented in his *History* that “this indicated an extraordinary falling off in merit in comparison with the times when the most distinguished alumni were not the men who had won these degrees, but the men who had received the medals of the debating societies.”

At the turn of the century, there were serious attempts to renew student interest in the Societies. In 1895, Professor James A. Harrison offered a trophy, consisting of a gold and silver wreath encircling a scroll of copper, hoping to spark interest in the annual debate between the Washington Society and the Jefferson Society. The names of the team members winning the trophy were to be permanently inscribed on the copper wreath, and the winning Society would earn the right to hold the trophy for the next year.

The Board of Visitors, as well as Professor Harrison, attempted to bring back interest in the Societies. They appropriated \$100 for the purchase of medals to be awarded to the most skillful debaters in each Society. These medals were called the “Rector and Visitors’ debating medals.” In April 1896, the recipients of the medals met for a public competition. The Washington Society representative won the right to speak for the University at the State Oratorical Contest at the College of William and Mary and in the Southern Intercollegiate Association competition at Centre College. By 1904, there was a debating and oratorical council composed of two members of each society, arranging for the annual competition between the Societies and for competitions with other schools.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Washington Society grew out of the spirit of competitive debate. In 1913, the Society worked with the Jefferson Society, proposing to the State Teachers’ Association that a speaking league should be formed of all the public and private secondary schools in Virginia. Seventy-five schools enrolled, and the league was put together by a member of each Society and one of the Secondary Education professors at the University. The three sent bulletins to each team, with debate propositions and necessary research material. In May 1914, the first interscholastic high school debates were held at the University. Twenty high schools competed, and in the final round, two girls from Buena Vista High School were victorious over a pair of boys from Charlottesville High. During the course of the competition, there was a free movie exhibition and a trip

to Monticello for the high school debaters. The debate and forensics section of the Virginia High School League is believed to have evolved from this early organization.

In 1915, the Washington Society held its last joint celebration with the Jefferson Society. Chief Justice Clark of North Carolina was the speaker, and both Society presidents awarded medals to their best orators and debaters. The celebration was apparently abolished as part of a compromise with the University, in return for a promise that the school would fund the inter-university debates. In his *History*, Bruce wrote: “The disappearance of the joint celebration at the final exercises was regretted and deprecated by the older alumni, whose affection for the University had, in no small degree, been riveted by the charm and distinction of that occasion in former times. The substitution of Founder’s Day introduced a purely college hour unknown to these alumni and without personal interest to them...”

With the stock market crash of 1929, there was not enough support for the Society to keep meeting. The Society adjourned for its “Major Interregnum,” which was to last fifty years, except for one brief revival from 1940 to 1943.

In 1940, the Society was briefly reawakened by William P. Oberndorfer, who served as the first president of the society during the 1940’s revival period. The Washington Society of that day met once a month in a room in Madison Hall “all decked out in black ties and with appropriate libations at hand.” The Society of that era was primarily a forum for philosophical and literary discussion, involving both students and faculty.

The advent of the Second World War had a negative impact on the Washington Society, much as the War Between the States had affected the Society in the previous century. The Society did not meet in 1944. Instead, it became inactive again and slept for thirty-five more years.

The Washington Society was revived again in 1979. The revivers of that era traced the original Washington Society through University yearbooks until the last mention of the group in 1929. They examined the yearbooks for an additional ten years and, seeing no further traces of the Washington Society, assumed that it had not been active since the 1928-1929 school year. Years later, the 1940’s era “lost alumni” were found in 1984 when the society began fundraising efforts to once again use the historic medals of the Washington Society as a prize for its literary and oratorical competitions. The May/June issue of the UVA ALUMNI MAGAZINE printed an article on the Society and noted that it had experienced a “50-year hiatus” from 1929-1979. In response, one of the “lost alumni,” Professor Francis H. Heller of the University of Kansas wrote a letter published in the November/December issue of the UVA ALUMNI MAGAZINE, protesting that the magazine “must have overlooked the brief revival of the society” while he was a student. A quick check of the remainder of the University Yearbooks revealed that the Washington Society had indeed been active from 1940-1943. The Society did not survive the war years, however. According to Heller, who was president during the 1942-1943 school year, he returned to the University in 1947 and “nobody could remember when and why the organization ceased to function.” The Society had simply stopped meeting.

The Washington Society was not to meet again until the fall of 1979, when three members of

the Jefferson Society met, noting with some regret the decline of debate at Jefferson Hall in favor of hearing guest speakers. The three also discussed their distaste with their Society's restrictive membership practices. They resolved to awaken the Jefferson Society from what one of the three would later call its "oratorical atrophy" by creating a rival literary society. They investigated the history of the Washington Society, and found that it was officially still in existence – that it needed only to be reawakened by constitutional means.

This itself presented some difficulties: The constitution prohibited members from being in more than one literary Society, and it stipulated that new members must be sworn in by existing Society members. It also called for meetings at Washington Hall, which had long since been reclaimed by the University for administrative offices.

Remaining true to the constitution, the three located an interested student who had been rejected by the Jefferson Society. Richard Randolph, a direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson, was sworn into the Society on November 1, 1980, by Mr. R. E. Heischman, a Charlottesville resident who had been an active Washington Society member from 1923 until 1925. The continuation of the Society was thus insured. Unanimously elected president, Randolph moved to amend the constitution at the first official meeting to allow dual society membership. As required by the constitution, the meeting took place "at" Washington Hall (outside on the front step), where subsequent meetings were also held, even in the snow, until the constitution could be amended to permit meetings elsewhere.

Two weeks later, after the membership prohibition had been properly removed by amendment, the three "revivers" took the membership oath. With the initiation of J. Mitchell Aberman, Stephen L. Huntoon, and Josiah D. Henson, the revival of the Washington Society became a reality.

For Washington's Birthday that year, February 22, 1980, many of the former traditions of the society were re-instituted. Mr. Huntoon read Thomas Jefferson's tribute to George Washington before the Jefferson Society. At the Final Celebration Banquet, Mr. Henson read Washington's Farewell Address. After much discussion, it was decided to hold an oratorical contest each Fall and a literary competition every Spring, with medals being promised to the victors. Unfortunately, none of the original society medals could be located at that time to copy, nor did finances permit, so certificates bearing a portrait of Washington were used as awards.

The Society was renewed as an educational arena where students could learn to speak, and where all types of oratory could be practiced. Literary presentations highlighted every meeting. The Society modeled the serious portion of its meeting agenda after the Oxford Debating Union, becoming perhaps the only forum for Oxford-style debate in the country. The Oxford style was adopted because it required original oratory, extemporaneous refutation, and critical analysis within every debate. Both serious and humorous topics were debated, followed by a commentary, after which the floor was open to the membership at large. Teamwork was encouraged, the development of a "tag-team" style of humorous debating, probably practiced nowhere else in the world.

As in past years, the Society renewed its friendly rivalry with the Jefferson Society. The "Jeffs," as its members were known, were generous enough to offer the Washington Society use of its

Hall on Thursday nights, until a permanent home could be found. The Washington Society leadership soon challenged the Jeffs to renew the Harrison Trophy debate, and also to a tug-of-war, with rules modified slightly to fit modern University tradition. The rejuvenated Washington Society won both contests that year.

Every year, on the ninth of October, the Society membership meets at the statue of George Washington on the Lawn and walks by candlelight to the door of Washington Hall, recounting the history of the Society, and commemorating the 1979 inception of the revival of Epsilon Alpha Pi, the Washington Literary Society and Debating Union of the University of Virginia.

James L. Bander *(March 1984)*